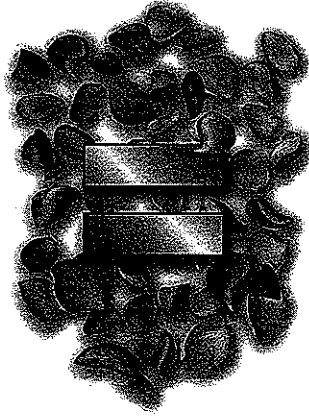


especially her sister, Prim. Throughout the Hunger Games trilogy, Katniss extends this sense of responsibility to encompass a larger and larger circle of people, eventually even putting herself at grave risk for a stranger. But through it all, her ethical choices bespeak an intensely personal response to the needs of her loved ones and others who in various ways touch her emotionally. She is *not* motivated by abstract principles of right and wrong. So how moral is Katniss, really?

### Sometimes Katniss Cares First and Thinks Later

Katniss's moral choices often seem to be guided by a kind of favoritism, or strong personal attachments to particular people, such as her sister. Some philosophers might see this as a deep character flaw, since they believe that we should make our moral choices from a standpoint of impartiality that gives equal consideration to everyone's interests. In this view, impartiality is what distinguishes moral actions from actions motivated by bias, personal attachments, and our own private passions. Because morality depends on abstract principles, such as the Golden Rule, that apply equally to all people regardless of their situation, morality is indifferent to our personal desires. Powerful emotions, such as Katniss's fierce need to protect Prim above all else, may not always be the best basis on which to make moral decisions.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) equated moral reasoning with impartial or objective thinking.<sup>2</sup> From Kant's standpoint, all people are equal in dignity and therefore entitled to equal rights and equal moral consideration. Impartial reasoning is the mark of an autonomous person who's a slave to neither the opinions of society nor her own private passions. An autonomous and moral person isn't moved primarily by personal desires, but instead always chooses the course of action that she believes will be the most fair or beneficial to



## SOMETIMES THE WORLD IS HUNGRY FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE

Katniss and the Feminist Care Ethic

*Lindsey Issow Averill*

A fence encircles District 12, separating Katniss Everdeen from the woods, and a law handed down by the Capitol says, "Trespassing in the woods is illegal and poaching carries the severest of penalties."<sup>1</sup> Yet Katniss shimmies her way under the fence and hunts, because her family needs to eat. When her friend Gale Hawthorne suggests running away from the oppressive heel of the Capitol and living in the woods, free of responsibility and the horror of the Hunger Games, Katniss responds with disgust because she can't even consider the idea of leaving her family to fend for itself. And when Effie Trinket calls Prim's name at the reaping, Katniss doesn't hesitate to volunteer to take her sister's place. The common thread running through these choices is that Katniss *cares*.

Despite the obstacles and dangers, Katniss believes it's her responsibility to provide for and protect those she loves,

everyone who might be affected. Fairness requires that we follow the same rules that we would apply if we were legislating for everyone. When it comes to morality, the same rules have to apply to all. We don't get to make special exceptions for ourselves or even for our loved ones.

Let's examine Katniss's actions in light of Kant's ideas. Since many of her decisions are motivated by her deep concern for particular individuals whom she loves, with a clear bias toward her own family, her reasoning hardly measures up to the exacting standards of Kantian impartiality. Gale points out how central family is to all of Katniss's decisions when he observes, "That was the one thing I had going for me, taking care of your family."<sup>3</sup> Fighting injustice, defeating the Capitol, or benefiting Panem as a whole—none of these mean as much to Katniss as helping her mother and especially Prim.

Consider Katniss's decision to take Prim's place at the reaping. Even though she recognizes that the situation is unjust, she isn't moved by some abstract ideal like justice or equality. Rather, her actions are motivated solely by her commitment to protect Prim, which she had been doing for years. Undoubtedly, the emotions that motivate Katniss to act courageously are good ones: loyalty, love, devotion, compassion, and care. But her decision to volunteer has nothing to do with impartial principles that she feels duty-bound to obey because they are equally binding on everyone else.

On the contrary, she's not the least bit surprised or offended when neither of Peeta Mellark's two brothers make a move to take his place. "This is standard," she says. "Family devotion goes only so far for most people on reaping day. What I did was the radical thing."<sup>4</sup> Katniss volunteers to go in Prim's place because her devotion to protecting her sister runs much deeper than anyone in District 12 believes is morally required, not because she's compelled by some abstract moral principle that's equally binding on everyone.

Katniss is frequently guided in her moral decisions by an emotional connection to particular individuals rather than by impartial reasoning. Consider how she gets shot during the battle between the rebel forces and the Peacekeepers holed up at the Nut. Yelling at the rebels to hold their fire as a wounded man staggers from the station and collapses to the ground, she once again risks her own life to save another person. This time, however, it's a stranger, albeit one with whom she feels a very special emotional connection. The scorched soldier from District 2 reminds her of a "burn victim from a mine accident" in District 12.<sup>5</sup> In particular, he reminds her of home, her father, and her family.

In trying to end the hostilities at the Nut, Katniss might be thought to be serving a high moral ideal: the achievement of peace and freedom for all of the citizens of Panem. Her actions, however, don't reflect an exercise of impartial reasoning, but rather the connection she feels to this particular wounded soldier. There are plenty of soldiers whom Katniss *does* kill and at least one civilian she shoots through the heart. Her decision to lay down her weapon in this instance can't be attributed to a belief in abstract ideals like justice, liberty, pacifism, or democracy. The decision stems from the sight of *that* soldier's suffering, which stirred up deep feelings of care that are rooted in her attachment to her home and family in the Seam.

In short, if Kant is correct that moral reasoning requires impartiality, then Katniss's "morality" is highly suspect, since it's born of an allegiance not to abstract principles but rather to particular individuals whom she loves.

### Sometimes You Need to Care about More than Justice

Although theories of impartial reasoning and abstract ideals tend to dominate our understanding of morality today, some feminists argue that the care that motivates Katniss's decisions

is an equally valid basis for moral decision making. The moral theory they have developed has come to be known as *feminist care ethics* or simply the *ethics of care*.

One of the key thinkers to question the superiority of moral reasoning based on a Kantian framework was feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan. In her book *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan examined the widely accepted idea that a fully developed sense of moral reasoning was defined by impartiality and dispassionate reason.<sup>6</sup> In particular, Gilligan critiqued the work of her mentor, the psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–1987), who used Kantian philosophy to construct theories about human moral development.

Kohlberg believed that there are several stages that individuals typically go through on their way to becoming mature moral reasoners who can understand and apply impartial moral principles. We begin as young children at what Kohlberg called the *preconventional stage*, during which our most important “moral” consideration is pleasing authority figures like our parents. At the apex of moral development, which Kohlberg called the *postconventional stage*, is the mature adult who is guided by universal, abstract principles of just behavior, like the ideal moral agent of Kant’s philosophy. Kohlberg designed tests to determine whether a person had reached this peak of moral maturity, but something curious happened when these tests were administered: men tended to score consistently higher than women on the scale of moral development.

Should this result be interpreted to mean that women are just inferior moral reasoners, due to either some natural deficiency or the way they’ve been socialized in a patriarchal society? Gilligan didn’t think so. Instead, she proposed that what this result reveals is that many women simply reason *differently* from the impartial way that philosophers like Kant and psychologists like Kohlberg take as their moral ideal.

Gilligan argued that *different* doesn’t necessarily mean “bad” or “inferior.” She coined the phrase “justice perspective”

to designate the abstract, impartial framework for moral reasoning that Kant and Kohlberg favored. This approach to moral reasoning makes perfect sense in the sort of situations and roles that have historically been reserved for men, such as in the legal system and in the world of business and politics, where it was meant to ensure fairness in interaction among independent adults of more or less equal status.<sup>7</sup>

A good example of reasoning from the justice perspective is provided by the interaction between Thresh and Katniss after Claudius Templesmith sends the tributes to the Cornucopia to retrieve what they need most to survive their last days in the arena. Having killed Clove, Thresh now has an opportunity to kill Katniss as well. If he were thinking only about saving himself, he would have no reason not to finish her off. Yet there’s another consideration: Thresh believes that he owes a debt to Katniss because of the care and protection she extended to Rue. In other words, Thresh is faithful to the abstract principle that *favours must be repaid*. Notice that this principle is abstract and universal because it says nothing about to whom the favor is owed. When Thresh spares Katniss, it’s not because he cares for her personally—in fact, he still regards her as an enemy whom he’s ready and willing to kill next time they meet—but because he wants to stay true to certain abstract ideals like fairness and reciprocity.

Katniss, on the other hand, isn’t all that concerned with abstract ideals of justice when she extends care to others. Yet she strikes us as a morally good person, maybe even a moral hero, even though her most important decisions have nothing to do with treating people impartially. Gilligan would explain that even if Katniss’s reasoning doesn’t always measure up to the standards of the justice perspective, there’s another approach to moral reasoning that takes a more favorable view of the emotional attachments that guide her decision making. Gilligan called this the “care perspective.”<sup>8</sup>

Gilligan pointed out that because the care perspective is more typical of women, the belief of many philosophers and psychologists that the only valid approach to moral reasoning is the justice perspective often allowed them to question or undermine women's moral reasoning ability. Whereas men confronted with a moral quandary will often seek a solution by focusing on abstract moral principles, women in the same situation will typically turn their attention to the concrete responsibilities and emotional bonds that arise out of particular caring relationships. In other words, women tend to think more like Katniss and men think more like Thresh.

### Sometimes We All Need to Be Cared For

Thinking like Katniss isn't necessarily wrong or inferior, Gilligan argued. It's simply that this care perspective has historically been unrecognized or devalued by male philosophers and psychologists because it was linked to women's care-based responsibilities. Like Katniss when she takes responsibility for Prim, women have traditionally taken on most of the responsibility for the care of children and other highly vulnerable members of society, such as the elderly, the sick, and the mentally or physically disabled. Consequently, women's moral reasoning has put a premium on maintaining, nurturing, and protecting the relationships and bonds of affection that make this vital caregiving possible.

While recognizing the importance of impartial moral rules, the care perspective, or feminist care ethic, never loses sight of the fact that our moral lives aren't lived in the rarefied space of abstract principles, but right here on the ground, where things get messy and complex and concrete relationships matter. Each situation is different, and its most morally relevant features can't always be captured by a general rule. Like Katniss when she's in the arena, the good moral reasoner from the care perspective must be alert to all aspects of her environment

so that she can respond in the best manner to the needs of the moment.

Above all, the care perspective insists that our personal relationships aren't just another variable to be ignored; they are the real substance of our moral lives and must be protected and nurtured. Unlike the abstract moral reasoning of the justice perspective, the care perspective draws on the emotions of care and empathy, focusing on responses that are specific to each situation and attentive to the needs of the persons involved. Finally, care ethicists recognize that human beings are interdependent. What's important, then, isn't just safeguarding each individual's right to fair treatment or to live free from interference by others, but rather to respect and protect the caring relationships that sustain and enrich our lives.

The justice perspective believes that one of the goals of morality is to ensure that we're all treated equally. Care ethicists also acknowledge the importance of political and legal equality, but at the same time they point out that many of our most important relationships are based not on equality but rather on unequal or asymmetrical relationships of dependency and responsibility.

Consider the relationship between Katniss and Prim or Finnick Odair and Mags. In both cases, the weaker party has needs that she can't meet without the assistance of the other, who is stronger and therefore responsible to care for the weaker. The case of Finnick and Mags is especially significant from the perspective of care, since at an earlier stage of their relationship, when Mags was Finnick's mentor, *she* was responsible for *him*.

This highlights an important fact that care ethicists like to emphasize: we are *all* weak and vulnerable at various stages of our lives and hence in need of the protection and nurturance we receive from caring relationships. Every one of us has been a child (like Prim), and—if the odds are in our favor—we'll someday be elderly (like Mags). In the meantime, most of us will also suffer illness or injury at various times in our lives

(like Peeta in the arena). And there are some of us who go through life more or less permanently disabled, either physically or mentally (think of Haymitch Abernathy and the alcohol addiction that is his response to the sustained emotional trauma of having to mentor two new tributes each year who will die in the arena).

In short, there will always be people in need of care—and all of us will find ourselves among them at times. Care ethicists believe that people in need deserve more than just the protection of their rights. Their needs should elicit a caring response from those of us who are in a position to help. Fortunately for us all, caring is something that comes naturally to most human beings, both men and women. That's why most of us would fall into Gale and Beetee's trap: seeing children in danger, we would rush to their aid. This desire to help the vulnerable is a *good* thing, even when it puts us in jeopardy.

### Sometimes Love for a Sister Leads to Care for a Stranger

Most of us are fortunate to have parents, siblings, close friends, or spouses whom we can count on when we're in need. But what about someone who doesn't have those caring relationships to sustain her? Or someone who's beyond the reach of those who love her? What about someone like Rue? Who will care for strangers?

Some philosophers believe that the great strength of the justice perspective is that its emphasis on impartiality helps us to understand why we have duties to those whom we don't care about or even particularly like. This touches on a common critique of care ethics, which we can examine by comparing Katniss's decision to protect Rue in the Hunger Games arena with the reason that Thresh spares Katniss.

Thresh's decision is based on abstract principles, but Katniss is moved to protect Rue because her resemblance to Prim

stirs up Katniss's protective instincts. Like Prim, Rue is small, physically weaker than the other tributes, and without any real fighting skills. When Katniss partners with the female tribute from District 11 instead of killing her, it's not because of some abstract ideal like "killing is wrong" or "children should be protected." Rather, it's because of emotions and memories associated with caring for Prim. Rue is a link to Prim, a reminder of that caring relationship, which awakens Katniss's protective instincts.

Critics of care ethics argue that a morality based on these sorts of emotional connections is unreliable. After all, emotions are instinctual and fickle, not always under our control, whereas acting in obedience to principles seems to be the sort of thing that's entirely up to us. We have no trouble recognizing Thresh's actions toward Katniss as proof of his morality, since he's clearly acting contrary to his inclinations and gains nothing (other than the self-esteem that comes from acting with integrity) from sparing Katniss. If, in contrast, Katniss protects Rue because she feels some emotional bond—in other words, if she's just following her natural inclinations—what makes her actions *morally* commendable?

Nel Noddings, a feminist philosopher who wrote *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, addressed this critique of care ethics by distinguishing between two kinds of caring: natural caring and ethical caring.<sup>9</sup> *Natural caring* is the spontaneous concern we feel for our loved ones, such as the caring a mother has for her child. When we're motivated by natural caring, we "act on behalf of the other because we care to do so."<sup>10</sup> Katniss's care for Prim is an example of natural caring, since it's what she's naturally inclined to do. But there are other times when something else in us—such as concern for our own safety or comfort—may resist the natural inclination to care. That's where ethical caring comes in.

*Ethical caring* occurs when our memories of past experiences of natural caring—as both givers and recipients of care—help

us to recognize the goodness of caring relationships. Caring becomes our ethical ideal as we begin to sense that we're at our best in caring relationships, which in turn leads to the feeling that we *must* care for others in certain situations, even if caring isn't what we most *want* to do at the moment—such as when Katniss cares for Peeta's wounds in the arena, despite her admission that "I want to run away" because of how revolting and distasteful the task is.<sup>11</sup> At times like these, caring may require a conscious decision and effort on our part "in response to the plight of the other and our conflicting desire to serve our own interests."<sup>12</sup> All that Katniss does to provide for Prim and her mother shows that she has strong inclinations toward natural care. But her capacity for ethical care develops over the course of the trilogy, beginning with her care for Rue.

Because Katniss's care for Rue is inspired by memories of natural caring—in particular, the deep affection that Katniss has for Prim—it's a good example of ethical care. Rue, the smallest of the tributes, needs protection and inspires in Katniss the ethical sense that she *must* care for this vulnerable child, even though killing Rue would bring Katniss closer to winning the Hunger Games.

In a way, Katniss's actions are similar to Thresh's, for they both spare a fellow tribute because of their sense of what they *must* do. Both place ethical ideals above personal gain, even if Katniss may not yet entirely realize that she *has* an ethical ideal. Whether Katniss realizes it or not, however, her sense that she *must* care for Rue can't be separated from her budding awareness that she's at her best when she's caring. That's the motivation behind ethical caring. But ethical caring differs from following abstract moral principles, like Thresh's rule of tit for tat, because ethical caring always occurs in response to a particular individual in need rather than from obedience to an all-purpose moral rule.

Earlier, we considered how some traditional ethicists wouldn't view Katniss's decision to spare the wounded soldier

at the Nut as an example of good *moral* decision making. After all, she's motivated by intensely personal feelings rather than considerations of impartiality. Now let's consider how that decision would be viewed from the care perspective. A care ethicist would say that Katniss's decision is a measure of how far she's moved beyond natural caring into ethical caring: no longer caring just for a little girl who poses no real threat to her in the arena, but now extending care even to an angry Peacekeeper who wants to kill her.

His resemblance to the victim of a mine accident recalls her father, whose life ended in a mining explosion back in District 12. It's safe to assume that Katniss's memories of her father and the natural caring they shared in their relationship are what allows her to extend ethical care to this suffering stranger. She recognizes him as an individual in need and responds as though to an imperative telling her that she *must* care for him, even if it places her in peril. His suffering also opens her eyes to the true horror and injustice of the attack on the Nut. In short, Katniss's care ethic inspires her both to protect the wounded soldier at the Nut and to make her poignant appeal for a cease-fire, as she comes to see the people of District 2 not as enemies but as fellow sufferers in need of a defender.

Katniss's actions show a clear arc of development from someone who manages her life according to natural care to someone who reasons from a place of ethical care. Her moral compass becomes more fine-tuned and nuanced as she matures—but care always remains her polestar. When Katniss first volunteers in Prim's place out of natural care, she's concerned for the needs of a small group of people, primarily Prim, her mother, and Gale.

By the time the Mockingjay revolution has achieved its victory, Katniss's circle of care has expanded to include many more people, including Peeta, Haymitch, Mags, Finnick, Johanna, Beetee, Cinna, Flavius, Octavia, and Venia. And beyond these individuals with whom Katniss has personal relationships or a shared history, her moral sensitivity has developed to the

point that she shows ethical caring for a complete stranger (the wounded soldier at the Nut) and an entire group of people facing danger (the children of the Capitol).

### **Sometimes You Care So Much That You Shoot an Arrow at the President**

In the climactic scene of the Hunger Games trilogy, Katniss faces an ethical dilemma that pits her own desire for revenge against her obligation to ethical caring. She chooses to kill President Coin rather than President Snow. An act of violence like this may not seem very caring. In fact, another common criticism of feminist care ethics is its supposed susceptibility to weakness or sentimentality. If your morality comes from a place of care, won't you be incapable of recognizing that sometimes the moral response to a threat requires the use of force or violence? In other words, does caring always mean rejecting violence? Absolutely not.

Katniss consistently fights to protect and defend those she cares for. She might seek a cease-fire when she glimpses the suffering humanity of her wounded "enemy" at the Nut, but she'll pull out all the stops when someone she cares for is in danger. Clove learned that lesson the hard way when he attacked Rue. Katniss put an arrow through his neck, a violent act that many care ethicists would see as necessary and right, because it's in the service of caring for a vulnerable person in need of protection.

Presidents Snow and Coin also threaten those Katniss cares for. President Snow is wickedness incarnate. He's manipulative and violent. He cares only for himself and his well-being, giving no thought to the well-being of the people in the districts. He lets some people starve while others waste food. He tortures his citizens and administers the annual horror of the Hunger Games to keep the people of Panem in a state of fear. A full list of all of his crimes and vices would go on for pages.

Although President Coin leads the resistance, she uses the same playbook as President Snow. She jails and tortures innocent people (Katniss's prep team), she drops bombs on her own people (Prim and the other rebel medics), and she's prepared to sacrifice more innocent children in a "final, symbolic Hunger Games" to punish the Capitol.<sup>13</sup> Katniss sums up the conditions under President Coin's new leadership: "Nothing has changed."<sup>14</sup> President Snow is no longer a threat to anyone, having been captured and relieved of power, but now President Coin presents the greatest danger to the children of Panem. So Katniss kills her.

From the perspective of feminist care ethics, an action that's normally considered unethical, such as political assassination, may actually be the ethical choice if it's motivated by care for innocents who can't fend for themselves. Noddings explains that when someone like Coin poses "a clear and immediate danger to . . . cared-for[s]," one "must . . . stop him [or her]," and possibly even "kill him [or her]."<sup>15</sup> When Katniss kills President Coin rather than President Snow, she's not drawing on general principles like "an eye for an eye" or "killers must be killed"—she's motivated by care instead.

As always, Katniss is coming from a place of care. Having been a child drawn into the horror of the Hunger Games, she appreciates the need to care for children, even the children of her oppressors. She knows that children like Prim and Rue suffer and die when people like Coin hold power. As violent and seemingly uncaring as assassinating Coin may be, Katniss believes it's the best way for her to care for those in need. Only this time she's caring for all the future Prim and Rues, by trying to ensure that they will live in a world where we no longer "sacrifice children's lives to settle" our differences.<sup>16</sup>

The Hunger Games trilogy is a fantastic ride, filled with heartfelt emotion and heart-pumping excitement, but it's also a journey of moral development. Along with Katniss, we grow into a deeper understanding of the complexity of morality and

moral reasoning. Experiencing Katniss's trials, we come to recognize that sometimes the answers to ethical questions are more complicated than the one-size-fits-all answers offered by the impartial morality of the justice perspective. Above all, we must follow Katniss's example of cherishing our memories of natural caring and letting them instill in us the ideal of ethical caring. In that way, we prepare ourselves to answer the cry of a world that's hungry for people who care.

## NOTES

1. Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2008), 5.
2. For more on Kant, see chapter 4, "The Odds Have Not Been Very Dependable of Late: Morality and Luck in the Hunger Games Trilogy"; chapter 7, "Competition and Kindness: The Darwinian World of the Hunger Games"; and chapter 14, "Safe to Do What?: Morality and the War of All Against All in the Arena."
3. Suzanne Collins, *Mockingjay* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2010), 367.
4. Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 25.
5. Collins, *Mockingjay*, 214.
6. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
7. Carol Gilligan, "Moral Orientation and Development," in *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Care Ethics*, ed. Virginia Held (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 32.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Nel Noddings, "Caring," in *Justice and Care*, 9–10.
10. *Ibid.*, 9.
11. Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 256.
12. Noddings, "Caring," 10.
13. Collins, *Mockingjay*, 369.
14. *Ibid.*, 370.
15. Noddings, "Caring," 27.
16. Collins, *Mockingjay*, 377.

## PART FIVE

# "AS LONG AS YOU CAN FIND YOURSELF, YOU'LL NEVER STARVE": HOW TO BE YOURSELF WHEN IT'S ALL A BIG SHOW