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Jane Addams' Democracy and Social Ethics: Defending Care Ethics **By Melissa E. Anderson**

To perform too many good deeds may be to lose the power of recognizing good in others; to be too absorbed in carrying out a personal plan of improvement may be to fail to catch the great moral lesson which our times foster.¹

The kind of social ethics that Addams describes in *Democracy and Social Ethics* are in many ways compatible with the modern Ethic of Care. Addams' social ethics, however, goes beyond the original concept of an Ethic of Care to provide answers to some problems that have arisen in Care Ethics. Addams' ethics not only provide a response to the problem of cultural relativity, but she also addresses the issue of practical application of this theory. Moreover, Addams bridges the gap that has been created between care and justice. Finally, Addams expands the application of an Ethic of Care to issues in Politics and Democracy, areas of study that are not commonly addressed by Care Ethicists.

What is an "Ethic of Care"?

Care is an approach to ethics that places an emphasis on "personal connection, context, and affective responses."² The development of an Ethic of Care is one of the most significant innovations in moral philosophy during the latter part of the twentieth century. The term "an Ethic of Care" was first coined in Carol Gilligan's 1982 publication of *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Following Gilligan, feminist scholars Virginia Held, Susan Hekman, Rita Manning, Nel Noddings, Sara Ruddick, Joan Tronto, and others have been recognized as having made significant contributions to the development of Care Ethics. Today, no discussion of ethics from a feminist perspective is complete without some mention of care.

Gilligan made this discovery about an "alternative moral voice" while working as an assistant to the acclaimed Harvard psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg. Gilligan's moral theory diverges most drastically from Kohlberg's Kantian beliefs in regards to her concepts of "connection, particularity, and emotion."³ For Gilligan, care focuses morality on the interconnectedness of people and the relationships they are necessarily part of. Gilligan's "Care", unlike most philosophical theories, embraces emotion, believing it has a significant role in creating these connections as well as motivating moral action. Gilligan believes moral action requires knowledge of the particular other and their circumstances and is therefore not a theory based upon universalized maxims. In doing so, care does not provide the "right" action for all people at all times, but the appropriate action given the circumstances.⁴

The Ethic of Care places an emphasis on something akin to a universalized process in the approach to ethics rather than universalized principles. Ethic of Care generally encourages people to think about the needs of others, and a willingness to consider the effects (both good and bad) of actions upon others. The "other" in this sense should be interpreted as in the cultural studies model of the person who does not share the same cultural or societal position as the "actor" or

¹ Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 66

² Maurice Hamington, "[Jane Addams and the Politics of Embodied Care](#)," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (Fall, 2001): 4.

³ Lawrence Blum, "Gilligan and Kohlberg: Implications for Moral Theory," in *An Ethic of Care: Feminist and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. , Mary Jeanne Larrabee (New York: Routledge, 1993), 50-53.

⁴ Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982)

person making the action. In order to evaluate whether this actor exhibits an Ethic of Care, Care Ethicists seem to indicate that we must examine an individual's existing works. We must look at their motivations and intentions of their actions, in order to see if the actor pays attention to the context of the situation, shows consideration for the needs and interests of others and consideration of the effect a given action will have upon others. These three things are ultimately the key elements of a general Ethic of Care.

It is important to note that the Ethic of Care adopts the feminist notion of Care rather than the paternalistic notion of Care. The paternalistic notion of Care does not pay attention to the context or the identity of the "other," but instead acts from the dominant group's perspective of knowing what's best for you. In other words, the paternalistic model fits with Joan Tronto's notion of "caring about." The feminist Ethic of Care accounts for context and makes an attempt at determining what is best for the "other" from the other's own perspective. In Tronto's terminology, the feminist model "cares for" the individual.⁵

Addams' Sympathetic Understanding/ Interpretation Parallels a Modern Ethic of Care:

We continually forget that the sphere of morals is the sphere of action, that speculation in regard to morality is but an observation and must remain in the sphere of intellectual comment, that a situation does not really become moral until we are confronted with the question of what shall be done in a concrete care, and are obliged to act on our theory.⁶

In her writings of "Charitable Relations," the first of five essays in Addams' *Democracy and Social Ethics*, begins by emphasizing the importance of the process of caring for others. She continually uses the term "sympathy" in association with an ethical form of caring.⁷ Thus, in using what she later terms an ability to "sympathetically interpret"⁸ other's morals and values, Addams seems to indicate that there is an importance placed upon a genuineness of emotion of ethical actor in attempting to understand the recipient of the action. It is the manner of the action and the intent of action that matters, not the subject of the action or even the action itself.

Addams notes the importance of this attitude in highlighting the difference in the kind of "care" that is given by the neighbor as opposed to the charity worker. Addams goes on to argue that it is the ethical standard of sympathetic understanding that is superior. Thus it is in the method of treatment that the ethical standard is established:

A most striking incongruity... is the difference between the *emotional kindness* with which relief is given by one poor neighbor to another poor neighbor, and the *guarded care* with which a charity visitor to a charity recipient gives relief. The neighborhood mind is at once confronted not only by the *difference of method*, but by an absolute clash of *two ethical standards*.⁹

Addams further illustrates what she means by giving the example of the way that we morally judge labor organizations, stating that we do not judge them "by their declaration of principles,

⁵ Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, (New York: Routledge, 1993)

⁶ Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics*. (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 273-4

⁷ *Ibid.* "warmth of heart and sympathy" p16; "human love and sympathy" p17; later in other sections - "recognition of claims of human brotherhood." p42; "succor to the helpless and tenderness to the unfortunate." p42

⁸ Addams first uses the term in the second chapter of *Democracy and Social Ethics* entitled "Filial Relations." She later appears to use the term 'sympathetic understanding' to the same effect. In neither case does she directly define the term, but places it on the path to "a higher social morality." (p35)

⁹ Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics*, (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 13. (emphasis added)

which we seldom read, but by their blundering efforts to apply their principles to actual conditions...”¹⁰

Addams is careful to differentiate sympathetic care from what she rejects as the pseudo-scientific approach to caring for others. She refers to it as “stilted,” demanding the other to conform to the actor’s own wishes regardless of whether the other has the capability to do so.¹¹ Addams says that the tendency to be “unsympathetic... is perhaps nowhere so obvious as in the household itself.” Addams seems to indicate that it is most obvious because it is in such strong contrast to the ideal family conditions of care.¹² Addams gives the example of King Lear, a father who is “so absorbed in his own indignation as to fail to apprehend his child’s thought... reveal[ing] the fact that his own emotions are dearer to him than his sense of parental obligation.”¹³ “His paternal expression was one of domination and indulgence, without the perception of the needs of his child.”¹⁴

The Problem of Cultural Relativity:

Care ethics is commonly attacked for succumbing to cultural relativity. This means that the values, standards and norms of each culture are different. The main critique of cultural relativity is that, because there is no independent, external or absolute moral standard, any theory that relies upon it is vacuous as it does not provide the reader with any guidance as to what kind of action or behavior is morally correct. Thus, “Care Ethics has often been criticized for a lack of a viable social dimension that addresses contentious issues...”¹⁵

In placing the emphasis of her social ethics on action, the actual process of sympathetic understanding/interpretation Addams creates a single universal *approach* rather than a universal principle. The ability to consistently apply this approach of sympathetic understanding allows Care Ethics to provide guidance of the way one should act, despite the existence of a culturally relative world. Addams is unique in adding this layer of universality to what is essentially Care Ethics.

Addams would agree that the world does not, and should not, operate on a set of maxims or rules that are to be universally followed. Instead, Addams sees morality, meaning the set of acceptable values and standards, as being culturally relative both descriptively and normatively. Addams acknowledges that the difference in cultural standards may be so different that it can be difficult to bridge the gap of understanding between two cultures.

The greatest difficulty is experienced when the two standards [of values] come sharply together, and when both sides make an attempt at understanding and explanation. The difficulty of making clear one’s own ethical standpoint is at times insurmountable.¹⁶

Moreover, “most of the misunderstandings of life are due to partial intelligence, because our experiences have been so unlike that we cannot comprehend each other.”¹⁷

Addams stresses the importance of bridging the gap between cultures. For Addams ethics has to do with the process of understanding through which we attempt to bridge the gap of culturally relative morals. Addams saw the most important aspect of social ethics as the element

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p76.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p32.

¹² *Ibid.* p48.

¹³ *Ibid.* p45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p46.

¹⁵ Maurice Hamington, “Jane Addams and the Politics of Embodied Care,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (Fall, 2001): 1.

¹⁶ Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics*. (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 44.

of judging whether the *process* of making a decision was morally correct, rather placing one's judgment upon the end of that decision. It was not the result of the decision that mattered so much as the way in which one went about making that decision.

...for by our daily experience we have discovered that we cannot mechanically hold up a moral standard, then jump at it in rare moments of exhilaration when we have the strength for it, but that even as the ideal itself must be a rational development of life, so the strength to attain it must be secured itself from interest in life itself. We slowly learn that life consists of processes as well as result, and that failure may come quite as easily from ignoring the adequacy of one's method as from selfish or ignorable aims.¹⁸

Care Ethics as Both a Descriptive and a Normative Philosophy

Because Addams adds this level of universality to Care Ethics, it becomes practically applicable and thus a solid normative philosophy. Care ethics generally exists as a normative philosophy. In giving real world examples of the application of the Ethic of Care, Addams strengthens the argument for it also existing as a descriptive philosophy. While it is not descriptively as universal as she would like to see it, she does make a case that it is more prevalent than one might assume.

In her chapter on Filial Relations, Addams seems to highlight the way in which this sympathetic understanding is modeled from the way in which family members care for one another. She argues that this moral social obligation can be better understood, first by when one moves "parental relations away from mere personal experience", and second when "the parents attempt to share in the children's pursuits and interests..."¹⁹ Addams, however, argues that this familial example should be extended to the society as a whole. "...This could be reduced to a modicum if we could preserve a sense of the relations of the individual to the family and of the later to society..."²⁰

Addams also gives good examples of failed attempts at employing an Ethic of Care. She gives the narrative of the employer who "doubtlessly built the [factory] town from the sincere desire to give his employees the best surroundings." However, "he ceased to measure the usefulness of the town by the standard of the men's needs." Addams concludes that "it is possible to cultivate the impulses of the benefactor until the power of attaining a simple human relationship with the beneficiaries, that of frank equality with them, is gone, and there is no mutual interest in a common cause."²¹

The Relation of Care to Justice:

Gilligan identified care as having a different moral voice from the traditional rights and consequences moral voice of justice. In this tradition, many have seen care as an ethical theory that competes with justice. Care was a feminine response, and justice is masculine.²² Gilligan's Ethic of Care is characterized by nurturance, placing an emphasis on responsibility to others. An ethic of justice is contrasted as being an expression of autonomy. Care is highly contextualized

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 43-44.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 46.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 66.

²² Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982)

and dependent upon the situation. It is Justice that is considered in terms of universalized abstract principles, rationality, and individual rights.²³

Associating Addams with Care Ethics is therefore initially problematic as Addams spent so much of her life fighting for social justice. However, Addams is not the only one to challenge this separation of care and justice. Many feminist philosophers have questioned the separation of care from justice, feeling that the division of the two concepts damages morality. This includes the work of Annette C. Baier, Elizabeth Ann Bartlett, Mary M. Brabeck, Marilyn Friedman, Merideth W. Michaels, Debra Shogan, Mary Ellen Waithe.²⁴ In fact, Addams closely inter-relates themes of care (sympathy) and justice. For example, Addams states that to “[love mercy] alone is to fall into the error of indiscriminant giving...and [to do justly] solely...results in such a dreary lack of sympathy and understanding that the establishment of justice is impossible.”²⁵

Moreover, there is no indication that Addams attaches any kind of gender distinction between her concepts of care and justice. She does this by giving examples involving men and women in appropriate contexts. Addams' examples of men using an ethic of sympathetic understanding are usually in examples of the actions of political officers and employers. Addams' examples of women are usually in examples of charity work and neighborhood culture. Thus she gives examples of both men and women both using care and working for justice. However she also give examples of relationships between fathers and daughters and of women as workers, challenging traditional gender norms themselves. She also gives examples of the neighborhood involving both genders fairly indiscriminately. All examples highlight the use of the process of sympathetic understanding in order to attain justice.

Ethic of Care as the Foundation for Democracy

For Addams democracy is once again not a universalized set of maxims and principles, but rather a way in which we should act with sympathy and regard for the fundamental goodness in the “other.” Addams concludes her writings in *Democracy and Social Ethics* by equating those that fear democracy with “losing faith in other people.”²⁶

We are thus brought to a conception of Democracy not merely as a sentiment which desires the well-being of all men, not yet as creed which believes in the essential dignity and equality of all men, but as that which affords a *rule of living* as well as a test of faith.²⁷

²³ Maurice Hammington, “[Jane Addams and the Politics of Embodied Care](#)” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (Fall, 2001): 6.

²⁴ Annette C. Baier, “The Need for More than Justice,” in *Science Moralism and Feminist Theory*, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, supplementary Volume 13, eds. Marcha Hanen and Kai Nielsen, (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1987), 41-53; Elizabeth Ann Bartlett, “Beyond Either/Or: Justice and Care in the Ethics of Albert Campus.” in *Explorations in Feminist Ethics: Theory and Practice* eds. Eve Browning Cole and Susan Coultrap-McQuin, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 82-88; Mary M. Brabeck, “Moral Judgement: Theory and Research on Differences between Males and Females,” in *An Ethic of Care: Feminist and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* ed. Mary Jeanne Larabee, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 33-48; Marilyn Friedman, “Beyond Caring: The Demoralization of Gender.” in *Science Moralism and Feminist Theory*, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, supplementary Volume 13, eds. Marcha Hanen and Kai Nielsen, (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1987), 87-110; Merideth W. Michaels, “Morality Without Distinction,” *Philosophical Forum* 17.3 (Spring 1986): 175-187; Debra Shogan, “Gender and Moral Agency,” *Atlantis* 13 (Spring 1988): 87-91; Mary Ellen Waithe, “Twenty-three Hundred Years of Women Philosophers: Toward a Gender Undifferentiated Moral Theory,” in *Who Cares? Theory, Research, and Educational Implications of the Ethic of Care*, ed. Mary M. Brabeck, (New York: Praeger, 1989), 3-18.

²⁵ Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics*. (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 33.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 122.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 6. (Emphasis added.)

Addams describes an ethical responsibility to all humans, regardless of preexistent relationships. She argues that we should afford the same basic ethical relationships to the stranger that we owe to our families. “The stern questions are not in regard to personal and family relations, but did ye visit the poor, the criminal, the sick, and did ye feed the hungry?”²⁸ It is in the extension of sympathetic understanding to the community, in modern language, the “other,” that we build Addams’ notion of democracy. For, “...unless all men and all classes contribute to a good, we cannot even be sure that it is worth having.”²⁹

Addams indicates that a democracy is in part defined by the extension of this ethical process to the greater society, as it is when “our affection becomes large enough to care for the unworthy among the poor as we would care for the unworthy among our own kin...” that we have truly attained democratic relations.³⁰ Moreover, she seems to indicate that a sympathetic interpretation of these differing moralities is a necessary condition for the preservation of Democracy. “To follow the path of social morality...implies that diversified human experience and resultant sympathy which are the foundation and guarantee of Democracy.”³¹

Addams views the “new democratic spirit” as one that mandates participation throughout all levels of society, including business. She differentiated between what she termed “individual or aristocratic management” and democratic management. She gives the example of the owner who unwittingly, and unmaliciously, subjects his workers to an aristocratic management of business. The manager “honestly believed he knew better than [the workers] what was for their good, as he certainly knew better than they how to conduct his business.... He did not realize that the men submitted to the undemocratic conditions of the factory organization because the economic pressures in our industrial affairs is so great that they should not do otherwise.”³²

As Addams notes “The employer is too often cut off from the social ethics developing in regard to our larger common experiences. This is sure to happen when he is good ‘to’ people rather than ‘with’ them, when he allows himself to decide what is best for them instead of consulting them.”³³ This parallels the structure of Joan Tronto’s argument that we should “care about” others rather than “care for” them.³⁴

Conclusion

Jeff.Riedel@il.proquest.com The kind of social ethics of sympathetic understanding that Addams describes in *Democracy and Social Ethics* build upon the modern notion of an Ethic of Care. Addams’ most significant addition to care is in her concept of sympathy which places an emphasis on the process of caring, providing the ability for care to be universally applied while still maintaining cultural relativism. In doing so she strengthens its application as both a descriptive and a normative philosophy. Addams also takes part in the significant debate over the original separation of care and justice by the founders of the Ethic of Care. Addams seems to indicate that the two concepts are dependent upon one another. She makes it clear that it is the balance of pure care (mercy) and pure justice that create the kind of care/sympathy that the Ethic of Care is talking about. Finally, Addams expands the use of an Ethic of Care to talk about democracy, an issue that philosophers do not commonly address from the perspective of care.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p.6.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 97.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 31.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 7.

³² *Ibid.* p. 97.

³³ *Ibid.* p. 70.

³⁴ Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, (New York: Routledge, 1993)

