

ETHICS OF CARE AND EMOTIONS

ELENA PULCINI

Dipartimento di Scienze politiche e sociali

Università di Firenze

elena.pulcini@unifi.it

ABSTRACT

What unites the ethics of care theorists (since Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*) is their enhancement of the affective dimension. However, their reference to the emotions remains generic. I propose to investigate this aspect further by asking: what emotions motivate care? I will affirm, first, the need to distinguish between the different emotions (such as love, compassion, or generosity) that motivate care in its various forms (private, social, global), in order to distinguish between the emancipatory and negative aspects of care; second, I will try to identify what the effectively ethical dimension of care is, by assuming the care towards the distant other (both in space and time), inspired by gratuitousness, as an exemplary case.

KEYWORDS

Care, emotions, empathy, distant other, gratuitousness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its birth, with the text by Carol Gilligan *In a Different Voice*,¹ the ethics of care has given an important role to the topic of the emotions, starting from the critique of the liberal paradigm of justice. Female care theorists denounce the abstract and rationalistic nature of the ethics of justice, based on the individualistic presuppositions of rights and autonomy, and propose integrating it with the ethics of care, namely, with a perspective that aims to underscore the importance of relationships and interdependence, and consequently the essential role of sentiments and emotions.

While agreeing with this ethical approach, I would like to underline two problematic aspects. The first one lies in the fact that it identifies tout court the ethics of justice with the traditional liberal paradigm (particularly Rawls and neocontractualism), and this precludes the possibility of thinking a

¹ C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1982.

different paradigm that can take into account potentially emotional foundations to justice, as Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen have effectively shown.² Just think of the role of indignation in the struggle against injustice, or compassion for those who are victims of humiliation as the emotional basis of the demand for justice. In short, I would like to emphasize that the moral role of emotions is not exclusive to the ethics of care, and that it may even be a prerequisite for thinking a different idea of justice which can correct the rationalistic vision of the hegemonic paradigm.

However, this is not what I intend to focus on here. Instead, I want to underline the second problematic aspect, which concerns not so much the distinction between the emotions of justice and the emotions of care as the distinction between the emotions that inspire care.

The problem consists in the fact that, while care theorists do underline the importance of the affective element for an ethics of care, they give a generic meaning to the affective and emotional dimension. We will see shortly why I believe this distinction is important. But first I would like, albeit briefly, to make some preliminary considerations on the link between emotions and ethics.

There seems to be no doubt, as has been the case for some decades now, as to the cognitive function of emotions and the need to overcome the traditional reason/emotions dualism. Emotions are not blind and irrational forces; they are not, in the words of Jon Elster³, «sand in the machinery» of rationality, but the motivational forces that presuppose the beliefs and judgements guiding our actions and our choices, both at individual and social level. The definition of Martha Nussbaum of emotions as «upheavals of thought»⁴, with their own peculiar intelligence, appears particularly convincing in this regard. Indeed, Nussbaum proposes a cognitive-evaluative conception of the emotions. However, while it may be true that emotions always imply assessment, it is more difficult, as Nussbaum herself says, to understand whether and to what extent they allow a good evaluation; that is, what their role or contribution can be in an ethical perspective.

In other words, can we say that emotions drive us to act ethically? And, if so, what kind of emotions?

² M. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2006; A. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, London, Allen Lane, 2009.

³ J. Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind. Rationality and Emotions*, Cambridge (MA), Cambridge University Press, 1999.

⁴ M. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought. The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Modern and liberal philosophical thought, starting from Hobbes, gave us the idea that individuals are motivated primarily by self-interest and selfish emotions; and that the ethical response can only be entrusted to rational strategies and norms. However, recently we have seen the reevaluation of a different school of thought, namely moral sentimentalism, which develops the ideas of David Hume, Adam Smith and Max Scheler, and affirms the existence of other and different motives for action; motives such as benevolence, generosity and compassion, which have their origin in that peculiar emotional quality that is sympathy, namely, the ability to feel the emotions of another person. According to this perspective which tends towards a critique of moral rationalism⁵, it is starting with our moral sentiments as a constitutive part of human nature that we are able to make judgements about what is good and right, and act accordingly.

This belief is confirmed today, as we know, in the scientific research of psychologists and biologists, and especially in the discoveries of neuroscience (such as the well-known mirror neurons), which reveal the universal fact that we have the ability to «feel the other». In other words, we are able to feel the other through what is called empathy, a term that for many authors coincides with that of Humean and Smithian sympathy, and that means the ability to participate sympathetically in the emotions of the other⁶.

If it is true then, as we learn from this new perspective of research, that there is an indisputable link between emotions and morality, there is also no doubt that this opens up a number of questions: what are the moral sentiments? How can we distinguish them from the emotions in a broader sense? What makes them properly moral?

I cannot, of course, go deeply into this matter here, but I want to emphasize three aspects which, as we shall see, are relevant to the link between emotions and forms of care.

First, moral feelings are, in my opinion, not only «positive» feelings, according to the tradition of moral sentimentalism, but also those passions that are traditionally considered «negative», like, for instance, indignation, which I have already mentioned with regard to justice; or shame, when it implies self-correcting to avoid the judgement of the other; or even fear, when it becomes fear for, fear for the fate of the other.

⁵ M. Slote, *Moral Sentimentalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010; E. Lecaldano, *Prima lezione di filosofia morale*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2010; S. Nichols, *Sentimental Rules. On the Natural Foundations of Moral Judgment*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁶ F. de Vignemont and P. Jacob, *What Is It like to Feel Another's Pain?*, in «Philosophy of Science», 79 (2012), no. 2.

Second, moral sentiments are not only those inspired by our immediate ability to empathize, but those we submit thoughtfully to our own approval, or better, as suggested by Adam Smith, to the approval of an impartial spectator who represents the hypothetical «moral authority»⁷. In other words, the moral sentiments are the result of our ability to correct the partiality of our immediate sentiments, since we are able to access, through the faculty of imagination, different experiences and contexts, for example –as we will see– feeling empathy for the suffering of unknown and distant persons.

Thirdly, the moral sentiments, as indeed all emotions, are not atomistic and independent structures, but they always work within relationships between people⁸. And this means that, except in extreme cases, people are not either capable or incapable of empathy, because instead this depends on the nature of the relationship with each other.

2. THE EMOTIONS OF CARE

On the basis of these premises we can ask, what are the sentiments that motivate care? As I have already said, the enhancement of the affective dimension as a foundation of ethics is what unites the majority of care theorists. But the reference to the emotional dimension mainly remains generic.

My suggestion is that we need to make deeper distinctions, for at least three fundamental reasons: first of all, to distinguish between the various forms of care (private, social, global) and thus to propose not a single but a more complex concept of care; in second place, to distinguish between the emancipatory and negative aspects of care; in third place, to identify what the effectively ethical dimension of care is.

In other words, addressing the issue of care in terms of emotions allows us to better focus on the image of a good care.

We can say without doubt that care presupposes the capacity for empathy. As Edith Stein said in her seminal text⁹, the empathetic act corresponds to an «awareness» of the other's feelings, while remaining conscious of the difference between oneself and the other. Empathy is what allows us to enter a relationship with the other following the very discovery of her existence. Empathy in other words implies «discovering the other», acknowledging her existence, that she is part of the world which we live in; it implies recognising

⁷ E. Lecaldano, *Prima lezione di filosofia morale*, cit.

⁸ P. Dumouchel, *Y-a-t il des sentiments moraux?*, in «Dialogue», 43 (2004), n. 3.

⁹ E. Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy* (1917), The Hague, M. Nijhoff, 1964.

the other as being different from ourselves, but as having sentiments, thoughts, desires, like us.

Therefore, there is no doubt that empathy is the precondition for care, as proposed in particular by Michael Slote, through his concept of an empathetic care¹⁰. Nevertheless, we can equally assert that empathy is also at the origin of our demand for justice¹¹. This means that empathy is definitely the necessary condition in order to think of subjects who recognize themselves as constitutively in relation with the other. However, it is not sufficient to explain the different emotional configurations that characterize the relationship with the other.¹² In other words, empathy can give rise to a variety of emotions, and each time this depends on who the other is and on the type of relationship binding us with her.

In my opinion, we can identify at least three models of caring relationships in which the figure of the other differs each time, three typologies that are not meant to exhaust the multiplicity of forms of care,¹³ but which allow us to focus on the diversity of motivations, (a) a private form, care out of love, that is, care towards someone to whom we are linked by a private personal relationship (husband/wife/son/daughter, friend, brother/sister); (b) a social form, welfare care, that is, care for the disabled, ill, elderly; and that which concerns what we call «care work»; (c) a global form, care towards the unknown other, whether «distant» in space (people who live in poor and disadvantaged countries), or in time (future generations).

Which emotions underlie each of these relationships? Love, compassion, generosity? And what gives a truly ethical value to these emotions?

It would take too long here to analyse the first two forms of care, based respectively on love and compassion, for which I prefer to refer to a wider version of my recently published paper¹⁴. Instead, I would just like to point out that the moral value of each of these two forms of care, both founded on the face-to-face relationship is, so to say, quite limited, in the first case by the fact that love, the emotional bond with the other, exists prior to the care relationship; in the second, by the fact that the compassion of the caregiver for

¹⁰ M. Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*, London-New York, Routledge, 2007.

¹¹ M. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, cit.

¹² Nussbaum (*Frontiers of Justice*, cit., p. 302) is right when she claims that empathy is morally neutral since it is simply «imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience», distinguishing it from compassion, which I will come to later.

¹³ On the multiplicity of caring relationships (in the family and friendships, with neighbours and strangers, etc.), see M. Barnes, *Care in Everyday Life. An Ethic of Care in Practice*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2012.

¹⁴ E. Pulcini, *What Emotions motivate care*, in «Emotion Review», first published (2016), January 21.

the care receiver - which is essential for good care - however coexists with an economic and remunerative aspect.

3. CARE TOWARDS THE DISTANT OTHER

I now come to the third form of care that I would particularly like to pay attention to, because it requires an extension of the figure of the other.

Today, the other is not just the family member, loved one, or the needy person to aid in a face-to-face relationship, it is also the unknown and distant other. What do I mean by the unknown and distant other?¹⁵ We can say that it is a distinctly contemporary figure, emerging in correspondence with globalized society and its unprecedented transformations. Today we live in an interdependent world in which distant people become important to us, that is, people who are distant both in space and in time. In the first case, I am alluding above all to the poor and disadvantaged peoples of the planet, afflicted by wars, hunger or famines; but also to people affected by a catastrophe or a dramatic collective event (earthquake, tsunami, environmental disaster). In the second case, I am alluding to future generations, to those who will inherit the world as we hand it to them.

Before asking what the motivations are behind caring for the distant other, we must ask whether the ethics of care can be extended to the distant other. Despite the scepticism prevailing among care theorists, who conceive of care as a face-to-face relationship, we must take into consideration the change in the very concept of distance in the global age¹⁶. Globalization in fact reduces distance because it produces an unprecedented condition of interdependence in virtue of what has been called a «time-space compression»¹⁷.

In other words, globalization implies that not only those who live in our area become potentially significant for us, but also those who live in countries thus far considered alien and remote, since it breaks down the boundaries between an inside and outside¹⁸ and means that for the first time the stranger objectively becomes, to use again Nussbaum's words, part of our «circle of concern». This means that we can recognize not just the legitimacy, but also

¹⁵ The *unknown* other is a concept that already appeared several decades ago in the reflection of the gift theorists (see J. Godbout and A. Caillé, *The World of the Gift*, Montreal, McGill/Queens University Press, 2001), but not specifically linked to the problem of *distance*.

¹⁶ F. Robinson, *Globalizing Care, Ethics, Feminist Theory, and International Relations*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1999.

¹⁷ D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, London, Basil Blackwell, 1989.

¹⁸ E. Pulcini, *Care of the World. Fear, Responsibility and Justice in the Global Age*, Netherlands, Springer, 2012.

the necessity to expand the ethics of care to those who live in disadvantaged conditions in far-off parts of the planet¹⁹.

But the question is, what motivations can drive human beings to recognize this objective condition? And consequently to take action for people to whom they are not bound by either a personal or professional relationship, to be concerned about their needs, to take their suffering and destiny to heart? What motivations and passions come into play in the case of the distant other?

4. THE OTHER DISTANT IN SPACE

In the first case, that is, in the case of the other distant in space, it seems plausible to again assume the emergence of compassion. It is true that compassion involves the proximity of the other, the face-to-face relationship. However, we can assume it in a wider sense, as love for humankind²⁰, a sense of sharing suffering that is prompted by recognizing a common belonging to humankind.

While it may be, as I suggested at the beginning, that through imagination we can access different and far-off experiences, this also means that we can extend our feelings to people and situations that are not part of our immediate proximity. Globalization, in other words, objectively promotes our capability to expand the figure of the other, whom we make the object of our moral sentiments.

In this sense, we can agree with the proposal by sociologist Luc Boltanski²¹ who has made a strong reappraisal of what he defines as a «politics of pity». He proposes a firm and urgent retrieval of the politics of pity in the face of the current explosion of the «question of humanitarianism» and the impelling problems that it poses. At the same time, he indicates the necessity to rethink it in new terms owing to the paradoxical reality that it is now called upon to resolve. Indeed, the paradox consists of the “distant suffering”, namely of the fact that the global age introduces a distance between the spectator and the person suffering. As a consequence, he wonders, what form can engagement

¹⁹ As Held (*The Ethics of Care, Personal, Political, and Global*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 66) says, «the care that is valued by the ethics of care – and to be justifiable must – include caring for distant others in an interdependent world, and caring that the rights of all are respected and their needs met. It must include caring that the environment in which embodied human beings reside is well cared for».

²⁰ E. Hillesum, *The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943*, Ottawa (ON), Novalis Saint Paul University, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002.

²¹ L. Boltanski, *Distant Suffering, Morality, Media and Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

assume when the person who should act is distant from the person suffering, and when we only become aware of others' suffering insofar as it is transmitted by mass media information and images? It is here, in the 'paradoxical treatment of distance' that the role of the emotions is fundamental. Indeed, it is conceivable that the spectators can be coordinated through «speech», through communication to others in the public space about what one has seen (for example, in television images). But this speech is «affected», which implies the involvement of the spectator's emotions before the spectacle of suffering, thereby favouring the passage from individual speech to collective commitment²².

While sharing the proposal of Boltanski, I would like to suggest, however, that this passage to commitment is probably more complex than he seems to think. I will come back shortly to this aspect, which moreover also relates to the second figure of the distant other, that is to say the other distant in time.

5. THE OTHER DISTANT IN TIME

The problem of the other distant in time has been dealt with by philosophical reflection since the second half of the twentieth century, in view of the new challenges posted by the age of technology and the risks that it produces in a global world. In particular I am thinking of the philosopher Hans Jonas²³ who for the first time grasped that an ecological crisis was coming to pass due to the hubris of the modern individual, to the unlimited action of homo faber and his Promethean omnipotence. Against the evils produced by the technological age and the danger of humankind's self-destruction, Jonas put forward an ethics of care and responsibility that restores sense and purpose to action and drives individuals to take charge of the future, and posterity. In the face of the spectre of a «loss of the world», Jonas says that the only answer is responsible action that enables us to regain the sense of a limit and give future generations a world in which life is worthy of being lived.

I think it is clear that in this case we cannot entrust compassion as the motivation for an ethics of care and responsibility towards the not-yet-born; because compassion nevertheless needs the other's presence, even if far away, it needs to see the other's fragility and suffering.

²² Ibidem, p. xvi.

²³ H. Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1985.

We could instead agree with some recent reflections, such as that of Jeremy Rifkin²⁴ and Peter Singer²⁵, when they point out the importance of empathy today, suggesting that the global age creates the objective conditions for the awakening of an empathic consciousness. The fact that we live in an interdependent world produces the awareness that we are part of one humankind, facing the same challenges and the same fate, and above all united by the same condition of vulnerability.

I have said, however, that empathy is only the presupposition for moral action, that it is not sufficient, by itself, to create a motivation, unless it is translated, from time to time, into a particular emotion. Therefore, we can take up Jonas' proposal when he sees fear as the emotional source of an ethics of responsibility; an empathetic fear, we could say, which essentially appears not only as a fear of, but rather as a «fear for», for the other and for future humankind, to whom we feel linked by an intergenerational chain.

This is, in other words, an exemplary case of a «negative» emotion, such as fear, which may result in a moral sentiment; provided that we are able, as I suggested at beginning, to activate the faculty of imagination, detach ourselves from the immediacy of the present, foresee future scenarios and imagine the possible catastrophe of humankind.

However, here arises a difficulty common to both figures of the distant other, which concerns the subsequent passage to commitment and care. While supposing that these passions (compassion, fear) will arise in the case of the unknown and distant other, nevertheless the risk is that it will stall at the purely emotional dimension, the spectator's commotion talked about by Boltanski in the face of media images of the distant suffering, or the virtuous fear hoped for by Jonas of individuals aware of the risks of humankind, may in other words only go so far. That is to say, we may only feel these emotions, they may not be transformed into the engagement and mobilization that give rise to care. Indeed, in this third case there is neither a loving affection that concretely links me to the other, nor a professional interest, nor, even less, the cogency of a duty.

So, what I would like to sustain is that, in order to pass to care, a giving attitude is required which, I shall point out right away, must not be understood as pure altruism, it is rather a disposition towards gratuitousness that not only implies recognizing our own vulnerability, but also that we are ontologically

²⁴ J. Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilisation. The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2009.

²⁵ P. Singer, *The Expanding Circle. Ethics, Evolution, and Moral Progress*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011.

indebted towards each other. Attention, solidarity and solicitude towards the other derive from the fact that we are, and we recognize ourselves, as being involved in a cycle of reciprocity, or better in a circle of enlarged reciprocity, within which everyone gives to the other that which she in turn has received or which she may always potentially, plausibly receive.

And this is the logic of the gift – as proposed by the authors of MAUSS (Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste en Sciences Sociales) – which works in the social field to assert and fuel the value of the bond and belonging²⁶. In this case care presupposes an inclination towards gratuitousness, gratuitous action, starting from the emotionally based awareness of the value of the bond and sharing. Moreover, it is this aspect that sets it apart from the ethics of justice, while this presupposes a symmetrical reciprocity inspired, as the philosopher Paul Ricoeur²⁷ says, by a «logic of equivalence» (to re-establish a balance, right a wrong or violation of a right, assert a principle of fairness), the gift presupposes a «logic of superabundance» which takes no notice of symmetry in the relationship with the other.

And, what is even more important, the gift, such as care, is a practice, a concrete and effective act, involvement and commitment. It is the active response to individualism which re-establishes the universal values of belonging, reciprocity and sharing. It is the expectation and creation of a bond which implies getting involved in a network of relationships.

What I would like to suggest, to conclude, is that this third form of care is of a truly moral kind because it is neither preceded by a personal feeling towards the other, nor «contaminated» by a monetary aspect. It is inspired by emotions and feelings, but does not always require the sight of the other's suffering in order to be put into motion. It keeps the distinctive quality of engagement, praxis and experience, but it is also something more, as it becomes an everyday way of living, a permanent form of action, capable of affecting the various spheres of our lives. And above all, it comes from the awareness that we can only ensure a future for the next generations if we act here and now, in the immediacy of the present²⁸.

²⁶ M. Mauss, *The Gift* (1923), London, Routledge, 2002; J. Godbout and A. Caillé, *The World of the Gift*, cit.

²⁷ P. Ricoeur, *Love and Justice*, in P. Ricoeur and R. Kearney (eds.), *The Hermeneutics of Action*, London, Sage, 1996.

²⁸ The subject analysed in this paper is part of a book I am writing on care and justice, to be entitled, *Care and Justice. The emotions as a social resource*. This paper corresponds, with some variations, to my presentation at the Centre for Global Cooperation, University of Duisburg-Essen, in April 2014

FURTHER READING

- L. Boella, *Sentire l'altro*, Milano, Cortina, 2006.
- C. Card, Caring and Evil. Caring, *A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education by Nel Noddings*, *Hypatia*, 5 (1990), n. 1.
- B. Casalini, *Il care tra lavoro affettivo e lavoro di riproduzione sociale*, in «La società degli individui», 46 (2013).
- H. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004.
- B. Ehrenreich and A. Russell Hochschild (eds.), *Global Woman, Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, Metropolitan Books, New York, 2004.
- A. Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1992.
- M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Empire*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2001.
- M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Multitude. War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, New York, Penguin Press, 2004.
- E. Kittay, *Love's Labor. Essays in Women, Equality and Dependency*, New York, Routledge, 1999.
- S. Laugier and P. Paperman (eds.), *Le Souci des autres. Éthique et politique du care*, Paris, EHESS, 2006.
- N. Noddings, *Caring, A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984.
- P. Paperman, *Care et sentiments*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2013.
- E. Pulcini, *The Individual without Passions. Modern Individual and the Loss of the Social Bond*, Lanham, Lexington, 2012b.
- E. Pulcini, *Care of the World. Fear, Responsibility and Justice in the Global Age*, Springer 2012
- W. M. Reddy, *Historical research on Self and Emotions*, in «Emotion Review», 1 (2009), no. 4.
- J. J. Rousseau, *Emile or on Education* (1762), New York, Basic Books, 1979.
- A. Russel Hochschild, *The Nanny Chain*, in «American Prospects», (2002), November.
- P. Stenner, *Emotions and Rights or, on the Importance of Having the Right Emotions*, *History and Philosophy of Psychology*, 7 (2005), no. 1.
- J. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries. A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, London, Routledge, 1993.
- V. A. Zelizer, *Caring Everywhere*, in R. Parreñas and E. Boris (eds.), *Intimate Labors, Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2010.
- M. K. Zimmerman, J. Litt, and C. E. Bose (eds.), *Global Dimensions of Gender and Carework*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2006.