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The Ethics of Care: Valuing or Essentialising Women's Work?

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Abstract A major theme of ethics, introduced by feminist philosophers in the 1980s, concerns the role of care in human life. While the importance of care has historically been neglected by philosophy, some argue that it should be placed at the centre of our ethical systems and understood as a locus of distinctive virtues that have been wrongly devalued as feminine. Whether caring reflects a characteristically feminine set of virtues has been a source of controversy, with some arguing that women have different ethical approaches from men, while others argue this has no basis in an essential sexual or gender difference. Despite these important questions, it is valuable to explore what an ethics looks like that places central importance on relations of care.

Keywords Ethics of care · Care work · Feminist ethics

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The Issue: Care as a Feminist Concern

In the great books of the moral tradition of Western philosophy, relations of care do not occupy much of a place. The pursuit of happiness—whether in Aristotle’s elevated sense of the happiness [*eudaimonia*] of the good life, or in the more modern utilitarian sense of the maximisation of pleasure and the minimisation of pain—owes much to a world in which caring offers love, tends to the vulnerabilities of the body, or provides, on a daily basis, food, clean clothing, shelter. Yet these elements of care in life, if noted at all, have not been attributed importance by philosophers, nor seen as aspects of the virtues or moral value of the carers who give them. Such labours, rather, form an invisible backdrop to properly ethical life.

When the ‘great’ moral philosophers (all male) have spoken of duties, of virtues, of rights and of justice, they seem to have had in mind the peculiar aptness of the masculine subject to fulfil their demands, masculinity being characterised by autonomy, invulnerability and self-reliance. Almost without exception, they neglect the virtues associated with women, often by treating caring roles as lives consigned to meaningless and menial activity. Despite being essential to daily life, the activities arising from responding to human need and vulnerabilities are treated as signs of limited capacities.

We find then, from Aristotle to Kant and beyond, a persistent trivialisation of women through their association with children or with the private world of merely family concerns, by contrast with the public world for which men’s natures are supposed to fit them. In these not so subtle ways, women’s subordination has been naturalised, and justified by reference to a staggering presumption that the provision of care marks its giver as inferior.

These philosophical themes are not mere historical curiosities. Although women’s representation in fields traditionally dominated by men has been growing, care work remains an area that poses many unresolved issues. In the provision of care for children, the disabled, the sick and the elderly, women perform the majority of the labour, paid and unpaid. The rise of neo-liberalism since the 1980s has seen both a new recognition of women’s paid labour as being of essential importance to

the economy and the dismantling and privatisation of public services, with disproportionate effects on women's lives as carers. While some efforts have been made to quantify the value of care in monetary terms, or to include unpaid labour in economic measures such as GDP, other forms of recognition afforded to the human value of care seem essential if we are to register its massive significance in all our lives, both as givers and receivers of its generosity. Too often such work only becomes visible when it is lacking, and scandal erupts; for instance, over the care of the elderly in nursing homes, whose staff may neglect or even abuse residents, while being placed under intense pressure to maximise the profitability of such businesses. Relations of care, it seems, are neither adequately recognised in the paradigms of monetised economic life and the jargon of market value, nor in our inherited traditions of contemplating the values and virtues that make for a truly human life.

Where does this leave us? On the one hand, we may wish to recognise the value of women's work as carers, work that many women profoundly associate with their identities; yet on the other hand, we may also wish to resist the gendered distribution of labour which has undervalued such work, exempted men from its tasks and placed women in positions of systemic social and political subordination as a consequence. Feminist debate around such questions has been intense. If we valorise care, what social revolutions might ensue? How might our thinking change on a vast range of issues from security, to environmental sustainability, citizenship or human well-being, if we adequately recognised the significance of care? On the other hand, does this not risk associating women with the sphere of caring work in which they have indeed been consigned to narrower lives than those available to men? To overcome the subordination of caring activity, must we not end its naturalised historical association with women?

Feminist Interventions

As noted, women have historically been associated with caring for others, whether children, the sick or the elderly. In the 1980s an attempt was made to valorise women's perspective on caring relationships, in the

context of an emerging critique of the over-valorisation of men's perspectives on ethical questions. In particular, Carol Gilligan offered influential criticism of the hierarchy of moral perspectives, described as 'developmental stages' by American educational psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg. Kohlberg placed capacity for moral judgement based on universal principles at the top of a scale of moral development and found that boys were more likely than girls to 'attain' such powers of reasoning. Gilligan questioned whether the more empathetic and contextualised approach the girls brought to moral reasoning, their emphasis on relationships and unwillingness to adopt a more abstract approach to rights and justice, meant an inferior place in the scale of moral development. She suggested it was the mark of a different moral understanding rather than a moral deficiency, and titled her landmark 1982 book *In a Different Voice*. On the basis of her own research interviews with women, she introduced an influential distinction between the ethic of care, which she found to be predominantly female, and an ethic of justice, which she found to be predominantly male.

Gilligan's questions inspired feminist philosophers to develop accounts of the ethical sphere which argued for the centrality of caring work and of fundamental human relations such as mothering, to sustaining fundamental social and moral capacities. The almost total neglect of such aspects of life in mainstream ethics made this body of work a major innovation. In 1986, for instance, moral philosopher Nel Noddings provided a theory of care that challenged a wide range of moral theories by identifying relationships as basic to human identity and care as a universal human attribute. Caring is characterised as a particularised relation, in the primary instance between two humans, that perceives and attends to the needs of another, and acts in response. It is clear that mothering is a paradigmatic instance of care, and reveals caring's often asymmetric nature, which distinguishes it fundamentally from the mutually interested contractual models of reciprocity that many modern traditions of ethics invoke. Caring explicitly avoids the abstract, impartial, impersonal reasoning of the deontologist, the utilitarian or the justice theorist. It involves a consideration of the perspective and interests of the other, and thus rational reflection, not simply reaction to perceived need; however, emotional connection and feeling for the other is intrinsic to it in a way

that few traditional ethical theories even begin to conceptualise. As Joan Tronto argues, care ethics implies that practices, not just principles, are constitutive of morality, and a 'thick' interpersonal and contextual form of attentive concern shapes care, that is poorly captured in 'thin' abstract reasoning.

This 'ethics of care' approach extends beyond one-to-one relations and has led to calls for a more compassionate basis to ethics and politics, as for instance in Virginia Held's work. Others such as Diemut Bubeck have suggested that the activity of care, rather than military service, should be a defining characteristic of citizenship. Some argue the idea of care as ethical may be capable of guiding not only private conduct, but human interaction in general. Yet although this suggests that caring might become the basis of a new universal moral philosophy, the association of caring with women, and more narrowly with an idealised maternity, risks positioning care as a limited form of ethics belonging to a world far removed from the 'tough' decisions taken in public, legal and corporate spheres. Moreover, 'the ethics of care' has been criticised as entrenching an association of women with care work, essentialising a feminine identity that is in many respects derived from unfair gender relations. The 'ideology' of mothering, for instance, places the burden of care work on women, then justifies it in terms of it being 'women's nature' to care.

Many have questioned Gilligan's finding that there are distinct 'styles' of moral reasoning that fall along simple binary gender lines, and to the extent that there are discernible differences, have queried what role oppressive socialisation has played in their fabrication. Yet Gilligan's research provided an impetus for considering what an ethics might look like that derived from what have clearly been a profoundly neglected set of relations, the ones that women have often been seen as closest to, and the ones that philosophy, political and economic theory have therefore egregiously ignored. Despite the force of concerns about enacting a form of stereotyping by attending to women's differences on these questions, this is not the end of the story for the potential rethinking that might be guided by an ethic of care, given the importance of caring work, and its continuing undervaluation in ethical, economic and political discourse.

Impact

It is increasingly implausible to see caring work and other intimate labour as anything other than providing vitally important relationships that structure and intersect all aspects of the public sphere. The confident presumption that care will be given often reflects a level of status and wealth that makes the benefits provided by care invisible, since they can be taken for granted as that which someone will provide. Conversely, poverty, social exclusion and race all entwine with a lack of available care. When poor migrant women of colour leave their own families behind in low-income countries, and are paid pittance wages to provide the care needed to support the economic productivity of men and women in affluent countries, this issue takes on a stark form for feminism. Some argue that this pattern of redistribution of monetised care calls into question feminist compromises with neo-liberalism (as Nancy Fraser has notably described). These substitute carers must both relinquish their own sphere of intimacy and occupy low-paid jobs as insecure workers with few rights in the country that hosts them. They too often are considered as dispensable labour, their work readily replaced. Curiously, such care work is rendered 'faceless' by its inscription in a global economy of exchange and loses essential human aspects that the ethic of care seeks to cherish.

Can 'caring work' instead become a paradigm for the public sphere and a defining element of a form of citizenship which pays attention to the emotional ties that bind us, and the faces that come to matter to us through intimate connections built around human vulnerability and need? How might its values shape sustainability, security or well-being? Judith Butler's work on the theme of 'precarious life' takes up something of this challenge, arguing that vulnerability is at once what most deeply connects us and yet that which global politics distributes most unevenly across populations. States make decisions about the nature, quality and distribution of care, not only for their own citizens, but for those in other places. Fiona Robinson argues that our view of human security would fundamentally change if we recognised not just how insecurity is presently distributed by states, but how responsibilities and relations of care grow out of global interdependencies.

Concepts such as that of corporate social responsibility have also been linked to an ethics of care by Robinson. This approach recognises the transnational nature of corporate partnerships, and thus the limited capacity of legal systems to regulate them, but nonetheless demands their accountability for caring about the social and natural environment they operate in, together with their economic and social impact. Robinson shows how moral arguments springing from the ethics of care can be used against structural violence, proposing that the contextualised focus that care brings can capture certain types of harm more easily than other theories. A strong ecofeminist tradition further tries to think about responsibilities to the environment through the lens of an ethic of care. Unlike many conventional moral theories, this enables us to recognise non-human needs and rich spheres of interdependency, including our own utter dependency on an environment that our exploitative practices are failing to nurture in return.

In an era when women's participation in the labour force has left large areas of unpaid care work in crisis, what can an ethics of care help us to recognise and value? Swedish gender equality policy leads the world in focussing on the importance of a more even distribution of care between men and women and in supporting moves towards a society when men share equally in caring activity in the home. There is currently some sign of progress in taking up these issues as public policy matters, and significant scholarship has been devoted to them in recent times. As we enter a new era of profound environmental crisis and intensifying global insecurities, it can only be hoped that some of the attention women have been expected to give to caring relations, is carried over into long overdue reconsideration of the nature and needs of the worlds in which we live.

Key Readings

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