

The relevance of critical insights of postcolonial theory to a political take on care ethics

Jorma Heier

This afternoon, I would like to do some mind contortions with you all. I do not know about you, but I find I have this tendency that when I really love a concept and I am convinced it does a world of good, I tend to see cases for its application everywhere. Such is the case with care theory's fundamental concepts of relationality and responsibility. I can spin almost any phenomenon into a story of relationships and the responsibilities that stems from them. - Sweatshop production of clothes? – Yes, we have a responsibility to care for non-exploitive working conditions because we enter in a relationship with the sewers and seamstresses when we use the clothes they made. – Refugees? – Yes, we have a responsibility to welcome them because we have entered a relationship with them when we colonized them, exploited them or sold their government the weapons that kill them now. - Affordable housing? – Yes, I stand in a socio-structural relation that benefits me with those who are least well-off, so I have the relational responsibility to care with others for affordable housing for all!

Because I have these tried and tested concepts at the ready, it might be I sometimes bring them in too soon and forgo other possible ways to tell the story. And because I am so convinced relationality and responsibility save the day, I am no longer open and sceptic to the harmful effect these concepts might have. I am curious: Do you have concepts that you tend to make use of often and that you are not open to see as problematic in most situations?

This afternoon, I would love to do some brain jogging with you all by looking at the critique that postcolonial theory has towards the concepts of relationality and responsibility. For contextuality, I will relate it to the critical function that Joan Tronto says care has.

In *"Care as a Basis for Radical Political Judgments"* (1995), Joan Tronto argues that care ethics is the preferable contemporary framework for radical political judgment. For Tronto, "the question of which framework for moral and political thought is best is not so much an epistemological [...] question" (Tronto 1995, 141)¹. 20 years later, Tronto slightly revises this statement by including considerations of epistemologies of ignorance into democratic care thinking (2013)². But epistemology gets a mention of

two times only in *Caring Democracy*. Against Tronto's understanding of the negligible status of epistemology in care theory, I would like to suggest that care theory started out as a critical epistemology that added a different, a female* perspective to morality, and that epistemological considerations have therefore been a part of care thinking from its very beginning. In twenty minutes, you will see why this is important for my argumentation.

What recommends care theory for radical and critical political judgments, Tronto argues, is first, that "notions of care make philosophical and political thought considerably more complex", which increases the likelihood that our thinking will "better capture the reality of human experience" (Tronto 1995, 145). And second, care fosters a shift in "what counts as knowledge" in political judgments and "whose voice should count" in it (ibid.). For Tronto, the specificity of care as a political ethics lies in its rejection of an understanding of political inclusion that seeks to "change the participants in a dialogue by inviting the previously excluded to join into pre-existing discourses on issues of justice, fairness, and so on" (ibid.). Instead, care is an invitation to reevaluate what discourses are important and whose voices have the most to contribute to our understandings of them. Care therefore requires those making political judgments to abandon their parochial views and concerns to be genuinely attentive to others (c.f. Tronto 1995, 146). What better way to make good on these requirements than to include the contribution of postcolonial critics into our understandings of relationality and responsibility?

In care thinking, the basic unit from which all other institutions spring is the relationship. If we start our political judgments from the lived experience of actual human beings, as Tronto urges us to do, then relationships, interdependency and responsibility come into view center stage. I can only speak for myself here, of course, but it is precisely this emphasis on relationships, interdependency and responsibility that drew me in to care ethics, in the first place.

It may therefore seem surprising that postcolonial theorists have repeatedly criticized the moral, political and epistemic underpinnings of care, especially its relational ontology and the concept of responsibility that stems from it. My lecture seeks to pick up the constitutional tensions in these two most beloved by me care ethical concepts. I shall argue that care theory will more fully realize its form and promise as a *political* ethics where it manages to include critical insights on the tensions within care from

postcolonial theory.

While feminist accounts of care acknowledge the exclusion of colonized people in accounts of universalism they do not make this a central cornerstone for their understandings of power asymmetries in caring relationships. “Indeed”, Nalinie Mooten argues, “postcolonial feminism has criticized the ethics of care in the same fashion as the ethics of care has criticized the European male-based Enlightenment for its exclusion of women and women’s experiences” (Mooten 2015, 6)³. The feminist ethics of care began by suggesting to take up ethical values that had been traditionally associated with the private sphere such as attentiveness and connectedness and to render them central political values. Nalinie Mooten (2015) suggests taking this politicization one loop of reflection further by taking a critical stance towards the neo-colonial elements in care’s ontology and epistemology. I hope that the incorporation of critical insights from postcolonial theory may help to render care truer to its form as a *political* ethics by thinking, and not just acknowledging, the fundamental contestedness and contingency of political relationships.

1. Relational Ontology and Idealizing of Relationships

Care practices assume as its smallest unit a relationship. This relationship can be between a person and themselves, as in self-care, or it can entail from two persons or beings up to an infinite number of beings in transnational, structural and institutional care. Relationships are founded and maintained by and through care, and they are seen as intrinsically valuable and as worth maintaining. To abandon an established relationship one-sidedly is to commit a harm, that of moral abandonment. Tronto acknowledges that there lies also harm in idealizing care relationships, in which anger and fear might be present. But because this relationship is life-giving and life-sustaining, the desirability of that caring relationship is usually not questioned fundamentally in care ethics, but taken for granted as its founding institution.

This is why postcolonial theorists such as Nalinie Mooten or Pat Noxolo speak of care’s “relational ontology” (Mooten 2015, 8). I take this to mean not that the ontology underlying care is relational, but that relationships have an ontological status within care theories. Ontologies operate with foundational figures of thought, that is, they assume as their starting point a set of “principles”, “laws” or “objective realities” which are “resistant to revision” and withdrawn from the shaping influence of the political

(Marchart 2010, 15; my translation)⁴. Foundational figures of thought seek to immunize themselves against critical questionings and examinations of their presumably irrevocable groundings of society.

A non-ontological way to think groundings is to assume with Oliver Marchart that all foundations are “*contingent foundations*” (ibid, Marchart’s italics) or partial groundings that occur as supplements in the absence of an ultimate grounding, in the form of a “plurality of partial grounds” (Marchart 2007, 8). Postcolonial critics of care seek to supplement the relational grounding of care with critical insights into the tensions inherent in post_colonial relationships, and, I would like to add, all structurally unequal relationships.

According to Tronto, care’s relational ontology provides a “very different set of standards for desert: people are entitled to what they need because they need it; people are entitled to care because they are part of ongoing relations of care” (Tronto 1995, 146). Postcolonial theorists counter that care’s relational ontology paints an idealized and not sufficiently complex picture of care relationships, which in real life experience are oftentimes a “far cry from the ‘milk-and cookies’ kind” (Mooten 2015, 9). While I would generally ascribe an uncritical appraisal of relationships only to some of the first generation accounts of care which think about care as a dyadic relationship that is modelled on an idealized version of mothering that brackets abuse, violence and neglect out of the picture, I still find five partial critiques of relationality in care to hold:

1. Relationality is posited as an ontological, superhistorical starting point of care that simply “is”

Ontology-critical authors point out that whether or not there exists a relationship at all between different parties is at the heart of political disagreement, and can therefore not be preempted. Uma Narayan adds that even where all parties agree there really is a common relationship between them, it still matters what accounts are being made of that relationship. In the context of colonialism and neocolonialism, the account that is made of the relationship between colonizers and colonized is a harmful one that depicts ‘caring Europeans’ bringing the ‘blessings of modernity and civilization’ to the ‘childlike and helpless uncivilized’. The relationship between colonizers and colonized ‘is’ not simply ‘there’, it is founded and shaped by paternalism_maternalism, violence, violation, injustice, inequality and dehumanization.

2. Relationships are not portrayed as entangled histories

The term relationship evokes notions of mutuality and equally sharing in them. Postcolonial theorists reject this imagery in favor of a more “messy”, “complex”, and “unsettling” (Randeria 2002, 4-5)⁵ picture, and make use of the concept of “entangled histories” that are unevenly shared, instead. Entangled histories render visible that the emancipation of middle class Euro_American women is made possible through the employment of migrant in-house care workers from the Global South or that, to quote Shalini Randeria, the “modernist narrative of a progressive secularization of Europe [is contemporaneous with] the fervent missionary activities of modern Europeans in the colonies” (Randeria 2002, 11). The perspective of entangled histories does not privilege the European angle of the history effecting both colonizers and the colonized, and therefore shuns “methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism” (ibid.). Relationships between colonizers and colonized are seen as mutually constitutive, but in unequal ways and with unequal enablements and constraints resulting from it.

3. The spatiality and temporality of relationships are not considered

Post-colonial relationships must be framed, Pat Noxolo et al. argue, in the “specificities of transnational inter-relationships between different people, places and spaces” (Noxolo et al. 2011, 419)⁶. Such a perspective renders visible that there is oftentimes precisely a “disconnection” between metropolises and post_colonies. At the same time, it draws connecting lines that recognize social-structural relations and shared responsibilities distributed across complex webs of causation and agency within the “‘power-geometries’ of relational space” (Noxolo et al. 2011, 418).

Attention to the temporality of the post_colonial relationship entails a backward-looking stance which shows how the history of imperialism and colonization has shaped the unequal relationships between beneficiaries and sufferers of colonialism and the ongoing asymmetry in relationships that neocolonialism and eurocentrism beget in the present. Attempts to fix colonization securely in the past are therefore ejected. A critical forward-looking stance seeks to pinpoint needs for positive change and improvement in the post_colonial relationships so that neo_colonization may cease to inform global relations.

4. The power dimension is not sufficiently analyzed

Postcolonial critics of care do not mean to state that care is “always domineering or oppressive, but that it contains the potential to be so” (Mooten 2015, 8). This is due, Mooten points out, to a “static moment” (ibid.) in care’s relational ontology: “By adopting a static notion of care, the ‘care-giver’ and ‘the recipient of care’ can thus also be substituted for ‘dominant’ and ‘inferior’, ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’, ‘powerful’ and ‘weak’” (Mooten 2015, 8). Because interdependence and vulnerability are posited as ontological parts of the human condition, it becomes hard to distinguish unequal degrees of dependency and vulnerability that are caused by oppression or domination. Moreover, the vulnerability in the postcolonial relationship, Gayatri Spivak argues, is a very specific form of fragility, in which the postcolonial subject hopes that “the Other will alter the very structure that produced [them]” (Mooten 2015, 13). And postcolonial feminists criticize care for “identifying primarily with the experiences of white middle-class women” (ibid.). Care ethicist should embrace more plural conceptions of what gendered and racialized realities in care look like, and consciously underline “the privileged language and position the metropolitan feminist embodies” (Mooten 2015, 13) when writing about care.

5. Opting out of relationships is not an acceptable or desirable option

For postcolonial critics, the ethics of care with its “underlying relational ontology” and contemporary neo-colonial global relations of care are “inevitably connected” (Mooten 2015, 1), as e.g. in the global care chain. This is further aggravated by the underlying notion in care that one should not abandon relationships. Instead, the ideal is posited that one should engage with the other politically. Because care’s focus is on the maintenance of relationships, Tronto has problematized that it entails a “conservative quality” (Tronto 1987, 660)⁷. This conservative quality becomes problematic in the colonial context, as the interconnectedness was forced onto the colonized by use of violence, and colonized subjects may wish to discontinue the relationship with the colonizers. As Uma Narayan has pointed out, colonial caring relationships are enwrought with domination, paternalism_maternalism, inequality, and responsibility as a false sense of a “world-historic mission” (Narayan 1995, 134-135)⁸.

Noxolo and others therefore argue that for one, Euro_American care ethicists should allow room for “some spaces, times, places, peoples and relationships [... that are] not

entirely determined through their relations with the north” (Noxolo et al 2011, 425) and therefore apart from the North, and for another, acknowledge that some post_colonies might want to “actively refuse some forms of [...] relationships that northern academics want to imagine” (ibid.), and part ways with the North. Care ethics in its current form can only subsume these cases under ‘moral abandonment’ (Tronto 2013, Walker 2006)⁹.

II. Responsibility

The work that the concept of responsibility does is to relate people across groups, time and space and to make them accountable to each other for their actions and omissions. Responsibility formulates care’s strong imperative not to turn away from someone in need, especially when one is related to the harm they suffer, and not to morally abandon people. Drawing on fellow traveler Iris Young’s writings, there are even care ethical works that connect refugees from post_colonies fleeing to Euro_America to colonial and neocolonial wrongdoing such as free-trade associations and sweatshops. So why then do postcolonial theorists take issue with the concept of responsibility in care ethics?

Uma Narayan (1995) and Gayatri Spivak (2004)¹⁰ criticize a paternalism_maternalism and a hierarchical relationship of superiority and inferiority inherent in responsibility. For Narayan, the concept of responsibility is one of the central discursive weapons that the colonizers wielded against the colonized. Paternalistic and maternalistic caring in the colonial context “included both a sense of obligation to confer the benefits of western civilization on the colonized, and a sense of being burdened with the responsibility for doing so” (Narayan 1995, 123). This paternalism_maternalism continues in today’s post_colonial relationships. Spivak argues that responsibility may carry within itself a social Darwinist agenda – the fittest must [assume responsibility to, J.H.] shoulder the burden of righting the wrongs of the unfit” (Spivak 2004, 524). There is a recurring pattern of asymmetry involved in today’s transnational relations whereby some nation-states are always righting wrongs, while others are always committing them, with the line of demarcation running along the global North-South divide. Groups in the global North are perceived to dispense justice and to right wrongs that “proliferate with unsurprising regularity” among the “notorious receivers of justice” in the global South (2004, 530). Responsibility in this sense is always possibly an alibi for economic, military, and political intervention. This is further intensified through

responsibility's implicit call to action: once responsibility is accepted, the "failure to act can", Noxolo argues, "become a marker of irresponsibility" (Noxolo et. al. 2012, 421).

A further critique concerns the lack of measures for the successful fulfillment or responsibilities. Oftentimes, that action was taken on at all will suffice as criteria. As a result, to Noxolo "language of responsibility can be adopted even when misuse of the language of responsibility takes on the form of "violent or juridical action that can leave real bodies either dead or in need of care" (ibid.). These responses by powerful governments may be rejected as the maintenance of unequal power relations by those acted upon. There exists therefore also a "need for a politics of refusal" (ibid.) of responsibility in some cases.

This is especially crucial since the Spivakian social Darwinism is closely tied to a deprivation of agency. Pat Noxolo, Parvati Raghuram and Clare Madge note that calls to responsibility are oftentimes accompanied by issues of "voice, address, and agency" (Noxolo et.al. 2012, 420). "Both the speakers and those called to be responsible seem to be located in the First World, while those they are responsible for appear to be 'poor Third World subjects'" (ibid.). Relationships of asymmetrical power are thusly reified. And the call to responsibility may therefore arise out of an "unevenness of relationships" (Noxolo et. al. 2012, 421).

Noxolo and others. further criticize that the concept of responsibility operates at a high level of abstraction. To make matters worse, there are no defined corresponding practices associated with responsibility. In contrast to care, there is no "responsibility work" – and therefore, there are no institutional parameters for assessing responsible action" (ibid.). Worse still, responsibility, especially in the form of "responsibilization" (ibid.) can be translocated out of the relationship and into the individual subject where it is "institutionalized through 'discipline and punishment'" (ibid.).

Again, a politics of refusal of responsibility may be in order. This politics may contain three forms refusals: first, the refusal of a "situation of dependency that is also a situation of irresponsibility" (Noxolo et al. 2012, 423). To reclaim agency in the dominating colonial relationship, colonized subjects must assume responsibility through a refusal to let the colonizers be the sole agents of responsibility. This implies an inclusion into the collective of collective responsibility (ibid.) on the part of the colonized.

Since colonialism took people out of "their own stream of history and put them into

someone else's" (Noxolo 2012, 423), reclaiming agency through responsibility may secondly involve a refusal of the existing unequal relationships and a demand for their "disconnection" (ibid.).

Thirdly, the refusal to respond may according to Noxolo and others "paradoxically, form the basis for real dialogue" (Noxolo 2012, 425). If the response is withheld, the resulting state of not knowing may foster "mutually listening care" and a "cultivated state of answerability" (Noxolo et al. 2011, 19). Answerability in turn cultivates the recognition that others have a claim on us because of their "contribution to who we are", even if that call includes a refusal of dialogue (ibid.).

To condense, the uncritical call to action underlying responsibility omits that the action in question, as well as its underlying responsibility stemming from relationality are open to contestation. According to Noxolo and others, there is therefore an always contested gap between the responsibility assuming action and its underlying relationship (Noxolo et al. 2012, 421). Responsible action involves moves to make "proximate that which is distant" and to affectively engage in a relationship that is "constitutive of who we are, and at the same time involve degrees of complicity in suffering and inequality" (Noxolo et al. 2012, 424). Instead of starting from the premise that postcolonial relationships are "firmly settled in particular ways", Noxolo and others argue responsibility "demands a continued openness to other settlements" (ibid.). To become genuinely postcolonial, responsibility must be understood as a responsibility to *do something*, not as a responsibility *for someone!*

III. Epistemic dimension

As outlined in my introduction, Tronto dismisses the importance of thinking about epistemology when thinking about frameworks for radical political judgments. I would like to argue that the critical aspects of relationality and responsibility that I just recounted prove otherwise. Charles W. Mills's study of the epistemic preconditions of what Mills calls the racial contract shows that privileged ignorance runs deeper than the inability Tronto acknowledges to see harm one has no direct connection to. The racial contract is an

"agreement to misinterpret the world. ... Thus in effect ... the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance ... producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made. Part of what it means to be constructed as "white" ... part of what it requires to achieve Whiteness, successfully

... is a cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities” (Mills 1997, 18; italics original)¹¹.

In the context of colonial injustice, this agreement to misinterpret the world might be thought of as a neo_colonial contract. Though not all Europeans are signatories, all Europeans benefit from it in their most basic everyday activities. Their position of privilege can be maintained only by remaining ignorant to the injustice of colonialism. Epistemic ignorance results not from nescience but from an active process of misinterpretation that turns the colonized into the Others of justice.

Uma Narayan argues that members of oppressed groups possess “a more immediate, subtle and critical knowledge about the nature of their oppression than people who are non-members of the oppressed group” (1988, 35)¹². But the fact that “epistemic outsiders” lack a detailed understanding of lived oppression neither excuses their ignorance nor places the burden of education on the oppressed. Bystanders and beneficiaries of oppression must become conscious of the hardships that they do not experience but that their actions help uphold. As long as the oppressed are expected to teach the non-oppressed about oppression, its beneficiaries will evade responsibility for their contribution to structural oppression (see Lorde 1984: 114-115)¹³. Narayan sees an alternative in the idea of “methodological humility” (1988, 37). It requires that epistemic outsiders be aware that as outsiders they might miss important points, and that their assignment of blame to “epistemic insiders” arises from inadequate knowledge of the situation. It also requires that the outsiders “attempt to carry out [their] attempted criticism of the insider’s perceptions in such a way that it does not amount to ... an attempt to denigrate or dismiss entirely the validity of the insider’s point of view” (ibid.).

If we take epistemic humility seriously, then feminist care ethicists cannot dismiss postcolonial insights about the constitutive tensions underlying care’s grounding concepts of relationality and responsibility. Although I think that care theory has come a long way from being the white-middle-class-women-centric endeavor that Nalinie Mooten and Pat Noxolo make it out to be, I will gladly admit that there is also a constitutive tension between care’s formal recognition of the political role that racialization and classification play in caring relationships as well as in the devaluation and invisibilization of care work, and the form and language in which mainstream care theory thinks about relationality and responsibility. Although the former and its

underlying structures and institutions of injustice and oppression, and the power asymmetries they have given rise to, have been payed heed to, that political language has not found entrance into conceptualizations of relationality and responsibility, which are still conceived in the language of ethical positing.

If care ethics is to be a *political* ethics, then we must incorporate modes of thinking contestedness and plural groundings that are not closed. The questions of what responsible action looks like, who is responsible to do what, what makes an equal and good relationship, and who stands in what kind of relation with whom are politically contested questions, whose answers cannot be posited by academics in armchairs, if they are to account for the lived experience of all human beings who find themselves in relations of interdependence and responsibility.

Bringing the political in *political* ethics back in then requires Euro_American care ethicists to look out for, accompany and incorporate the political disruptions that subaltern and oppressed care practitioners and theorists bring to bear on the canonical understandings of relationality and responsibility.

Thank you for your attentiveness!

¹ Joan Tronto 1995: Care as a Basis for Radical Political Judgments. In: *Hypatia* Vol. 10, No. 2, 141-149.

² Joan Tronto 2013: *Caring Democracy. Markets, Equality, and Justice*. New York: New York UP.

³ Nalinie Mooten 2015: Toward a Postcolonial Ethics of Care. In: *Academia.edu*, https://www.academia.edu/18028845/Toward_a_Postcolonial_Ethics_of_Care; last accessed on 10.06.2018.

⁴ Oliver Marchart 2010: *Die Politische Differenz*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.

⁵ Shalinie Randeria 2002: *Entangled histories of uneven modernities: Civil society, caste solidarities and legal pluralism in post-colonial India*, paper presented at the Civil Society Network conference at the Wissenschaftszentrum für Sozialforschung Berlin (WZB), November 2002.

⁶⁶⁶ Pat Noxolo, Parvati Raghuram and Clare Madge 2011: Unsettling responsibility: postcolonial interventions. In: *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 2011 Royal Geographical Society, 18. July 2011, 418-429.

⁷ Joan Tronto 1987: Beyond gender difference. In: *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* Vol. 12, No. 4, 660-1.

⁸ Uma Narayan 1995: Colonialism and Its Others: Considerations on Rights and Care Discourses. In: *Hypatia* Vol. 10 No. 2, 133-140.

⁹ Margaret Urban Walker 2006: *Moral Repair. Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 20.

¹⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 2004: Righting Wrongs. In: *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Volume 103, Number 2/3, Spring/Summer 2004, 523-581.

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- ¹¹ Charles Wade Mills 1997: *The Racial Contract*. Cornell: Cornell UP.
- ¹² Uma Narayan 1988: Working Together across Difference: Some Considerations on Emotions and Political Practice. In: *Hypatia*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 31-47.
- ¹³ Audre Lorde 1984: Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference. In: *Sister Outsider. Essays and Speeches*, 114-123.