

The Silence of Our Mother

Eywa as the Voice of Feminine Care Ethics

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“If there is a hell, you might want to go there for some R&R after a tour on Pandora,” Colonel Miles Quaritch informs the new arrivals to Hell’s Gate. Yet Pandora reveals itself to Jake Sully as an enchanted world of wonder. Can Pandora be both a heaven and a hell?

Quaritch depicts Pandora as a living nightmare, a den of horrors where every conceivable danger lurks. Pointing toward the jungle, he warns the new arrivals: “Out there, beyond that fence, every living thing that crawls, flies, or squats in the mud wants to kill you and eat your eyes for jujubes.” To his mind, Pandora is a deadly arena with enemies at every turn. Not only does the planet harbor a race of hostile humanoids with natural endowments and fighting skills that make them “very hard to kill,” along with a dizzying assortment of other hostile life forms, but even the atmosphere itself is poisonous. To survive in such an environment, you must harden yourself, so you’ll be mentally prepared to do whatever it takes to stay alive. “You’re on Pandora, ladies and gentlemen,” Quaritch grimly reminds the new arrivals. “Respect that fact, every second of every day.” The upshot of his ominous “old school safety brief” is that a healthy dose of fear is an indispensable tool for survival in this pitiless place. Let down your guard and Pandora will “shit you out dead with zero warning.”

After listening to Quaritch’s description, we might be surprised to learn how very differently the Na’vi view their world. Of course, like Quaritch, they “respect” Pandora, but not as a powerful foe. They

know the perils of their environment every bit as well as Quaritch does, but fear doesn't define their relationship to their world. Above all, they revere Pandora – and Eywa, the deity who pervades and animates the planet – as a source of life, a nurturing mother, a provider, and a protector. Pandora, for them, is more than just an arena of deadly conflict. It's first and foremost a place of caring.

How Can You See, with Jujubes for Eyes?

That Quaritch and the Na'vi have such divergent views of the natural world may have something to do with the very different *social* worlds in which those worldviews were born. The militarized precinct of Hell's Gate epitomizes the conventional idea of a "man's world" – a place where your status depends on demonstrating courage, strength, and endurance in the face of adversity. It's a contentious world that is forever sorting its denizens into winners and losers. Jake's voiceover at the beginning of the movie nicely sums up the ethos of this place, at the same time as it lays bare his own fiercely competitive temperament: "I became a Marine for the hardship. To be hammered on the anvil of life. I told myself I could pass any test a man can pass." And the world that does the hammering is, according to this hardcore Marine, nothing short of "a cold ass bitch." Of course, to describe Hell's Gate as a "man's world" is not to deny that a tough gal like Trudy Chacón can more than measure up to its demands; but she's clearly in a minority. The military personnel on Pandora is overwhelmingly male. By contrast, the world of the Na'vi is much more feminine. Na'vi women are equal partners with their men and are just as capable as their male counterparts. And as the *tsahik* (spiritual leader) of the Omaticaya clan, Neytiri's mother Mo'at exercises an unrivalled degree of power and influence due to her ability to interpret the will of Eywa, the Na'vi's female deity. With their devotion to Eywa – their "Great Mother," who connects them to each other and to everything else on Pandora – the Na'vi embrace an ethic that is distinctly maternal.

Could differences in male and female temperaments give rise to different ethical outlooks? That was the thesis of psychologist Carol Gilligan in her 1982 book *In a Different Voice*, which has come to be regarded as a watershed in the history of thinking about gender issues.

Whereas men tend to view life as a contest in which individuals constantly attempt to advance themselves at each other's expense, women more typically view themselves as intimately tied to larger interpersonal networks sustained by relationships of care and intimacy. According to Gilligan, these two ways of situating ourselves in relation to the world have given rise to two distinct "voices," masculine and feminine, each of which is associated with a different approach to moral decision making.

The masculine voice puts a premium on *justice* – in particular, on protecting individual rights and on appealing to abstract rules in order to adjudicate conflicts. Principles of justice are important because they allow us to manage our conflicts without having to break out the poison-tipped arrows on a regular basis. We can define justice in many different ways, but in the modern world it has become common to think of justice as consisting in a set of rules or principles that aim to safeguard the rights and to balance the legitimate interests of all people, impartially. One of the most influential theories of justice is known as "contractualism," which likens the demands of justice to the terms of a contract that we have entered into with each other. We all give up our rights to do whatever we please, we agree to live under a set of rules that apply to everyone as free and equal individuals, and we receive the benefits of social cooperation and a guarantee that our rights will be protected just so long as we don't interfere with the rights of others.¹

The feminine voice, on the other hand, bears a remarkable resemblance to the voice of Eywa, since it focuses not on refereeing disputes, but rather on the *care* that sustains the web of concrete relationships in which people can flourish. "Our Great Mother does not take sides," Neytiri tells Jake. "She protects only the balance of life." We can think of these two voices as belonging, respectively, to the impartial judge and the caring mother. Gilligan argues that men tend to gravitate to the "justice perspective" and women to the "care perspective," though both genders are sufficiently versatile to approach questions of morality from either perspective.

The problem, according to Gilligan and many other feminist critics, is that almost all of the ethical theories that have dominated Western philosophy until quite recently have been one-sidedly masculine: they view conflict as the fundamental fact of society and morality as a way to manage our skirmishes and prevent them from getting too

destructive. In short, these “masculine” ethical theories express a view of society not unlike the view of Pandora expressed by Colonel Quaritch. Imagine a different sort of “old school safety brief,” one that someone like Quaritch might give not to new arrivals on Pandora, but to individuals on the threshold of adult life in the human world:

You’re not in diapers anymore, ladies and gentlemen. You’re in the adult world, where you’re just one among many individuals, all fighting to get ahead and prepared to eat your eyes for jujubes if you get in their way.

Truth be told, this isn’t a bad description of what we see of life on Earth in the opening sequence of the movie, before Jake leaves for Pandora. And in such a world, where “the strong prey on the weak” and interpersonal conflict is both inevitable and, as Jake’s brother Tommy discovered, sometimes deadly, a morality focused on rules that insure fair treatment for all has an obvious appeal. Fairness matters greatly to Jake, as we see when he brings his fists to the defense of a young woman who’s being bullied by a man in a bar. As Colonel Quaritch says: “You’ve got obey the rules.” In this case, though, it’s not “Pandora rules” but rather the rules of morality that offer us our only hope for survival in “the most hostile environment known to man” – the human social world! However, while conflict may be an undeniable fact of social life – as well as an ineliminable feature of the natural world on both Earth and Pandora, as Jake discovers in his very first outing beyond Hell’s Gate – this is by no means the whole story. Both the Na’vi and the terrestrial proponents of feminine “care ethics” help us see the bigger picture.

The Gifts of Our Mother

“Try to see the forest through her eyes,” Grace admonishes Jake. Through Neytiri’s eyes Jake will learn to see heaven on Pandora, while the belligerent Quaritch can never see anything but a hellish landscape of danger and strife. Neytiri’s more benign vision of Pandora comes into clear focus for Jake at a crucial moment during his training, when the two of them spy on a mother viperwolf playing affectionately with her pups. Previously known to Jake only as a vicious killer, his

onetime deadly foe is surprisingly revealed to be a tender caregiver. However, to peer into this corner of the viperwolves' world requires a stealthy approach. Jake and Neytiri must keep a respectful distance so as not to provoke another attack like the one Jake clumsily incited on his first night in the forest; for even the most tender caregiver can turn into a ferocious killer when the welfare of her children is at stake. That's a lesson that Quaritch learns all too well when his assault on Pandora unleashes the fury of Eywa. Quaritch lands on a planet full of life, diversity, and communion, but all he can see is conflict and opportunities for violence. What he never seems to realize is that the violence of Pandora, cruel and merciless though it may be, is in the service of something that his jujube eyes can never see – the tender care that Pandoran creatures extend to each other.

Despite the description that Jake offers early in the movie, Pandora is more than “just another hellhole” where mercenaries and miners do dirty jobs and get handsomely remunerated for their troubles – a world of “hired guns, taking the money, working for the company.” Beyond the grubby pursuit of self-interest at Hell's Gate lies another world of breathtaking beauty, where everything is deeply interconnected, each being living from energy that it “borrows” from others and that it is bound in due course to “give it back.” The metaphor of borrowing, which Neytiri uses to describe the connection between all living things on Pandora, may sound superficially like the same contractual tit for tat that governs the relationship between the Resources Development Administration (RDA) and its hired guns. That, at least, is an interpretation that fits with the justice perspective, with its focus on fairness and reciprocity. There is, however, a crucial difference between the Na'vi worldview and this contractual model. The Na'vi seem to regard the borrowed energy that nurtures and sustains their existence as a gift of Eywa, their Great Mother. And, ironically enough, the name human beings chose for the Na'vi's world is Pandora, a Greek name meaning “All-Gifts.” But the “sky people” seem to lack a full appreciation of the implications of that name, not recognizing that the proper response to a gift is not a jealous sense of entitlement but rather heartfelt gratitude, which is most genuinely expressed as a desire to give back.

Reflecting on mothers and their gifts brings us to the heart of the care perspective. Proponents of care ethics like to remind us that, long before we were in any position to demand justice, insist on our

rights, or enter into contracts, we were entirely dependent on the maternal care we received from our mothers or other primary caregivers. As vital to our existence as their relationship with Eywa is to the Na'vi, these caring relationships are not about satisfying the terms of some contract or ensuring that neither party encroaches on the rights of the other. Instead, the hallmark of the caring relationship between a child and her caregiver is the profound bond between two hearts – like *tsaheylu*, but without neural queues – an emotional attachment that makes the parent especially sensitive to her child's needs. Nor is it a freely chosen relationship between equals who have calculated the costs and benefits of cooperation. As the parent opens her heart to the child, she realizes that she can't detach herself from this relationship without damaging her very identity and her integrity as a person. Moreover, she recognizes that being the stronger party in the relationship doesn't necessarily give her the upper hand. It's the needs of her child, the more vulnerable party, that dictate what she must do.

If not for these unchosen bonds of care, the sort of relationships that the justice perspective believes lie at the heart of morality couldn't even get off the ground. Consider Quaritch, who has spent his entire adult life wrangling with powerful opponents and coming out on top through his own ingenuity and strength. Hard as it is to imagine, even this stalwart warrior began life – to quote William Shakespeare (1564–1616) – “mewling and puking in the nurse's arms,” only much later becoming “jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel, seeking the bubble reputation, even in the cannon's mouth.” Had he survived his final smackdown with Jake, Quaritch might have eventually found himself once again in a state of utter dependency, a physically frail old man, “sans teeth, sans eyes, sans everything.”² Of course, Quaritch might put it differently. In his own poetic voice, he might say that he entered this world a “Shavetail Louie” and that in the course of time this world will “shit him out dead.” But the point is the same: those self-sufficient individuals whom the justice perspective imagines us to be represent at best only one stage of our lives, which is wedged between long periods of dependency. Perhaps Quaritch's contract with the RDA includes provisions for his geriatric care, but the care he received as an infant was presumably not given to satisfy the terms of a contract. If it was like the care most of us received, it was a gift of love.

It's easy for adult men like Quaritch to forget their dependence on the care of others, which may in turn cause them to imagine social reality to be much more conflictual than it really is. As Carol Gilligan observes, "women perceive and construe social reality differently than men."³

Since the reality of connection is experienced by women as given rather than freely contracted, they arrive at an understanding of life that reflects the limits of autonomy and control. As a result women's development delineates the path not only to a less violent life but also to a maturity realized by interdependence and care.⁴

Historically, women are the ones who have had the most intimate experience of care, since they have traditionally been the ones tasked with providing it for children, the sick, the disabled, and the elderly. If the justice perspective was born of the experience of men in the rough and tumble world of "territorial threat displays," where you better "keep your head on a swivel" and keep an eye out for hostiles at every pass, the care perspective reflects an experience of the world much more familiar to women, where nurturing and responsive care, rather than disputatious jousting, are the anchors of daily life.

The Work of Our Mother

Reflecting on how philosophers have traditionally thought about ethics, feminist philosopher Nel Noddings tells us: "One might say that ethics has been discussed largely in the language of the father: in principles and propositions, in terms such as justification, fairness, and justice. The mother's voice has been silent."⁵ The Na'vi, though, can hear their mother's voice and so seek to emulate her practice of caring.

The philosopher Sara Ruddick (1935–2011), one of the pioneers of care ethics, identified three activities at the core of what she calls "maternal work": preserving the life of the child, fostering the growth of the child, and training the child for social acceptability.⁶ When Neytiri undertakes the work of teaching Jake the ways of the Na'vi and imparting the skills he needs to both survive and flourish in the environment of Pandora, she's engaging in this very same sort of

“maternal work” – a fact that’s underscored by her initial characterization of him as “like a child.” And, according to Ruddick, this practice of mothering is of singular importance not only because it answers to the vital needs of the child – and childlike adults, such as Jake – but also because it cultivates certain valuable moral and intellectual qualities. In particular, the mother must develop a sensitivity and responsiveness to the “nature” of the child, for “children are nothing before they are natural, and their growing is a work of nature. When children thrive, it is nature that thrives.”⁷ And, through her loving attention to the nature present in the child, the mother may come to acquire an appreciation of nature in general that allows her to see it as something much more than a menacing arena of conflict. As Ruddick explains:

The settled antagonism of treating “nature” as an enemy is at odds with the engaged, sometimes adversarial, but fundamentally respectful relation to “nature” characteristic of preservative love, even more with the “natural” beneficence underlying growth.⁸

The preservative love that informs maternal work involves taking what is given by nature, safeguarding it, and helping it to realize its full natural potential. For the Na’vi, to engage in the work of nurture and care is to participate in the work of Eywa in her unending effort to sustain the conditions under which her children can flourish.

Nel Noddings is a philosopher who has drawn from the maternal perspective to develop another influential account of caregiving, which highlights the caregiver’s need for what she calls “engrossment” and “motivational displacement.” We are “engrossed” in the “cared-for” to the extent we’re able to occupy her perspective, which requires “stepping out of our own frame of reference and into the other’s.”⁹ As the Na’vi would say, we must truly “see” the other, for recognizing her needs is an indispensable precondition of caring for her properly. Then we can give ourselves over to “motivational displacement,” in which we are motivated by the needs of the other rather than merely by our own desires. Such empathetic engagement with other beings, including other species, seems to be the hallmark of the Na’vi way of being in the world. Consider a Na’vi who seeks to ride an ikran (mountain banshee): if she approaches the ikran simply as an object to bend to her will, she’ll never be able to make the bond. When the ikran seeks to “kill” her, she will fail to recognize it as an act of “choosing,”

interpreting it instead as an aggressive provocation and an invitation to respond in kind. Making the bond with an ikran requires an intricate dance, in which one must accurately interpret the nature and the needs of the ikran in order for the partnership to be formed. Even before *tsaheylu* is consummated, the Na'vi must be able to occupy the perspective of the other.

And, just like the *tsaheylu*, the caring relationship between two human beings involves more than just an intellectual grasp of the other's situation. It requires emotional engagement. Philosopher Annette Baier (1929–2012) has pointed out one reason why care ethics puts such a premium on emotions:

It might be important for a father figure to have total control of their violent urges to beat to death the children whose actions enrage them, but more than control of such nasty emotions seems needed in the mother or primary parent, or parent-substitute, by most psychological theories. They need to love their children, not just control their emotions.¹⁰

Love provides the motivation for caring. But emotions are also important to the care perspective because they sometimes allow us to grasp aspects of a situation that may not be available from a justice perspective.

Caring is complex and messy. There's no simple, one-size-fits-all formula that will tell us how to care, since genuine caring requires sensitivity to the needs of particular individuals as they arise in highly specific situations. This may be one of the reasons why philosophers have often preferred the clear-cut, impersonal rules of the justice perspective, where abstract, formal reasoning dictates what's right and wrong, without any messy complications or emotions. According to Noddings, "ethical argumentation has frequently proceeded as if it were governed by the logical necessity characteristic of geometry."¹¹ And many philosophers have argued that that's how it should be, since sentimental biases can so often cloud our ability to act rationally and to make truly responsible ethical decisions.

Consider the destruction of Hometree. Parker Selfridge did the math, concluded that his obligation to the stockholders was more important than the lodging preferences of "the blue monkeys," and made his decision, confident that he was doing the right thing. His inability to empathize with the Na'vi and to understand the world

from their perspective (“We try to give them medicine, education, roads. But, no, no, no, they like mud!”) leaves him unable to see their attachment to Hometree as anything other than irrational intransigence. According to his own “rational” calculations, taking the lives of a certain number of intransigent Na’vi is an acceptable price for getting the surviving Na’vi to move. Of course, later, as flames engulf Hometree, Selfridge looks on with an expression that suggests that even he is affected by the horror of what he had done. But we can imagine a truly hard case like Quaritch dismissing that emotional reaction as mere sentimentality that clouds one’s judgment and softens the resolve to do what must be done.

In contrast, consider Neytiri, who feels the awful weight of her action when she’s forced to kill the viperwolves who are attacking Jake, recognizing that what she must do is a serious harm to both herself and her world. That’s because the maternal perspective of the Na’vi enables her to see much more than the “sky people” can. When she looks at Jake’s fierce attackers, what she “sees” is not just the mortal threat they pose to Jake, but mothers, pups, and their own struggle for survival. When she slays them, she mourns for them and the families they leave behind. This “engrossment” and “motivational displacement” is bound up with a distinctive perspective, one that becomes more and more accessible to Jake as his own motivations and attitudes begin to mirror those of the Na’vi and as he comes to appreciate the perspective of the mother.

Mother Takes Sides

Emphasizing the maternal origins of care ethics doesn’t mean that men aren’t capable of caring. Neytiri’s father, Eytukan, clearly cares deeply for his people, with an attentiveness and concern not unlike the feelings of a mother for her children. Nor should we suppose that care ethics has no room for justice. Most care ethicists recognize that both the father’s voice and the mother’s voice must be included in a full account of our moral responsibilities. As Baier observes, “there is little disagreement that justice is a social value of very great importance, and injustice an evil.”¹² Moreover, most care ethicists acknowledge the inevitability of conflict in a world where the interests of everyone don’t necessarily coincide. On a planet where “the strong prey on the

weak,” there will be a place for masculine warrior virtues of the sort Quaritch exemplifies – such as physical courage, strength, endurance, and pride – alongside the maternal caring ones. Caring might require mounting your ikran, grabbing your quiver of poisoned arrows, and going into battle to protect those you care about. For this reason, warriors like Jake and Tsu'tey have an honored place within Na'vi society. Neytiri is also an excellent warrior. And so, for that matter, is Eywa.

Before leading the battle against the “sky people,” Jake pleads with Eywa: “See the world we come from. There’s no green there. They killed their mother, and they’re gonna do the same here. ... I will stand and fight. You know I will. But I need a little help here.” It’s at this point that Neytiri speaks the words that we quoted earlier, about how Eywa is a nurturer, not an adjudicator of conflicts: “Our Great Mother does not take sides, Jake. She protects only the balance of life.” Yet Neytiri is not entirely right. Like any good mother, Eywa bestows her care on all her offspring equally, remaining impartial when disputes arise between them; but, when the very survival of that caring relationship is imperiled, she can’t remain on the sidelines. As Noddings writes: “The one-caring has one great aim: to preserve and enhance caring in herself and in those with whom she comes in contact.”¹³ When the intricate web of relationships that comprises life on Pandora is under assault, protecting the balance of life means taking sides and joining the fight.

“All I ever wanted in my sorry-ass life was a single thing worth fighting for,” reports Jake in his opening voiceover. In the end, he found what he was looking for in Eywa. Jake has learned that the masculine perspective of the warrior is incomplete, that it needs the feminine ethic of caring to give a worthy meaning and purpose to the fight. Without that care perspective, the world can easily devolve into a living hell.

Notes

1. For more on contract as a basis for ethics and on the communitarian alternative, see Chapter 14 by Dale Murray.
2. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII, lines 44, 51–53, and 66.
3. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 171.

4. Ibid., 172.
5. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 1.
6. Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 17.
7. Ibid., 77.
8. Ibid., 115.
9. Noddings, *Caring*, 24.
10. Annette Baier, "The Need for More Than Justice," in her *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 30–31.
11. Noddings, *Caring*, 1.
12. Baier, "Need for More Than Justice," 19.
13. Noddings, *Caring*, 172.