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1 Politics of Vulnerability

By proposing to valorize moral values primarily defined as "feminine"—caring, attention to others, solicitude—the ethics of *care* has contributed to modifying a dominant conception of ethics, and has changed deeply the way we look at ethics, or conceive of what ethics should look like. It has introduced ethical stakes into politics, weakening, through its critique of theories of justice, the seemingly obvious link between an ethics of justice and political liberalism. But an important aspect is perhaps to be found in the kinds of resistance that ethics of care encounters: theoretical objections to ethics of *care* are connected with a frequent rejection of the demand—immediately seen to be essentialist—for a specifically *feminine* ethics. However, *care* corresponds to a quite ordinary reality: the fact that people look after one another, take care of one another, and thus are attentive to the functioning (or the commerce) of the world, which depends on this kind of care.

Ethics of *care* affirms the importance of care and attention given to others, in particular to those whose lives and wellbeing depend on directed and constant attention. Ethics of care draws our attention to the ordinary, to what we are unable to see precisely because it is right before our eyes. So before being a feminine ethics, it is an ethics that gives a voice to humans who are undervalued precisely because they accomplish unnoticed, invisible tasks, and take care of basic needs.

This ethics arises in response to historical conditions that have favored a division of moral labor such that activities of care have been socially and morally devalorized. The assignment of women to the domestic sphere has reinforced the exclusion of these activities and preoccupations from the moral domain and the public sphere, reducing them to the rank of private sentiments devoid of moral and political import. The perspectives of *care* carry with them a fundamental claim concerning the importance of care for human life, for the relations that organize it, and the social and moral position of care-givers. (Kittay and Feder, 2002). Recognizing this means recognizing that dependence and vulnerability are traits of a condition common to all, not of a special category of the "vulnerable." This sort of "ordinary" realism (in the sense of "realistic," proposed by Diamond, 1991) is largely absent from the majority of social and moral theories, which tend to reduce the activities and preoccupations of *care* to a concern for the weak on the part of selfless mothers, and nothing more than a sentimental fact. Hence the importance of acknowledging the first principle of the ethics of care: *the person is vulnerable*. It is an anthropological teaching, both ordinary and tragic. This is how Cavell defines the everyday, and the anthropological tonality of any approach to everyday life:

> The intersection of the familiar and the strange is an experience of the uncanny (…)
> What I call Wittgenstein's anthropological perspective is one puzzled in principle by anything human beings say and do, hence perhaps, at a moment, by nothing. (Preface of Cavell in Das, 2007, p. x)

The ethics of care leads us to a completely different view of the aim of ethics, by drawing our attention to ordinary and usually unseen details of our lives. The philosophical craving for generality is "contempt for the particular case"; moral perception is care for the particular. In "Vision and Choice in Morality" (1997), Iris Murdoch writes of the importance of attention in morality. (This is one initial manner in which we may express *care*: to pay attention to, to be attentive.) *Attention* is part of the ethical meaning of *care*: one must pay attention to these details of life that we neglect.

Attention, care, are part of a new understanding of human experience as singular. As Cavell says:

> I think of this as checking one's experience—which entails consulting one's experience, subjecting it to examination, as well as momentarily stopping, turning yourself away from whatever your preoccupation and turning your experience away from its expected, habitual track, to find its own track: coming to attention. (Cavell, 1981, p. 12)

Care is defined on the basis of this specific attention to the importance of things and moments, to its inherent concealment. This fragility of the real and of experience, to speak in Goffman's idiom (1987), is characteristic of ordinary experience, which is "structurally vulnerable" since its sense is never *given*. The reorientation of morality toward importance and its connection to the structural vulnerability of experience could define the ethics of *care*. The notion of *care* is indissociable from a whole cluster of terms that comprise a language game of the particular: attention, care, importance, significance, to count. It is in the use of language (choice of words, style of expression and conversation) that a person's moral vision, his or her *texture of being*, is intimately developed and openly shown. This texture has little to do with choices and moral arguments but instead with what matters and gives expression to the differences between singulars.

> We cannot see the moral interest of literature unless we recognize gestures, manners, habits, turns of speech, turns of thought, styles of face as morally expressive. The intelligent description of such things is part of the intelligent, the sharp-eyed, description of life, of what matters, makes differences, in human lives. (Diamond, 1991, p. 375)

A form of life, from the point of view of ethics, is defined by perception—attention to moral textures or motifs (described by Diamond and Nussbaum (in Laugier 2006) in their essays on Henry James). These motifs are perceived to be "morally expressive." Literature is a privileged site of moral perception, through its creation of a background that makes moral perception possible, by allowing important (significant) differences to appear. An example is J. M. Coetzee: to read what he writes in *Disgrace* about animals makes you see them differently, how they matter in our moral world.

> Justification, in ethics as anywhere else, goes on within lives we share with others, but what we may count in that life is not laid down in advance. The force of what we are able to say depends on its relation to the life of the words we use, the place of those words in our lives. (Diamond, 1991, p. 27)

Martha Nussbaum (1990) defines ethical competence in terms of an active and fine-tuned perception (in contrast to the ability to judge, make arguments, and choose). For her, morality is a matter of perception and attention, and not one of argument. One possible objection to her approach would be that one then returns to a caricatural opposition between sentiment and reason. Novels teach us to regard moral life as "the scene of adventure and improvisation," which transforms the idea we have of moral *agency* and makes visible to us "the values in moral improvisation" (Diamond, 1991 p. 316). Within such an approach, *care* is at the root of ethics, rather than a subordinate or marginal element of it. Moral learning defines ethics as attention to the real and to others. It is initiation into a form of life and a sensible training based on exemplarity. Morality (and politics) thus concerns our ability to read and assess moral expression. This ability is not purely affective; it is *conceptual* and *linguistic*—it is our ability to make good use of words, to use them in new contexts, to respond/react correctly.

As Charles Taylor has said, ability for moral expression is rooted in a malleable form of life, vulnerable to our good and bad uses of language. It is the form of life (in the natural sense, as social) that determines the (ethical) structure of expression, which inversely reworks it and gives it form.

> This structure can only be put to work against a background that we can never completely dominate, for we remodel it endlessly, without dominating it and without having an overlooking view. (Taylor, 1985)

The relationship to the other, the type of interest and care that we have for others, the importance we give them, exist only in their singular and public expression. What Cavell describes in a skeptical mode is described by Taylor in a more "hermeneutic" mode, but both

lead to moral questioning on the basis of mutual expression, of the constitution of style and the apprenticeship of attention to the expressions of others: "Human expression, the human figure, to be understood, must be *read*" (Cavell, 1979, p. 363). This reading of expression, this sensibility to meaning, which makes *responding* possible, is the product of attention and of *care*.

We must modify and enlarge our sense of rationality based on the notion of ethical rationality, without thereby rejecting all form of argumentation or returning to the conformism of founding ethics in practice. The focus, a result of the influence of Kant and Rawls, on moral notions such as duty or choice leaves out essential ordinary moral questioning, and has been insufficient for reflecting on the ordinary moral problems that *care* poses. As Diamond remarks, someone who is perfectly rigorous and moral may be petty or stingy, and this unlovable (in the strong sense) trait is something that could, instead of being considered a vague, non-ethical, psychological concept, form an integral part of moral reflection. Baier suggests that we focus on a quality such as *gentleness*, which can only be treated in descriptive and normative terms and which "resists analysis in terms of rules" (Baier, 1985, p. 219), since this quality is a response appropriate to the other, *according to circumstance*: it necessitates an experimental attitude, sensibility to the situation, and the ability to improvise, to "move on to something else" when faced with certain reactions. According to Baier, the legalist paradigm perverts moral reflection:

> Those who object to analytic methods most often reject not only the comparison of philosophical thought to mathematical computation, but also the legalist paradigm, the tyranny of the argument. (Baier, 1985, p. 241)

Baier, like Murdoch, criticizes the idea that moral philosophy can be reduced to questions of obligation and choice—as if a moral problem, since it can be formulated in these terms, can also be treated thus. Baier takes up I. Hacking's (1984) observations on moral philosophy's obsession with the model of game theory. For Baier, this is a masculine syndrome ("a big boy's game, and a pretty silly one too"). Certainly,

ordinary moral life is full of decisions. But what leads up to decisions is just as much the work of improvisation as the work of reasoning or the application of principles. Tronto puts it beautifully:

> Care requires justice, but it also requires that we think of justice in concrete cases and circumstances, not just as a general set of principles that are left to courts, politicians, or philosophers, to apply. (Tronto, 1993, p. 14)

It is sometimes feared (Ogien, 1998, 2004) that the anti-theoretic and "ordinary" approach could lead to a new and perverse form of foundationalism and conservatism, encouraging us to rely on customs and traditions rather than on argued principles. Murdoch has argued very well against this argumentative neutrality of morality: the very idea of neutrality is itself liberal, and is ideologically situated within liberalism. Cavell's somewhat different response to this fear bears on the difficulty of saying who this *we* is—what is the custom or tradition on which we would rely. The essential question concerning morality is perhaps that of the point of departure, of the given. This specific relation to our "ordinary claims to knowledge," to ordinary moral authority, is, according to Cavell, an essential element for defining moral life and the nature of our moral agreement. My agreement or my belonging to *this or that* form of life, social or moral, is not given. The background is not *a priori* and can be modified by practice itself. The form of this acceptance, the limits and scales of our agreement, are not knowable *a priori*, "no more than one can *a priori* know the scope or scale of a word" (Cavell, 1989, p. 44).

> There is a pervasive and systematic background of agreements among us, which we had not realized, or had not known we realize. Wittgenstein sometimes calls them conventions, sometimes rules… The agreement we act upon he calls 'agreement in judgments' (§242), and he speaks of our ability to use language as depending upon agreement in 'forms of life' (§241). But forms of life, he says, are exactly what have to be 'accepted'; they are 'given'. (Cavell, 1979, p. 30)[1]

[1] See Laugier, 2015, 2018

That we agree in language means that language—our form of life—produces our understanding of one another just as much as it itself is a product of agreement. Language is natural to us in this sense; the idea of convention is there to at once ape and disguise this necessity. "Beneath the tyranny of convention, there is the tyranny of nature." Cavell writes (1979, p. 46). At this point, the criticism mounted by Cavell of the usual interpretations of "form of life" becomes relevant. Cavell opposes these interpretations by his use of the translation *life form* rather than *form* of life. What is given is our form of life. What leads us to want to violate our agreements, our criteria, is the refusal of this given, of this form of life in not only its social but also its biological dimension. It is on this second (vertical) aspect of form of life that Cavell is insisting, while at the same time recognizing the importance of the first (horizontal) dimension, i.e., social agreement. What discussions of the first sense (that of conventionalism) have obscured is the strength for Wittgenstein of the natural and biological sense of form of life, which he picks out in evoking "natural reactions" and "the natural history of humanity." What is given in forms of life is not only social structures and various cultural habits, but everything that can be seen in "the specific strength and dimensions of the human body, the senses, the human voice" and everything that makes it the case that, just as doves, in Kant's phrase, need air to fly, so we, in Wittgenstein's phrase, need friction to walk (*Philosophical Investigations*, §107).

It is a wonderful step towards understanding the abutment of language and the world when we see it to be a matter of convention. But this idea, like every other, endangers as it releases the imagination. For some will then suppose that a private meaning is not more arbitrary than one arrived at publicly, and that since language inevitably changes, there is no reason not to change it arbitrarily. Here we need to remind ourselves that ordinary language is natural language, and that its changing is natural.

Let us turn to an example that Diamond gives, in which Peter Singer declares himself in favor of the defense of animals:

> What I mean by 'stupid or insensitive or crazy' may be brought out by a single word, the word 'even' in this quotation: 'We have seen that the experimenter reveals a bias in favor of his own species whenever he carries out an experiment on a non-human for a purpose that he would not think justified him in using a human being, even a retarded human being.' (Diamond, 1991, p. 23)

What does not work in such an argument is not the argument itself, but the use of this terrifying word "even": the absence of *care*. When Diamond affirms that moral philosophy has become blind and insensitive, she means insensitive to the human specificity of moral questioning and to ordinary moral life. This does not mean that the morality she wishes to promote would be indifferent to exceptional situations, which may in fact be situations of choice, but rather, that the tragedy of great decisions is in a certain way inherent to and contained within the ordinary; our everyday problems require the same attention and care. It is this dimension of tragedy that separates an ordinary ethics from theories of consensus and community, from an alleged common sense to which one has easy recourse in justifying conformist positions. What matters, in moral perception, is not agreement and harmony but the perception of contrasts, distances, differences and their expression. It is that moment in which there is a "loss of concepts," when something doesn't work any more…

> A sensibility to the conceptual world in which someone's remarks are situated is a moment of human sensibility to words…I am now interested in our ability to recognize the moment in which someone's words show, or seem to show, a way of leaving the common conceptual world. (Diamond, 1988, pp. 273–4)

On Diamond's account here, there is not an opposition between sensibility and understanding, but rather, a sensibility to a form of a *conceptual life*. This is what explains the "sensible" reactions we have to ideas. There is no need to separate argument and sentiment in ethics, as Nussbaum sometimes does and as certain formulations of *care* risk implying. It is rather the sensible character of concepts and the perceptive character of conceptual activity which are at work:

they allow for *the* clear vision of conceptual contrasts and distances (as, for example, when one hears someone speaking and without necessarily being able to offer arguments against what he or she is saying, *knows* that it is somehow not right at all). To give *care* its place, one must give it the greatest place, and consider that morality as a whole must become sensible—a "sensibility which would encompass the totality of the spirit." This question—of expression and experience, of when and how to *trust one's experience*, of finding the validity proper to the particular—goes beyond the question of gender, for it is the question of all our ordinary lives, men and women alike. The history of feminism begins precisely with the experience of inexpression, of which the theories of *care* give a concrete account in their ambition to valorize ignored, unexpressed dimensions of experience. This is the problem, beyond gender, that *care* confronts and which it allows to be presented without metaphysics. John Stuart Mill was concerned with the situation in which one does not have a voice for making oneself understood because one has lost contact with one's own experience:

> Thus the mind itself is bowed to the yoke: even in what people do for pleasure, conformity is the first thing thought of; they like in crowds; they exercise choice only among things commonly done: peculiarity of taste, eccentricity of conduct, are shunned equally with crimes: until by dint of not following their own nature, they have no nature to follow: their human capacities are withered and starved: they become incapable of any strong wishes or native pleasures, and are generally without either opinions or feelings of home growth, or properly their own. Now is this, or is it not, the desirable condition of human nature? (Mill, *On Liberty*, III)

This is a situation not specific to women, and which captures all situations of loss of experience and concepts together (and it can motivate a desire to come out of this situation, to repossess one's language, and to find a world that would be the adequate context for it).

To regain our contact with experience and to find a voice for its expression: this is the first aim, perfectionist and political, of ethics. It remains to articulate this subjective expression with the attention to the particular that is also at the heart of *care*, and thereby to define

a *knowledge through care*. The moral knowledge, for example, that literature or cinema gives us through an education of our sensibility (sensitivity) cannot be translated into arguments but *is* nonetheless knowledge—hence the ambiguity of Nussbaum's title, *Love's Knowledge* (1990): not the knowledge of a general object, love, but the particular knowledge that a perception sharpened by love, or a sharpened perception of love, gives us. There is thus no contradiction between sensibility and knowledge, *care* and rationality. Ethics is an attention to others and to the manner in which they are, along with us, bound up in connections and practices. All ethics is thus an ethics of *care*, of the care for others.

Martha Nussbaum calls for a "perceptive equilibrium," parallel to Rawls's "reflective equilibrium," which could, like the "moral vision" she attributes to Henry James, produce an alternative to moral reasoning: "Novels construct the model of an ethical style of reasoning which is context-linked without being relativist, and which gives us concrete imperatives that can become universals" (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 8). Nussbaum nevertheless continues to refer to moral principles that are, to be sure, contextualized, but which are universalizable on the basis of concrete cases. She allows us to understand one of *care's* demands: through this "loving and attentive" reading, *caring*, we perceive moral situations differently, actively. This changes our perception of the responsibility of the moral agent and of agency. The attention to others that literature proposes to us does not give us new certainties, or the literary equivalent of theories; it puts us face to face with, in the grips of, an uncertainty, a perceptive *disequilibrium*. Diamond insists on the idea that human deliberation is "an *adventure* of the personality undertaken against terrific odds and among frightening mysteries" (Diamond, 1991, p. 313). By focusing on a narrow conception of ethics and of perception, one runs the risk of *bypassing the adventure*—missing a dimension of morality, and more specifically, the *face of moral thought*, "what moral life is *like*" (Diamond, 1991, p. 25). A dimension of morality is missed through lack of *care*.

Gilligan writes that a "restructuring of moral perception" should allow for "changing the meaning of moral language, and thus the

definition of moral conflict and moral action" (1987, p. 43), but also for an undistorted vision of *care*, one in which *care* would not be the disappearance or diminution of the self. *Care*, understood as attention and perception, is to be differentiated from a sort of suffocation of the self by pure affectivity or devotion, as the oppositions *care/justice*, *care/rationality* could suggest. *Care*, by suggesting a new attention to the unexplored or neglected details of life, confronts us with our own inabilities and inattentions, but also, and above all, shows us how they are then translated into theory. In becoming political, what is at stake in ethics of *care* is epistemological: they seek to bring to light the connection between our lack of attention to neglected realities and the lack of theorization (or, more directly, the rejection of theorization) of these social realities, rendered invisible. Who has cleaned and straightened this room in which we are standing? Who is looking after my children right now?

From this perspective one may take up certain critiques brought against the ethics of care. Joan Tronto has suggested that the dyadic image of care (the amorous or maternal face-to-face) to which Gilligan remains attached is too narrow to include the ensemble of social activities that attentive care embraces. She considers that the philosophical valorization of *care* must base itself not so much in a particularist ethics but rather in an enlargement of the concept of action. This perhaps obliges one to give up on one part of the ethics of *care*, the idea of a specifically feminine ethics, and to join Tronto in moving towards a more gender-neutral anthropology. Gilligan's position was indissociable from a sexed anthropology: for her, the relationship to the self and to others as expressed in moral judgment took opposing directions for men and for women. According to Tronto, this position would inevitably lead to a sort of anthropological and political separatism of the genders. Against a sexed anthropology, she proposes an anthropology of needs, in order to found the social dignity of care. Not only do certain of our needs (and among the most important ones) call directly for care, but care defines the (political) space in which listening to needs becomes possible, as a veritable attention to others. In the end, the non-affectivist revival

of *care* would call for an anthropology of vulnerability. *People are vulnerable*: it is this principle that definitively opens the space of needs and their consideration.

Reflection on *care* seems to oppose a feminine and a masculine conception of ethics, the first being defined by attention, care for the other, a sense of responsibility, and intimate connections; the second by justice and by autonomy. There is no need to emphasize the difficulty one would face in contrasting a feminine ethics and a masculine ethics, an ethics of care and an ethics of justice, and the risk one would run of reproducing the prejudices that the ethics of care (at first, as a feminist ethics) was precisely aimed at combating. For Tronto the idea that women have special moral qualities is quite misleading:

> As long as women's morality is categorized as a special kind of morality, then any argument made from 'women's morality' can be dismissed as irrelevant to the genuine concerns of 'real' or 'universal' morality. (…) One of my main targets in this book is a position that was current at the time, that there might be an alternative moral theory to adapt that grows out of women's experience, a position to signify that women occupy a moral 'high ground'. To me this argument is as one-sided as the argument that women are incapable of moral thought. (Tronto, 2009, p. 12-13)

One can, and as we shall see, Tronto does, integrate *care* into a general ethical, social, and political approach which would not be reserved for women, but which would be an aspiration for all, and would thus allow for an amelioration of the concept of justice.

One can, as others, like Nussbaum, Gilligan herself, and Diamond have suggested, redefine *care* and the just by redefining ethics on the basis of the sensible and of moral perception, something that has to do with a special expressivity of women.

Are these incompatible? Can the kind of new attention that *care* forces upon us be separated from the women's point of view? We should acknowledge the fact that women's voices have been deadened throughout history and that the ethics of care has given them an expression space. We see, however, that it is only in passing from ethics to politics that ethics of *care* can be given its critical power. By calling for a society in which *care-givers* would have their voice, their

relevance, and in which the tasks of *care* would not be structurally invisible or inconspicuous, they bring to light the difficulty of thinking these social realities.

> Recognizing the importance of care would thus allow us to revalue the contributions made to human societies by the outcasts, by women, by the humble people who work everyday. Once we commit ourselves to remap the world so that their contributions count, then we are able to change the world. (Tronto, 2009, p. 15)

This connection between the ethics and politics of *care* is not the classical passage (already rightly criticized in Rawls) between a foundational ethics and its practical implementation. As Tronto puts it, the valorization of care passes through its *politicization* and voice. The ethical affirmation of the importance and dignity of *care* cannot go without a *political* reflection on the allocation of resources and the social distribution of tasks this allocation prescribes:

> As a type of activity, care requires a moral disposition and a type of moral conduct. We can express some of these qualities in the form of a universalist moral principle, such as: one should care for those around or in one's society. Nevertheless, in order for these qualities to become a part of moral conduct, people must engage in both private and public practices that teach them, and reinforce their senses of, these moral concerns. In order to be created and sustained, then, an ethic of care relies upon a political commitment to value care and to reshape institutions to reflect that changed value. (Tronto, 1993, p. 177-178)

Truly pursuing the ethics of *care* would imply both including practices linked to *care* in the agenda of democratic reflection and empowering those concerned—both care-givers and -receivers. This is what makes the ethics of care so difficult to grasp, even for feminists. The recognition of the theoretical pertinence of ethics of *care*, and the valorization of affections and affectivity—the importance of which we have seen in correcting a narrow vision of justice—necessarily pass through a practical revalorization of activities linked to care and a joint modification of intellectual and political agendas.

No ethics of care, then, without politics: Tronto is right, but we must perhaps also pursue the critical and radical—feminist—idea that

was at the source of the ethics of *care* and of Gilligan's theses, which have been treated with such irony: the idea that dominant liberal (masculine, if one wishes) ethics are, in their political articulation, the product and expression of a social practice that devalorizes the attitude and work of *care*.

> The world of care, needless to say, has generally been ignored by social and political theorists. The world of care, needless to say, is often inhabited more thoroughly by women, people of lower class and caste status, working people, and other disregarded ethnic, religious, linguistic groups. They are the people most often excluded by politics. Even to bold thinkers who wanted to support the claims for women's greater public roles, such as Simone de Beauvoir, the vilification of the 'immanent' life continued. (Tronto, 2009, p. 15)

This perhaps allows one to begin to understand why theories of *care*, like many radical feminist theories, suffer from misrecognition: it is because a veritable ethics of *care* cannot exist without social transformation. The ethics of *care* gives concrete and ordinary questions—*who is taking care of whom, and how?*—the force and relevance necessary for critically examining our political and moral judgments.

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