25 Years of Care Ethics: A Personal Retrospective

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Flashback: Home Economics Class, 8th Grade, Circa 1977

Sitting in my newly co-ed home ec class, with two boys who decided a 1:8 gender ratio just might be the right move for their love lives, I toil over my first and last knitting project — a rather misshapen kitty cat. In the course of conversation, I announce loudly to my fellow knitters my liberal feminist intentions: “I am not going to get married and I am not going to have children; when the time comes, I’m just going to live with some man and follow my career.”

Keeping this early declaration in mind, it shouldn’t be surprising that, eight years later when I am first introduced to Carol Gilligan and the ethic of care, my response is suspicious. By claiming that women utilize an ethic of care while men use justice, Gilligan seems to suggest that women are better suited for caregiving roles within the home than for professional life. Thus, I see her as calling into question my liberal feminist aspiration — to craft a self-chosen life that foregrounds self-development and career.

Some 30 years later, I have a career — and a husband and two children. I teach ethics and feminist philosophy at a small Catholic women’s college in central Minnesota. Needless to say, my views on work, family, feminism, and care ethics have changed dramatically since 8th grade. I have evolved from an early skeptic of care ethics to someone who thinks its critical examination of the many ways women’s caregiving work has been marginalized and devalued is radical, transformative, and vitally important feminist philosophical work. In this autobiography, I map out some key moments in my personal engagement with care ethics. As you’ll see, care ethics and I literally grew up together. By using my personal story to recount the development of care ethics over the past 25 years, I hope to put the theory into historical context and provide partial insight into what care ethics meant to the first generation of women.
who encountered it. Given care ethics’ contention, that moral reflection is narrative in nature, story telling seems an especially fitting way to portray the evolution and significance of this theory.

**Phase I: 1970s–1980s — Liberal Feminist**

My mom’s major life decision, the family story goes: should she fulfill her lifelong dream to become a Catholic nun or marry my father, whom she had been dating steadily since the 8th grade? She chose marriage, and six children followed in quick succession. My parents were on a journey that would take them from their German Catholic working-class roots and extended family in Ohio, to a nuclear family in Pennsylvania that achieved upper middle class status through 30 years of my father’s exertions on the career ladder at GE aerospace. The rewards of my dad’s job were great but the price was high — especially for my mother. She was faced with raising six children 500 miles away from her closest relatives while my dad put in the long hours necessary to make it in corporate America.

![The author’s parents, Margaret and David Keller, 1967.](image-url)
While I have vivid and warm memories of our lives as a Vatican II Catholic family — priests with guitars and love beads, church services with children sitting cross-legged around the altar, “Happenings” (huge parties of Catholic families, priests, and nuns singing and playing music) — my family broke from the Catholic Church shortly after my own confirmation. My mother, who had participated in the political events of the era to the extent possible as a mother of six — protesting the Vietnam War, posing as a straw buyer in the fair housing movement, offering our house as a safe house for battered women — had grown increasingly alienated from a newly conservative, post-Vatican II Catholic church, largely due to its views on women and reproductive rights. The loss to my parents and our family was, I think, enormous; we never regained the extended community I recall us as having in my early childhood.
My family was, in the words of one of my cousins, full of “women’s libbers.” The boys did housework (but somehow, the girls never cut the grass) and dinner conversations included such timely topics as women’s rights, abortion, and teenage pregnancy. In my family we assumed that the girls’ education was just as important as the boys’ and of course the girls would work outside the home. Despite my parents’ progressive thinking, I experienced my early commitment to feminism less as a position arrived at through intellectual argument than as a matter of survival. As a teen I wanted, above all else, to escape my mother’s fate. Despite being proud I had a stay-at-home mom, and despite pitying children who had working mothers, I associated being a housewife with depression, anger, and resentment. I longed to be free, and freedom to me meant following my father’s example — pursuing a career outside the home and cultivating a sense of identity based on my own, individual accomplishments.

As I look back now, I realize I had internalized and was guided by a white, middle class, 14-year-old’s vision of liberal feminism. I firmly believed in the equality of men and women. Equality for me meant men and women possessing the same skills, pursuing the same jobs, and receiving equal pay for equal work. I envisioned the world, or
at least the U.S., as inhabited by rational adults each pursuing and developing their individual talents and receiving recognition for their efforts in the form of generous compensation for successful, satisfying, and status-conferring careers (doing what was never quite clear). In my youthful naïveté, I believed the obstacles to gender equality must already be well on their way to being removed, as the feminist cause was clearly so rational and so just.

This conception of liberal feminism carried me through college. I encouraged my friends to take Introduction to Women's Studies and courses taught by radical feminist theologian Mary Daly; I was amazed at how they were transformed as a result. (In the course of a year one friend turned from a conservative, reserved, lime-green-chinos- and-dockers-wearing preppy to an outspoken, argumentative, self-declared radical feminist-Marxist-Taoist intent on creating social change from the top down.) Yet it never occurred to me that I needed to study feminism. After all, I already knew all I thought there was to know about feminism — women are just as capable and just as valuable as men — and they deserve equal pay for equal work.

Phase II: 1984–1993 — First Encounters with Care Ethics: Resistance to the Theory

Boston College: 1984

Cut to senior year in college; my first encounter with Carol Gilligan, at the hands of Kevin, a philosophy graduate student I'd gotten to know from a course on Nietzsche. He excitedly tells me about this new book, In a Different Voice, which argues that men and women use different models of moral reasoning, with men using justice and women care. He then presents me with the Heinz dilemma, in which a man is faced with a choice: allowing his wife to die from a rare kind of cancer or breaking into the druggist's laboratory, in order steal the cure for his wife. Kevin asks: what would you do if you were in this situation? I smell a trap. I see Gilligan's gender difference claim as implying that women are better suited to being caregivers than men are, and I worry that giving her any ground will potentially trap me in a variation on my mother's life. I quickly think back to my recent philosophy classes, in the hope of beating the rap. I land on the story of Socrates in Plato's Crito. Even though Socrates has been unjustly condemned to death, he refuses to break the law and escape with his friends' help. Got it! The right answer must be — uphold the law at all costs! After all, my feminist philosophical mind reasons, men made the laws, so didn't it make sense they would hold them in high regard?

With no less than the father of Western philosophy on my side, I slyly inquire: isn't there an alternative to stealing the drug? Aren't there friends who can help out Heinz
and his wife? Perhaps a payment plan could be negotiated? Surely, there must be more to this story that can let us resolve this situation!

As it turns out, I responded in exactly the way Gilligan would have predicted. Rather than accept the terms of the story as given, I looked for more narrative detail, especially with regard to the relationships of the protagonists, in the hope of finding an inclusive solution that would save the wife while upholding the law. My answer sounds nearly identical to that of Amy, the 11-year-old girl from In a Different Voice, who Gilligan thinks models the care approach to moral thinking. By contrast, the justice approach is embodied by Jake, a boy who conceives the right to life and the right to property hierarchically, with the right to life clearly more important. Such hierarchical ranking leads him to the conclusion that of course Heinz should steal the drug to save his wife’s life (Gilligan 1982, chapter 2).

A smug and self-satisfied Kevin gloats: “Gilligan’s right! Men and women do think differently!”

I feel angry and betrayed, uncomprehending of how an answer based on Plato could possibly be construed as feminine and hence, to my liberal feminist mind — which so wants to prove that men and women think alike — wrong.

**Graduate School: 1990–1998**

Dissertation. My theme? Models of intersubjective ethics. This topic emerged out of my frustration with Kant’s individualism, while taking a graduate seminar on his ethics and epistemology. The two philosophies I’m comparing, because they provide alternatives to the Kantian model? Habermas’s discourse ethics and feminist care ethics.

One key problem I have to address: but what is care ethics? As a philosophical theory, it is still very much under construction in the early 1990s. Which model should I use? Or do I create my own model of care ethics? I’m reluctant to do so. Despite endorsing care ethics’ conception of the moral agent as necessarily in relation with others, I’m still deeply suspicious of the ethic. I am skeptical of the gender difference claim and empirical research seems to support such skepticism (see, for example, Greeno and Macoby 1993; Luria 1993; Nunner-Winkler 1993; Walker 1993; for defenses of the gender difference claim against these critiques, see Baumrind 1993; Gilligan 1987; Gilligan 1993).

Moreover, radical feminist critiques of care ethics for reinforcing women’s traditional roles and undermining women’s hard fought autonomy resonate deeply with me (see, for example, Card 1985, 14–17; Code 1991, 106ff; Hoagland 1992, 85ff; Scultsas 1992, 19ff; Sherwin 1992, 50ff.) Thus, when I read critiques of Nel Noddings
for claiming that the severing of relationships inevitably diminishes one’s ethical ideal, even in such extreme cases as ending a marriage with an abusive husband, I am right on board\(^1\) (Card 1990; Hoagland 1990; Houston 1990; Noddings 1986, 114–115).

Immersing myself in criticisms of care ethics, it turns out, isn’t an especially productive approach to writing my dissertation, as my goal isn’t supposed to be to criticize care ethics but to show how care ethics provides a viable alternative to the Kantian tradition.

One committee member insists I use the principle of charity when describing care ethics. He has me repeatedly revise my care ethics chapter. It takes me a year and a half to write this first chapter of my dissertation, because it’s so hard for me to piece together a sympathetic account of the ethic.

**Phase III: 2000–2008 — My Gradual Conversion to Care Ethics**

Okay, I fess up. I’m not globally maternal. I don’t go gaga over random infants and toddlers, and I really don’t know how to talk to children who aren’t mine. For much of my life, I didn’t even think about children very much — a perspective that was reinforced, no doubt, by decades of studying philosophy and living and working in college settings. Childhood became for me part of the dues you pay on your way to becoming an adult, as opposed to being interesting and important in itself. During this period of my life, feminist work on maternal thinking and maternal practice did not speak to me, and the aspects of care ethics I found important were those that provided alternatives to the Kantian inspired individualistic and universalistic tradition in moral theory, namely, care ethics’ relational view of the moral agent and its emphasis on context, particularity, and narrative in moral deliberation. In my teaching and thinking, I conceived care ethics mostly as a new addition to the standard list of moral theories, as its feminist credentials seemed uncertain. After all, the empirical evidence on the much ballyhooed gender difference claim was hotly contested — Gilligan herself was eventually forced to clarify her initial gender claim (Gilligan 1987 25–27). This fact, coupled with the radical feminist critiques of care ethics, strengthened my perception that care ethics, rather than advancing the cause of gender equality, reinforced gender stereotypes.

Three factors, partly personal and partly in the development of the theory itself, significantly reshaped my understanding of care ethics and brought me to my current view — that care ethics marks a significant development in feminist theorizing that has important implications for feminist politics and activism. These three factors are team-teaching a class on Feminism and Families in which Joan Tronto’s *Moral
Boundaries is a central text; becoming a mother myself; and reading Eva Kittay’s book, Love’s Labor.

“Feminism and Families”: The Theory of Having a Family

Spring 2000. In good philosophical style, my husband and I think through the implications of becoming parents for seven years before deciding to have children ourselves. In the midst of our deliberations, I team-teach a senior seminar on Feminism and Families with Dr. Sheila Nelson (Sociology), which examines feminist critiques of the family and how social structures and social policies impact the family, with particular attention to how they contribute to or minimize incidences of poverty. We read a wide range of sociological and economic literature and use Joan Tronto’s Moral Boundaries: Toward a Political Theory of Care for our ethical analysis. Although I have taught care ethics in various guises for years now, teaching this course finally helps me see the promise of care ethics for developing a trenchant, feminist analysis of our society. What’s different here?

Joan Tronto provides an entirely new way to conceive of care. In the powerful central chapters of her book, she breaks acts of caring into four distinct phases: caring about, taking care of, caregiving, and care receiving, and then examines how each of these components is gendered, raced, and classed. For example, Tronto conceives taking care of primarily as administrative work and argues it is typically done by more powerful social groups, such as men, whites, and the economically advantaged, whereas caregiving entails the hands-on provision of care, and is typically done by the least powerful social groups — women, people of color, and those who are economically disadvantaged. With this analysis, Tronto takes care ethics in a new and promising direction — not only are different dimensions of care named, for the first time the theory is developed such that it can identify and critique existing social inequalities. This shift is made possible by the fact that Tronto’s analysis focuses on care as work, as opposed to care as a distinctive (gendered?) form of moral thinking.

Within the context of Feminism and Families, Tronto’s analysis proves useful for students analyzing their service learning placements. Her terminology helps them analyze where care breaks down with regard to a whole series of family related placements. For example, Rachel Wick, a senior philosophy major and Gender and Women’s Studies minor, initially finds herself frustrated with “Bobbie,” the mother of “Camille,” for perpetuating her family’s poverty through her own indolence. Yet when asked to use Tronto’s framework to reflect upon her placement, Rachel realizes that Bobbie cared about her daughter enough to bring her to the attention of the Children’s Mental Health Mentoring Program, which had taken care of Camille by assigning her a men-
tor, Rachel, who would then give care to Camille. By contrast, no one was demonstrating such care regarding Bobbie, a poor single mother on worker’s compensation. As Rachel says,

“As an adult, Bobbie is assumed to be an autonomous and competent individual, capable of determining her own need for care. Because of this respect for autonomy, Bobbie’s vulnerability and dependence are labeled character flaws. She is responsible for the problems in her life, because they are a result of individual deficiencies, and this makes it justifiable for me to judge her character and maintain distance from her problems.” (Keller, Nelson, and Wick 2003, 47)

By adopting the care perspective, which emphasizes that periods of dependency inevitably recur throughout our lives, Rachel shifts from an attitude of detachment and judgment to one of engagement and compassion; she asks the critical question: why weren’t social service agencies acknowledging and addressing Bobbie’s need for care?

In the introduction to her book, Tronto declares her goal of liberating care from three moral boundaries that have constrained it — the boundary between morality and politics, which grants moral arguments little purchase within politics; the moral point of view boundary, which conceives morality proper as impartial and universal; and the boundary between the public and the private, which views care ethics as an ethic of the private sphere, detached from public life (Tronto 1993, 6–11). My experience using Moral Boundaries in Feminism and Families suggests Tronto succeeds in her goal, shifting our understanding of care from an ethic of interpersonal relationships to a useful tool for analyzing public policies and social practices, from the question of “is care a feminine way of thinking” to “what would it mean to take care seriously as a political value?” Tronto’s version of care ethics finally allows me to see the transformational possibilities of adopting a care ethic.

“Famous last words: ‘I am not going to get married and I am not going to have children’.”
The author with daughter Jeong Lan, spouse Chuck, and son Sang.
The Practice of Having a Family

As has doubtless been the case for many women before me, I soon found parenting to be the single most demanding project I have ever undertaken. Among other parenting challenges, I find that parenting requires a consistent taming of the ego in a society which places repeated emphasis on its cultivation and indulgence. Surrounded by parenting books, attending various adoption and parenting workshops, engaging in many late night parenting strategy sessions with my spouse, and making daily resolutions to take parenting — you guessed it — *one day at a time*, I am consistently aware of the enduring gap between my parenting ideals and my parenting practice. I am stunned that anyone would *ever* think mothering somehow comes “naturally” to women or that reproduction of the species is primarily a biological function we share in common with other animals. Suddenly I understand on a visceral level why Sara Ruddick’s book, *Maternal Thinking*, became a feminist classic and why *In a Different Voice* became a national bestseller that instigated such a storm of thinking and writing by women philosophers and psychologists.

Given the centrality of care for the survival of our species, and given how much thought and discipline must go into responding to demands for care in a calm, consistent, compassionate, and productive manner, under some of the most challenging of circumstances, the failure of philosophy to take seriously this dimension of human experience is, I now understand intellectually, emotionally, and physically — shocking. *Finally* philosophy is taking seriously a set of values, issues, and concerns that have been central to women’s lives — and to the survival of the species — forever. For in order for children to grow up and become the highly functional selves that populate philosophical narratives, from the ancients to social contract theory, from Sartre to Rawls — one or more people need to devote a lot of time and energy to their development.

With these realizations, the trajectory of my conversations with my mother change dramatically. Throughout my 20s, my siblings and I regularly confronted my parents for perceived inadequacies in their raising of us. Now I call my mother with genuine amazement in my voice: Mom, how did you ever manage to raise six children and find the time, energy, and initiative to make homemade spaghetti sauce with meatballs? How did you manage to sort through eight people’s clothes and keep them clean, well ordered, and in season? Forget that, how did you find the time to get us all bathed, with everything else you were doing? How did you do all of that with a husband who was often on the road and with no extended network of support? I now find myself astonished by these organizational miracles.
Love’s Labor: Public Policy and the Family

In the single worst piece of professional advice I was ever given, a fellow graduate student tells me in my first weeks of graduate school that I won’t really want to work closely with Eva Kittay. As that student explained, “she doesn’t really do feminism, she does that care stuff.” Years later, when I eventually get around to reading Eva Kittay’s tour de force, Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency, I am stunned by its beauty, insight, and rhetorical force. Eva is instantly inducted into my personal pantheon of feminist philosophical goddesses.

Rather than emphasizing the particularism, narrative, and attention to context of care thinking, as did Gilligan and early care ethicists, Kittay’s analysis is similar to Tronto’s in that it focuses on the political, philosophical, and public policy implications of taking seriously care work (which Kittay calls “dependency work”). With articles that range from the deeply personal and moving story of caring for her profoundly mentally retarded daughter, Sesha, to critically engaging the notions of equality and reciprocity embedded in John Rawls’ towering works, A Theory of Justice and Political Liberalism, to challenging the time limits and work requirements entailed by the 1996 welfare reform law, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Kittay envisions and urges us to create a world that is organized around supporting dependents and the dependency workers who care for them. Given that women still do a disproportionate amount of the dependency work in our society, Kittay argues that it is only in such a world that women will be able to achieve social and political equality. As Kittay succinctly puts it:

Looking at the economy of social cooperation in terms of burdens and responsibilities, we see that the independent fully functioning citizen assumes the burdens and responsibilities of one, while the dependency worker assumes those of more than one, and the dependent those of less than one. If we look at that same economy in terms of benefits, we see the dependent still counting as one, as does the fully functioning citizen. In contrast, however, if the dependency worker must also secure rights and benefits for her charge, even at the expense of her own rights and benefits, her own welfare comes to count for less than one. (Kittay 1999, 91)

Economists have argued that women, in deciding to have children, make a free choice that ends up compromising their economic and, Kittay would add, social and political status (see Fuchs 1989, for example). They argue that if women don’t like these negative effects of their life choices, they alone bear responsibility, as they could have chosen differently. Kittay contends it is wrongheaded to view mothering and other forms of dependency work in this way. As she argues, “If none made such a choice, society could not continue beyond a single generation. Therefore this is a conception

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of the good which occupies a special place with respect to the welfare of society” (Kittay 1999, 92). Thus, for Kittay, dependency work is not one life choice among many about which the state should remain neutral. Rather, in a just society the state should ensure that social policies are in place to ensure the well-being of dependency workers who, by attending to the needs of their charges, work for the well-being of all of us.

Kittay’s account of care ethics helps me better understand my dilemma at age 14. I knew I wanted equality and respect and to be able to make my own choices regarding how to live my life. I had intuitively absorbed the liberal conception of equality, which only granted equality to persons unencumbered by obligations to dependent others. Thus, faced with the choice of career and equality or family and inequality, the answer to me was clear — equality.

In 1977, neither my parents nor the feminism I had embraced had developed the conceptual framework that would have helped me understand why I was being faced with this set of options. The answer to gender inequality at that time seemed to be that women should act as ideal workers and be wholly committed to their careers. There seemed to be no cost, only benefit, associated with abandoning traditional feminine roles. The development of care ethics, with its emphasis on the centrality of the work of care to a well-functioning society, helped make it clear that the answer to patriarchy couldn’t simply be a wholesale abandonment of care. Rather, as Kittay demonstrates, achieving gender equality requires acknowledging the widespread need for care, sharing more equitably the burdens and joys of caregiving, and restructuring public policy and social institutions to ensure that caregivers are also cared for and can participate as equals in political, social, and economic life. Far from reinforcing gender stereotypes, this version of care is a radical and life affirming feminist philosophy that promises a better world for all.

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Bibliography


Notes

1. See also Victoria Davison’s concern that Noddings’ “engrossment” in the other can undermine individual autonomy and integrity by leading one to place the relationship above one’s own deeply held principles (Davion 1993, 168–73).

2. For more information on this course, read the jointly authored article, “Care Ethics, Service-Learning, and Social Change” (Keller, Nelson, and Wick 2003, 39–50).

3. This general theme, that dependency workers are penalized in a multitude of ways for providing care-giving work necessary for the survival of the species, is taken up by a series of recent authors who, like Kittay, suggest how we can begin to change public policies to rectify this situation. See, for example, Crittenden 2001, Folbre 2002, and Williams 2000.