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Book Review

Caring to Know: Comparative Care Ethics, Feminist Epistemology, and the Mahābhārata

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Caring to Know: Comparative Care Ethics, Feminist Epistemology, and the Mahābhārata
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Caring to Know argues that “caring is not the ‘other’ of reason and that our lived experiences of caring and being cared for can be useful resources for truth-seeking” (1). This claim is fleshed out over six chapters using a creative blend of analytical feminist theory, virtue theory of knowledge, and cross-cultural philosophy. The brief conclusion braids together different strands of the argument.

While laying out the groundwork in Chapter 1, Dalmiya allows the reader to study the toolbox she deploys to develop a “care-based epistemology.” This move is indeed ingenious, given the book’s ambitious project. In developing such an epistemology, *Caring to Know* uses salient insights of care ethics to think about how our “background relationality” impacts our knowing (45). In traversing this relatively underexplored trail, the reviewed book leans on an interpretation of a virtue theory of knowledge, which can fruitfully combine central arguments of care ethics with epistemology. In addition, the book embeds its explorations in a cross-cultural framework of the Indian epic Mahābhārata.

Dalmiya is not content with an understanding of caring, whose sole focus lies on reshaping morality. Rather, she prefers to use caring “to redefine reason and rationality at the same time that it attempts to reshape morality” (3). Why? “Care ethics and care epistemology are . . . joined at the hip” (3). Dalmiya’s care-based epistemology is premised on an understanding of a knower familiar to readers conversant with feminist scholarship. Conventional moral theories model their knowers as disembodied, abstract, and neutral reasoners who can arrive independently at the same transcendent, context-free, universal rules. In contrast, the knower of this care-based epistemology uses her experience of concrete situations to reflect on them, as well as to tease out ways of behaving appropriately in similar situations in the future.

To behave in a moral way, this knower is thus dependent on her own particular ways of being in, and knowing, the world. Importantly, as an embodied being, this knower finds herself placed within a particular web of relationships. Each relationship within this web is associated with certain needs. The knower/carer uses her own positionality in this web to deliberate upon, understand, and (ideally) fulfil these needs. The emotional responses, which she elicits, help her fine-tune her interrelation with other members in these relationships. Meanwhile, her own emotional responses to the concrete situation allow her to take up responsibility for needs met, and also for resulting omissions. Dalmiya promises to illustrate that precisely this way of intuiting a knower has the potential to help us better shape our own interpersonal encounters. Such a knower would, universally, attempt to minimize, if not avoid, oppression, exploitation, marginalization, and privilege in these encounters.

One could argue that Dalmiya’s specific modeling of such a knower already pushes the

book toward relational humility. After all, such a knower “soils” herself in “the messy world” of interpersonal relationships (7). Committing herself to being a carer in a particular relationship, the emotional demands associated with this relationship force her to be perceptive to the needs of the cared-for. To ably fulfill them, she cannot afford to posit herself as the neutral, sole, true knower of their interests. She must have her ear to the ground and be perceptive to their needs; some degree of communication with them is necessary. However, given that caring for multiple others could give rise to conflicting demands, the carer might have to work out compromises so that the needs of all the cared-for can indeed be met adequately. In other words: caring is an intellectually demanding task. As a process that stretches into time, it can, nevertheless, be honed through mindful practice (22). On both of these counts, the salience of the virtue of relational humility is easy to see. “Relational humility is the necessary condition of successful care,” Dalmiya notes, and arguably “the condition for successful inquiry as well” (26). If this is indeed the case, what value does the Mahābhārata add to this discussion? Why recur to a text steeped in Hindu tradition, myth, and social hierarchy, when the author herself concedes that “it was not interested in a feminist future” (133)?

Still today, the Mahābhārata captures the moral imagination of several thousands of people worldwide. Drawing on it, Dalmiya is able not only to embed her account. With a vivid description and creative interpretation of its parables and stories, she can also stabilize other ways of understanding interpersonal relationships. Moreover, weaving in tales from the Mahābhārata, she is able to usher in narratives that—despite the epic’s antiquity—may help us understand what it means to be a human being in today’s highly exploitative world.

Chapter 2, for example, confronts us with a relatively unbecoming scene featuring the Mahābhārata’s paragon of virtue, Yudhiṣṭhira (50). After having wagered his kingdom, his wealth, and himself to his cousins (the Kauravas) in a dice game, Yudhiṣṭhira pawns off his wife Draupadi. Dragged out and disrobed in front of the royal assembly, the menstruating Draupadi points out what could seem to be a mere technicality: Does someone like Yudhiṣṭhira, who has already forfeited the right to his own self, have any plausible claim on her anymore? Dalmiya reads into the thunderous silence that greets Draupadi’s outburst in the assembly some philosophically significant points. Draupadi draws the assembly’s, and the reader’s, attention to her own concrete situation on various levels: As a menstruating female, she should be secluded; as someone born into their common high caste, she should not be subjected to the humiliation meted out to her by him. Moreover, she is related to several people involved in the dice game, and these relationships should shield her from such inhuman treatment. But Dalmiya’s creative reading does not halt here.

She uses this story to draw attention to the imperfectability of care. Even a virtue paragon, like Yudhiṣṭhira, did become insensitive to the vulnerability of his dependents. In the stressful situation he finds himself in, he loses his own identity as a relational self, and with it his moral compass. He cannot adequately respond to the needs of his wife (52). Furthermore, the author brings to our notice how the Mahābhārata makes room for the alterity of Draupadi's voice in public. This menstruating and disrobed wife of the former king neither accepts her fate nor remains silent. She challenges her husband in the presence of a predominantly male audience. Her outrage, it seems, is mainly directed toward her husband, who has allowed himself to be catapulted out of his identity as a relational self, an identity that was fundamental to their spousal relationship. (In the course of the epic, Yudhiṣṭhira is able to regain the relational self he lost in this assembly.) In addition, Draupadi's ire is also directed toward the onlookers, many of whom are her relatives. By not intervening to end her humiliation, they too fail to act on their identity as relational selves.

Dalmiya carefully uses tales such as these to underscore the contextuality, ambiguity, and uncertainty of an ethical life. This life cannot be mastered with the help of predetermined, context-neutral, universal rules. Living a good life, rather, involves attending to and practicing the various dimensions of care: caring about someone one values, experiencing the attitudinal reorientation that ensues, taking care of this person within a broader social context, acknowledging the care given, and finally, developing a second-order caring about care. The reflexive moment of the latter stabilizes the attitudinal and volitional transformations brought about by care (66–74), ensuring that care does not collapse into self-abnegation. “Attention to the other does not flow from inattention to the self” (78). Arguably, this self-reflection, which is grounded in an interrelationality, guards against a paternalist appropriation of the cared-for as well.

Chapter 3 draws out various aspects of being a good epistemic knower. Given the book's care-epistemological project, Dalmiya unsurprisingly distances herself from rule- and faculty-based, as well as individualistic, conceptions of epistemic success. But how does she develop a “holistic way of articulating intellectual virtue” with a cross-cultural punch? Inspired by Linda Zagzebski's general framework of virtue epistemology, the author reads relevant passages of the Mahābhārata as sources that can help us make sense of virtue responsibility. Good epistemic practice depends on cultivating certain virtues.

While different narratives about a virtuous knower in the epic iterate that relational humility is an intellectual virtue, it is important to underscore the epic's specific understanding of this virtue. The Mahābhārata suggests that the narrow pursuit of truth may have to be abandoned when the situation demands it. How so? Dalmiya distinguishes between two ways in which the term *Dharma* (roughly: morality) is used in the text. The

“big-D Dharma” deals with general moral precepts and principles that are binding for all human beings. This Dharma also refers to the cosmic law, the telos of the universe. For its part, “small-d dharma” or “little-d dharma” specifies general instructions on how to behave in particular contextual roles (101, 58–59). Within the life span of individuals, moral specifications emanating from both Dharmas might clash. In such cases, a virtuous knower will strive to maintain the reign of “big-D Dharma” for one particular reason: by harmonizing several values, this Dharma attains cosmic balance.

Specific agents may be prone to not seeing the broader picture. They continue to clasp onto “little-d dharma.” Take Yudhiṣṭhira’s willful misinformation during the aforementioned battle, for example. To stave off further killing on the battlefield, the divine Kṛṣṇa instructed Yudhiṣṭhira to carry out a subterfuge. To get his opponent Droṇa to lay down his arms, Kṛṣṇa suggested that Yudhiṣṭhira simply proclaim that Aśvattāma was killed. The plan played on the deliberate confusion between Aśvattāma the elephant and Droṇa’s son of the same name. On the battlefield, Yudhiṣṭhira proceeded as agreed. However, faced with the prospect of giving up the moral norms encoded in his dharma for Dharma, Yudhiṣṭhira got cold feet. He clung to his dharma as an “inflexible rule-follower” (106) and muttered under his breath that the elephant Aśvattāma was dead. Believing that he had lost his son, Droṇa immediately laid down his arms. And yet, the epic berates Yudhiṣṭhira for choosing to deceive his cousin in order to maintain his own self-image as a truth-teller. He is said to have failed morally because he was unable to organize his beliefs within a “broader axiological horizon” (106–7). As a result, Yudhiṣṭhira, unlike other moral heroes, did not immediately enter heaven toward the end of his life on earth; he had to make up for this sin. Again, we see this virtue exemplar failing to grasp the relationality of his self, his own place in the larger world.

The episode illustrates a larger point too: Knowing *that* there is no direct relation between the possession of certain virtues and epistemic excellence may not necessarily suffice. One must also know *how* this excellence can be achieved. One way would be to increase the pool of possible knowledge sources across the social spectrum. The Mahābhārata helps us to understand this point through the story of someone who has “social capital” as a knower (109). Troubled by his own moral failing after having killed a harmless bird, the learned sage Kauśika sought out a Brahmin housewife and a butcher, both placed on the lower rungs of the social hierarchy. He learns from these “deviant” others that knowledge about life and larger metaphysical questions depends neither on social status nor solely on theoretical ruminations. It can also be gleaned from *knowing how* to lead a morally upright life, even if this life is led under relatively mundane circumstances. These interpersonal encounters initiate a “deep characterological transformation” (113) in the learned sage. Kauśika flips through several emotional registers, which first make him ascribe ignorance to himself. He then proceeds to carry out the necessary steps to

rectify this ignorance. This self-important Brahmin learns to give up his own “epistemic privilege” and become receptive to “cognitive Others,” who happen to be placed at the social margins (114). Motivated by his own awareness of his “positive ignorance,” he decenters himself while centering them within his cognitive orbit (115). With him, we realize that these moments “of self-receding and other-foregrounding” are “organically related” (119). He becomes a humble knower within this community of interdependent knowers.

Dalmiya rightly directs our attention to how a male knower like Kauśika is made to see the importance of maintaining knowledge communities such that knowers like him can continue in their truth-pursuing activities. We can now better grasp why intellectual virtues have a strong social dimension. Knowledge can only be accrued when the groups in which intellectual debates take place abide by moral practices. Epistemology and morality, as the author underscored at the outset, are joined at the hip. But how can relational humility be cultivated in a society “where knowledge itself is valued as power” (134)? Why should the epistemically privileged voluntarily relinquish their social capital in this regard?

Chapter 4 guides us through a thick tapestry of arguments that could provide an answer. Let me attempt to briefly give a sense of the main strands here. As we saw, Kauśika masterfully overcomes his own ignorance by boldly seeking out deviant sources of knowledge. However laudatory such individual attempts may be, they cannot immediately overturn systemic oppression. Several Kauśikas would be needed for this purpose. Note another difficulty: such individual attempts may not alter the social status of those involved at all. In the narrative, the housewife, the butcher, and the sage continue to inhabit their social roles, even though the latter claims to have been transformed by the encounter. Read through our own lens, Kauśika could be accused of cultural appropriation. He uses the subaltern Others to further his own narrow agenda. We catch up with him when he relinquishes his epistemic power; at the end of the process, this center of Brahmanical privilege has just increased his privilege through his forays into the margins. So, what would be the way forward?

Kauśika’s decision to learn from subalterns could be traced back to him becoming painfully aware of the contingency of the social fortune afforded by his caste and gender. Such a reflection on one’s own social status is “*materially grounded* and inflected by structures of privilege and oppression (144). Kauśika knows that he does not know something that he as a sage should have known. In addition to projecting others as possible knowers, this self-ascription also gestures to the possibility that his ignorance could be systemic. Current structures of knowledge production in his society prove to be inadequate for his purposes. His own epistemic privilege could simply have resulted from ingrained

patterns of attributing socioepistemic privilege. This realization, coupled with his intellectual humility, could bring the center of such a privilege to become unsteady and falter. This seems to be a fair point. But what vested interest would the dispossessed have in adopting the virtue of intellectual humility? Would it not threaten to increase their oppression when they give up their guard when encountering their oppressors?

Kauśika's shame motivates him to act. Having killed a harmless bird in a fit of anger, he perceives himself as falling short of his own ideals; a sage like him should simply not have given into rage. In attempting to curb his rage, Kauśika allows himself to be guided by another experience: feeling shame. He is overcome by the "pre-linguistic normative awareness" of the latter, which forces him to act (153). Although his own behavior (seeking out a housewife and butcher) may not necessarily find the approval of his Brahmanical society, it leads him to an "appreciation of differential privilege" (154). At least in his case, the experience of shame paves his way to relational humility. However, to learn from his subaltern Others, Kauśika has to equalize them; he has to place them on par with his own Brahmanical male self. When their interaction begins, he experiences "a mental shift towards impartiality" (160). His search for truth is not affected by the social status of his informants. This shifting could initiate a further shift in ensuring "conditions of justice," as the Mahābhārata highlights (160).

At this point in the discussion, Dalmiya opens our eyes to the possibility that shame could be triggered by experiences relative to one's social status. The dispossessed, for example, could feel shame after having become acutely aware of the injustice meted out to them (as in Draupadi's public humiliation). "Since complicity (if any) is allowing these injustices to continue, the resulting shame in such instances leads to articulating *resistance*" (162). Note, though, that privilege itself depends on the roles one inhabits. Just as a female white professor may be more socially dominant than a male bus driver of color depending on the situation in which they encounter each other, a Dalit professor in contemporary India could be more socially dominant than a Brahmin housewife with minimal education. "Margins are relative depending on where we plot the center," Dalmiya adds (162). In other words, social universes, which are drawn around centers of socioepistemic privilege, start to wobble when those placed at the center begin to practice relational humility. Notably, these universes have several such centers of privilege; they move with our perspective on them. Given this fluctuating state of affairs, it behooves moral agents to adopt the disposition of relational humility if they seek to minimize the degree of cruelty they inflict on others. One way to do so would be to allow for, and perhaps foster, articulations of resistance when they are voiced by those who perceive themselves as underprivileged.

Careful readers of this review would rightly anticipate that this insight cannot be inter-

preted as a universal rule. Rather, it is more of a kind of reasoning, or *yukti*, that would enable one to carefully appraise the complexities of a moral situation. This aligns with the epic's use of the concept of *dvaidha*, "which signifies an immersion in plurality and alternatives" (171). Just as a good doctor has all the possible symptoms in the back of his or her head when diagnosing a disease, a good epistemic knower would have an "ever-present simmering and clamouring background of alternatives" relevant to the appraisal of a (moral) situation (174). Single-dimensional (moral) rules, on the other hand, "lead the imaginative muscles of [our] moral sense" (*prajñā*) to stall and freeze since they are not designed for complexity (172). And yet, *dvaidha* does not necessarily lead to the desired result. Good moral decisions are like shots in the dark. Even if some of them woefully miss their mark, they can be helpful in honing our decision-making processes for the next round.

Chapter 5 then brews the right blend of caring and knowing. It seeks to increase the moral focus of our relationality so that "entrenched social biases" can be overcome. Simultaneously, however, it endeavors to curb the demands of relationality so that one is "not drained by the incessant cacophony of needs demanding to be met" (189). Readers should by now be well prepared to follow the moves involved in facing this demanding task. Relational humility is a "hybrid virtue," which slices through the distinctions of the epistemic, ethical, and political domains (187, 193). Kauśika, as we saw, is ready to give up his comfort zone, the small spot under the tree under which he meditates, and meet the housewife and butcher in their own respective spaces. This sage, whose main activity until then had been solitary meditation, bootstraps himself out of this solitude; he engages with "radical others" on their own turf and learns from them. Kauśika is able to overcome the "deeply prejudicial environments" of knowledge spaces in his society (195). But how can we learn to overcome our biases, "which masquerade as common sense or fact" (196)? Here the care-perspective is crucial.

We are involved in caring relationships, in which we care for others and are cared by them. Our own commitment to being caring people can allow us to step beyond the narrow confines of our own caring communities. Carried along by warm memories of being cared for, we feel for those unrelated Others whose needs are unmet or not sufficiently met. If we value ourselves as caring persons, we acquire and hone our disposition to relational humility in "concrete caring relations" (199). Good mothers, nevertheless, know that an excessive, and perhaps obsessive, attention to one's own children tends to smother their future development (even as future carers). Likewise, good caring agents will know that excessive attention to one's own caring community is counterproductive and can undermine functional relationships of care. In both cases, one must "go off the ego-line" (204).

Our discussion about receptivity in the Mahābhārata furthers the discussion here. The worry that this understanding of care could violate the fact-value distinction is unfounded. As the quote from Jonardon Ganeri vividly underscores, truth must be permitted “to run riot in the soul” (211). Clinically separating descriptive truth from normativity cannot but be an academic, armchair exercise, which, as Yudhiṣṭhira learned, is fraught with moral peril. This moral exemplar, as we saw above, failed the test of intellectual virtuosity precisely on this ground. By not grasping that truth spreads horizontally “across the various normative maps we employ in our lives,” he failed to practice truth (213). So far, so good. But how does Dalmiya attempt to reign in the draining effects of care?

Here, the political perspective becomes salient. Several modern liberal states tend to privatize care. By restricting it to domestic spaces, caring activity is in general removed from the public eye. In the process, it is rendered as being relatively insignificant. Yet, a moment’s contemplation on one’s daily life would indicate that there is a disconnect here. Care is a fundamental aspect of our lives. If we, as Dalmiya argues, carefully studied caring virtues, we would realize that these virtues are interwoven in the very moral fabric of our communities. She hopes that by “self-consciously wedd[ing] . . . feminist sensibilities” with the “radical *potential*” of the Mahābhārata, we can begin to conceive being a citizen in a wholly new way (224). We would then perceive ourselves and our co-citizens as also foreigners sharing in the same human vulnerability.

However, one worry voiced earlier remains: against the background of our current social practices, relational humility seems to be a good option mainly for those whom a society marks as being privileged. Practicing relational humility, these moral agents can make clear, even to their underprivileged counterparts, that they are indeed keen on shedding their own privilege. But despite the caveats offered above, adopting relational humility may be rash, even unwise, for those who continue to perceive themselves as oppressed. Dalmiya’s conception would counter this worry with the following observation: even the underprivileged would do well to practice this virtue for the reasons elucidated earlier. If, however, they in their encounters with the privileged, have reason to hold that “some griefs and memories of harm continue to haunt,” they could choose to opt out of such a relationship (79).

Chapter 6 continues braiding the book’s main argument by shedding light on two types of “care-knowing.” Although both relate to truth-seeking inquiry, care-knowing I results when caring is practiced as an epistemic skill, whereas care-knowing II ensues when knowing is guided by the caring disposition discussed earlier. To get a better grip on this distinction, Dalmiya reflects on the first form as a “virtue of mechanism” with which we relate to other minds, the second as a form that gives important clues about the world around us (124).

Let us consider how those at the center of epistemic privilege can possibly relate to marginalized others like paraplegics or women inhabiting different sociocultural backgrounds. A classic answer would be through empathy. This emotion would help us open ourselves up and transport ourselves into their world. Dalmiya cautions that imagination (i.e., placing ourselves in a marginalized person's shoes), albeit being a good way to start, could lead to a projection of the Other, which is starkly modeled on one's own self. As a result, the "*radical* otherness" of the empathized person could be erased in the process (245). One reason is that our social spaces are power encoded. How to proceed, then? Well-intended "formalistic mantras" of avoiding this short circuit seem to have very little "inductive success" (246). This is where care-knowing I steps in.

Through this caring practice, the carer/knower makes herself vulnerable in knowing the Other. She lays open her fumbling, her "dis-ease" (289), her discomfort in capturing the otherness of the Other. Through foregrounding her own vulnerability, she transforms herself from a "subject of knowledge to an object of curiosity" for the Other (249). Making a concerted attempt at this transparency signals to the other person that the carer is intent not to harm her. She can indeed be a trustworthy person in whom one could confide. The trust that ensues between them could put the carer in a better position to respond to the interests of the cared-for. In a further step, she can help to articulate these interests in the public sphere as demands and entitlements. Nevertheless, knowing others through such caring practice can easily slide into oppressive relations, as many carers intimately know. Ideally, this slippage can be halted when the carer harnesses her "virtue of mechanism" through her disposition to care (care-knowing II). This latter knowing, as we saw above, is motivated by relational humility. As a virtue that weaves in emotions (like shame) and democratic intuitions (like the equalizing we witnessed above), it is thus better positioned to guide epistemic practice. It has the potential to "enable micro-relations of respectful interchange" (277). Importantly, Dalmiya's care-knowing II not only hinders oppression in dyadic relationships. It holds the promise of reconfiguring our intellectual landscape by bringing into the fold new, or hitherto oppressed and/or erased conceptual schemes too. We learn to perceive them as potentially equal alternatives that merit our engaged scholarly attention and concern.

Caring to Know is a rich, multilayered book. It may warrant several revisitations so that its insights can come upon one like "cataplectic flashes" (169). Remarkably, the author places her own project, "comparative *feminist* philosophy" (and with it this book), largely within the constructive branch of comparative philosophy (296, 292). This branch focuses on common problems within different philosophical traditions and hopes to create a "more comprehensive third space" (296). Arguably, the book does try to carve out such a space.

Yet *Caring to Know* cannot be subsumed under the umbrella of conventional comparative philosophical approaches. Unlike other “giants of comparative philosophy,” this author does not content herself with merely “locating Sanskrit conceptual terms on the conceptual map of Western theories of knowledge and meta-epistemological debates” (98). In fact, the book’s methodological insights invite one to radically question and critique previous ways of doing comparative philosophy. It calls us to “engage with the messy issues of unjust privilege,” which play out in this discipline too (279). In this regard, it urges us to critically contemplate our own power-encoded spaces when we do (comparative) philosophy.

One upshot of the same would be that we can no longer pretend that we are able to capture the “essence” of “Eastern” and “Western” philosophical traditions. The development of such supposedly diametrical positions has itself resulted from sociohistorical contingencies. The book furthermore encourages us, as philosophers, to boldly engage with a radical philosophical “self-making,” which, among other things, will allow us to, when indicated, experience shame at the miserable track record of our discipline (289). As the book highlights on several occasions, academic Euroamerican philosophy as we know it today has, in general, used its social privilege to posit itself at the center of philosophical activity.

If these observations are plausible, the book demands of us as humble relational knowers to refrain from simple cultural juxtapositions. Not only are such exercises naively blind to the power politics played out in philosophy; they might also cause serious damage to those subjects whose lives are entangled with the other traditions we study. Our current landscape, even in comparative philosophy, is still dominated by a “hegemony in the production of theories where the non-Western can only serve as ‘objects’ of study in discursive systems originating from the West” (302). Humble relational knowers cannot be complicit in such practices. We must do everything in our ability, in concert with others, to get these centers of academic activity to wobble.