

**Joan Tronto, Moral Boundaries, Routledge, 1993**

Whether or not one agrees with the arguments of Carol Gilligan (1982) that there is a distinctive feminine ethic of care which contrasts with the dominant masculine ethic of justice and rights, one should query the impetus for the debate at this particular moment in history. I would agree with Joan Tronto's position in her book Moral Boundaries that it suggests the fragility of our contemporary paradigms of the related enterprises of ethics and politics. The classical liberal boundary line between the sphere of the ethical and that of the political is under question from all sides. Not only are there feminist critiques of the impartial observer or Rawlsian original position assumed in order to derive principles of justice and rights (Okin, 1989, Young, 1990). There are also postmodernists who are sceptical of any "grand theory" that attempts a new foundation or redrawing of the bases for ethical decisions (cf. Butler and Scott, eds., 1992). And there are communitarians who maintain that the problem has to do with liberal individualism which glorifies capitalist consumerist market values, and in so doing undermines moral obligations and virtue based on our social roles in our communities of origin (Sandel, 1982, MacIntyre, 1991).

Feminist ethicists have responded to this challenge to liberalism either by, like Susan Okin, attempting to expand the parameters of liberalism to include feminist concerns (Benhabib, 1992), by rejecting theoretical ethics altogether in a search for postmodern theories of subjectivity and politics as performative, pluralist and contextual (Phelan, 1994, Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), by developing Habermasian theories of ethical and political decisions as requiring a reciprocal dialogical process (Young, 1990, Jaggar, 1991) or by attempting to develop lesbian

and/or feminist existential communitarian models for transforming values and civic virtues (Hoagland, 1988, Ferguson, 1995).

Joan Tronto's book Moral Boundaries inserts itself into this debate in a novel way. Rather than take one of the opposing positions sketched above, she steps back from the debate to ask what are the historical reasons why, given capitalist development and male dominance, modern Western ethical and political thought has developed its contemporary parameters. Her historical perspective is not exactly genealogical in the Foucauldian sense, since she does not detail how the moral boundaries she lists (morality/politics, the impartial moral point of view/private sentimentality, public/private distinctions) are put into place historically as strategies of power to control objectified populations. Rather, she argues in a more structuralist vein that the dilemmas of modern political thought, e.g whether to side with the "morality first" camp of liberal thinkers like Hutcheson and Hume or the "politics first" thinkers like Machievelli, arose because of the change in the moral "form of life" from a feudal hierarchical and local communitarianism to a capitalist cosmopolitanism.

Such a major change in the political economy also changed social life: people had to develop a moral code which would allow them to relate to distant others, and those diverse from them in terms of religious and cultural backgrounds. This made irrelevant the moral sentiments view of morality of Hutcheson, Hume and Adam Smith, that ethical obligations are based on feelings of sympathy and empathy, since it could not account for duties to distant others. Thus arose ideal observer theories and Kantian categorical imperatives that attempted to solve the moral strains imposed by the new capitalist way of life by posing a sharp dichotomy between reason and self-interest, reason and emotion, and basing principles of morality and justice on the former not the latter. Whereas the moral sentiments school still hoped for a way to combine reason, self-interest and emotion in ethics, a way that would make sense of traditional virtues, Kantian and utilitarian liberal ethics come to dominate modern Western ethics. These approaches, based on a reason/emotion split, reject definitively the Aristotelian virtues ethic that presupposes an automatic individual identification of self-interest with that of a community in which one is embedded and from which one draws ones moral habits, virtues and duties.

With respect to male dominance, Tronto argues that the Kantian reorganization of morality paralleled the separation of public from private and the association of women with the latter sphere that took place with the separation in industrial capitalism between public wage labor production and private domestic life. The former morality of sentiments became associated with women, emotions, privacy and particular family obligations, while the new morality of justice became associated with men, public politics and rationality. Thus women's morality, the ethics of care and context, is trivialized and not seen to be a matter of public importance; indeed, in Kantian ethics, it seems to no longer deserve the name of morality at all since it concerns particular and not universalizable normative claims.

Tronto's concern in this book is to move beyond this separation of the ethics of care and the ethics of justice into two incompatible spheres identified as feminine and masculine. Indeed, she faults those like Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984) who validate a feminine ethics of care for not paying attention to the wider social and political institutions into which our particular caring practices fall. If like Nell Noddings we only defend the importance of caring for those particular others, such as family, neighbors, and friends, with which we happen to be connected, we have de facto legitimated class, race, national and imperial divisions which create our particular connections without scrutiny as to whether they are just or not.

Perhaps the best argued section of the book is Tronto's double-edged critique of both Gilligan and Kohlberg's positions on moral development. In addition to the feminist critique mentioned above of the feminine ethics thinkers, she also faults Kohlberg's defense of a Kantian universalism on the grounds that it leads to a moral elitism. Kohlberg posits a process of what Tronto calls "objectification" as a necessary stage of moral development, since stage four of conventional morality presupposes that one connect oneself to the values of one's group or community, but in the process one has to "other" those and their values that are not in one's group. But what Kohlberg ignores here is that in a society structured by oppression, such "othering" is asymmetrical, since those in the dominant groups end up thinking of those "othered" as morally inferior, while those in subordinate groups tend to accept the view of the dominants that they and their group's values are inferior.

Moving on to post-conventional morality for Kohlberg presupposes that one is able to detach oneself from one's home group values by imaginatively placing

oneself in other roles, thus developing flexibility and individuality in accepting or rejecting the codes of one's group. But since the majority of those who achieve this stage are in socially elite groups, a by-product of such a moral development process is that one has adopted morally elitist values in which those "othered" are still considered morally inferior.

Tronto points out that Kohlberg explains the lower development scores of women, working class members and those from nonwhite races and nations on his moral scale, not by acknowledging its elitist and sexist bias but by arguing that such populations are not given as many opportunities for role-taking as middle and upper class educated white males. But this ignores the problem of assimilation, i.e. that postconventional morality is supposed to have individuals ignoring others' group differences and taking them to be the same as oneself, without seeing how structural inequalities may continue to make those differences relevant and oppressive. Thus the moral elitism built into the idea that differences are irrelevant (assimilationism) but still make one morally inferior to "the same" (objectification) ends up being a power/knowledge position of its own which validates the moral reasoning processes of white middle and upper class Western men.

Tronto proposes to get around the limitations of Gilligan's ethics of care by generalizing the care critique. That is, she asks whether the general organization of our society is fair in the way some are privileged in the amount of care they receive while others do not get their basic needs met (hence, aren't sufficiently cared for). By recontextualizing questions of justice through questions of who cares for and who receives care, Tronto maintains we can better answer questions of justice.

Tronto thus proposes a radical revision of our approach to public concerns. Rather than to adjudicate the distribution of goods and services by abstract claims to universal rights or entitlements, she proposes to substitute the degree to which a society satisfies particular human needs as a yardstick by which to measure its moral worth. As she says, "for a society to be judged as a morally admirable society, it must, among other things, adequately provide for care of its members and its territory (p. 126)". In order to judge how adequate the care offered by a society, we must highlight the four ethical elements of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness. Societies which don't notice or recognize the needs of their members, refuse to be responsible or competent to meet them and

which do not develop responsiveness to vulnerable people because of prevalent myths of autonomy are, by this criterion, guilty of moral failures.

There are three related difficulties with substituting an ethics of meeting needs for an ethic of defending rights as the base of a just public policy of goods distribution. First, how do we assess needs? Second, who is responsible for meeting needs (the state, corporations, family relatives)? Third, what do we do when needs conflict? Tronto acknowledges these issues and attempts to give us some guidelines for adjudicating disagreements about what people need as well as conflicts between needs. However, in my opinion she does not succeed in this task. Tronto suggests we should not take needs as commodities but pay attention to who is doing the caring work to meet the needs. We should also insist that needs be placed in a political context where recipients are "taken seriously" rather than being delegitimated as dependents. But such directives are still too vague to deal with the power/knowledge questions of how needs and capabilities of intended recipients are to be determined, whose needs take priority in the case of conflict, and who is responsible for assuring those needs get met.

Let us discuss an example to make these issues clear. Suppose we agree that our "society" is at fault for having such a large percentage of hungry and homeless people. Who is responsible for meeting the needs of these people? The government? Independent charities? Their kin? Corporations? All of us by random handouts and acts of kindness to hungry and homeless strangers? The wealthy elite? By not providing an answer to this question, Tronto's move to a public policy based on care is in danger of being vacuous, since conservatives, liberals and radicals can each claim to be adhering to it while disagreeing on the importance of public concern with caring.

Though Tronto warns us against relativist theories which would, e.g. justify greater First than Third World consumption on the ground that needs are culturally relative, she doesn't provide an alternative ground for the "more objective" standard for needs, that all people "need" to develop their capacities, that she accepts from Martha Nussbaum. For example, she claims that people need to be cared for so that they develop their own autonomy as a way to develop their capacities. But why should we assume this? Young children who become musical prodigies because of the authoritarian prodding of their parents presumably weren't given autonomy, yet developed a musical capacity in this way. And isn't autonomy itself not a universal

value, but one which has historically developed primarily in industrial societies with traditions of civil liberties? Don't other societies succeed in developing capacities of their members without valuing autonomy? In any case, must we wait until a society develops the value of autonomy before we can fault it for not promoting it? Or should that society be "forced to be free" (Rousseau) by insisting on grassroots democracy, gender democracy in the home, and so forth?

Part of the problem with Tronto's approach may be her attempt to defend a Marxian "from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs" principle of justice without really describing the economic, political and historical context in which such a principle could be accepted. If you remember, Marx argued in Critique of the Gotha Program that such a principle would be utopian until a communist society was achieved, and that even in the first stage after overthrowing capitalism we would have to act on a principle of merit, "from each according to their ability, to each according to their worth/merit/work". Although Tronto gives us a historical argument for why the morality of sentiment was replaced by a Kantian morality of justice in the 18th century, she gives us only sketchy reasons for why her own public ethic of care, which she says bears a "family resemblance" to the morality of sentiments, would or could be likely to replace the Kantian ethic.

Tronto claims that her own context-based morality is superior to universalistic moralities because her theory, like other pragmatic theories of morality, does not maintain the "strict boundary between politics and morality" that the former theories do (p. 148). But this seems to imply that her public ethics of care is only plausible if presented with a politics that can achieve it. But how would she suggest we attack the current political ascendancy of the New Right in the US? After all, as she admits, the lack of a national day care policy in the US is due to the fact that there is no notion here that the care of young children while their parents work is a social responsibility. But what does she see happening or what strategies can we offer that are likely to change that belief? Instead, the resurgence of the New Right and the strengthening of conservative welfare reform initiatives suggest that the discourse of "deserving" vs. "undeserving dependents" is likely to continue unchecked in the present climate. In short, Tronto needs a much stronger Marxian type argument that the conditions for a social revolution are at hand if she means to persuade us that the discourse of a public ethic of care will be a politically relevant tool to change our moral and political paradigms.

Given the weakness of the historical argument she offers for the timeliness of her own more context-based metaethical approach, the problems she raises in general for any ethic of care appear difficult to solve. For example, she points to the "problem of partiality" shared by all ethics of care. How does she propose to get over that faced by her own version, particularly since, as she puts it, a society is only morally responsible for the adequate care of its members and its territory. How, in an age of global capitalism and multinational corporations, with the history of imperialism having set nations in the Third World in an impossible bargaining position with respect to First World nations, can we morally justify not holding the United States responsible for famine in Cuba (an obvious case because of our embargo), but also for poverty in Latin America and most of the rest of the Third World? What counts as "our territory" in a global economy and eco-sphere now so interconnected?

But suppose Tronto is merely taken to suggest that those of us of good will, e.g. concerned radicals and feminists, can change our own paradigms of the moral and the political by adopting her type of public ethic of care. Even in this case, I would argue, she must deal with the partiality problem she correctly raises as an issue with any ethics of care. How am I, a white middleclass Northamerican woman, going to be led to care about, and hence try to bring about a public policy to care for, starving children in Cuba, Nicaragua, or even in Harlem or Mississippi? What moral psychology, what feminist politics, what feminist ethico-politics will lead me to broaden my concerns to these class, race and nationally distant others?

To answer this, we need to consider the political, economic and moral conditions for a concrete ethics and politics of solidarity to arise. And here, I would argue, we need to look at what actual and potential oppositional networks and communities are forming that might be persuaded to adopt the kind of public ethics of care that Tronto advocates (cf. Ferguson, 1995). In short, we need to contextualize the possibility and political effectiveness of such a paradigm shift in even more of a collective and political way than Tronto has offered.

In spite of these shortcomings of Joan Tronto's work as so far developed in her book Moral Boundaries, her book is an important first step in attempting a paradigm-shift for feminist ethics to a feminist ethico-politics, a task many others are also undertaking (cf. Butler and Scott, eds., 1992, Walker, 1995, Bar On and Ferguson, eds., forthcoming). It is also a very good source for clear summaries and

feminist critiques of the Gilligan-Kohlberg debate. For these reasons I would highly recommend it for those interested in new approaches to radical social change and moral revolution.

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