

Fall 2011

## Caring, Journalism, and the Power of Particularism

Maurice Hamington

*Portland State University*, maurice4@pdx.edu

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: [https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/phl\\_fac](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/phl_fac)



Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#)

---

### Citation Details

Hamington, Maurice, "Caring, Journalism, and the Power of Particularism," *Expositions: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities*, Fall 2011.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. For more information, please contact [pdxscholar@pdx.edu](mailto:pdxscholar@pdx.edu).

## Caring, Journalism, and the Power of Particularism

MAURICE HAMINGTON

*Metropolitan State College of Denver*

Why do some people donate blood while most eligible individuals do not? Why do many self-identified environmentalists eat meat? Why do numerous people who are concerned with social justice ignore oppressive practices affecting women? These questions have both ethical and psychological dimensions. Ethics, as it is traditionally understood in terms of rules, rights, and consequences, emphasizes rationality but often reason is not enough to compel moral action. One can make compelling *rational* arguments with empirical evidence to support donating blood, becoming vegan, and advocating education and aid to assist girls and women in developing nations. Yet, cognitive assent is insufficient to change the behavior of many people. Until individuals make a personal, affective connection – until people *care* – creating change and taking moral action are a challenging struggle. One way to view *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* is as a case study for eliciting care within the complexities of contemporary international society.

There is a fascinating contradiction of social forces at work today. On a large scale or macro level, evidence suggests that human society is becoming more cooperative, empathetic, and understanding as a matter of survival and communal flourishing. A spate of books has documented this phenomenon. In *Empathetic Civilization*, Jeremy Rifkin views empathy as the basis of civilization: “More complex social structures, then, promote greater selfhood, greater exposure to diverse others, and a greater likelihood of extended empathy” (Rifkin 2009, 42). In *The Age of Empathy: Nature’s Lessons for a Kinder Society*, Frans de Waal suggests that modern studies of primates reveal an outstanding capacity for cooperation and compassion, not just competition as often portrayed in the ruthless “survival of the fitness” characterizations of nature. De Waal describes how, “many animals survive through cooperation, so there is a long evolutionary history to compromise, peaceful coexistence, and caring for others. Empathy is part of the survival package, and human society depends on it as much as many other animal societies do” (de Waal 2009). Despite the historic tide of human cooperation and empathy, there appear to be pockets of backlash against empathy sometimes entangled in efforts to maintain systems of power and at other times tied to complacency and apathy. For example, in the United States, the growing disparity between the wealthy and the poor/working class is in part held in place by rhetoric antithetical to empathizing with those who need social services and thus painting taxes or transfer payments as a social evil even though they fund those services. The anti-caring rhetoric is so strong that President Barack Obama was criticized for suggesting that a Supreme Court justice nominee should exhibit empathy (Bazelon 2011). In an ironic twist, empathy was

characterized as anathema to the ability to carry out justice. Of course, international conflict and violence also demonstrate failure to care.

Amidst the contradictory social forces, Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn offer a path to caring for women and girls who live in distant lands and cultures. *Half the Sky* presents story after story regarding the plight of women facing oppressive practices. These stories allow the reader to enter an imaginative relationship with the girls and women described that is only possible when the abstract is moved to the concrete. Kristof and WuDunn also offer stories of successful interventions on behalf of women that provide concrete examples and means for the reader to enact care.

### **Caring and Knowing the Particulars**

Care ethics represents a revolution in moral philosophy that began in the 1980s and continues today. It was born out of women's experience of care being undervalued but has evolved into a robust field of moral theorizing and practice.<sup>1</sup> Nel Noddings describes that, unlike traditional normative ethics, "In care ethics, our obligation rarely ends with a justified decision or act. Life goes on after the decision, and we must tend to the relations we have established" (Noddings 2010, 82). Like any revolution, there are many critics and resisters of this new way of thinking about ethics. Nevertheless, care theorists continue to challenge presumptions that morality can be reduced to an abstract formulation of rules, rights, or formula of consequences. Care ethics reframes morality around relationships. Accordingly, care represents both action (sometimes referred to as labor) and a disposition. Imagination and emotion coalesce to make an empathetic and caring response possible. To fuel imagination and the resultant empathy care integrates epistemology and ethics as knowledge is indispensable to the caring relationship. The more one knows, the more potential for care is present, and, in turn, caring activity creates new knowledge – that is the potentially powerful role for a book like *Half the Sky*.

One under-thematized aspect of care ethics is its moral particularism: a family of beliefs that variously argue moral principles may represent helpful ethical guidelines but are too general and absolute to be applied universally. Traditionally, philosophy has favored a quest for moral universalism, which is the meta-ethical position that ethics must be applied similarly despite an individual's specific context. Philosopher Susan Hekman characterizes care ethics as part of a modern intellectual "sea change" that is moving away from absolutism and universalism toward particularism and concreteness (Hekman 1995, 38). The moral particularist contends that ethics requires the hard work of exploring each situation and understanding the context rather than applying a universal law as definitive judgment. The notion of particularism is a controversial one among traditional philosophers<sup>2</sup> largely because of the dangers of relativism, but there is no question that in understanding the particulars of another person's situation a connection is made that makes empathy and action more likely (Hamington 2004).

Kristof and WuDunn compel readers to care. *Half the Sky* takes readers around the world to lands and societies very different than our own. The book does not ignore the significant cultural

differences between people but it finds in the stories of women's lives themes that resonate with us – desires for health, education, meaningful work, freedom from attack. These are aspirations that we can understand and identify with as fellow human beings. The stories presented are about people who are made real to us. In a sense, the argument of the book is both rational and visceral.

Take the story of Woineshet Zebene, an Ethiopian girl. Her plight is recounted in Chapter Four of *Half the Sky*. Woineshet merely wanted to stay in school but was the victim of a common practice of kidnapping and rape of young women who might spurn suitors. Her story, accompanied by a photograph of her and her father, compel readers – readers who likely can make their own decisions about when to marry and whether to go to school – to sympathize about the struggles of Woineshet. In *Half the Sky*, oppression is given a name and a face and other narrative particulars that foster an empathetic connection. Woineshet's is just one of many women's stories brought to life in the book. Woineshet is just one person we come to care about.

### **Journalism and Moral Progress**

One of the challenges for care ethics is the mechanism for caring for distant and unfamiliar others. Caring for close and intimate others is much easier. In fact, Noddings refers to the care for intimate others as “natural” caring because the actions appear to be instinctive and prereflective. Noddings describes care for less-familiar others that requires thought as “ethical caring” (Noddings 2010, 16–18). There is little moral praise for natural caring which is something of a social standard. When natural care does not occur, as when a parent fails to care for a child, there are social sanctions applied (unfortunately, frequently with significant gender differences). However, ethical caring is often viewed as morally praiseworthy: for example, when someone goes out of their way to help someone else. Of course, natural caring and ethical caring are fuzzy categories that exist on a continuum of caring activity that engage varying levels of effort, thought, and personal risk. *The health and well being of global society is in part predicated on pushing or extending the standards of care from natural caring toward ethical caring*. Building a caring society in part means making more of ethical caring like natural caring – a common and familiar practice. Physical distance is not the only challenge to caring. We are living in an era of immense global complexity that includes people living with great prosperity while others face marginalization and oppression. One of the advantages of having wealth is the ability to insulate oneself from the plight of others. Modernity's great advances have not mitigated the need for caring.

Modern journalism, including all the technology it entails, can be an important vehicle for ethical caring in a complex and disparate world. I am including *Half the Sky* as a work of journalism because the authors are journalists and the book is a work of nonfiction that brings attention to contemporary issues. A skilled writer can take the reader to Somalia, China, or El Salvador and into relationship with individuals who subsequently become real to us and thus rise to our attention over the din of seven billion earth inhabitants. As such, journalism can provide

the imaginative link to caring. However, with that reporting comes tremendous moral responsibility.

In an era of competitive, commercialized news, journalistic integrity is under great scrutiny. For journalism to be a vehicle of ethical caring, attention to inclusion and voice is crucial. Just like the challenges inherent in an accurate ethnography, the choice of whose story to tell, what questions to ask, and what to include in the written piece can have a great deal of influence over the character of the final message. Although particularism has the potential to create connection, empathy, and lay the groundwork for action, the dangers of particularism include misrepresenting context and voice.

Despite the challenges, *Half the Sky* exemplifies the potential of the journalist's spotlight to foster connection and care. Empathy is one thing. Action is another. It is difficult to imagine reading the stories of Srey Rath, the Cambodian teenager who was forced into sexual slavery, or Mahabouba Muhammad, an Ethiopian woman who was sold to a man sixty years of age as a second wife and was subsequently beaten, raped and suffered from a fistula, and not feel some empathy. Can that empathy turn to action?

### **Empathy is Not Enough**

Thus far I have focused on the potential for empathetic care created by *Half the Sky*. The particular and contextual knowledge of women and girls provides the imaginative foundation for empathy. I must know the other to make the connection and have a visceral sense of understanding. However, empathy is only part of the equation for care ethics. Caring is a disposition *and* an action. To claim empathy without taking action is morally hollow. Caring action is dependent on the knowledge that leads to empathy but empathy is not a sufficient cause of action. Once again, traditional ethical systems are not adequate to determine or explain behavior. David Hume realized back in the mid-eighteenth century that morality was motivated by emotion but rational approaches to ethics dominated the Western tradition (Hume 1975). Humans must be moved to action – a complex mechanism that may begin with empathy but includes a number of psychological factors including the will and ability to make a difference. Carers must be motivated to act – they must have the will to care.<sup>3</sup> For example, a common response to reading *Half the Sky* might be deep concern and pangs of empathy accompanied by a feeling of powerlessness or lack of confidence that the reader can do anything about the tragic circumstances described. Oppression of women and girls in India, Congo, and Cambodia seems so far away and perhaps intractable given traditions and systems of power that reinforce it.

Kristof and WuDunn provide pathways to make caring possible. First, the authors feature numerous individuals who have acted in ways to make a difference on behalf of oppressed women. One activist described is Jordana Confino who as a high school student became a champion of Girls Learn International, an organization that pairs classes in the United States with classes in countries where girls' education is poor such as in Afghanistan, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, India, Kenya, Pakistan, Uganda, and Vietnam. In the program, cross-cultural

information is exchanged while the students in the United States raise money to upgrade the education in the partner class (Kristof and WuDunn 2009, 230–232). Kristof and WuDunn offer a model of action and activism that feeds the imagination of the reader regarding the possibility of his/her own caring potential. The same mechanism that works to assist the reader empathize with the girls and women in oppressive regimes also helps the reader empathize with those who are difference-makers. In other words, if a high school student can make such a positive change, why can't I? Confino is one of many activists profiled in *Half the Sky*. Such profiles do not guarantee action on the part of the reader, but they facilitate the imaginative leap toward action.

*Half the Sky* also gives direct channels for caring action. The final chapter is titled, “What You Can Do” and the very final section delineates “Four Steps You Can take in the Next Ten Minutes.” The Appendix includes three pages of organization websites that assist women and girls internationally. Kristof and WuDunn offer a holistic approach to caring. The lives and experiences of women oppressed by violence, human trafficking, female genital mutilation, and misogynistic limitations are narratively recounted to develop an empathetic connection. Models of average people taking caring actions that traverse international boundaries are offered and existing channels for more information and action are presented. The reader is left with the understanding that helping women is necessary and possible.

The emphasis of the solutions given in *Half the Sky* is on direct actions, which tend to be approaches that are less political in nature. This may have been an intentional approach on the part of the authors, but political scientist Daniel Engster reminds us not to ignore larger systemic policy decisions. He warns, “Caring for distant others involves more than just providing individuals with direct aid and infrastructure support; it also entails critically assessing national policies and international law in order to determine whether they hinder the ability of distant peoples to develop responsive governments and care for themselves” (Engster 2007, 190). *Half the Sky* challenges us to act on behalf of women in distress all over the world but in a representative democracy, action may take the form of electing officials who enact policies that support women. Of course, direct action and political action need not be mutually exclusive. Just because one works to make changes in the areas and using the resources that one controls does not mean that they cannot also be politically engaged in efforts to make systemic change. Furthermore, efforts to make change individually and directly can fuel the motivation and evidence for systemic transformation.<sup>4</sup>

### **Feminism: An Ongoing Need**

One of the striking implications of *Half the Sky* is the ongoing need for feminist analysis and feminist activism. The previous discussion of care theory is a direct result of feminist theory, but feminist analysis also addresses systems of power and privilege. Broadly construed, feminism is an effort to empower women, which employs the consciousness that gender matters in our society. Although Kristof and WuDunn attend to financial, social, and certain cultural considerations, masculinity is not discussed. Masculinity and femininity seem like intractable

constructs, but we know that they are not because they vary so much from time and place. Although it is fashionable to periodically declare the death or obsolescence of feminism, Kristof and WuDunn offer a compelling demonstration that women's empowerment is far from accomplished. This is not a book about isolated atrocities, but rather a compendium of modern day systemic gender violence. Each of the stories offered has a social and cultural context that supports brutality against girls and women. Of course, men are the victims of violence as well, and that experience should not be diminished in significance, but the widespread and systematic violence perpetrated against women is overwhelming. Kristof and WuDunn do the essential work of bringing a spotlight to violence against women, but a sustained feminist analysis is absent. In particular, Kristof and WuDunn, who are far from claiming a feminist approach, offer what might be labeled a "liberal feminist" analysis: describing violations of individual liberty and bodily integrity in service of strengthening human rights. Although there is merit to naming injustice, the full picture of oppression must include a radical feminist analysis of institutional forces at work. Systems of patriarchy where men dominate women are hierarchies of power and privilege that are socially constructed and thus must be maintained by a social vehicle such as economics, religion, social convention, or violence. As Chandra Mohanty describes, "sexism, racism, misogyny, and heterosexism underlie and fuel social and political institutions of rule and thus often lead to hatred of women and (supposedly justified) violence against women" (Mohanty 2003, 3). Empowering women cannot be entirely divorced from challenging oppressive forms of masculinity in a given context. This is particularly important for lasting change as empowering women can lead to new strategies of oppression if men are not provided with means for change. Without a robust feminist analysis addressing the social and political systems at work, the complete picture of women's oppression is absent from *Half the Sky*.

Another way that *Half the Sky* makes the case for feminist analysis is in the picture of international violence against women painted by the text. Contemporary feminist scholarship – particularly because of its own inconsistent past – is particularly sensitive to issues of ethnocentrism and racism. Current emphases on the intersectionality of identity and global feminism are examples of feminist theorists responding to the complexities of the category "woman." One might read *Half the Sky* as a text that reinforces the notion that human trafficking and severe violence against women are tragedies of "other" countries and not issues for North American or white women. That is of course not the case.<sup>5</sup> A global feminist analysis with sensitivity to local context might have given *Half the Sky* a richer analysis of the lives of international women. This might have been achieved through consultation with local activists and scholars. Inclusion of representative examples of women struggling with violence and oppression in North America and Europe might have mitigated the sense of "othering" violence in developing nations.

The feminist critique offered here of *Half the Sky* is intended to be proportional. The reader of any text has intellectual responsibilities as do the authors. The reader's intellectual responsibilities include ongoing pursuit of knowledge. No text has all the answers. *Half the Sky* is a well written entre into the issues and that may be its most compelling and useful role.

Hopefully, readers will continue to seek answers and ask questions that will lead to deeper analyses of the systemic forces of violence and oppression in the lives of women.

### **Conclusion: Educating for a Cosmopolitan World**

Perhaps one of the most important lessons of *Half the Sky* is about what it means to be ethical in the twenty-first century. Given the interconnected nature of our world society, contemporary ethics cannot ignore epistemology: knowledge is intimately tied to modern morality. Earlier I discussed how knowledge was a necessary (but not a sufficient) condition of caring. However, to be regarded as a caring citizen of the world entails making the effort to learn about others, including international others. A number of factors conspire to keep us from knowing about international crises of violence, including the sheer amount of information available to us through modern technology, busy lives that lack habits of thinking about distant problems, and media that focus on domestic issues (and raise entertainment news to a level of significance). To say that we don't know about the violence, poverty, and health issues being suffered by others is hardly morally convincing in a world where so much information is available at our fingertips. Yet, data suggests that US citizens are woefully lacking in awareness of international affairs.<sup>6</sup> Ignorance cannot exonerate us from our role of caring world citizens. Part of our moral responsibility as caring citizens of the world is to seek out information about the plights of others. If morality is relational as care ethics proposes, then we cannot simply be passive and wait to form relations, we need seek out a relational understanding with unfamiliar others. In other words, global citizenry in a cosmopolitan world requires sympathetic, connected knowledge of others where we endeavor to form deep and disruptive knowledge of others. Such knowledge can be described as "disruptive" in the sense that it jars us from the routines and patterns of our day to draw attention and emotive reactions.<sup>7</sup> However, disruption is not just a power of certain knowledge. It also requires a certain openness to being disrupted and becoming engaged.

John Dewey favored the term "inquiry" over epistemology, which connotes an active sense of knowledge development. Applying Dewey's term to the current context, ongoing social and international inquiry is part of what it means to be a caring human today. Caring in a cosmopolitan world requires both taking the time and effort to learning and understanding about others but also the development of empathetic skills or what has been described as emotional intelligence. Such inquiry cannot be the responsibility of the curriculum of educational institutions alone. Given the dynamics of international affairs, engaging in ongoing awareness and lifelong learning is crucial to have the epistemic basis for caring. Reading a single book, like *Half the Sky*, clearly does not supply sufficient global knowledge, but it's a start.



## Notes

1. Care ethics has gained acceptance and is being further explored both theoretically (Carol Gilligan, *Joining the Resistance* [New York: Polity, 2011]; Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* [New York: Oxford, 2006]; Nel Noddings, *The Maternal Factor: Two Paths to Morality* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010]; Michael Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy* [New York: Routledge, 2007]) and as applied ethics in areas as diverse as nursing (Susan S. Phillips, and Patricia Benner, *The Crisis of Care: Affirming and Resorting Caring Practices in the Helping Professions* [Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994]); political science (Daniel Engster, *The Heart of Justice: Care Ethics and Political Theory* [New York: Oxford, 2007]), business (Maurice Hamington and Maureen Sander-Staudt, eds., *Applying Care Ethics to Business* [Dordrecht: Springer, 2011]), social theory (Maurice Hamington and Dorothy C. Miller, eds., *Socializing Care: Feminist Ethics and Public Issues* [Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006]), and animal ethics (Josephine Donovan and Carol J. Adams, eds., *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Rights* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2007]).
2. See, for example, Mark Norris Lance, Matjaž Potrč, and Vojko Strahovnik, eds., *Challenging Moral Particularism* (New York: Routledge, 2008).
3. For an exploration of the mechanisms involved in moving from empathy to action, see Maurice Hamington, “The Will to Care: Performance, Expectation, and Imagination,” *Hypatia* 25:3 (Summer 2010): 675-695.
4. The philosophy of Nobel Prize-winning activist and Settlement Movement pioneer Jane Addams is an excellent example of local, individual efforts informing larger systemic change. Addams would often use her experiences on the streets of her poverty-stricken immigrant neighborhood to fuel her efforts to make policy changes at the state, national, and international levels.
5. According to the US Department of Education, “Contrary to a common assumption, human trafficking is not just a problem in other countries. Cases of human trafficking have been reported in all 50 states, Washington D.C., and some U.S. territories. Victims of human trafficking can be children or adults, U.S. citizens or foreign nationals, male or female.” “Human Trafficking of Children in the United States: A Fact Sheet for Schools,” <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osdfs/factsheet.pdf>.
6. A 2007 report by the Pew Research Center concludes, “the coaxial and digital revolutions and attendant changes in news audience behaviors have had little impact on how much Americans know about national and international affairs.” Andrew Kohut, “What Americans Know, 1989–2007,” <http://people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/319.pdf>.

7. Maurice Hamington, "Hull House: Urban Epistemology and Social Action," *Southwest Philosophy Review* 25:2 (July 2009).

## Works Cited

Bazon, Emily. 2011. "Mysterious Justice." *New York Times Magazine*, 20 March.

De Waal, Frans. 2009. "Bodies in Sync: Contagious Laughter, Yawns, And Moods Offer Insight Into Empathy's Origins," *Natural History*, September, <http://www.naturalhistorymag.com/features/251555/sept>. (Adapted from *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society* [New York: Crown, 2009].)

Engster, Daniel. 2007. *The Heart of Justice: Care Ethics and Political Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hamington, Maurice. 2004. *Embodied Care: Jane Addams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Feminist Ethics*. New York: Routledge.

Hekman, Susan. 1995. *Moral voices, moral selves: Carol Gilligan and feminist moral theory*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Hume, David. 1975. *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

Kristof, Nicholas D. and Sheryl WuDunn. 2009. *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 2003. *Feminism With Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Noddings, Nel. 2010. *The Maternal Factor: Two Paths to Morality*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Rifkin, Jeremy. 2009. *The Empathetic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in A World in Crisis*. New York: Penguin.