

# Aesthetics and the Ethics of Care

## Some Critical Remarks

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This discussion piece raises some worries in the view Yuriko Saito develops in her *Aesthetics of Care: Practice in Everyday Life* (2022), on the role of aesthetics in fostering a way of life, which is infused by a particular kind of care towards the world. My claim is that Saito's theory is haunted by problems similar to those Gregory Currie has recently addressed towards philosophical views on the cognitive value of literature. Like such approaches in Currie's view, Saito's claim that an appropriate kind of aesthetic appreciation nurtures care ethics, too, would benefit from a more empirically grounded inquiry. Moreover, I believe that Currie's sceptical points on the idea of literature as a vehicle for expanding our emphatic capacities are also relevant to Saito's account of the relation between aesthetics and care ethics. I close by sketching a different way of relating aesthetics and ethics from Saito's in terms of the notion of exemplification. | *Keywords: Aesthetics of Care, Care Ethics, Empathy, Everyday Aesthetics, Saito*

With the recent *Aesthetics of Care: Practice in Everyday Life* (2022), Yuriko Saito continues her important contributions to everyday aesthetics. It is in no way an overstatement to say that without her work, this field would look very different today – or would perhaps not even exist. While such themes as green aesthetics and the ways in which “the power of the aesthetic” can help in constructing a better world were already central to her landmark *Everyday Aesthetics* (2007, pp. 55–58, 77–103), in *Aesthetics of Care*, she gives an even more ambitious account of the potential relationships between aesthetics and sustainable ways of life.

More precisely, Saito's treatment now takes the form of exploring the ways in which what she calls “an aesthetics of care” could help foster an ethically respectful and sustainable relationship to our surrounding world for which there certainly is an urgent need in our times of various crises some of which could even mark a significant threat to our very existence. In this case, she believes that a particular kind of attitude of care ties aesthetics and ethics together. In other words, in her view, proper aesthetic appreciation and care are both permeated by such mental states and virtues as attentiveness,

responsiveness, respect of particularity, open-mindedness, and focused attention (Saito, 2022, pp. 28, p. 30, pp. 35–36). There is “a reciprocal relationship” between care aesthetics and care ethics, in that they both emphasize “the importance of experiencing the other, whether a person or an object, on its own terms through unselfing and decentering while activating the imagination” (Saito, 2022, p. 29, 113).

Saito’s account of the aesthetics of care is by no means the only field of aesthetics where the potential ulterior significance of aesthetic phenomena has been explored. It bears an interesting similarity to the long-standing discussion on the cognitive value of literature, which Saito, however, does not discuss. With some terminological and case-example adjustments, her ideas on the aesthetics of care and on the ethical value of aesthetic appreciation could be easily turned into a potential contribution to this field.

Philosophers of literature have seen literature as the source of such cognitive values as conceptual knowledge, knowledge of possibilities, knowledge of the feel of experiences, knowledge of human nature and character, knowledge of the processual nature of emotions. In general, a host of philosophers consider literature an important vehicle for expanding some important cognitive capacities of ours like imagination and empathy (Mikkonen, 2013). The latter emphases are particularly important to Martha Nussbaum’s famous ethical view of literature. According to her, literature can promote “a finely aware and richly responsible” moral life, as her motto, derived from Henry James, goes (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 37).

However, certain new developments in the discussion on the cognitive value of literature, I think, also raise some worries for Saito’s aesthetics of care. In this short discussion piece, I draw attention to some of them.

One of Saito’s central claims is that aesthetic appreciation permeated by an appropriate kind of care strengthens our general care relationship towards the world. She writes: “an aesthetics of care enables an ethical relationship”. This is because, “cultivating an aesthetic sensibility to appreciate the object of experience in its singularity and wholeness nurtures ethical attention and respect” (Saito, 2022, pp. 3–4).

To defend her claim that this type of relationship indeed prevails between aesthetics of care and care ethics, Saito draws on the work of a number of philosophers, researchers, and other thinkers, as well as draws attention to some specific aesthetic practices. These, for example, include virtue aesthetics, Arnold Berleant’s aesthetics of engagement, the ethical implications of Iris Murdoch’s concept of ‘unselfing’, design education, the analogy Martin Buber draws between encountering a person and encountering a work of art, as well as the art of the tea ceremony in Japanese aesthetics and Emily Brady’s notion of imagining well.<sup>1</sup> Along with Murdoch’s unselfing, Saito’s (2022, pp. 17–18) conceptual arsenal includes such concepts as “radical decentering”,

<sup>1</sup> Josephine Donovan’s aesthetics of care, John Dewey’s aesthetics, Ronald Hepburn’s environmental aesthetics, Harry Broud’s theory of art education, Marcia Eaton’s account of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, relational aesthetics, Gernot Böhme’s notion of atmosphere, Paul Ziff notion of aspection, and Joan Nassauer’s landscape aesthetics are

“respecting the other”, “appreciating the other on its own terms”, and “transcending one’s own horizon”. All these notions seek to capture different aspects of the kind of world-relation that Saito finds central to care ethics and, due to their structural similarities, aesthetic appreciation characterized by such mental attitudes, in her view, helps foster it.

Despite its numerous merits, one crucial component could be argued to be missing from Saito’s account. Even after all the impressive theories, ideas, and concepts she draws on, it is hard to get around the fact that the relationship Saito draws between care aesthetics and care ethics can also be construed as a causal relationship, in the sense that one is assumed to lead to the other or to further its realization. As Saito (2022, p. 8, italics added) puts it, “ethical care acts require sensibility and imagination that are most effectively *nurtured* through aesthetic means”. Or still more specifically: “If I am surrounded by... small agents of human decency indicative of the care given to my needs, comfort, and well-being [such as a particularly well-designed peeler], I become *disposed* to pay it forward by spreading the gift of care” (Saito, 2022, p. 115, italics added).

I am not claiming that Saito explicitly formulates the relationship between care aesthetics and care ethics in causal terms, but I, nevertheless, think it is a fair reading of her position. Rather than causality, she describes the relationship between the aesthetics of care and care ethics as a form of “mutual enhancement” (Saito, 2022, p. 5), which, unlike causality, is a bidirectional relationship. But even the claim of mutual enhancement contains an element of causality; the aesthetic has an *effect* on the ethical. Mutual enhancement presupposes at least some type of causal relationship between the two parts of the mutually enhancing relationship.<sup>2</sup>

However, if the relationship in question, that is of nurturing care ethics through aesthetic means, is acknowledged to involve a causal element, it would be good to give empirical evidence for its existence, which Saito does not really provide, apart from some examples of art projects and everyday aesthetic objects she thinks embody an attitude of care (2022, pp. 83–84, pp. 93–98, pp. 100–103, pp. 117–118). The examples she uses from imaginative manhole covers to well-designed ATM machines do illuminate her idea of the aesthetics of care, but they are not enough to establish the kind of connection between care ethics and care aesthetics she seeks in any strong sense; their eventual effect on people remains unexplored and hence their evidential value might not be as strong as Saito believes.

This is precisely the challenge that Gregory Currie has raised for philosophy of literature in his recent *Imagining and Knowing: The Shape of Fiction* (2020). The basic idea of his challenge is very simple: Philosophers of literature who believe that literature can foster the kinds of cognitive values listed above need to present better empirical evidence on the positive impacts they attribute to literature. Currie writes:

also among Saito’s key sources of inspiration (Saito, 2022, pp. 30–32, pp. 36–37, pp. 42–45, p. 59, pp. 79–80, pp. 89–90, pp. 117–118).

<sup>2</sup> I thank the reviewer for pressing me on this point.

We hear a lot about fiction's role in promoting knowledge and understanding, enlarging the imagination and expanding our capacity for empathy. Evidence for some of these claims is available and more can surely be found. But the relation between fiction and learning is massively complicated; we should not let our humanistic values drive us to a defensive posture every time it is suggested that knowledge from fiction might not be so easy to get, that we might sometimes end up with ignorance and error, that it's sometimes easier to have an illusion of knowing than it is to know, that the contours of the fiction/knowledge landscape can't be mapped from the philosopher's armchair. (Currie, 2020, p. 8.)

Already well before Currie's book, Nussbaum received strong criticism for not providing any real empirical evidence for her account of the moral value of literature (see, for example, Possner 1998). Similar critical remarks, I think, can also be extended to Saito's view on the aesthetic conditions of care ethics.

The analogy between Saito's aesthetics of care and the cognitive value of literature can be drawn even further. Empathy has its own role in Saito's view, particularly in her discussion of care in medical practices (2022, pp. 39–41), and literary reading, too, has been considered to improve our emphatic skills. This has also been the subject of considerable debate in the empirical study of literature and one paper defending the idea of literature as an important source of the expansion of empathy, David Kidd and Emanuele Castano's *Literary Reading Improves Theory of Mind* (2013), received global attention when it appeared.

Currie, however, has been quite sceptic towards the claim about literary reading's positive impact on our capacity for empathy. Referring to more recent studies that do not support Kidd and Castano's initial findings, he claims that it is too soon to make any definitive conclusions based on the available empirical research on the matter. According to Currie, some background assumptions also require much more scrutiny (Currie, 2020, p. 206). I believe that Saito needs to confront similar questions to those Currie addresses to claims on the emphatic value of literature.

One of Currie's critical remarks is well-known from other contexts; causality must be separated from correlation. Two things can occur simultaneously, but this does not yet show that there is a causal relationship between the two, in the sense that the other *causes*, *produces* or *initiates* the other. This, of course, was already the core of David Hume's infamous critique of causality.

The direction of the causal relationship is also not clear. For example, in the case of Saito's analysis, it could be that the ethics of care explains a particular type of aesthetic attitude and not the other way around. Similarly, literary reading does not necessarily explain the possible high level of empathy of avid readers, but the high level of empathy explains their interest in literature (Currie, 2014, p. 651). It is also possible that behind both care aesthetics and care ethics, there is some third factor, such as some type of general human civility, that explains them both. Be that as it may, from this perspective, the contributing role of the aesthetic in care ethics, nevertheless, needs to be better drawn out. This, however, seems to require at least supplementing

philosophical and theoretical insights with the findings of robust empirical inquiry, for example in the form of testing hypotheses with the sorts of experimental methods Currie (2020, p. 213) argues it is time for philosophers of literature to accept into their methodology. It is, of course, itself an interesting question what sort of empirical findings offer support for the claim of the positive cognitive impacts of literature, or, as in Saito's case, the care ethical potency of the aesthetic.

Currie, furthermore, argues that views, in which literary reading is said to improve our emphatic skills, include an understanding of empathy as an inexhaustible capacity that we cannot run out of. However, if empathy, after all, is not this type of boundless capacity, the claim of the positive impact of literary reading on our emphatic skills is put into a new light. This is because, if literary reading requires empathy, we consume our restricted emphatic skills while reading and do not, in fact, necessarily emerge from our reading moment as more emphatic people, but, at worst, quite the contrary. But could not aesthetics of care use up our care ethics similarly? Currie (2020, p. 212) also observes, more interestingly I think, that we tend to allow ourselves small vices after feeling particularly virtuous. From this observation, it again follows that virtuousness in the form of aesthetics of care does not necessarily lead to virtuous care outside of the initial aesthetic context. In general, Currie (2014, p. 651) feels that philosophers of literature should take the possibility that literary reading can give us a false sense of having improved as people, when nothing of the sort has in fact taken place, much more seriously. As he maintains in the above quotation, we might just have an illusion of having cognitively improved. Again, I see no reason why the sense of depth and attentiveness we have of our aesthetic habits could not give a false impression of how ethically careful we are.

One important weakness of Saito's aesthetics of care is that she underestimates the role of interest in fostering our care relationship towards things. She seems to approach care as a kind of general human capacity, which spreads over all aspects of a caring person's life; care in one area of life, such as the aesthetic, radiates to other areas, such as the ethical.

But is there truly this type of relationship between different areas of life? For example, the reason, why someone might be keen on mending his car seems to be that he is *interested* in cars, not that he just happens to channel his general care energy to cars, which could just as well find its expression in other areas of life. Similarly, caring for aesthetic objects can simply result from an *interest* in the aesthetic aspects of life, not that one happens to direct one's general care-like attentiveness to aesthetic matters. In this respect, the relationship between the care we exhibit in our aesthetic life and the care we exhibit in our ethical life does not seem to be that straightforward. It might, in fact, be as numerously complex as Currie believes the relationship between fiction and learning to be.

All in all, I believe that Saito's valuable points on the aesthetics of care would profit from being further considered in light of the kinds of worries Currie addresses to philosophers of literature – which I actually think are overly

sceptical, although that is a topic for a different paper. I agree with Saito that we tend to exhibit more care towards things we find aesthetically valuable, but her ultimate claim seems to be much stronger. The care we exhibit towards the things we find aesthetically valuable or that we find exhibiting care radiates into our life as a whole, and this I think still needs more support.

To be sure, there are other seemingly compelling ways of understanding the moral significance of the aesthetic than in terms of causally improving our moral capacities. For example, Nussbaum (1998, p. 355) has responded to the types of criticism to her view raised above that, rather than as initiators of causal chains, she believes literary works can serve as “examples” of the kinds of qualities and capacities that she thinks underpins “a finely aware and richly responsible” moral life. The ways in which readers adopt and absorb the moral visions or “senses of life” embodied in literary works into their own moral apparatuses is a more complex question than that of straightforward causality, but they can nevertheless have a genuine and significant role in such moral developments.

There seems to be an initial plausibility in this idea: I doubt that anybody would deny the importance of having epistemic exemplars in one’s life who can inspire us to develop our epistemic skills and virtues, and who can help us believe in more responsible ways, even if this relationship cannot be compressed into a simple causal relationship (Zagzebski, 2012). Rather than causality, another way to capture the relationship between care aesthetics and care ethics might be in terms of Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin’s notion of exemplification. On this account, care aesthetics might exemplify care ethics, and, like all exemplifying symbols and things, it could draw our attention to some important features of the object exemplified, i.e., care ethics in this case. Elgin writes on exemplification:

Exemplification is not just a device for underscoring salient features or supplying emphasis. It often highlights and affords epistemic access to features that were previously disregarded... It points up a feature, enabling us to mark out its contours and appreciate its significance. It equips us to recognize that feature when we encounter it in other contexts. Exemplification, then, is not just a vehicle for conveying salience; it is a source of salience. (Elgin, 2017, p. 186)

Similarly, the care aesthetic appreciation at best exhibits can alert us to some salient features of care ethics and, thereby, help us realize what it is about, as well as grasp its significance, even if the aesthetic in this case would not straightforwardly causally affect the capacities required in care ethics. If somebody wants to learn what care ethics is, we could draw her attention to the care aesthetic appreciation exemplifies.

I do not doubt that similar points can be found in the *Aesthetics of Care* – Saito (2022, p. 92), for example interestingly discusses the ways in which care can be expressed through objects. But at least to me, the core of Saito’s claim on the relationship between the aesthetics of care and care ethics could still be made sharper. I hope these small points will be beneficial to that end.

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