

Chrissie Rogers

Intellectual Disability and Being Human: A Care Ethics Model

New York: Routledge, 2016 (ISBN 978-0415664585)

Reviewed by Christine A. James, 2018

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Chrissie Rogers's *Intellectual Disability and Being Human* offers a unique combination of disability theory, care ethics, pop-culture references, and sociological insight. Combining these approaches is unique, and the task is enriched by Rogers's background in sociology and social theory combined with her knowledge of feminist philosophy. Rogers addresses some of the most significant areas of life related to care ethics, including education, mothering, and relationships. The text begins in chapter 2 with a response to Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach to disabilities, building on both the capability and care approaches to illustrate specific problems faced in the educational setting when educators and parents address intellectual disabilities. Rogers argues in chapter 3 that education professionals and students are often left without opportunities to reach their full potential as learners and leaders. The context of care and motherhood is addressed in chapter 4, with Rogers including sociology research on the interconnection between morality and humanity in mothering. In chapter 5, intimacy and a variety of relationships are discussed, as well as media representations of such relationships.

The research and reflection on the current literature for this text is outstanding. The discussion of Nussbaum's work is clearly written and contextualized with crisp relationships to the traditional philosophical concepts of human flourishing and rights (42ff.). Rogers addresses her own take on the care ethics model of disability, and it is very clear to the reader how Rogers will connect the social-justice approach to the individual- and personal-care approach (49). Rogers begins by addressing Nussbaum's argument that people who assume their lives are complete, and will never involve some need for care, are living with a fictional understanding of their own condition and a misunderstanding of the institutional structures that are required to create a good society (Nussbaum 2006, 127, cited on 49). Rogers continues in the next section of the chapter by discussing the care ethics perspective in three areas: the "emotional, practical, and socio-political spheres." This brings together the care ethics approach with the capabilities approach that Nussbaum introduced with her discussion of personal life conditions and institutional structures in 2006.

The chapters on education and mothering are both equally well grounded in academic literature, and include a number of references to pop culture and mass media that will connect the book to

broader audiences and students who are newer to the literature. Chapter 4 begins with an example from BBC Radio 4; chapter 5 includes a reference to a mockumentary series on BBC 4 by Ricky Gervais called *Derek* in which the main character (played by Gervais) is intellectually disabled (127). Such examples illustrate the challenges of dating and living a complete life with a fuller set of relationships than those normally presumed possible for the individual with disabilities, that is, maternal and familial relationships. Rogers builds this narrative by including similar pop-culture examples from *Forrest Gump*, *EastEnders*, and *Emmerdale*. In each example, Rogers notes that there is a good/evil binary that tends to be at play within disability narratives; the person with an intellectual disability is assumed to be in need of care, but is somehow believed to be beyond or above experiencing negative emotions like malice. The challenge, Rogers notes, is to avoid infantilizing or romanticizing such characters in a way that diminishes their legitimate emotional experiences.

At the end of each chapter, a set of goals with specific recommendations is given. For example, the goal of the fifth chapter is to "position intellectually disabled people at the center of an agenda where their bodies, lives, and desires to have friendships, sexual relations and intimacy are critically examined within a care ethics model of disability" (134). The pop-culture examples and the connection between an ethics of care and public policies like those centering on education, which Rogers provides, seek to position persons with intellectual disabilities at the center by acknowledging the full range of emotional and personal experiences and challenging institutions and public policies to provide space for the full range of experiences and human interactions to occur.

The text is well grounded in the literature, in theory, and in practical suggestions and connections to "real world" examples. Rogers provides a fine example of how feminist scholarship can address a range and variety of real women's lives and needs. However, it has to be noted that Rogers is trying to acknowledge many different approaches at the same time, and that such a task is challenging. For example, at the end of chapter 4, the recommendations in the concluding remarks are heartfelt but difficult to enact, and risk being considered inappropriate by some advocates of disability rights (110). The discussion here reinforces the importance of mothers and children--especially children with disabilities--being considered within a sociopolitical sphere of tolerance, humanity, caring, and care-full spaces. Even with Rogers's scrupulous attention, the negotiation of mother's needs and child's needs is an ongoing and difficult question. Rogers is right to say that ethical caregiving is "more nuanced than this" (111), and "care-full mothering indeed involves everyone" (111). The connections drawn to the work of Nel Noddings, Virginia Held, and Joan Tronto are very well placed in this chapter, but the ending is still problematic (Noddings 1984/2003; Tronto 1993; Held 1995; Noddings 1995; Held 2006; Nussbaum 2006; 2011). The point cannot be overstated that care-full mothering needs everyone, and that we have to be care-full not to overemphasize and overburden the mother in the context of care ethics; I wish Rogers had addressed this in more detail, as examined below.

The end of the chapter on education, chapter 3, provides somewhat more solid ground. Rogers argues that "social justice, relationality, care and ethics need to be considered" and that the "care-full moral environment" can be combined with the insights of Nussbaum's capabilities approach (84-85). Rogers makes this case well by relating it to specific research in sociology of education and gives detailed examples of children excluded from educational opportunities. Her arguments

for removing obstacles, sometimes called "barriers" in United States disabilities literature, are well formed and convincing. These obstacles and barriers are rooted in the combination of the personal and the institutional that Rogers and Nussbaum both address: cultural, socioeconomic, and political ways in which students are excluded within the educational context. Rogers specifically mentions media representations of disabilities that then affect how students are treated in school settings, both by teachers and fellow students. On the institutional level, we can also imagine support programs that see reductions in government funding, lack of teacher training, lack of personalized education program support in overburdened school districts, and so on. Rogers's argument acknowledges the problems at multiple levels.

The main difficulty in the care ethics approach to education that Rogers recommends is evident when Rogers notes (in transition to the next chapter on mothering):

It is time to apply a care ethics model of disability to education that includes all caring spheres, and all humans, but this cannot be done in a vacuum. Therefore it makes sense to look to the family, and mainly mothering, as I have identified already that domestic relations are key in working towards both a caring and a care-full education and a caring and care-full domestic environment. (85)

Looking to mothering can be a dangerous double edge. The major challenge in discussing care ethics has always been addressing the issue of "essentialism," the claim that the ethics of care, or the different ethical voice of women, has roots in essential biological or gender differences. This problem of essentialism leaves women as caregivers at the lower end of the hierarchy, treated unfairly, with their care work undervalued. Rogers does not mean to do so, but at this point the text can be misread. One wants to agree and to acknowledge the importance of mothers and their significant role in and out of the educational context, but we will still have to deal with the problems of essentialism and the effects of placing the caregiving mother in a position of disadvantage and misuse. It seems that this text begins to step beyond a reification of the old problems of the ethics of care, but it would take additional discussion of what Rogers means by "everyone" who must participate and play a role in the "care-full" spaces described in the educational and domestic spheres to fully take that step.

Overall I recommend Rogers's text and I applaud her unique and well-researched combination of ethics of care, capabilities approaches to disabilities, sociological theory, and pop-culture references. It is rare that a book combines such careful scholarship and clear writing with an eye toward practical knowledge and making a genuine difference in the everyday lived experience of real women.

References

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