

Honorary doctorate speech for Joan Tronto
University of Humanistic Studies
29th January 2014
by prof.dr Carlo Leget

Dear Professor Tronto, dear Joan,

“The world will look different if we move care from its current peripheral location to a place near the center of human life. As we transform current moral boundaries to focus on an integral concept of care we will also need to alter other central aspects of moral and political theory. We will need to rethink our conceptions of human nature to shift from the dilemma of autonomy or dependency to a more sophisticated sense of human interdependence. Furthermore, we will recognize how our current moral and political theories work to preserve inequalities of power and privilege, and to degrade ‘others’ who currently do the caring work in our society.” (Tronto 1993, 101)

Anyone familiar with your work will immediately recognize these words as a famous passage in your book *Moral Boundaries* which was published in 1993. This passage has been quoted by many scholars ever since, and they capture much of what you have tried to achieve in the twenty years following this seminal book.

Your work has been a great inspiration to many scholars of various disciplines in a large number of countries who convene under the umbrella of ‘ethics of care’, and if there are any striking similarities between the ethics of care and the University of Humanistic Studies, one of them undoubtedly is the combination of a modest position in relation to mainstream science and a not-so-modest ambition to contribute to a more just and humane society in which every human being can flourish and enjoy a meaningful life.

Your acceptance to receive an honorary doctorate from this university which celebrates its 25th anniversary gives us the opportunity to commemorate the reasons why we are so grateful for what you have given us. I would like to mention three of these reasons and elaborate a little on them.

1. In the first place, you have provided a major contribution to the development of the ethics of care, the interdisciplinary approach that is the subject of a unique Master studies at this university. The ethics of care was born out of the critical observation by Carol Gilligan that girls structurally scored lower than boys in psychological tests which were based on Lawrence Kohlberg’s theory about the moral development of children. Analysing these lower scores, Gilligan discovered ‘a different voice’, an alternative to the mainstream approach to ethics, in which a caring approach could be discerned. Gilligan’s book was followed by what has become known as the ‘justice *versus* care’ debate in the 1980’s, that was framed in terms of gender issues. It has been your great merit to transform that debate by pointing out the misguided presuppositions that united both sides of the discussion. Working from (originally: feminist) political theory as your first discipline, you reframed questions, bringing the political dimension of care to our attention. That political dimension of care has become one of the major critical insights the ethics of care has been able to offer to the world ever since. The famous definition of care you developed together with Berenice Fischer, and the four (and later five) phases of care that are central to your work have become central to the body of knowledge of the ethics of care. That automatically brings me to my next point.

2. Your way of working is an excellent example of academic life at its best: not a competitive and dehumanizing self-centred industry of knowledge and careers, but an issue driven and humanizing contribution to the problems of real people in society that are often invisible or silenced. The texts you have written show how a critical rethinking and a rigorous analysis of society, can change the way we look at the world. And more than that: you are also an advocate for people who are marginalized along the lines of gender, class and race by market forces that misallocate caring responsibilities. You stand on the barricades for gay and lesbian rights. You actively contribute to making the world a more caring place, and making caring more just. Reading your work one witnesses the creative process of reconceptualising what we thought we understood so far about care. One of the great merits of your work consists of inspiring debates, and inviting us to think beyond traditional boundaries, not closing them. In the preparation of this festive event we have collaborated with scholars from different European countries in order to make a gift for you in the form of a book: *Moral Boundaries Redrawn*, a reflection on the debate that has been going on for the past 20 years about your seminal work, and which will be presented to you tomorrow. In this book, to which you contributed yourself, you give us insight into what inspired your thinking, how it has developed into the work *Caring democracy* that appeared last year, and what is needed for the future. *Moral boundaries redrawn* is a great testimony of how you consider yourself to be one voice among many in an ongoing critical debate that we are happy to continue during the conference tomorrow.

3. In the third place, you have proven to be a fruitful and inspiring thinker and teacher of scholars from a wide range of disciplines. Your work has been well received both in Europe and the United States – in the book just mentioned you give insightful descriptions of this reception – and speaking of Europe, it is telling that 17 out of 24 leading colleagues interviewed for our website EthicsofCare.org mention your work as the most important must-read. These colleagues come from different disciplines, but what unites them is heavily inspired by the way you conceptualise care as a practice that is a decisive element in a humane world. You are also a great teacher, and at this university – thanks to the visionary initiative of Henk Manschot who invited you – we were lucky to have had you as a visiting professor in 1994, and you have returned to Europe many times afterwards. Often after your work had been translated – into French or Italian for example – you crossed the Atlantic again to think along with us and engage in a critical dialogue. I think it is just to say that your early work and the way you collaborated with many Dutch colleagues twenty years ago has helped to introduce and develop the ethics of care in The Netherlands in its early stages. We are both proud and happy to have a unique Master in Ethics of Care and Policy at this university, and this honorary doctorate that you will receive today is also an expression of what you have meant for this university in this respect.

People do not receive honorary doctorates just for being a kind and humane person. Nevertheless, you must forgive me for not saying a few words about your personality. One of the boundaries that are redrawn in your milestone book is that between the public and the private sphere. The way you are present in public – accessible, open, positively contributing and stimulating – is a living testimony of one of the ways in which this boundary can be redrawn, to the benefit of all those who wish to participate

in intellectual debates. I hope that we will be enjoying your kind and magnanimous presence again during the following two days of working together and in many years to come.

Carlo Leget, Utrecht, 29 January 2014