

Questions for International Care Ethicists

Answers by Dr. Dominique Héту, htu@ualberta.ca

1. Where are you working at this moment?

I am doing my postdoctoral fellowship at the Canadian Literature Center, at the University of Alberta, in Edmonton, Canada.

2. Can you tell us about your research and its relation to the ethics of care?

My postdoctoral project aims at developing the idea of posthuman care, which I situate within a theoretical framework shaped by critical posthumanism, feminist care ethics, ordinary ethics, and contemporary literature (mostly Canadian creative works). This is rooted in new materialist posthumanist feminist philosophies and in my critical readings of fictional pieces that dramatize intersubjective relationships marked by different experiences of precarity, but whose imaginary worlds also breach boundaries between human, nonhuman, life, and death. Not only am I suggesting that care ethics shares points of tension with critical posthumanism, but I am also trying to show how the particular, imagined human and nonhuman interdependencies and encounters problematize and challenge naturalized social hierarchies and oppressions as well as allow a differentiated attentiveness to socio-spatial power forces that govern majority ethics. It is thus a posthuman care that directs attention to how the “self is materially connected to the rest of the world, in affinity with its other subjects” (Vint 189). What my corpus of novels and short stories exposes and bring into focus is thus an “accountable posthumanism ... that can embrace multiplicity and partial perspective, a posthumanism that is not threatened by others” (189).

Moreover, I am interested in how characters are made to respond to experiences of dependency by preserving, transforming, and fostering relational comfort. The stories I am interested in weave discourses of violence, oppression, healing, and becoming by stressing the “turbulent processes” of life and by exemplifying the difficulties that come with difference and with emotional, moral responses. The literary texts also illustrate, through their representations of care gestures that are at times helpful and at others harmful, the constant ambivalence of care and the importance of not idealizing interdependency and relationality.

Care ethics is particularly relevant for my research because I am concerned with issues of solidarity, responsibility, accountability, ordinary life, and feminism. Critical posthumanism has helped complicate the scope of these issues in relationships, interdependencies, and ethicalities that the selected literary texts render visible and reimagine. The latter, rather than strictly exemplifying theory and philosophy, expose the many entanglements of caring agencies and the “interweaving of living things” (de la Bellacasa 161) in a way that is specific to literature.

Accordingly, on the one hand, I am also working on circumscribing the literary traditions that contribute to the emergence of feminist care ethics as key critical field for understanding and challenging contemporary events and for thinking, collectively and in solidarity, about “what matters.” On the other, I want to stress how the discourses of the ethics of care allow

conceptualizing and reinforcing literature as ethical and poetic expression of what Amelia De Falco names “the impossibility of disconnected, autonomous human existence” (166). Especially in terms of posthuman care, I am working on/with literature as a response to the myth of human independency, as it serves to raise awareness, through ideas like empathy (Pulcini, Slote, Nussbaum), ordinary life (Das), and wonder (La Caze, Economides), about the role of care (understood as a fundamental “parameter of existence” (de la Bellacasa)) in defeating oppression and sustaining ethical, good life. Another related objective is thus to bring the notion of wonder and the field of ordinary ethics in the conversation to better frame a contemporary “poethics” of care (Deschênes) that engages with “human survival and happiness” and with the experience of being as “always to be following (something, someone), always to be in response to call from something, however nonhuman it may be” (Bennett xiii). Finally, in line with a care ethics methodology, literature as a form of ethical response or even as a form of care should not be idealized: not all forms of care stem from an ethical, responsible, and/or well-intentioned position.

3. How did you get involved with the ethics of care?

I got involved with the ethics of care while preparing my dissertation project on the aporetic figure of home in contemporary novels written by women. I was interested in home as a network of relationships, as an experience of solidarity, of relationality, and of ethical commitment to relational spaces, but I was unable to anchor these fictional experiences in a framework that directly addressed, simultaneously, the moral charge of emotional work as well as its material dispositions and entanglements. After submitting my project to my supervisor, she noticed that I was less interested in the problematic representations of home than in the ethicalities of lived experience, and more precisely in the shared, relational experiences of lived space. She recommended Tronto’s *Moral Boundaries* and Sandra Laugier’s *Le souci des autres*. These two books gave me access to a field of research that completely changed my perspective on scholarly work as well as my approach to literature and to thinking lived space and relationships.

More precisely, I came to care ethics through my use of the fields of emotional and human geography, ordinary ethics, and critical posthumanism. These research areas gave me tools to better read seven North-American novels in which I studied the figuration of “geographies of care.” My configuration of geographies of care, along with my theorization of posthuman care, resonate with a “feminist impetus” (Braidotti 8) and, much like Astrida Neimanis’s bodies of water, they are “not arbitrary, but arise in response to a particular contemporary question or problem” (8): my inquiry is rooted in the resurgence of the theme of vulnerability (Ferrarese 132) and in an ethical and political “rethinking [of] bodily matters beyond a humanist imagination” (Neimanis 9).

4. How would you define ethics of care?

Simply put, care ethics is an ethico-political engagement to live with others and to understand and work against global and local systems of domination. I owe my conceptualization of care-related experiences and ethicalities to care ethicists like Joan Tronto, Selma Sevenhuijsen, and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, and to feminist thinkers like Sarah Ahmed, Karen Barad, and Jane Bennett, who, despite not being care ethicists, helped me widen the scope of singular, relational experiences affected by care and by ethical responses. Relying on the work of anthropologist Veena Das and philosopher Sandra Laugier,

I also include in this definition the important place of the ordinary – the taken for granted, the invisible, the small gestures and attitudes. I think a solid definition of care ethics must also rely on feminisms and on the diversity of women experience in a variety of contexts. Hence a definition of care ethics includes the importance of particularity, of concrete lives in thinking the modalities of care such as vulnerability, responsibility, recognition, care work, and emotional labour. A definition of care ethics should thus also take into consideration the necessary intersectional component of a care ethics methodology, and I hope that in the years to come we will have access to a more diverse body of work on care ethics to better understand, represent, and situate the many realities and experiences of the “contemporary global crisis of care” (Hamington).

5. What is/are the most important thing(s) you learned from the ethics of care?

From a literary perspective, becoming familiar with the ethics of care marks a shift in my approach to reading and to doing critical work on literature. It has taught me how to listen properly to the voices in the texts. First, it has confirmed or validated the importance of shedding light on and reading stories that show the complexities of ethical response and attention – a *differentiated*, situated, contextualized response that is always accountable – to fragile human and nonhuman forms and expressions of vulnerability, and to minoritized, diminished, invisibilized lives. It has helped me to focus on how care, as a transformative, representational, and affective tool in the selected narratives, allows, despite the frequent inadequacy of caregiving (De Falco 7), to imagine more inclusive living environments that take the particularities of experience into consideration. I also came to understand how a care ethics approach to literature provides necessary conceptual keys for reading and interpreting disability, class-related issues, sex-gendered issues, and other experiences and situations marked by oppression, dependency, and asymmetrical care relations. Second, a care ethics approach to literature has brought renewed attention to the practice of literary studies and critical reading by doing more than just exemplifying moral philosophy and “showing” or “representing” situations of care, whether helpful or harmful. Expanding Nussbaum’s theory of education through imagination – and keeping in mind that she has rejected care ethics –, I think that care and its modalities (responsibility, recognition, tending to, etc.) help to account for a literature that triggers emotions and wonder, that calls out to readers and critics, that seems to fit closely with its time in a way that is often critical and well thought out, and thus that also takes charge of it, hereby doing philosophical and ethical work that is not easy to do in traditional philosophy. Accordingly, drawing on Cora Diamond and literary scholar Marie Carrière, care and literature sustain one another, and it is possible and easier, with literature, to develop a capacity for understanding the unthinkable, or at least for decoding and uttering the unendurable. Literature gives access to an aspect of ethical life that has a place or potential for expression only in literature: the fact that certain elements of reality are unbearable, cannot be thought or configured except with great difficulty in philosophy (Diamond). Hence, while the poetics of care and the critical use of care in literature operate on different levels, they are both committed to investing a fundamental value of literature and more widely of the humanities: a desire to assert and expand the contribution of cultural productions to contemporary thought about our shared human entanglements and vulnerabilities.

6. Whom do you consider to be your most important/inspiring teacher(s) in this area and why so?

In my attempts to develop a feminist care ethics in the field of literature, I have learned a lot from the work of Selma Sevenhuijsen, Joan Tronto, Iris Marion Young, Seyla Benhabib, and Sandra Laugier. The writings of Veena Das on ordinary ethics and of Amelia DeFalco on care in Canadian literature have also been key in my work.

7. What works in the ethics of care do you consider to be the most important and why so?

Joan Tronto's *Moral Boundaries*, for its illuminating weaving of ethics and politics of care. Sandra Laugier's immense body of work has been very helpful and has opened many doors for me. Virginia Held's *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global* is another book to which I've returned again and again.

8. Which of your own books/articles should we read?

My articles on geographies of care in literature are available in the Canadian journals *Canadian Literature*, [Nouvelles vues](#), [Mosaic](#), and [Transverse](#). Some are in French, but my [dissertation](#) is available in English: *Geographies of Care and Posthuman Relationality in North American Fiction by Women*. I have a chapter on care ethics in the upcoming book *Comparative Literature for the New Century*, edited by Giulia De Gasperi and Joseph Pivato and soon to be published at McGill-Queen's. I am also co-editing an upcoming issue on the poetics of care in French-Quebecois literary journal *temps zero* and I am also working on and editing an issue on care ethics and Canadian literature.

9. What do you perceive as burning issues that you would like to draw attention to?

It seems that our contemporary world is putting heavier weight on the shoulders of precarious groups, and there is growing interest for developing intersectional methodologies and perspectives that could help counter such attacks on the minoritized and hence on democracy. My work also draws attention to the importance and necessity of interdisciplinarity and collaboration: I wish more scholars and fields of research would acknowledge the transversality of care ethics and its key participation in projects that address, either on global or local levels, issues of accountability, responsibility and solidarity.

10. We always welcome new articles. On what topics would you (or your possible students or colleagues) like to contribute?

I would love to publish or encourage my colleagues to publish or engage in collaborative/interdisciplinary work on the interconnections between care ethics and studies in literature (and the arts). There is growing interest for such a conversation, and I would like to involve more interlocutors and share our work beyond Quebec, Canadian, and French borders. Articles could address specific cultural or literary productions, but they could also be about the challenges of developing a caring approach to literature, of using literature to exemplify/amplify care ethics, or to use literature as a form of care ethics. Interviews could also be done between literary scholars who work on such issues.

11. The ambition of www.ethicsofcare.org is to promote ethics of care internationally and to interconnect care ethicists. Do you have any recommendations or wishes that the editorial board members of the website should pay attention to?

A lot of work is being done right now on the ethics of care in Québec and in Canada, both in French and in English, and in a wide range of disciplines. It would be worth paying attention to it, and possibly developing collaborative projects, in solidarity. We could consider posting relevant CFPs on the website or even organizing—if we have the means— events annually or every two years to consolidate the field internationally.