Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* and the Ethics of Care

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman originally published her utopian novel *Herland* in serial form in her own small circulation magazine, *The Forerunner*, in 1915, and it was not until its publication in book form in 1979 that this story of an all-female society reached a world-wide audience. The acclaim it then received from those engaged with second-wave feminism rested on the great skill and humour employed to expose the irrationality and hypocrisy of patriarchal thinking and practice. This is done principally through the dialogues between the women of Herland and the three stereotypical male explorers who have discovered a country of three million women in the remote highlands of South America. The women of *Herland* have lived without men for 2000 years, leading a communistic existence marked by cooperation, sustainability, intelligence and innovation. The society originated from a natural calamity during a war, a huge avalanche sealing the pass that connected the country to the outside world, in the process taking the lives of all the male warriors. The problem of reproduction was resolved by the miracle of parthenogenesis; originally a woman conceived without male assistance and gave birth to a daughter, followed by other daughters. It was from this mother than the entire society developed. At first each woman produced five daughters, but when this eventually caused a problem of over-population the women learned how to control their fertility and produce only one daughter each, once they had reached the responsible age of 25. Nurturing and education are collective responsibilities, and the most able carers take the leading role (Gilman, 1999: 104, 84). A collective reverence for motherhood, viewed as the "sacrament of a lifetime" is the most

valued ethic, and is the foundation for an incredibly strong sense of solidarity (*idem*, 89; also 70, 102, 138).

The nature of this ethic is the focus of this chapter. I will argue that *Herland* anticipates the ethics of care approach that has attracted so much attention at the interface of philosophy, psychoanalysis and social and political theory since the appearance of Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* in 1982 (Gilligan, 2000). I will also argue that some of the problematic issues raised by the novel are reflected in some of the theoretical concerns that have been raised in the debates about the ethics of care. The first part of the paper will show how the basic elements of such an ethics are set down in *Herland*, and some of the problems involved. The second part will introduce modern versions of the ethics of care, and the final section will deal with the relationship between the ethics of care and *Herland*, focusing on the criticisms levelled at Gilman's book by Joan Tronto in *Moral Boundaries* (Tronto, 1994: 158-161).

The Religion of Collective Motherhood

Van, the male narrator, encapsulates the driving ethic of the Herlanders when he concludes that "mother-love with them was not a brute passion, a mere 'instinct,' a wholly personal feeling; it was – A Religion" (Gilman, 1999: 69). The book is a witty dissection of patriarchy and the stereotypical male perceptions of what constitutes the natural role of women. In using the utopian device of imagining a long-established all-female society, Gilman is able to make generalizations about the character differences between men and women. Historically, assertions of natural difference have been used by men to subjugate women, in the form of justifications for the patriarchal exclusion of women from positions of public power, politically and culturally. Because of this long history of essentialist arguments justifying male superiority, most second wave feminists, reading *Herland* for the first time in the early 1980s, would have been uncomfortable with Gilman's assertion of essential differences, especially as it is so explicitly grounded in the adulation of motherhood. "Biological" arguments had been used to confine women to domestic roles for so long that most feminists considered it necessary to either avoid or reject any biologically-grounded argument for women's emancipation. However, difference feminists pointed out that simply because previous assertions of difference had been used to justify male

superiority, this was not a good reason to rule out the possibility that character differences may well exist. Such differences could be used to expose the inadequacies of masculine assumptions and their need to be challenged by feminine character traits. Gilman's approach assumes that there are distinctively female characteristics that, if allowed to flourish, would transform the world for the better, and this approach chimes with claims made by difference feminists over the last three decades, such as Carol Gilligan (1982 and 2003) and Luce Irigaray (1993 and 2001).

We shall now turn to how Gilman develops her maternal ethics in the fictional society of *Herland*. Although the social structure is clearly collectivist, the importance of personal bonding is recognized through the "year of glory" that the mother spends with her daughter before returning to her normal work (Gilman, 1999: 104). The mother does not have exclusive responsibility for her child, but is part of the team who take care of nurturing and education, with those most skilful at the art of mothering playing the leading role. So, while each mother experiences "a certain range of personal joy" in the particular relationship with her child, this is generalised into a love for all children, so that all one million children are regarded as "our children" (*idem*, 72). Gilman suggests that the conscious sacrifice of normally limiting a mother to one child intensifies the loving ethos that suffuses the whole society. One of the older women, Somel, explains to Van that "we soon grew to see that mother-love has more than one channel of expression. I think the reason our children are so – so fully loved, by all of us, is that we never – any of us – have enough of our own" (*idem*, 71). The highest accolade that the society of *Herland* can bestow is the permission to bear more than one child, and those honoured in this way as "Over Mothers" are part of a line which comes closest to the aristocracies that exist in the outside world (*idem*, 70). Van observes that the power of mother love, the maternal instinct admired in his society, was paramount in *Herland*, and that the strength of the sister love was "hard to credit" (*idem*, 59). Such is the power of collective commitment that the children carry only one name, for a family name is irrelevant when all belong to the one family (*idem*, 76).

The religion of the Herlanders is a form of pantheism based on the centrality of the cycle of motherhood. However, Gilman's depiction of its historical development is typical of a humanistic sociology of religion that portrays an emerging self-consciousness of human

powers moving from Polytheism to Monotheism and then to Pantheism. The first mother became the God of the country and she is worshipped in the Temple of Maaia. Originally there had been a number of deities, but then they centred on the Mother Goddess and later, as they progressively realized that they were in control of their own destiny, they developed a form of Maternal Pantheism (*idem*, 61). Maternalism is therefore extended beyond the commitment to the good nurturing of children to the energizing principle underlying the entire reproduction of society. They had created a sustainable economy in which all the emphasis was placed on scientifically-managed natural growth and sustainability.

The strength of this identity with nature is neatly illustrated by Ellador, who goes on to marry Van, when she explains to him what impelled her to choose the occupation of forester (*idem*, 101-102). At the age of 11, she caught an unusual butterfly and took it to her insect teacher to identify it. The teacher told her that it was one of the few remaining female obernut moths, so called because it fed off the obernut, the country's staple food. The society had been trying to exterminate it for centuries because it was a major threat to their food supply, and Ellador's intervention meant that the eggs would not be laid and thousands of trees, bearing thousands of bushels of obernuts, would be saved. The teacher explained the natural history of the tree and the moth, and the social history of the society's struggle to overcome the problem, and Ellador, filled with pride at what she had done for all the women and girls, resolved to become a forester. Van commented that this was but one of many such instances in which the social nature of the society was affirmed. He also noted the driving force of the naturalistic ethic:

> Such high ideals as they had! Beauty, Health, Strength, Intellect, Goodness – for these they prayed and worked. They had no enemies; they themselves were all sisters and friends. The land was fair before them, and a great Future began to form in their minds. (…)
> Here was Mother Earth bearing fruit. All that they ate was fruit of motherhood, from seed or egg of their product. By motherhood they were born and by motherhood they lived – life was, to them, just the long cycle of motherhood. (*idem*, 61)

However, it was a naturalism that valued the ingenuity of the women, who used their intellect to manage natural growth, including their own improvement, achieved through their strong commitment to education (*idem*, 61, 106-108). This self-awareness involves an acknowledgment of their unnatural isolation, and, provided that it need not

threaten their basic principles, they cherish a return to dual parentage, eventually celebrating the marriage of their women with the explorers as a symbol of human solidarity (*idem*, 119).

The controversial aspects of life in *Herland* have been the source of lively debate within feminism. Like so many radical thinkers of the time, Gilman was interested in eugenics, and she tells us that the women of *Herland* "breed out (…) the lower types". Some of the "worst types" were unable to conceive, while others were persuaded to relinquish motherhood because they were not suited to it. But those women possessing a "disproportionate egoism" who gave birth, often thinking their children would be better than others, had their babies taken from them and nurtured collectively (*idem*, 83). The nature of the behaviour that provoked such punishment is not made clear, except for the example of those who exhibited sexual feelings; such feelings were regarded as atavistic and resulted in them being denied motherhood (*idem*, 92-93). How these judgements are arrived at is not made clear. At the wedding ceremony the "dignitaries" are described as the Great Over Mother of the Land and a number of High Temple Counsellors (*idem*, 119). The high level of social cohesion suggests that these counsellors may have been elected in some form of democratic process, but the Great Over Mother would have been one of the few who had been permitted to have more than one baby. We should be wary about drawing too many conclusions from this vagueness about the political processes of the society, for Gilman may not have wanted to draw attention from her two central themes, the ability of women to revolutionize social relations, and the irrationality of patriarchal relations that the explorers try to defend with increasingly embarrassing clumsiness. Interestingly, she began her public career in the Nationalist Movement of Edward Bellamy in 1890, inspired by his utopian novel, *Looking Backward*, which is also vague on the political processes of the alternative society (Scharnhorst, 2000: 65).

Care Ethics and *Herland*

Gilman's maternalism anticipates by more than half a century the interest in a distinctively feminine approach to ethics known as the "Ethics of Care", first articulated by Carol Gilligan in *In a Different Voice* (1982). Based on the findings of three psychological studies, Gilligan argues that the women involved had a different view of

moral issues than the men. The women focused on concern for others arising from a sense of close interconnectedness, whereas the men's ideas focused on abstract rules and principles applicable to all moral problems. Gilligan argued that this different voice, expressed by women, arose from the experiences of inequality and interconnection, inherent in the relation of parent and child, giving rise to the ethics of justice and care. The ideals of human relationship involved a vision that self and other will be treated as of equal worth, and that, despite differences in power, things will be fair. It was a vision that "everyone will be responded to and included, that no one will be left alone or hurt" (Gilligan, 2000: 62-63). She goes on to argue that in the different voice of women "lies the truth of an ethic of care, the tie between relationship and responsibility, and the origins of aggression in the failure of connection" (*idem*, 173).[1] To paraphrase the distinction, we have ideas of Justice, based on impartial rules arrived at through reason, and Care, based on feelings of empathy with our fellow beings, derived from emotion. However, at this stage it should be noted that while care ethics might be driven by emotion, this is not at all incompatible with its application through reason. *Herland*, for example, is portrayed as a society that displays a high level of substantive rationality and is at the same time sustained by deep emotions. As Van comments, "with these women the most salient quality in all their institutions was reasonableness" (Gilman, 1999: 77). However, I think two important questions arise from the argument for a distinctive ethics of care that have important philosophical and political implications. The first relates to where this caring faculty arises, whether from biology, pure and simple, or from processes of socialization developed throughout history. Gilman discusses this issue directly in *Herland*. The second is the scope of the ethics of care, that is to say, whether it is a sufficient principle to guide all moral judgement, or whether it requires supplementation by other forms of ethics which emphasize rules and process.

On the question of how women may have developed this moral outlook, Gilman steers us to thinking of this as the product of a long period of socialization through education. In a conversation between the elders and the three explorers, the question is posed as to why there are such physical differences among the Herlanders when cross-fertilization has not taken place. The most chauvinist of the explorers, Terry, asserts that their physical variation proves that there must be men involved. A dual answer is

provided, pointing partly to education, enhancing slight differences, presumably through expression or exercise, and partly to the "law of mutation", which they had found in their own work on plants (*idem*, 78). The women and the explorers are in agreement that greater physical variety would probably be beneficial, and that is why one of the women, Zava, says that the Herlanders greatly mourned the loss of half the population when the men disappeared. However, she suggests that this "loss" had been compensated by the conscious striving for improvement triggered by the enormous challenges they faced. Terry replies that science (he cites the evolutionary biologist August Weisman rather than Charles Darwin) has proved that "acquired traits are not transmissable", to which Zava replies then that the achievements of the Herlanders must be due either to mutation or solely to education (*idem*, 78-79). Gilman is asserting here that an all-female society is every bit as likely to have developed the science of mutation as the modern world, and the dialogue opens up major questions about how we understand human development. Gilman is making general statements about women's nature similar to modern "difference" feminists – in particular that women tend to be more pacific and to place a higher value on relationships – while allowing for a long process of self-education or socialization through which they can exercise these traits in substantively rational ways. This does not involve a rejection of Darwinism,[2] but it does allow for a form of Lamarckian development specific to human cultural relations, as has been argued by the biologist Stephen Jay Gould and the historian Eric Hobsbawm (Gould, 2001: 103-105; Hobsbawm, 2004). An important implication of this is the extent to which we can hope, as a species, to learn from our mistakes and develop a disposition to peaceful cooperation and mutual respect.

Gilligan, although developing the idea of an ethics of care from empirical analysis of the experiences of women, does not think that the "different voice" of the ethics of care *has* to be female, but can be developed by both sexes – "the different voice I describe is characterized not by gender but theme" (Gilligan, 2000: 20). A much older approach, found in a 1943 paper by Erich Fromm, emphasizes that although there are character differences between the genders, they are far less deep than the things that men and women share in terms of potential, desires and fears. The gender differences are conceived as "colorings" that do not influence the capacity to do work of any kind

(Fromm, 1997: 112-113). In general, Fromm argues that the "care" elements associated with feminism need to become preponderant over the patricentric values that became dominant, particularly in modern society (Wilde, 2004: 57-74). If this approach is adopted, it overcomes certain obvious objections, as, for example, Steve Pinker's assertion that character differences would disqualify women from becoming constitutional lawyers or Supreme Court Justices (Pinker, 2002: 342), or Kate Soper's argument that difference feminism in general, and the emphasis on the maternal function in particular, implies that some women are "cast out from femininity" because they are not mothers nor intend to become so (Soper, 1990: 233). That certain values have been transmitted through thousands of years of family structure does not entail a biological determinism that prescribes only a limited range of propensities or implies a deficiency in those who to do not experience motherhood. Indeed we have already seen a marked reevaluation of parenting that challenges traditional roles, and there have been theoretical and political initiatives to apply care and empathy into the public sphere. Both of these developments are in line with the issues raised in *Herland* almost one hundred years ago.

The basis of care ethics may be located in the historical role of motherhood, but the ethics of care is not confined to mothers or potential mothers; it is available to all humankind. Michael Slote, in his recent affirmation of an ethics of care and empathy as a full-blown ethical alternative to conventional approaches to justice, points to the moral sentimentalism of past male philosophers (e.g. Hume, Hutcheson, and Smith), and also Christian ethics, to suggest that there is nothing to prevent men from achieving this outlook. He argues that we should be encouraged to think of a fully-developed ethics of care as "nothing less than a total or systematic *human* morality, one that may be able to give us a better understanding of the whole range of moral issues that concern both men and women than anything to be found in traditional ethical theories" (Slote, 2007: 3).

This brings us to the second question as to whether or not an ethics of care contradicts or complements conventional approaches to justice. Joan Tronto supports the ethics of care approach but argues that the care versus justice dichotomy is false (Tronto, 1994: 166-167). The care approach is needed to rectify the one-sidedness of justice approaches, but a care approach can be dangerous if it does not accept that the political context in which care operates needs to be regulated by conventional justice principles.

On these grounds she is critical of the contribution of modern care theorist Nell Noddings (Noddings, 1984), and also of Gilman's *Herland* for supposing that a single principle of care can cope with all social problems.

Tronto's Criticisms

Tronto focuses on *Herland* (Tronto, 1994: 158-160) as an example of the problems inherent in a "morality first" approach whereby care is the sole moral value that informs politics. Tronto supports the promotion of an ethics of care, defining caring as "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" (*idem*, 103). However, for Tronto, care alone is not a sufficiently broad idea to solve such problems as inequality and privilege, general issues about the just ordering of society. She points out that Gilligan's ethics of care is conceived almost entirely in personal relationships and therefore doesn't deal with social connections in much larger units (*idem*, 96). When it comes to the potential hazards of applying the care ethic on a societal basis, she uses Gilman's *Herland* as a vivid example of what can go wrong. Tronto argues that Herland's stability is linked with its hierarchical structure in which the leading mother figures guide the proper raising of the children. Not only do they have the power to punish women for signs of sexual interest, but they exclude some women from having children at all. Tronto suggests that only the most stable and thoughtful women are permitted to give birth, but this, I think, is a misreading of the text, since Gilman refers to the prohibition applying only to a "few worst types". More generally, Tronto argues there is no diversity of any kind in Herland, an entirely homogenous society in which the social harmony is enforced:

> Gilman must posit a degree of social harmony and an absence of conflict that almost permits no individuation among people. Gilman's account of the importation of private caring values into public life makes clear that, unless all differentiation among people is removed, it cannot work. (*idem*, 160)

Generalizing from that, Tronto argues that only a society where all differentiation among people has been removed could emanate from a principle based on personal caring values (*idem*, 160). Her major theoretical point here is that outside of any

transformed context, "Care is not a sufficiently broad moral idea to solve the problems of distance, inequality and privilege" (*idem*, 158). Tronto's argument raises crucially important points about the place of care ethics in the context of claims to moral universalism, and the example of *Herland* appears to offer a stern warning to those who, like Slote, assert that "a care-ethical approach can be used to understand all of individual and political morality" (Slote, 2007: 2). However, before dealing with this theoretical point, let us see if we can at least offer some mitigating points in defence of Gilman's intentions in the novel.

The first point that should be made is that this is a work of fiction, and the utopian genre relies on imagination – a suspension of disbelief – in order to draw attention to major failings in our present reality and provide hope for future possibilities. In this short novel Gilman presents a richly ironic and quite devastating critique of patriarchal values, and at the same time shows how an ethic of care could sustain a harmonious society. Furthermore, she wants to avoid the mistake made by her utopian predecessor, Edward Bellamy, in *Looking Backward* (Bellamy, 2009) in portraying the alternative society as perfect in every way. The "problems" in Herland relating to the recalcitrant mothers and those with sexual leanings are treated as "wrong" behaviour by "inferior" women, and are considered as a threat to protect the greater good. However, as this judgemental attitude is so obviously inconsistent with the character-types described, the reader is challenged to consider what hypothetical alternatives may make the overall social model more defensible. This aspect of the utopian genre has been present at least since More's original *Utopia*, in which a number of questionable practices are described approvingly, almost certainly deliberately formulated to provoke controversy and further discussion (More, 2002). Critics of the genre normally emphasize the dangers of perfectionism and fail to see the rich irony that is present in the best utopian works, which prompt us to see that the specificity of the vision is flawed but may be redeemed by something different. In the case of *Herland*, a radical ethics of care would reject the majority attitude towards the women who did not conform, demanding that care and empathy need also to be extended to them. This would encourage ideas about the potential for more radical participatory democratic processes, or the possibility of alternative sub-groups within the general model. In other words, the idea of an ethics based on care would have to be

expanded to include principles of how the whole range of relationships between strangers is guided, reviewed and judged.

On Tronto's specific point about the impossibility of individuation, there are at least two examples which suggest that Gilman certainly thought there could be both individual and social choice and development. On the individual level, there is the story of Ellador's discovery of her destiny as a forester, and on the social level, there is the awareness of the women that their society is not complete or perfect, and so they are inclined to reintroducing a gendered society. In other words, we might be able to conceive of individuation in Herland, and the absence of examples of individual difference may be explained by the author's desire to achieve the primary intentions outlined above in a short novel in which characterization was developed strictly to support those intentions.[3]

Having outlined these points of mitigation, however, I think that Tronto's major argument must be conceded, particularly the judgement that not only does *Herland* lack all individuation, but that a society of that sort *must* lack individuation. The governing principle of motherly love, as depicted in *Herland*, does not protect certain individuals from what appears to be quite arbitrary punishment. Those individuals are excluded from the strong solidarity of the majority, which appears to equate with Durkheim's notion of mechanical solidarity, based on strong cultural homogeneity enforced ruthlessly and emotionally by moral taboo (Durkheim, 1964: 70-110). From Gilman's depiction of Herland, it is hard to see how the high level of discursive sophistication demonstrated by the women is sustained without high levels of participation in substantive issues. Tronto is surely right that we need to have a moral framework that could promise justice through these deliberations between members of society who may not be bound by strong social bonds and traditions. Slote's *The Ethics of Care and Empathy* is an elegant attempt to argue that an ethic of care is all that we need, and that it is applicable in relations between strangers in a political situation, so that "a law is just if it reflects or expresses empathically on the part of the legislative group that is responsible for passing it" (Slote, 2007: 95). However, this formula is weak and unconvincing, and the brevity of his chapter on social justice (seven pages long) indicates the weakness – or at least the undeveloped state – of the universal care ethics position. It is encouraging, however, that

recent virtue ethics perspectives, in the form of the capabilities approaches of Amartya Sen (2009) and Martha Nussbaum (2006), bring us closer to overcoming the boundaries between the personal and the political and between care and justice which both Tronto and Slote want to move beyond (Tronto, 1994: 10, 166-167; Slote, 2007: 96). These are theoretical steps that can elevate care and empathy to a more significant place in our moral discourse, with implications for social practice. In this respect the novel and other art forms play a vital role in the dissemination of this ethical perspective, and, for all its problems, Gilman's *Herland* succeeds in appealing for the imperative of caring for all *our* children,[4] and in demanding recognition of the potential of all women.

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Notes

[1] This is remarkably similar to the distinction between matricentric and patricentric value systems made by Erich Fromm as early as 1934. The matricentric complex is characterized by a feeling of trust in the mother's unconditional love, fewer guilt feelings and a far weaker superego than in the patricentric complex, a greater capacity for pleasure and happiness, an ideal of motherly compassion, and love for the weak and others in need of help (Fromm, 1999: 19-45).

[2] Not all Darwinists would agree. Stephen Pinker describes Gilligan's ethics of care as "invidious claims without scientific support" (Pinker, 2002: 342), but he doesn't discuss the fact that Darwin himself left open the possibility that acquired traits could be inherited.

[3] The same could be said of More's *Utopia*, in which individuals are not even mentioned but in which different groups are mentioned as well as different sources of enjoyment and edification.

[4] In one of the dialogues Van is forced to concede that, in the USA of the early twentieth century, about one third of the population lived in poverty (Gilman, 1999: 63-64). This is roughly the figure for the world today.