



Care Ethics in Jane Addams (1860–1935)

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Jane Addams died a half century before the term “care ethics” would come into use, however a number of contemporary theorists have observed the proto care ethics language in Addams’ writing. Care ethics is a relational approach to morality that emphasizes a connected ontology and epistemic attention to the particularities of lived experience. Similarly, Addams valued proximal and relational knowledge to foment what she referred to as “sympathetic understanding.” Much like contemporary care scholars who are trained in political theory, Addams sees a connection between sympathetic understanding and a robust democracy: “To follow the path of social morality results perforce in the temper if not the practice of the democratic spirit, for it implies that diversified human experience and resultant sympathy which are the foundation and guarantee of Democracy.” For Addams, it is crucial that citizens in a democracy engage with one another to reach across difference to care and find common cause. Care theorists recognize the significance of a relational epistemology and a relational ontology, and so did Addams which is why some find her work prefiguring care theory.

Addams had a reputation for being a skilled and respectful listener who refused to vilify those for whom she disagreed with. Similarly, care ethics is a comprehensive approach to ethics that is less concerned with adjudication who is right and wrong as it is with responding to expressed need and helping others to grow and flourish. Addams frames many of the social ills that she addresses in her works as a product of people being disconnected from one another.

It has been argued that contemporary care theory can benefit from some of Addams insights. For example, care ethics has emphasized responding to expressed need which can have a passive connotation. Addams advocated actively seeking out the needs of others which suggests a more assertive form of care.

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