Geography and ethics: everyday mediations through care and consumption

Jeff Popke*

Department of Geography, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858, USA

I Introduction

Some months ago, in preparation for compiling the next three geography and ethics reports, I registered with one of the common electronic database services to receive the titles of journal articles focused on ethics. There are two things that I found noteworthy about this exercise. The first is the sheer volume of contemporary work on ethics – by my rather unscientific reckoning, something of the order of 1500 articles dealing with ethics are published in academic journals each year. The second is the presumed audience for much of this work. It seems that the vast majority of recent ethical writings are aimed not at the readers of social science journals like this one, but rather at the mundane world of institutions, organizations and public policy. In recent months, articles have addressed the ethical dimensions of a wide range of social and organizational practices, from auditing to zoo keeping. Ethics are being discussed by bankruptcy lawyers, money managers, judges and dentists, and applied to our sporting events, our militaries, and even our space agencies. Ethical conversations, it seems, are taking place at a multitude of sites across the social domain.

This state of affairs should probably be applauded. But it does not necessarily ensure that our social institutions function ethically or responsibly, or even that we can easily determine what that might mean. At issue here is a common challenge of ethical thinking: how do we bring normative demands to bear upon the social world of order, rules, and public policy? One well-known theorist who grappled with this challenge is Emmanuel Levinas, who often admitted that his conception of ethics, based as it was on a one-to-one relation with the singular Other, was rather difficult to translate into a social world of citizen-subjects:

> As *prima philosophia* ethics cannot itself legislate for society or produce rules of conduct whereby society might be revolutionized or transformed . . . [ethics] hardens its skin as soon as we move into the political world of the impersonal 'third' – the world of government, institutions, tribunals, schools, committees, and so on. But the norm that must continue to

*Email: popkee@ecu.edu

inspire and direct ... [this] order is the ethical norm of the interhuman. (Levinas and Kearney, 1986: 29–30)

In this report, I want to take up the issue that Levinas highlights: how can we live up to the demands of ethics and responsibility in a world held together by an array of impersonal organizations, institutions, and forms of discursive power? One response to this challenge is to imbue the practical exigencies of daily life with ethical significance, to expand the realm of the social that is normally subject to moral or ethical judgement. Here, I want to take up two recent streams of this kind of work, focused on care and consumption.

II The moral geographies of caringscapes

There has been a renewed interest of late in the realm of social reproduction (eg, Mitchell *et al*., 2004), what Katz describes as 'the fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life' (2001: 711). Once viewed largely through the Marxist lens of 'superstructure' to the productive 'base' or through a territorial welfare approach, social reproduction has more recently been theorised as a landscape of care, suffused with affect and emotion (Davidson and Milligan, 2004). Drawing broadly on feminist understandings, this recent work has investigated the complex geographies of caring work at a range of scales, and also sought to bring the social spaces of care – so often relegated to the personal, private sphere of the home – under renewed public scrutiny. Reclaiming 'care' as a social, and thus political, relation is in this way a project rich with ethical implications.

One vein of this recent work has focused on what we might call the 'moral geography' of the caregiving process itself. Authors have concerned themselves with the intimate 'spaces of care', understood following Conradson as 'a socio-spatial field disclosed through the practices of care that take place between individuals' (2003: 508). Much of this work has emphasized the subjective, emotional and affective qualities of the care giving relationship. Thus, Conradson (2003), in his work on a British community drop-in center, characterizes the care relationship as a spacing of subjectivity, and in similar fashion Bondi and Fewell (2003) examine counseling as an intersubjective practice that is fundamentally spatial.

This intimate, intersubjective nature of care has also been discussed by McCormack in the context of Dance Movement Therapy. Drawing on non-representational theory, he elaborates an ethics focused on what he calls the 'event of encounter'. 'With affect,' McCormack writes, 'the question is not only "how far can we care" but also becomes one of cultivating a commitment to those relations that may increase the intensity of attachment and connectivity' (2003: 503). Collectively, these examinations of the microgeographies of care remind us that caring is an embodied activity, something also noted by Hughes *et al*. (2005), who draw upon the work of Irigaray to recast the notion of care *vis-à-vis* disabled bodies (see also Howitt, 2002).

At a broader scale, recent work has highlighted the varied institutional geography of care work. McKie *et al*. (2002) use the term 'caringscapes' to describe these varied social landscapes, which they suggest have not only spatial dimensions but temporal rhythms as well. Researchers have examined a wide range of such caringscapes, from institutional sites such as mental health facilities (Gleeson and Kearns, 2001), elder care facilities (Milligan, 2003; Cutchin, 2004), community drop-in centers (Conradson, 2003), hospitals (Fannin, 2003), and hospices (Brown, 2003), to the complex geographies of home that have long been of concern to feminist geographers (Pratt, 2003; Dyck, 2005; McDowell *et al.*, 2005).

Discussions of this complex geography of care sites bring up two notable points. First, caregiving as a social practice is determined by the creative strategies of (largely female) caregivers in both professional and family settings (Pratt, 2003; McDowell *et al.*, 2005).

Such strategies, which may stretch across both territorial boundaries and familial generations (Dyck, 2005), are conditioned by policy shifts that have placed the burden of care increasingly onto individuals and families. Second, care should thus be viewed as a fundamentally social, and hence, political relationship. As Brown puts it, 'questions of care . . . cannot simply be mapped onto existing liberal democratic maps of the political. They transform its very foundations' (2003: 835; see also Staeheli, 2003).

III From spaces of care to care ethics

A second line of inquiry has taken up a more direct engagement with care as a form of ethics. From this perspective, care is more than simply a social relation with moral or ethical dimensions; it can also be the basis for an alternative ethical standpoint, with implications for how we view traditional notions of citizenship and politics.

Much of this work is inspired by a series of feminist conceptualizations of an 'ethics of care', especially the writings of Joan Tronto (Fisher and Tronto, 1990; Tronto, 1993) and Selma Sevenhuijsen (1998; 2000; see also Clement, 1996; Tronto, 1999; White, 2000). As elaborated by Fisher and Tronto, caring is 'a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web' (Fisher and Tronto, 1990: 40). Advocates of a care ethics argue for placing these kinds of activities, and their associated values, at the center of democratic life. Doing so has implications for how we conceptualize the political subject, and can pose challenges to the standard liberal notions of individual rights and normative justice.

In recent geographical scholarship, this 'care ethics' has been deployed as a means to foreground a wide range of normative claims in opposition to the subjects and spaces of liberal-democratic political theory. Such work begins with the recognition that care is, as Conradson puts it, a 'shared accomplishment' (2003: 508). A care-centered theoretical perspective is thus premised on a *relational* conception of subjectivity, which stands opposed to the autonomous rational subject of individual rights and responsibilities (Brown, 2003; Haylett, 2003; Maeckelberghe, 2004). An ethics based in understandings of care would thus stress our 'connectedness to others' (Lloyd, 2004: 247); be 'based on mutual obligations and relations of trust' (McDowell, 2004: 157); stress 'co-operation rather than competition' (Smith and Easterlow, 2004: 115); and favor 'interdependence over individuation' (Smith, 2005: 11). Caring, in this sense, is not so much an activity as an attitude or orientation, a way of relating to others characterized by values of compassion and a 'normative concern for inclusion' (Staeheli and Brown, 2003: 773; see also Gleeson and Kearns, 2001; Haylett, 2003).

Empirically, this ethics of care has generally been applied in two basic contexts. First, and most directly, researchers have sought to reconceptualize the sites and spaces of caring work itself. Thus, Gleeson and Kearns (2001) argue for a more nuanced understanding of deinstitutionalization, and Brown (2003) traces some of the complex (and contradictory) meanings that underlie hospice care. End-of-life care is also the focus of recent discussions by Lloyd (2004) and Maeckelberghe (2004), both of whom argue that a relational and contextualized ethics of care can force us to rethink our understandings of independence, competence and personal autonomy, with implications for how we view aging and dementia.

A second line of recent inquiry has drawn upon an ethic of care to consider the practices and policies of 'welfare' (Williams, 2002). Much of this work appeared in a special themed section in *Environment and Planning A*, guest-edited by Staeheli and Brown. As they note in their introduction (2003), a feminist ethics of care offers a challenge to the conventional distinction between a public

realm, viewed as the site of politics and justice, and the private spaces of emotion, care and welfare. In this way, care-centered theory can provide an ethical stance from which to evaluate and critique policy decisions that might otherwise be viewed as beyond the purview of public concern (Fine, 2004).

Haylett (2003), for example, shows how a feminist ethics of care can provide an alternative account of 'welfare-to-work' reform in Britain and the United States. She highlights in particular the emotional and affective dimensions of care that are neglected in work-centered discussions of welfare reform. From this perspective, 'an oppositional register of meaning and value is pitched against rationalist and economistic notions of welfare, and questions about the legitimacy of reform are foregrounded' (Haylett, 2003: 811). A similar argument has been put forward by Smith and Easterlow, who view welfare reform as 'an attack on the ethics of care' (2004: 114; also Smith, 2005). In Smith's view, reclaiming the standpoint of care ethics can politicize not only social reproduction and care work, but also the so-called free market principles under whose banner much 'welfare reform' has taken place. 'Markets', she insists, 'do not have to be exempt from an ethic of care' (2005: 15).

IV Extending the ethics of care
Taken together, the work discussed here illustrates the value of an ethics of care for expanding the social sites that might be considered subject to moral, ethical and political judgement. Although there is little agreement about the details of such an approach, I would agree with the assessment of Joan Tronto (1999: 116) that 'we are still too early in the evolution of care thinking to dismiss some avenues of thought as unproductive'.

There are nevertheless some significant challenges to placing an ethics of care at the center of geographic inquiry. Not least is the crucial question addressed in some detail by David Smith (1998), namely: *how far should we care*? If (as much of the work reviewed here is at pains to point out) relations of care are affective, embodied and relational, then an ethics arising out of this would seem to be necessarily partial and situational, holding only for those with whom we have some immediate contact and familiarity. Thus, as David Smith puts it, 'advocates of an ethic of care . . . need to consider how to spin their web of relationships widely enough that some people are not beyond its reach' (2000: 97). The key question is perhaps how an ethics of care can instill a sense of responsibility not only toward those with whom we have caring relationships, but also toward different and distant others. There seem to be two kinds of response to this question.

One set of responses would link a disposition of care to some notion of justice, as a set of principled, more-or-less universal precepts against which acts of judgement can be made. This, roughly, is the position of David Smith (2000) and, implicitly, most of the work discussed here. From this position, care need not be opposed to universal ideals like justice, but can be used to amend justice to recognize the importance of new values (see Crittenden, 2001, for an alternative view). Responsibility toward others, in this view, is guaranteed through the collective negotiation of rules, policies and practices that recognize and foster an ethos of care. As Lloyd puts it, 'a feminist ethics of care can . . . be understood as an attempt to develop a new moral epistemology, which breaks with the rules of liberal political philosophy and offers a new conceptualization of ethics, justice and autonomy' (Lloyd, 2004: 247).

A second possible response would be to emphasize care as a fundamental feature of our being-human. Such an approach might begin with a recognition of our common vulnerability and dependence upon others, such that care is a kind of universal, 'an activity that binds us all' (Williams, 2002: 509). Responsibility toward others, under this conceptualization, would be located not in the abstract universals of justice, but rather in the recognition of our intersubjective being.

Something akin to this kind of argument can be found in recent work drawing on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, who characterized ethical responsibility as 'the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity' (Levinas, 1985: 95; see Barnett, 2005; Popke, 2003; 2004).

V Ethical consumption as 'caring-at-a-distance'

The tension between local practice and caring at a distance has perhaps been best developed in a second recent area of geographical inquiry, namely the burgeoning literature on ethical trade. There is now a large body of work on issues of consumption and commodity chains, much of it recently reviewed in this journal (Goss, 2004; Hughes, 2005a; Watts *et al.*, 2005; see also Kneale and Dwyer, 2004; Mansvelt, 2005). Rather than attempt a thorough review, then, I wish to highlight selected work that focuses on the normative dimensions of commodities (Castree, 2004) and thus bears upon the questions of care and ethics.

We can begin with Daniel Miller's (2001) observation that consumption as a social practice can have moral or ethical dimensions. Miller is concerned to counter the view, common in some versions of Marxism, that consumption is merely commodification by another name, a hollow and alienating act in which, as Marx put it, the social relations of production assume 'the fantastic form of a relation between things' (1990: 165). Instead, Miller insists that the everyday practices of shopping are often suffused with ideals of love and care, such as the mother who passes up dozens of garments until she finds just the right one for *her* child, both appropriately stylish and within budget. 'It is possible', he suggests, 'that people appropriate this plethora of goods in order to enhance and not to detract from our devotion to other people' (2001: 231). This suggests that we should attend to the ways in which consumers often 'recontextualize' commodities after their purchase. As Sayer (2003) has argued, this can take

diverse forms but may include moral considerations.

A similar argument is made by Barnett *et al.*, who discuss what they term the 'ordinary ethics' of consumption practices (Barnett *et al.*, 2005b; see also Barnett *et al.*, 2005a; Clarke *et al.*, 2005). Drawing inspiration from Foucault's notion of ethics as care of the self, they suggest that ethical dispositions are always-already inscribed in the everyday performance of consumption. The question becomes how such dispositions are 'worked up, governed, and regulated by an array of actors who make possible certain forms of individualized conduct' (Barnett *et al.*, 2005b: 29). In the case of so-called fair and ethical trade, these ordinary ethics of care are 'worked up' in various ways, as discussed in a number of recent works.

VI 'Working up' ethics: the 'ethical complex'

For most commentators, ethical trade is neither an unambiguous moral good, nor a simplistic and insincere form of marketing or commodification. It is, rather, a set of institutionalized practices that, from the perspective of ethics and responsibility, offer both opportunities and challenges. The challenges arise from the ways in which ethical consumption is embedded in what Friedberg (2004) calls an 'ethical complex', which includes not only consumers, but also producers, suppliers, retailers, non-governmental organizations, and various institutional arrangements through which rules and standards are negotiated. These relationships have been discussed recently for a wide range of commodity chains, including fashion (Crewe, 2004), cut flowers (Hughes, 2004; Hale and Opondo, 2005), furniture (Reimer and Leslie, 2004), fresh vegetables (Friedberg, 2003), organic produce (Clarke *et al.*, 2005) and tropical fruit (Cook *et al.*, 2004).

A frequent conclusion of this work is that in practice the ethical complex is often governed by the corporate strategies and management systems of retailers

and suppliers (Crewe, 2004; Hughes, 2004; 2005b), as well as the conflicting internal politics of various NGOs (Friedberg, 2004). These realities can blunt the ethical force of fair trade initiatives. Under the UK's Ethical Trading Initiative, for example, retailers place high expectations on their suppliers to ensure compliance with ethical standards. But in the absence of proper funding for such things as worker housing or better wages, it is producers, and eventually workers, who bear the burden of price and quality pressures (Friedberg, 2003; Hale and Opondo, 2005; Hughes, 2004). In this way, as Friedberg (2003) notes, codes of conduct and ethical standards can themselves be a form of 'fetish', obscuring no less than commodities the social relations of their emergence.

There is a host of larger issues here as well. For starters, the premium placed on higher quality and the higher price thus charged combine to leave out of the ethical trading circuit the poorest consumers, as well as producers who are disadvantaged (by having less productive land, for example) (Goodman, 2004). In addition, we can note the limitations of an ethical practice that relies upon a model of individual consumer sovereignty, a model that seemingly plays into a neoliberal agenda that would mitigate against a collective notion of responsibility (Goodman, 2004; Hudson and Hudson, 2003). Finally, examinations of the specificities of ethical trade leave aside the question of whether Northern consumption patterns are just or sustainable (Hudson and Hudson, 2003).

Despite these concerns, most commentators agree that more direct links between production and consumption, as well as increased media coverage of fair trade issues, do offer greater opportunities for consumer activists and NGOs (Friedberg, 2004; Hale and Opondo, 2005). The question from the perspective of ethics is: how are these opportunities mobilized to promote an expanded sense of care?

VII Can care defetishize the economy?

In the first instance, it is clear that knowledge and information are important to any project aimed at extending networks of care through consumption (Hudson and Hudson, 2003). Social movements are aware of this, of course, and work to highlight labor or environmental conditions at the other end of the commodity chain. In this sense, the ethical trade movement can be viewed as a reincarnation of the traditional Marxist concept of 'defetishizing' the commodity to reveal its underlying social relations of production (for a discussion, see Castree, 2001; Hudson and Hudson, 2003; for empirical examples, see Mitchell, 2003; Cook, 2004). One interesting difference is the increasingly widespread availability of the internet (at least among wealthy Northern consumers), prompting Daniel Miller (2003) to ask: could the internet defetishize the economy? Although Miller is less than sanguine about the prospects, Holloway suggests that technological mediation can, in fact, foster a certain kind of ethical relationship by extending relations of care across distances. Ethics, he states, 'emerge from the networks of relations between the heterogeneous assemblages in which they are constituted; they are relational ethics arising from associations and encounters between distanced things' (Holloway, 2002: 78).

In practice, of course, the performance of consumption is mediated by all kinds of cultural-semiotic codes and values. As Goodman notes, it might therefore be better to speak not of an 'unveiling' of the commodity fetish, but rather a *re-working*. Consumers draw upon different imaginaries in the process of 'caring at a distance', imaginaries that may, for example, reinscribe the fetish in the form of a pristine nature or exotic indigenous producer just waiting to be 'saved' by the generosity of Northern consumers (Goodman, 2004; see also Bryant and Goodman, 2004; Cook *et al.*, 2004; Coulson, 2004).

To suggest that our ordinary dispositions of care are mobilized via deliberate

representational strategies is not to suggest that the acts thus engendered are necessarily devoid of moral or ethical purchase. As Goodman (2004) argues, the reworked fetish of ethical consumption can, in fact, serve to shrink psychological distance, and thus establish a relational ethic of care toward human and non-human actants within particular commodity chains. The refetishization of commodities toward this end might thus be seen as a moral good if it fosters an expanded domain of responsibility (Clarke *et al.*, 2005).

VIII Conclusion

In a recent commentary, Nicky Gregson (2003) argues that social and cultural geographers ought to 'reclaim the social' as a site of geographical analysis. She asks us to consider just what we mean when we invoke the social, and to reflect upon how this relates to our normative vision for society, as well as our role as critical academics. I largely agree with Gregson's argument, but would add a call for a more direct engagement with theories of ethics and responsibility on the part of social and cultural geographers. For it is not merely enough to 'reclaim' the social; we must also reinscribe the social *as a site of ethics and responsibility*. An expanded, relational and collective vision of the social is crucial if we are to heed Levinas's injunction to use our ethical sensibilities as a guide for the impersonal institutions of the state. He writes:

> There is need for a state. But it is very important to know whether the state, society, law, and power are required because man is a beast to his neighbor (*homo homini lupu*) or because I am responsible to my fellow. It is very important to know whether the political order defines man's responsibility or merely restricts his bestiality. (Levinas, 1989: 247–48)

There is much at stake in this distinction. As I finish this report, the Gulf region of the United States is continuing its long recovery from the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina. After months of debate, and recalling the media images hinting at the 'bestiality' of the (largely black) survivors, this event has come to symbolize in stark fashion the absence in these times of any larger sense of civic responsibility toward our more marginalized neighbors.

It may be, as some are suggesting, that the storm will eventually prompt a renewed debate in the USA about our collective obligations, and that the task of rebuilding will include what Mike Davis and Anthony Fontenot (2005) have called the 'moral reconstruction' of the region. If we are to take advantage of such a moment, however, we need to continue to develop ways of thinking through our responsibilities toward unseen others, and to cultivate a renewed sense of social interconnectedness. As the work reviewed here suggests, a feminist-inspired ethic of care can assist in developing such a sensibility, as can various pragmatic strategies for turning our ordinary moral dispositions – as consumers, as citizens – toward more just and sustainable ends.

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