

# Care and Nutrition: Ethical Issues

## Exploring the Moral Nexus between Caring and Eating through Natural History, Anthropology and the Ethics of Care

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### ABSTRACT

*The way in which human beings eat is quite revealing of the kind of moral beings that they are. This sheds a light on how non-human animals eat as well as behave in activities regarding food. Every mammal at some moment of its life depends on someone else to be fed. Such activities involving food are universal and natural forms of caring. In these situations, social relationships between individuals are defined or reinforced. Thus, actions that involve sharing and caring can easily be seen as moral ones. At the same time, however, since meals are natural and ordinary that it is very difficult to view them as moments of immorality. Forms of injustice and domination over other genders, ethnic or social groups as well as over other species rest in the small and apparently inoffensive choices and gestures of everyday meals.*

*Keywords:* morality, nutrition, care, ethics of care, naturalization, women studies, food studies, altruism, androcentrism, Darwinism.

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### 1. NATURALIZING CARE

The ethics of care are a family of moral theories, insights and practices that aims to not losing sight of the experiences, activities and works involved in caring. Such activities, that are embedded in the everyday ordinary life, are constantly neglected by moral and political mainstream theories. Nutrition is a caring activity as it is related to many forms of domestic care and nursing. The moral issues related to food and personal relationships in the domestic sphere are hardly definable in terms of utility, rights or justice, they are a matter of care. In the words of Michiel Korthals, “meals belong to the extremely vulnerable and valuable meeting points where informal

relationships are intensified” (2004, 17). Feeding one another is a natural caring activity that creates and reinforces social bonds, precisely the kind of activity that the ethics of care seek to empower.

However, nutrition carries a set of morally problematic forms of domination on some human beings and over many other animals. The theorists of care argue that such issues are particularly insidious because of their being part of “the way we eat”. Something that is perceived as perfectly natural and ordinary.

An ethic of care, to fruitfully address this kind of issues and underline what other moral theories are neglecting should not be an idealized theory. The ethics of care in this perspective is a naturalized approach, one that focus on matters rather than in general assumptions. Naturalization, in the broad sense, is a philosophical view grounded on strictly empirical data (Flanagan, Sarkissian, and Wong 2008, 2). There are several grounds on which the ethics of care is to be considered naturalized. First, this means that, as Eva Feder Kittay puts it, care is “neither abstract nor disembodied: it is an ethics that begins with the reality of caring, with real women (mostly) tending to embodied beings in all their concrete particularity” (2009, 126). The ground on which this ethical frame is rooted is an anthropological one made of real, concrete experiences. Second, this means that the source of the normativity is to be found in the same activity or practice to which the norms apply. There are no moral principles, no abstract theorization outside the ordinary activities and feelings emerging from caring tasks.

The ethics of care, when it comes to nutrition, is generally concerned with exploring the everyday emotions, experiences or injustices felt by caregivers and care-receivers. This involves collecting empirical data which are mostly not “natural” like the ones from natural sciences. Nevertheless, this does not mean that “natural” facts shouldn’t be relevant to the ethics of care. In fact, care can be enriched by this further instance of naturalization concerning “natural” empirical facts. A “natural” and naturalized concept of care does not apply nearly to a very specific group of humans (i.e. women), it goes far beyond gender and species.

The caring activities related to nutrition have been crucial to the natural history of human beings. In an evolutionary and naturalized account of the concept of care, nutrition is the primal form of caring, as breastfeeding is the very first form of nurture that every new-born mammal experiences. Psychoanalytical development theories have been pointing out that the lack of maternal care in human beings can seriously undermine the regular development of children. Similar effects have been observed in many other mammals: Harlow and Suomi have (cruelly) tested rhesus monkeys in order to demonstrate that the lack of maternal caring makes young individuals

“enormously disturbed”, unable to normally take care of themselves and socially interact with others (Rachels 1990, 218). Jane Goodall (2000, 148-50) with a much more loving and human approach describes Passion, a chimpanzee mother showing a clear lack of sensitivity to her son needs and requests, the British ethologist holds that as a result of that behaviour the young ape grows up showing severe psychological and social problems.

Among the theorists of care, Nel Noddings (1984, 79-80) maintains that maternal caring is the “natural” and fundamental form of care and it is the condition for further “moral” care in human beings. The connection between care and morality in this case is a strong one: the moral nature of human beings depends on their very first nurture relationships. However, several theorists point out the risks involved in this way of considering maternal care as primal and paradigmatic. The *cliché* of women as selfless nurturers tends to reinforce the exclusive assignment of care tasks to women. Focusing on all the positive emotions linked to motherhood can be misleading, as it deflects attention from the oppressive masculine domination structure in which those experiences take place (Held 2006, 553-4). Nevertheless, naturalizing care helps seeing it as central to our moral nature. Such awareness may prevent us from fostering the prejudice that being involved in such activities could be somehow degrading.

An example of a naturalized account of care is provided by the neuroscientific work of Jaap Panksepp presenting care as one of the seven basic emotional systems that all mammals share:

[...] the roots of human empathy reach deep into the ancient circuits that engender caring feelings in all mammals, where we identify our own well-being with the well-being of others [...]. If a young animal can only survive by initially obtaining food from another animal, there is nothing like social bonding and maternal devotion to ensure that such sharing takes place. (Panksepp and Biven 2012, 284-8)

This way of rooting caring behaviours in the most ancient structure of the mammalian brain can have strong moral and political implications:

- On one hand the brain’s structures that are active during maternal care are also active in male caregiving, thus it separates care from femininity. The devaluation of tasks that are considered “feminine” ones, as well as the stigmatization of specific social groups (mostly women) because of their being caregivers, rest in the “natural” association between care and femininity. Showing that such connection is not a “natural” one could be an important starting point for the empowering of caregivers and the recognition of their social importance.
- On the other hand, it suggests that caring may be something we share with a significant part of the non-human world even beyond mammals,

which might have strong moral implications. The fact that we share a set of capacities with non-human animals that are the condition for our being social and moral beings seriously undermines anthropocentrism.

Moreover, the natural world presents numerous examples of forms of care that exceed family and species' bonds: birds' parents, for instance, are both involved in the nutrition of their offspring; orphan mammals are sometimes adopted and fed by an adult of another species and elder individuals are fed by the community. Charles Darwin relates the following anecdote:

Capt Stansbury found on a salt lake in Utah an old and completely blind pelican, which was very fat, and must have been long and well fed by his companions. Mr Byth, as he informs me, saw Indian crows feeding two or three of their companions which were blind. (Rachels 1990, 148)

James Rachels holds that in human beings these would be clear examples of moral behaviour and altruism. A significant amount of experiments on the moral capacities of non-human animals (de Waal 2006) involves food sharing, which is quite revealing of the transspecific link between nutrition and morality. The fact that ethologists judge such activities explicative of how animals show altruistic behaviours suggests that the capacities that enable moral care could have emerged in that kind of interactions. This means that our eating, and more precisely our eating together, is strictly related to our being altruistic and moral beings.

## 2. NUTRITION AS A WAY OF CARING IN HUMAN SOCIETIES

There are multiple ways in which nutrition can be a form of care for others. In different care situations, such as mercy, romantic love, parental care or feeding non-human animals, different foods carry specific meanings. Italian anthropologist Vito Teti (2015, 70-1), for example, describes the *cunsulo* tradition in the South of Italy, which consists, when a member of the community dies, in the offering of prepared dishes for the mourning family that is not in condition to cook. Teti holds that the etymology of the word "companion", from the latin *cum* (together) and *panis* (bread), is paradigmatic of the social bond's reinforcing function of nutrition.

Nutrition can also be a form of self-care. Comfort foods, for example, are forms of consolation – by eating specific foods (generally high-caloric ones) charged with nostalgic and emotional meanings. In Hollywood's movies, for example, the best medicine for a rough break-up is often eating a huge ice-cream box in front of the television. Food choices can also be

seen as forms of care for oneself. A vegetarian choice, for example, can be a form of moral perfectionism. One could feel that eating other creatures' flesh is no longer an option, it is no longer something that is compatible with the kind of person that we are, that we want to be (Pollo 2016, 100). This attempt to achieve the moral transformation of oneself through the transformation of food habits dates back to ancient Greece. Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry of Tyre wrote *On Abstinence from Animal Food*, advocating vegetarianism as a form of purity and self-improvement. Likewise, the personal experience of many modern vegetarians often rests on similar thoughts. In these cases, the care for others arises from the care for oneself. Similarly, some feminist vegetarians hold that meat consumption is sustained by an anthropocentric and androcentric culture (Adams 1990), directly responsible for the endless suffering of billions of animals. Therefore, a vegetarian could feel that, in order to morally transform herself in the person she wants or even need to be, she must stop eating animal proteins.

There can be personal, moral and political reasons for changing one's food habits. The link between morality, nutrition and personal identity is well expressed by the maxim "we are what we eat", that we can find in many philosophical, religious and anthropological theories as well as in pop culture. Even though we are certainly much more than what could be reduced to what we eat, nutrition is strongly bonded to what we are: "Food is a question of personal identity" (Korthals 2004, 2-11). From a very young age, children start defining themselves through their personal wishes and tastes: their perception of their own personality is mainly composed by what they like and what they dislike. A sudden change in food habits, even for grownups, is therefore a quite traumatic experience. It can generate confusion and uncertainty due to the loss of part of one's identity and culture.

Changing one's food habits for moral reasons is much more than a mere matter of choice. It means giving up something truly meaningful to human life. If we feel that the way we eat is somehow immoral because it harms other beings, we could try to change it because we care about them. We could also decide to change it because we care about ourselves and the kind of person we are. In this case, we might want to change our food habits in order to become better persons from our very own moral perspective. At the same time changing the way we eat means losing part of our culture, part of what we are, of what constitutes us deeply (Butler 2004, 2-23).

In human societies, the caring task of feeding one's relatives is often, in a morally problematic way, a feminine one that includes activities such as

grocery shopping, setting up the table, cooking, doing the washing-up and many more chores. As Korthals puts it “food is therefore a gender matter *par excellence*” (2004, 20). By responding to one’s family needs for food, women engage in a multitude of thoughts, dispositions and activities. On the other side of the table, men through small gestures and daily rituals contribute (awarely or not) to keep such culinary tasks as an exclusive feminine duty. Men often do not cook because they “don’t know how to cook”, the reason (or the pretext) is that such knowledge is traditionally and exclusively transmitted from mother to daughter. Therefore, the caregivers find themselves obliged by their culture to take care of those who “don’t know how to cook” by cooking and getting to know how to cook. This form of domination is a matter of daily routine. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2013, 32-4) describes the typical behaviour of men who come home before dinner, put their slippers on, wait for the food to get prepared. During meals men tend to eat more (it is a sign of virility) – by so doing they give women, who finish their food earlier, time to clear the table. Bourdieu holds that dishes like the French *pot-au-feu*, which requires a lot of attention and entire days of preparation, are linked to the traditional conception of women’s role: the fact that a woman who entirely dedicates herself to domestic tasks, in France, is called a *pot-au-feu* is quite revealing of such connection. Hence Bourdieu claims that the cultural preference for such kind of dishes is not independent from the androcentric desire to confine women within the domestic walls all day long.

The assignment of such domestic tasks to women, according to French philosopher Sandra Laugier (2015, 43), resulted in the exclusion of such activities and concerns from morality and from the public sphere. Care tasks are reduced to private feelings without any political or moral relevance. Aurélie Damamme and Patricia Paperman (2009, 153) have carried out a research work on this feminine experience of ordinary domestic care-giving. They interviewed many women, pinpointing their sometimes unbearable feelings of injustice, resentment and even rage. Caregivers need to be taken care of as well. The main goal of the ethics of care is to let caregivers have a public voice, so that such private experiences get to be expressed and publicly heard. By doing so, such apparently ordinary and trivial tasks can come to be considered real professions practiced by individuals with needs and a legitimate political voice.

### 3. CONCLUSION

This short analysis of the evolutionary and ethical relationship between caring and nutrition seems to show that our way of eating is deeply intertwined with our being social and moral beings. Many of the behaviours that make us social agents have probably emerged in interactions that involved food. Hence meals can be seen as the daily testimony of our being moral beings but also of our being immoral. Every meal is a proof that someone is taking care of us and that other human and non-human beings deserve to be taken care of. Eating is sharing life, it is something we do *with* some beings and *to* some others. To decide which beings deserve to be (or not) on each side is an ethical and caring task to be performed every day.

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