**Care and the Politics of Jesus**

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On March 14, 2013, the Junior Senator from Ohio, Republican Rob Portman, a practicing Methodist and social conservative came out in favor of same-sex marriage defying the ideology of his religion, political party, and his own consistent anti-gay voting record. This event is instructive for the exploration of care and the politics of Jesus. What prompted Senator Portman’s change of heart? Was it an outgrowth of his religious ethics? Did he find insight in reading the Bible? No. His new ethical position came as a result of a relationship—a caring relationship. Portman’s son came out to his parents in 2011. That personal experience and knowledge opened up the moral imagination for Portman and allowed him to care about a constituency that he had consistently voted against. As Portman describes, his long time opposition to same-sex marriage “was rooted in my faith tradition that marriage is a sacred bond between a man and a woman. Knowing that my son is gay prompted me to consider the issue from another perspective: that of a dad who wants all three of his kids to lead happy, meaningful lives with the people they love, a blessing Jane and I have shared for 26 years.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Portman frames his actions as a very caring response—attending to the needs of a particular other and in doing so learned something about unfamiliar others. The question in light of the current context is whether such a revelation could be accomplished within Christian ethics.

There are surprisingly few investigations of the intersections between care ethics and Christian ethics. On the one hand, this may be because of the historic enmity between feminism and certain sectors of Christianity. On the other hand, the two approaches may be so diametrically different that neither Christian ethicists nor feminist theorists wish to engage it. Yet, the concept of care and its attendant notions of empathy and compassion are prevalent in Christian ethics. For example, the Gospel of John, part of a literature that is particularly authoritative for Christians states:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35)

This commandment of love seems like a strong and radical declaration of caring. However, the word “love” like the word “care” are pervasive terms that are used without a great deal of precision. As feminists and ethicists have developed the concept, care ethics refers to an approach to morality that emerges out of relationships and reflects an attentiveness to the particulars of an individual’s context that favors empathetic, emotional, and imaginative understanding while eschewing formulaic approaches to ethical adjudication. **[slide 2]** To suggest that Christians have a commandment or obligation to care is to beg the question of what the definition of that care is. Does it reflect the same understanding that care theorists have developed over the past quarter century? Furthermore, there are serious issues regarding whether care can be authoritatively commanded—this is the political question. These are questions we will explore in this presentation. **[slide 3]** I will begin by addressing the trajectory of care theory that my project assumes, and then I will discuss the extent to which Jesus is a care ethicist. In essence, the question of Jesus’s ethics is only part of a larger question political question regarding how power influences ethics through ideology and dogmatism. I want to touch upon the naturalized epistemology and normativity of care and conclude with some suggestions about the relationship between care ethics and Christian ethics.

**Care Theory and Its Branches (a kind of disclaimer)**

You are probably aware of the history and development of care ethics but I want to ground my project in a unique trajectory of praxis not found in mainstream care ethics literature. Care theory is typically described as a relational and contextual approach to morality that coalesced into a field of study in the 1980’s through the pioneering work of feminist scholars such as Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings and Joan Tronto. At first, with some hesitation and concern, feminist theorists slowly embraced care ethics and the number of published works multiplied. Subsequently, other fields began to explore care theory and its application. Nursing journals, for example, were early adopters of care thinking. Today, we find a burgeoning group of political theorists and education scholars taking up care ethics spearheaded by Tronto but including Fiona Robinson, Dan Engster, Julie White and others. In philosophy, care ethics has been accepted and developed by a number of notable non-feminist scholars such as Michael Slote. Care theory is still new enough that many scholars are endeavoring to shape its definition but they all share common commitments to the relational nature of care ethics including its emotional content, its fundamental concern for context, and its eschewing of formulaic approaches to morality. **[slide 4]**

My ongoing project shares this foundation but I have been endeavoring to push care into some uncharted waters. Like Susan Hekman and a few others, I view care theory as a paradigm shift in moral thinking. What I have attempted to demonstrate in my previous work is that care is much more than an alternative adjudicative theory of ethics in the Western tradition. It is my contention that care engages different questions and does different work than the Western moral tradition and that care is very much a post-modern theory, which inhabits a variety of liminal spaces.[[2]](#endnote-2) Specifically, I have suggested that care is as much about epistemology and ontology as it is about ethics. Accordingly, I have argued for the corporeal basis of care as our body gathers, holds, and expresses knowledge of caring that can be imaginatively extrapolated if the appropriate skills are honed and the experiences reflected upon. With this warning, I want to address the question of Jesus’ ethics to better understand ostensibly what is the basis of Christian ethics.

**Was Jesus A Care Ethicist?**

There are plenty of incarnations of Jesus. He has been portrayed as a liberator, revolutionary, king, co-pilot, teacher, etc. With these various images come different moral approaches. Some have taken up arms in battle in Jesus’ name while others have become pacifists in Jesus’ name. Some institutions have developed elaborate rules in Jesus’ name while some communities choose to live simply in Jesus’ name. So what was Jesus morality? There are many obstacles to knowing for sure. For one thing, Jesus, like Socrates, did not do us the favor of writing anything down. He left it to his apostles to write down his acts and teaching and the earliest collections we have today, Mark, as well as the hypothesized Q, were not composed until 30 years after his death. Each of the Gospel writers had a particular agenda as they wrote about Jesus teachings in light of their own faith community so it is difficult to get at exactly what Jesus said and what words were put on his lips.[[3]](#endnote-3)

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Looking over the passages of the Gospels that are likely to reflect Jesus’ teaching as determined by modern biblical scholarship as exemplified by the work of the Jesus Seminar, an organization dedicated to biblical literacy, there exists a thread that indicates a care ethics character to the teachings of Jesus including:

1) A calculation of consequences do not completely define morality.

2) Rules do not completely define morality.

3) Morality can be found in individual acts of kindness (care) including acts of forgiveness and physical assistance.

The idea that consequences or outcomes are not central to Jesus teachings can be seen in the **parable of the lost sheep** where Jesus describes a shepherd who goes after a single sheep rather then tend to the flock which What morality do we glean from this? Should we take the parable of the lost sheep literally? Should you leave 99 sheep alone in the forest to search for one that is missing? This is an example of hyperbole or what some commentators call a “case parody.” Jesus offers an exaggerated response that rhetorically grabs his audience’s attention and forces them to think. The parable of the lost sheep cannot be constructed as a principle for living. If this were a rule, society would be a mess. Jesus is making a statement here about commitments and values not creating an absolute rule to live by, and he is certainly flying in the face of consequentialism. Jesus is emphasizing the commitment to care for all individuals on a one-to-one basis. This is an important concept in care: to stress individual relationships that form the basis of family, community, and society.

There are also several occasions where Jesus appears to suggest that morality is more than laws or rules such as in Jesus’s response to the Pharisees in Mark 2:27 when they thought it was wrong that his disciples were eating wheat from the wheat fields on the Sabbath by saying “The Sabbath day was created for Adam and Eve, not Adam and Eve for the Sabbath.” Here Jesus is specifically declaring that **people are more important than rules**. This is very similar to the maxim of feminist care ethicist, Nel Noddings’ dictum that the students are always more important than the subject. Jesus broke written and unwritten social and religious rules on numerous occasions. He interacted with sinners, gentiles, and women. Jesus was not an anarchist. He did not overturn all the laws, but he saw that laws had a certain place and they could not define all of what constitutes. morality. Again, this is very consistent with care ethics. In fact in this respect, care ethics is a very challenging morality. Rules and principles are shortcuts for the moral life for which we can appeal to in times of need. They can provide important guidance. Care ethics does not call on us to throw out rules and laws willy nilly, but to carefully consider how the people in our lives are impacted by these rules. In this case, Jesus believed that caring for the needs of his disciples outweighed the adherence to a rule.

In Mathew 5:39 Jesus, he says, “Don’t react violently against the one who is evil: when someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other as well. When someone wants to sue you for your shirt, let that person have your coat along with it. Further, when anyone conscripts you for one mile, go an extra mile. Give to the one who begs from you.” Once again we have an exaggeration which is not a literal rule for living but an emphasis on values such **as commitment to others and forgiveness that display a caring quality** even when the other person is unkind. Jesus is not setting an absolute principle but he is making a commentary about how people should relate to one another. This passage highlights a commitment to fostering caring relationships which entail resisting revenge and giving more than asked for.

Another passage that the Jesus seminar ranked as having the highest possibility of coming from the lips of Jesus is one of the best loved stories in Luke, the parable of the Good Samaritan:

There was a man going from Jerusalem down to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him, beat him up, and went off, leaving him half dead. Now by coincidence a priest was going down that road; when he caught sight of him, he went out of his way to avoid him. In the same way, when a Levite came to the place, he took one look at him and crossed the road to avoid hem. But this Samaritan who was traveling that way came to where he was and was moved to pity at the sight of him. He went up to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring olive oil and wine on them. He hoisted him onto his own animal, brought him to an inn, and looked after him. The next day he took out two silver coins, which he gave to the innkeeper, and said, “Look after him, and on my way back I’ll reimburse you for any extra expense you have had.” Luke 10: 30-35

In this classic tale, the moral message hits like a slap in the face. Given the long standing animosity between the Judeans and the Samaritans, and the place of honor that the priest would have had, or the place of tradition that the house of Levite would have had, this story has an unexpected twist. **Morality is found in the acts of care from an unexpected source. Jesus was not concerned with who someone was or their ethical standing, but what they did.** Care is active and seen in behavior and habits even among strangers. The Samaritan looks after the fallen man to the point of insuring his convalescence. Truly an act of care.

What I have endeavored to demonstrate is that there are attributes in the moral teachings of Jesus that reflect elements of care ethics including: the rejection of consequentialism as the totality of morality, the rejection of rule-based ethics as the totality of morality and the embracing of care like behavior. There is compelling evidence that Jesus acted in such a way that the commitments to care seen in relationality, affective knowledge, and concrete situations are important to his morality.

**Dogmatism and Ideology [slide 6]**

Given the resonance with care that can be found in what are believed to be the teachings of Jesus, I would like to suggest that *dogmatism* and *ideology* that prevent caring within the context of Christian ethics from being the same as care ethics described by feminist theorists. This claim engages at least two questions about Christian ethics and care ethics. One is an ongoing point of contention in Christian ethics: to what extent does Christian ethics describe a different moral content than any other ethic? The second question is the extent to which care ethics is more than a theory of normative action?

The eminent Christian theologian, Georgia Harkness offers a taxonomy of definitions for Christian ethics:

Christian ethics may mean (1) the best in the moral philosophy of all ages and places, (2) the moral standards of Christendom, (3) the ethics of the Christian Church and its many churches, (4) the ethics of the Bible, (5) the ethics of the New Testament, and (6) the ethical insights of Jesus.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The first position suggests potential compatibility between Christian ethics and other forms of ethics including care ethics. Harkness admits that despite notions of creeping infallibility and two thousand years of uniform morality, Christian ethics has witnessed a “process of incorporation and amalgamation” that in practice “has often meant the accommodation of Christian principles to what was incorporated.”[[5]](#endnote-5) However, the other definitions that Harkness offers (number 2 through 6) do not readily admit of moral progress. Each indicates a more or less fixed notion of what Christian ethics is. When that fixation is particularly intransigent, we refer to it as dogmatism. In a psychological analysis of dogmatism, Milton Rokeach describes dogmatism as “(a) a relatively closed cognitive organization of beliefs and disbeliefs about reality, (b) organized around a central set of beliefs about absolute authority which, in turn, (c) provides a framework for patterns of intolerance and qualified tolerance toward others.”[[6]](#endnote-6) By extension, moral dogmatism implies uncompromising beliefs. Such dogmatism is a particular challenge for care ethics because of the inherent particularism involved in care. As Noddings and others have described, care emerges out of a relationship whereby the caregiver is or engrossed in the one-cared for. Ideally, care is a moral ideal, the caregiver does not carry a prescribed notion, rule, or principle as to the caring response. That response must be an organic outgrowth of the circumstance which is not to say that certain structures of caring, what in a Deweyan sense might be described as habits of care, cannot be applied as a guide in a new situation. For example, in the desire to help a homeless individual, my response may be informed by previous experiences but that such care does not excuse me from having to carefully attending to the circumstances and needs of the particular person I am caring for. Dogmatism suggests a particular response or a limited range of responses to a given situation thus truncating the potential for care. For example, if my response to a query about an unplanned pregnancy was either a dogmatic, “carry the fetus to term” or at the other extreme a rote “abort the fetus,” I would be abdicating my relational responsibility to care in regard to the particulars of an individual.

Ideology, when defined as guiding ideas, does not represent a threat to care because there is an implied openness to adapting to the circumstances of an individual. However, ideology that is absolute or dogmatic, not only suggests that context will not be considered but that ideas will be held in higher regard than people. Such a hierarchy is not only a violation of one of Kant’s formulations of the categorical imperative, but it is antithetical to care. When Noddings proclaims that “the student is always more important than the subject,” she is providing an example of how our relationships with people should trump fixed concepts of moral good. This is a challenging concept as the Western tradition is replete with declarations of authoritative ethical principles. For example, care would challenge the notion credited to Martin Luther King that “If a man has not found something worth dying for, he is not fit to live.” Underlying the quote is the claim that some ideas are so important that they are worth removing us from all of our relationships and relationship potentials. Ideas are valued over humanity. Bertrand Russell is purported to have responded to such a hierarchy by saying, “I would never die for my beliefs because I might be wrong.” Of course, the Western notion of martyrdom is derived from the Christian tradition of placing ideas above humanity.

In one of the few scholarly discussions of the intersections between care ethics and Christian ethics, Ruth E. Groenhout finds a favorable comparison between care and “agapic” ethics. Agapic ethics represents a Christian approach to morality that is not dogmatic but in fact, as Groenhout points out, is relational, particularist, and compassion-based much like care theory.[[7]](#endnote-7) The difference between agapic ethics and care ethics, according to Groenhout is that the latter is based in God’s relationship with humanity while care is specifically humanistic. In a tremendous irony, Groenhout claims that agapic ethics has a mechanism to prevent self sacrifice while care theory does not. Ultimately, she suggests that, “Care theory needs analogous concepts to the ideas of creation, sin, and vocation if it is to offer a theoretically adequate account of care without advocating unceasing self-sacrifice.”[[8]](#endnote-8) It is true that an early criticism of care ethics by feminists was the notion of perpetuating women’s role of exhaustive concern for others over concern for self. Furthermore, I disagree with Noddings’s continued use of the term “altruism” in regard to care—I don’t view care as altruistic (for reasons grounded in Noddings’s own notion that care is fundamentally relational and thus I am always part of the equation). However, to claim that Christian agapic ethics can help promote care for self in ways that care cannot is ironic give the history of morality and martyrdom in the history of Christianity.

Returning to my questions at the beginning of this section, one can see why comparative analysis between care and Christian ethics is problematic. Which Christian ethics is to be addressed? Institutional and dogmatic ethics? Relational Christian ethics? Or something else? However the other side of the equation is equally problematic. Groenhout and others, both religious and nonreligious ethicists, often ask the wrong questions of care theory because they are falling into the trap of treating care as simply an alternative to other moral theories in the Western tradition. Groenhout introduces the need for an authority or external motivation for care. However, I would like to suggest that care is as much an ontological theory and epistemological theory as it is an ethical theory. Humans are not simply individual agents engaged in ethical transactions, we are “second persons” wholly relational in our being involved in continually negotiating our dynamic selves through every iterative act of caring. Another way to think about this is to conceive of care as very much a postmodern and liminal understanding that resists simple applications of modernist categories. I think the naturalized epistemology and naturalized normativity help illuminate the ways in which Christian ethics and care ethics are not alike.

**Naturalized Epistemology and Naturalized Normativity (and Ontology) [slide 7]**

As I alluded to earlier, my conception of care theory is that it entails relational reciprocity and growth whereby knowledge, morality, and self authorship are inexorably entangled. We might refer to care as necessitating a form of feminist naturalized epistemology. Accordingly, in the work of Lorraine Code and other feminist philosophers, the relative identity, social position, and community of the knower impact the known. As Marianne Janack describes, “Naturalism is defined here as an approach to epistemology that focuses on causal accounts of knowledge, and in the case of feminist naturalism, these causal accounts also include social, political, and historical factors. Primarily, feminist naturalism seeks to emphasize the ways in which cultural and historical factors can enable, rather than distort, knowledge.”[[9]](#endnote-9) Caring encompasses a form of knowledge creation that is organic and emergent from our relationships. Again the example of Senator Portman is instructive. Knowledge begets the possibility of care, but at the same time, caring motivates inquiry and knowledge creation. The more I know the story of someone’s life—their experiences as well as their character, likes, and dislikes—the more potential there is that I might grow in care for them. And, the more I care for someone the greater I am motivated to learn about them. With each iteration of a caring act and the intendant knowledge it generates, I am shaping my sense of self and personality as well as how other people view me. In other words, the process of caring inquiry not only builds knowledge and habituates processes of knowledge acquisition, it sets my identity on a certain trajectory. This is what John Dewey refers to as growth. Our relational exchanges reaffirm our ontological positions as second persons whose very being is influenced by others. Yet, we make choices regarding acts and what we attend to and thus we will ourselves to care within our relationships. For example, if I confront someone who is crying, I can respond in many ways. If I respond in a caring manner, my actions will likely include habits of care that facilitate learning why the person is crying and whether I can help. Familiarity with such actions through practice can result in viewing myself as a caring person. Every caring act then becomes an act of growth and self authorship grounded in our transactions with others. In other words, this naturalized epistemology is steeped in a naturalized normativity. The norms of care are dictated and emerge from the situation particulars rather than a predetermined mandate. By contrast, Christian ethics entails an a priori epistemology based on the revelation of God in the bible. There is a presumption of insight into God’s will, particularly through the life and words attributed to Jesus. While Christian ethics can mandate care, it cannot mandate an openness to the particular needs of the cared for.

**Conclusion: Authentic Care and Christian Ethics as Incompatible (not incommensurable)**

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Politics is the art and science of influence. In that sense, all theories of ethics are political because they endeavor to influence others toward a particular set of values and commitments. However, Christian ethics is premised on an authoritative position. There can be disagreements as to what Jesus intended, but ultimately Christian ethics must be reconciled with what is believed to be the morality of God. Thus in a certain way care ethics can never be equated with Christian ethics. They may share some characteristics—just as care ethics shares some characteristics with virtue theory and consequentialism. Care ethics, however, is particularistic, responsive, and emergent out of the circumstances and relational environment and not based on an authoritative figure of any sort, such as a deity. As Senator Portman describes, “I wrestled with how to reconcile my Christian faith with my desire for Will to have the same opportunities to pursue happiness and fulfillment as his brother and sister. Ultimately, it came down to the Bible’s overarching themes of love and compassion and my belief that we are all children of God.”[[10]](#endnote-10) Despite his rationalization at the end, his Christian faith and the corresponding ethic did not prompt his new-found inclusiveness. He needed a moral insight not readily available in care ethics.

To be truly responsive, I have to want to care out of my own volition and not be commanded to and not out of a sense of duty. Once care is an obligation, then I can begin to play the deontological game of asking where does my duty end. Care that encourages growth of self and knowledge creation is governed by a genuine desire to be attentive and responsive to the other. Care that is based on ideology or authority is not truly open. Can I have a robust care for someone if my response to pregnancy is delimited by the injunction that someone must bring a fetus to term or that their relationship with someone of the same sex is sinful?

The combination of deifying Jesus and ethical ideology, ultimately makes Christian ethics and care ethics incompatible but not incommensurable with one another. Of course, Christians are capable of caring but the term Christian ethics is inherently limiting in the caring response to the one cared for such that the term “Christian ethics” loses its descriptive meaning were it to have the same responsiveness as care ethics.

1. Rob Portman, “Gays Also Deserve Chance to Get Married,” *The Columbus Dispatch,* March 15, 2012 <http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/editorials/2013/03/15/gay-couples-also-deserve-chance-to-get-married.html> [accessed March 20, 2013]. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Hence I prefer to address “care theory” rather than “care ethics.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The Jesus Seminar started in 1985 and it brought together scholars from various denominations to employ a scholarly view of the bible with no religious agenda and in opposition to a fundamentalist view. The Jesus Seminar consists of dozens of the finest biblical scholars from across the nation and around the world to debate the historical nature of the bible. After deliberation, they vote. First they addressed the words of Jesus resulting in the 1993 publication of The Five Gospels and then they addressed the actions of Jesus resulting in the 1997 publication of The Acts of Jesus. Recognizing the disagreement in biblical scholarship, they vote along a 4 point scale ranging from Red which is the most likely to originate with Jesus to Pink which is likely to have originated with Jesus to Grey which is unlikely and Black which is the least likely to have been original to Jesus. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Georgia Harkness, *Christian Ethics* (Abingdon Press, 1957). Available online at <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=802&C=1076> (accessed 1/11/13) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Milton Rokeach, “The Nature and Meaning of Dogmatism,” *Psychological Review* 61:3 (1954) 194-204, 195. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ruth E. Groenhout, “I Can’t Say No,” in *Philosophy, Feminism, and Faith*, eds., Ruth E. Groenhout and Marya Bower (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 161-164. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Groenhout, “I Can’t Say No,” 167. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Marianne Janack, “Feminist Epistemology” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/fem-epis/#SH3a> [accessed March 19, 2011] [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Portman, “Gays Also Deserve Chance to Get Married.” [↑](#endnote-ref-10)