

Care Ethics, John Dewey's "Dramatic Rehearsal," and Moral Education

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[Moral] deliberation is a dramatic rehearsal (in imagination) of various competing possible lines of action.

—John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*

Although there have been a few efforts to find useful intersections between the philosophy of John Dewey and feminist care ethics, there remains much to be explored and much to be gained.¹ Dewey's holistic and aesthetic approach to ethics provides an intriguing framework not only for enriching the contemporary notion of care ethics but also for how the habits of caring can be developed. Specifically, this essay focuses on Dewey's notion of "dramatic rehearsal" within moral deliberative processes as fostering a caring imagination. Moreover, infusing an embodied dimension to Dewey's concept of dramatic rehearsal suggests that rich experiences of character acting, also referred to as "method acting," can exercise our empathetic and imaginative capacities. If dramatic embodiment is viewed as a potent method of empathy development, the implications for contemporary approaches to "moral education" are significant. Furthermore, in a world where communications, technology, and information demands have sped up decision making, Deweyan deliberative processes remind us that the complexity of caring requires longer temporal horizons. I begin with a brief discussion of the congruence between Dewey's ethics and care prior to addressing the implications of dramatic rehearsal.

DEWEY AND CARE ETHICS

Feminist care ethics has come a long way in the past twenty-five years. Early work by Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings in the 1980s struggled with defining this new approach to ethics. Sometimes the language of the early efforts to describe care implied gender essentialism and perhaps overused the mother-child relationship as paradigmatic of caring. In addition, initial attempts at distinguishing care ethics from traditional approaches overemphasized the dichotomy between care and justice, a bifurcation that recent theoretical work has mitigated. Since their original work on care, both Gilligan and Noddings have clarified their positions and responded to critics. Perhaps more importantly an array of feminist and nonfeminist philosophers and theorists has weighed in on care. Today, care ethics is a robust area of exploration for moral theorists and applied ethicists, generating rich and voluminous research.

Care ethics is an approach to ethics that centers on context and relationships over rubrics of moral adjudication. Single sentence definitions are often inadequate to encapsulate care theory. Diemut Bubeck defines caring as the "meeting of the needs of one person by another person, where face-to-face interaction between carer and cared for is a crucial element of the overall activity and where the need is of such a nature that it cannot possibly be met by the person in need herself."² Peta Bowden

claims that care "expresses ethically significant ways in which we matter to each other, transforming interpersonal relatedness into something beyond ontological necessity or brute survival."³ Each of these definitions offers important insight into care but does not capture its depth. Care ethics involves valuing empathy and emotion over rules and rights. Theorists of care do not entirely eschew principles and moral systems but do not believe that these exhaust the depth and breadth of ethics. Because care is so contextually dependent, some have accused it of relativism, however its contextual nature is indicative of care's close ties to particularist epistemology. Specific knowledge of concrete others as opposed to abstract knowledge of others is crucial to the connection and empathy that are at the foundation of care.

With just a few exceptions, American pragmatist philosophy is strikingly absent from the discussions about care ethics. This is surprising because American philosophy is generally regarded as feminist friendly, as witnessed by the resurgence of interest in the social philosophy of Jane Addams.⁴ The pragmatist commitment to pluralism, community, and growth are consistent with feminist philosophy.⁵ In particular, Dewey's ethics can be described as congruent with feminist care ethics in at least five aspects:

1. *Particularism*. For Dewey, moral deliberation is an outgrowth of emergent situations "where we need to *discover* what is good and right."⁶ Although care ethicists avoid the term "right," they do claim that individual situations give rise to the concrete imaginative material necessary for empathy and care.⁷

2. *Eliding ends and means distinctions*. Virginia Held describes the ethics of care as both a "practice and a value."⁸ As a practice or caring labor, a caregiver works on behalf of another to allow them to grow and flourish. As a value, caring becomes a normative standard of moral assessment but not in a forced choice or dichotomous manner. Similarly, Dewey's concept of the "ends-in-view" points to a false distinction between ends and means that, when applied to morality, seeks a middle ground between Kantian and utilitarian approaches. In this regard, caring can be described as a skill and a disposition — an approach to the world, or to use a Deweyan concept, a habit — but it is also a moral ideal that is manifested in action.

3. *Extended temporal horizons*. Dewey recognizes that moral deliberation takes time in the playing out of imaginative possibilities. Moral rules or consequential calculations, although often complex, are rubrics that can cut short the time necessary to engage in a full moral deliberation. Because care ethics is fundamentally relational, it seeks long-term solutions that are not always easily derived. One of the reasons that those employing the care voice did not score well on Lawrence Kohlberg's "Heinz Dilemma" exercise, as recognized by Gilligan, was that their ambivalent responses included concern not only for immediate resolution but for long-term relational implications as well.⁹

4. *Complex consequentialism that integrates relational considerations.* Dewey is very concerned with the consequences of moral decisions but believes there needs to be a depth of understanding that moves beyond a utilitarian calculus: “It is sympathy which saves consideration of consequences from degenerating into mere calculation.”¹⁰ Similarly, Noddings has stated, “Care theory is consequentialist (but not utilitarian). It asks after the effects on recipients of our care. It demands to know whether relations of care have in fact been established, maintained, or enhanced.”¹¹

5. *Valuing Emotion.* Both Dewey and Noddings believe emotion has a positive role to play in morality, but both are careful to qualify their claims. Noddings claims that caring receptivity for the other requires “feeling and sensitivity” but that emotion alone cannot ensure caring.¹² Similarly, Dewey writes, “*Emotional* reactions form the chief materials of our knowledge of ourselves and of others.”¹³

Annette Baier has made the persuasive case that David Hume can be included in the intellectual genealogy leading to contemporary care ethics.¹⁴ An equally persuasive case can be made that given how much his ethics resonates with care theory, Dewey can be described as a proto-care ethicist.¹⁵

DRAMATIC REHEARSAL AND THE AESTHETICS OF CARING

Stephen Fesmire observes that Dewey’s notion of dramatic rehearsal has been largely ignored in philosophical literature.¹⁶ This oversight may in part be due to the tendency by some to interpret Dewey as seeking a scientific approach to ethics. Dewey did value science for its empiricism in terms of its system for validating experience, but not in the sense of scientific rational detachment.¹⁷ The idea of dramatic rehearsal is particularly contradictory to such scientific detachment, which may have made Dewey’s work on it easier to ignore. Also, Dewey addresses the notion of dramatic rehearsal in fits and starts in a number of his writings so it lacks an extended unified treatment.

For Dewey, moral decision making is a deliberative process. This deliberation “involves doubt, hesitation, the need of making up one’s mind, of arriving at a decisive choice.”¹⁸ In Dewey’s approach, moral principles are guides and should not be treated as rules requiring rote application: “Deliberation is not then to be identified with calculation, or a quasi-mathematical reckoning of profit and loss.”¹⁹ Dewey maintains an important role for emotion in the deliberative process, particularly sympathy. He describes sympathy as, “the animating mold of moral judgment not because it dictates take precedence in action over those of other impulses (which they do not do), but because it furnishes the most efficacious *intellectual* standpoint.”²⁰ Dewey claims that through sympathy one can consider a variety of implications to various constituencies. Thus far, in this brief foray into Dewey’s ethics, the description very much parallels that of care ethics. For example, Michael Slote’s recent work on the empathetic basis of care ethics resonates with Dewey’s description of deliberative moral processes.²¹

It is Dewey's aesthetic turn in describing moral deliberation that has the potential to bring novel insight to care ethics. As Patricia Goldblatt describes, Dewey believed everyone was capable of being an artist and living an artful life.²² This belief plays itself out in Dewey's ethics through the metaphor of drama. For Dewey, life is experienced as a narrative with moments of decision making that play out in any number of directions. Through the deliberative process of dramatic rehearsal, individuals imaginatively follow a variety of perceived available and competing narratives to their climax prior to making a decision. As Dewey elaborates,

Deliberation is actually an imaginative rehearsal of various courses of conduct. We give way, *in our mind*, to some impulse; we try, *in our mind*, some plan. Following its career through various steps, we find ourselves in imagination in the presence of the consequences that would follow: and as we then like and approve, or dislike and disapprove, these consequences, we find the original impulse or plan good or bad.²³

Dewey emphasizes that this process is "dramatic" in order to clearly distinguish it from a pure calculation and to highlight the depth of insight to which such imaginative speculations aspire.

William Caspary explains that moral deliberation for Dewey is dramatic in four senses: Its concern for character, its concern for plot, its difference from utilitarian approaches, and its openness to unexpected circumstances.²⁴ The concern for character and plot are illustrative of the contextual nature of dramatic rehearsal. One needs to know the individuals and situation of those involved to richly think through the implications of moral decisions. Failure to acquire such understanding will result in a truncated or superficial dramatic rehearsal that can degenerate into simple rule application or an ethical calculus. For example, associating individuals with stereotypes based on identity features (that is, racism) can result in impoverished moral deliberation. Caspary's final point, that dramatic rehearsal is open-ended or "suspenseful" highlights the indeterminacy of the process. When one engages in dramatic rehearsal, the results of playing out various scenarios are not predetermined and can be surprising, perhaps challenging one's own perceived values and commitments. Every dramatic rehearsal has the potential to challenge one's sense of moral character.

Dramatic rehearsal offers care ethics a method of framing the decision-making process. Caring is always a choice, even though sometimes caring appears to be "natural" or a very easy choice. In the process of deciding what actions, if any, will provide effective care, we consider a rich set of possibilities. In any morally demanding situation, knowledge of the individuals and the context involved are crucial for our imaginations to adequately rehearse what the implications of actions will be and whether those actions will reflect the growth and flourishing intended by caring. If the knowledge and imaginative skill are present, the potential caregiver can "inhabit" (but not own) the position of the others to better understand the impact and perception of a decision. It is an imperfect process because humans are imperfect, but attending to dramatic rehearsal can provide a rich vehicle for caring decisions.

There is very little in contemporary care ethics literature that addresses the role of aesthetics and imagination. Dewey bridges the artificial distinction between art and science by valuing the depth and complexity of artistic engagement and the scientific quest for knowledge and understanding. Regina Leffers describes Dewey's aesthetic as one that emphasizes connection over fragmentation of individuals and life experience. Accordingly, an aesthetic of care is one that can find connection and commonality in the experience of others. Leffers explains, "art is a quality that impregnates our undergoing and doing, making us receptive and vulnerable, conscious and purposeful," and thus approaching life with a robust aesthetic quality can help us see our connection to social problems and individuals in need that we may not attend to in a deeply fragmented world.²⁵ In this manner, an aesthetic of care through dramatic rehearsal can help with the very challenging process of caring for distant or unfamiliar others who are not part of one's family and friends.

Caring for those who are close to us is much less difficult than caring for strangers. Proximity breeds familiarity that in turn fosters the potential for caring. Conversely, caring for someone who is personally, geographically, or culturally unfamiliar requires imaginative work. Furthermore, proximal caring, such as the care for a child, is not considered morally extraordinary. The real ethical challenge is to care for, and therefore act on behalf of, strangers or those who are "others" for us. As Daniel Engster describes, "Nationalists, racists, and others may feel great sympathy and compassion for individuals within their group but contempt for individuals outside it. Care theorists are then faced with the question of explaining why we *should* care for strangers and distant others."²⁶ Engster's answer is a rational theory of obligation. Although some care theorists favor the notion of an obligation or duty to care, others resist that designation. For example, Held contends that care ethics is at once normative and yet distinct from traditional approaches to justice.²⁷ Dewey's dramatic rehearsal provides perhaps a middle way or holistic method of moral reflection that includes numerous considerations but importantly allows us to imagine a stranger who is not so strange.

CONCLUSION: CARE, DRAMATIC REHEARSAL, AND MORAL EDUCATION

Education theorists Jane Roland Martin and Nel Noddings are both well grounded in Deweyan philosophy and both view caring as a crucial element of a moral education. Martin describes the "3 C's" — caring, concern, and connection — as vital to a robust contemporary education: "Care, concern, connectedness, nurturance are as important for carrying on society's economic, political and social processes as its reproductive ones. If education is to help us acquire them, it must be redefined."²⁸ Noddings characterizes moral education as including four major components: "modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation."²⁹ Consistent with both Martin and Noddings, dramatic rehearsal can be viewed as a pedagogical tool for developing an empathetic imagination. For Dewey, it begins with play.

Given its open-ended character, dramatic rehearsal entails an element of "playfulness." Modern social and educational emphasis on productivity often has come at the expense of valuing "play," and Dewey believes this trend to be a mistake.

Dewey finds playfulness essential to imaginative development of children: "when children play horse, play store, play house or making calls, they are subordinating the physically present to the ideally signified."³⁰ The same can be said of dramatic rehearsal. In the process of imagining the various paths of moral choices, we require the skill and time to reflect beyond the present circumstances to potential outcomes — not to just the physical outcomes but to their rich ethical significance as well. Dewey claims, "Children have great powers of dramatic simulation."³¹ To play out imaginative moral scenarios, adults have to use these powers of dramatic simulation in complex ways.

To close, I briefly explore a possible implication of taking Dewey's notion of dramatic rehearsal seriously with regard to care ethics. If dramatic rehearsal of potential caring actions is a skill, or a habit that requires development and practice to mature, then it suggests a new or additional approach to contemporary moral education. Rich character acting is a means for individuals to playfully inhabit the lives and situations of others in a manner that can facilitate the development of imaginative resources, which can be applied to making life choices that engage dramatic rehearsal. In this case, character acting is defined as more than memorizing lines and recitation; rather, it entails adopting the back story and personality of a character and then responding to others and circumstances in a consistent personal narrative. This approach to acting is often associated with the theories of Constantin Stanislavsky (1863–1938), known as "The System," or later with the work of Lee Strasberg (1901–1982), known as "The Method," and has been enormously influential in contemporary drama. Actors take up the psychological disposition of their characters, developing a depth of understanding that allows them to confront varied circumstances and "stay in character." Philosopher Paul Woodruff explicitly describes the educational potential of method acting:

In modern theater, since Stanislavsky, preparation for performance may itself be educational. You will explore the larger context for your character, imagining, if necessary, a background story not supplied in the text. That is good practice for working out ways to understand other people in real life, a laboratory for empathy. Then as you perform your scene, you will learn to be sensitive to the emotion you are trying to elicit from others. Performers may develop multiple sympathies much more deeply than we do when we merely watch.³²

In this manner, method acting becomes the means of developing the skills and habits of care. Valuing dramatic rehearsal suggests that drama is more than entertainment or a luxury, but participates in developing important moral skills. Furthermore, the arts, which are usually considered educationally expendable given limited resources, become a central component of moral education made particularly significant in a diverse democratic society.

Method acting is an embodied approach to Dewey's dramatic rehearsal. Through acting, we can physically and emotionally embody characters and develop a depth of understanding that works from the "inside out." As John Harrop describes, "The system [Stanislavsky's approach] presumes that emotional memory is embedded in muscle memory: the senses collect experience as we go through life, and these are absorbed into the body and stored away waiting for impulses to re-energize

them.”³³ Contrast this approach with case studies. Although case studies are an excellent method for moral contextualization (and an approach favored by Dewey), they focus on circumstances and less on the internal position and dispositions of those involved — they feature the “outside in.” Character acting starts with the individual and then confronts situations. The deliberative process would suggest that reflection must also be part of the imaginative exercise. Once the character acting has been completed, a period of further reflection on what was learned or can be applied would enrich the imaginative processes.

An interesting discussion in regard to this application of dramatic rehearsal is who to portray. Virtue theorists have long advocated the emulation and reading of individuals regarded as possessing high moral standards for the purpose of internalizing and replicating these ethical qualities. However, caring may dictate that there are also advantages to practicing dramatic rehearsal by portraying characters of less moral repute. In such a case, post-dramatic reflection is perhaps of greater importance, but the opportunity to better understand others and move beyond superficial dismissal of evil is possible. For example, taking the time to inhabit the character of one of the pilots who perpetrated the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, may have significant moral implications. The purpose of such an exercise would not be to exonerate the immorality of their actions. However, since care theory encompasses more than ethical adjudication, what might be learned through dramatic rehearsal about the anger, motivation, and disposition of the pilots could be instrumental in ethical understanding and moral reflection on other circumstances.

I hope this essay contributes to what will become a larger discussion regarding the intersection of American Pragmatist Philosophy and Feminist Care Ethics and, in particular, how Dewey’s work on dramatic rehearsal can contribute to contemporary care theory.

1. One of the few articles to address the relationship between Deweyan ethics and care ethics is M. Regina Leffers, “Pragmatists Jane Addams and John Dewey Inform the Ethic of Care,” *Hypatia* 8, no. 2 (1993): 64–77.

2. Diemut Bubeck, *Care, Gender, and Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 129.

3. Peta Bowden, *Caring: Gender Sensitive Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1997), 1.

4. See, for example, Maurice Hamington, *The Social Philosophy of Jane Addams* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009); and Maurice Hamington, *Feminist Interpretations of Jane Addams* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

5. Scott Pratt, *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 25–37.

6. John Dewey, *Ethics* (1932), in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 7, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 317.

7. Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (New York: Oxford, 2006), 38.

8. Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 29–43.

9. The “Heinz Dilemma” was the instrument used by Kohlberg to determine the moral maturity of his participants. He was measuring how they argued principles and consequences. Gilligan claimed that there was another moral voice, care, which was not being attended to. In this manner, Gilligan helped

give rise to modern care ethics. Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

10. John Dewey, *Theory of the Moral Life* (New York: Irvington, 1960), 130.
11. Nel Noddings, *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 30.
12. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 33.
13. Dewey, *Theory of the Moral Life*, 129.
14. Annette C. Baier, "Hume, the Women's Moral Theorist?" in *Women and Moral Theory*, eds. Eva Feder Kittay and Diana T. Meyers (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987), 37–55.
15. Maurice Hamington, *Embodied Care: Jane Addams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Feminist Ethics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 93–96.
16. Stephen A. Fesmire, "Dramatic Rehearsal and the Moral Artist: A Deweyan Theory of Moral Understanding," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 31, no. 3 (1995): 569.
17. George Fernando Pappas, "Dewey's Moral Theory: Experience as Method," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 33, no. 3 (1997), 520–56.
18. Dewey, *Theory of The Moral Life*, 134.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 130.
21. Michael Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
22. Patricia Goldblatt, "How John Dewey's Theories Underpin Art and Art Education," *Education and Culture* 22, no.1 (2006): 17.
23. Dewey, *Theory of the Moral Life*, 135.
24. William R. Caspary, *Dewey on Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), 113–15.
25. Leffers, "Pragmatists Jane Addams and John Dewey," 74.
26. Daniel Engster, *The Heart of Justice: Care Ethics and Political Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 37.
27. Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 46, 74.
28. Jane Roland Martin, *Changing the Educational Landscape: Philosophy, Women, and Curriculum* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 206.
29. Nel Noddings, *Philosophy of Education*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2006), 226.
30. John Dewey, *How We Think* (1910) (New York: Prometheus, 1991), 161.
31. Dewey, *How We Think*, 166.
32. Paul Woodruff, *The Necessity of Theater: The Art of Watching and Being Watched* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 228.
33. John Harrop, *Acting* (London: Routledge, 1992), 58.