

A Performative Theory of Care

A Presentation and Discussion with Graduate Students for the
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As a discrete field of study, care ethics is three decades old. By comparison to traditional deontological and teleological moral philosophy, care is still very much in its infancy stages. Questions of how to characterize care remain a source of discussion. Various theorists describe care as a Kantian duty, a virtue ethic, or even a form of consequentialism. Indeed, care has similarities to each of these traditional ethical categories. However, rather than argue that care should fit one of these frameworks, I suggest that this categorical ambiguity signifies that care represents a paradigm shift in ethical thinking. There is a compelling desire to understand care through established structures but I contend that care represents a novel approach to ethics that moves beyond strict normative considerations of "what is the right thing to do?"

In my earlier work, I described care as embodied. Our bodies have unique cognitive and physical capacities to care. When those capacities are developed, the potential for increased quantity and quality of care grows. However, care is more than a normative theory of ethics. Care has an ontological aspect. As care habits are developed and reinforced they become easier and potentially more frequent. Repetition of caring behavior is how one builds an ethical identity recognized by themselves and others. Furthermore, care has epistemological implications. Knowing and caring exist in a dynamic relationship to one another. The more one knows about someone, the more opportunity for connection and empathy. Similarly, the more one cares about someone, the more they want to know about that person which in turn improves the efficacy of care. I indicated earlier that care moves beyond strict normative considerations, yet it still maintains a normative quality: an emergent normativity. Rather than prescribed behavior, the normative caring response is the product of openness and attentiveness to the need that emerges out of a particular context. Taken altogether, I suggest that care affects who we are, what we know, as well as our moral behavior.

In this presentation, I build to an understanding of care that is performative. I begin with reviewing definitions of care with an emphasis on how care is both personal and political. From there, I outline my previous work on the embodied character of care. Applying the structure of Judith Butler's work on gender identity as performance and John Dewey's work on habit, I develop a notion of caring identity built on iterations or habits of care. This "performativity" is a postmodern framework that operates in the space between absolute individual agency and social or natural determinism. Accordingly, performances of care support and constitute our moral identity including our ability to respond to emergent needs. The notion of performativity helps merge ontology, epistemology, and ethics into a holistic theory of care. I will utilize numerous concrete applications, including those from health care to facilitate understanding the arguments presented.