

The Analysis of Practice of Care in the Public Sphere: A Perspective on Virginia Held's Ethics of Care

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Abstract: *Ethics of care, an ethical theory that emphasizes interpersonal relationships, emotions, and moral responsibility, is gaining increasing attention in the modern public sphere. Virginia Held advocates extending care beyond personal interactions to the public domain. Practicing care in the public sphere allows for a shift away from the utilitarian principle of "greatest good" or the rigid rationality of deontological ethics. Instead, it focuses on individuals' emotional needs, vulnerabilities, and social relationships. This approach not only elevates the moral dimension of policies but also enhances their inclusiveness towards people, society, and nature.*

Keywords: *Ethics of care; Virginia Held; Community*

1. Introduction

Virginia Held is one of the most prominent contemporary Western thinkers in the field of ethics of care. Held criticizes traditional moral philosophical theories for being detached from reality and neglecting interpersonal relationships. Drawing on the fundamental life experience that every individual survives through care at the beginning of life, she further enriches and refines the concept of "care," viewing it as both a practice and a value. Held emphasizes the moral significance of "caring relationships" and "responding to needs" as essential preconditions for the survival of individuals, the proper functioning of society, and international cooperation. Her work demonstrates the relevance of ethics of care to political, social, and global issues, expanding the ethics of care from the private to the public sphere. Through the lens of Virginia Held's ethics of care, centering care as a core value and emphasizing human vulnerability and interdependence can promote social justice and fairness in a diverse society, while fostering the development of a more humane public service system that directly benefits individuals in their daily lives.

2. Ethics of Care and Social Guiding Principles

"We should respect the rights of all people in every place, but first, we should cultivate in everyone the ability and behavior that enable us to care for all others as we care for ourselves."^[1] As Peta Bowden points out, care "expresses an ethically significant way in which we matter to each other, transforming interpersonal relationships into something beyond mere ontological necessity or primitive survival."^[2] If relationships in the context of family or friendship are dominated by the pursuit of personal interests and the fulfillment of individual rights, or if members of a social group or organization view personal rights and the rights of others as oppositional, placing their own interests above the entire interaction, these relationships will be difficult to maintain. What plays an important role in the formation and maintenance of these relationships are the trust, solidarity, mutual care, and empathetic responses required by caring relationships. "Based on care rather than justice, we can coherently form a political entity with others and develop a civil society."^[3] The pursuit of economic, political, and cultural interests by citizens themselves or any social group must be rooted in a sufficiently caring social relationship, recognizing and upholding the moral value of these relationships so that the political institutions, economic systems, and legal frameworks of society can function properly, and the interests of both society and its citizens can be safeguarded. Through sufficient trust, mutual consideration, and the ability to respond to the needs of all people, a society or nation can be formed, consolidated, and better maintained, ensuring that everyone's rights are respected. Even weaker but still evident caring relationships between more distant individuals enable them to trust each other enough to live harmoniously and respect each other's rights.

Under the current globalized environment, both parties' interests must be mutually cared for, their rights mutually acknowledged and respected, and both sides must adhere to international agreements and conventions. These are prerequisites for peaceful coexistence between different countries. The ethics of care, on both individual and societal levels, establishes relationships of care, concern, and reciprocal response to needs. These are caring relationships that enable humanity to survive and continue moving forward. We should not ignore the profound reality of human interdependence and must reconstruct society within the framework of caring relationships. Therefore, the relationship between care and justice needs to be redefined. In Virginia Held's view, both justice and care are important moral values and are crucial to morality. However, "care may be the most profound and fundamental value"^[4]. Without care, there would be no life; humanity cannot survive without care. Justice is indeed one of the most important moral values, but many aspects of life (such as family and friendship) can continue without justice. Hence, Held advocates for an "integration" of justice and care, asking, How can the framework shaped by justice, equality, rights, and liberty be integrated with the network formed by care, relatedness, and trust? She opposes any reductionist perspective that views justice ethics and ethics of care as separate, and instead leans toward a holistic moral theory that includes both perspectives. She argues that the two cannot be arbitrarily merged into a single cohesive theory. Rather, integrating the viewpoints of both ethics of care and justice theory can provide new foundations for moral judgment. Held is concerned with how to integrate care and justice without overlooking the different emphases of each. In this regard, she suggests maintaining the distinction between the two moral systems and clarifying the areas where both should be prioritized. Therefore, she sees care as a broader and deeper moral theory, capable of explaining the moral norms of justice, and argues that "care and related concerns should be viewed as part of a larger picture, to which justice, utility, and virtue should appropriately conform." Within the framework of care, fairness, justice, and rights can and should be demanded, as humans are naturally entitled to rights and deserving of justice. In certain limited areas, care may even take precedence over justice.

3. Reciprocal Self and Civil Society

The ethics of care focuses on interpersonal relationships, with care shaping self-identity. The construction of moral autonomy cannot be separated from the role of care, which is reflected in three aspects: First, care is the life source and foundation of moral autonomy. Human emotions of care are innate, generally manifested as joy, benevolence, and compassion for life. These emotions naturally emerge without external guidance or prompting. For example, a mother's affection for her child is more imbued with maternal sentiment than that of men. This type of natural caring emotion is a necessary component of moral activity, as caregivers naturally respond to the needs of those they care for. As such, the natural emotion of care and the need for ethical care are elevated, becoming mutually dependent and forming the foundation of moral autonomy. Second, attention must be given to the real connections and relationships between people. ethics of care holds that the construction of moral autonomy cannot be separated from the reality of social existence, and the realization of personal value must be achieved through connections with others. The moral acts of caring must be realized within social relationships. Finally, it is important to focus on human moral and emotional values. In traditional ethics, emotions were excluded from rationality, and moral autonomy based on rationality discriminated against the female subject. ethics of care, however, constructs moral autonomy from the perspective of emotion, making ethics of care more important. By emphasizing the value of moral emotions and respecting each individual's emotional needs, moral autonomy becomes not only a reflection of freedom and equality but also a response to the need for love and dignity, which serve as the foundation and prerequisite for virtuous behavior. In morality based on external regulation, self-discipline can only be achieved when moral autonomy is attained. The ethics of care allows people to pursue the value of moral emotions by integrating autonomy with instinctive emotions, thereby opening the door to virtue. The conditions for realizing love and dignity constitute the fundamental values of ethics of care and provide the fundamental means for practicing ethics of care in daily life, transforming society, reshaping human nature, and advancing civilization. This approach better meets the needs of human subjectivity and perhaps more fully reflects the autonomous value of morality influenced by caring emotions.

Held believes that within group organizations, members are more likely to participate in joint projects based on mutual resonance, and the reciprocal self fostered by ethics of care is more capable of uniting and nurturing caring relationships, thereby building trust. "Just as public welfare is not the sole responsibility of one individual, but the result of everyone's collective effort."^[5] In acts of care, the focus should be on respecting and fulfilling others and their rights, rather than merely following rules and ignoring the vibrant and dynamic lives within the framework of legal order.

4. Caring for Nature and Modern Ecology

A healthy natural environment is the foundation of human survival, and managing the relationship between humans and nature, as well as humans and animals, is a crucial aspect. Events such as the Plague of Athens, the Antonine Plague in ancient Rome, the Justinian Plague in the Mediterranean, as well as modern crises like locust infestations in Africa and avalanches in Kashmir, all serve as stark reminders—nature's power is immeasurable, and humanity should approach it with awe. In Enshi, Hubei Province, there is an 81-year-old man who has been guarding China's loneliest zoo by himself for 32 years. Luo Yingjiu, the director, food supplier, porter, cleaner, ticket seller, veterinarian, guide, and even undertaker of Phoenix Mountain Zoo, takes care of all the zoo's animals. Most of the animals are old or injured—feeble tigers and lions, listless monkeys, stray dogs and cats, and even a farm pig. In truth, this place is less of a zoo and more of a sanctuary. Whether or not visitors come, Luo patrols the animal enclosures like a guardian, tending to their every need, from food and water to hygiene, and frequently communicates with them. Luo's daily routine includes cleaning cages, going to the market to buy meat and vegetables, feeding the animals, and opening the zoo to guests. He barely has time to think about his own meals, always prioritizing the animals' well-being over his own. The intimate relationship between Luo and the animals, and their harmonious coexistence, simply illustrates that achieving harmony between humans and nature requires acknowledging their mutual connection and interdependence. From the perspective of ethics of care, caring for the natural environment reflects an interactive, reciprocal relationship. Caring for nature is not a simple, human-centered perspective that judges the relationship between humans and nature based solely on human values. ethics of care asserts that "care is not a foolish passion; care is concerned with accepting the other as they are, so that care may elicit a response" [6]. Humanity should approach nature with respect and caution. This attitude requires mutual recognition and respect, especially regarding the interconnection of values, and it requires embracing the values that arise from these connections.

Based on this foundation, caring for the environment requires us to think from an environmental perspective to a certain extent. As the eco-philosopher Leopold proposed in his concept of "thinking like a mountain," only then can we better define the value of nature and make human concern for nature effective. In the process of building a community of humans and nature, this inward-to-outward concern holds significant value because only through genuine care can humans understand nature in a comprehensive, aesthetic, and even emotionally rich way. True reverence for nature allows people to fully enjoy the diverse gifts that nature bestows while minimizing the damage caused by natural forces as much as possible. Humans should take a proactive approach in protecting the natural environment, actively maintaining ecological balance and biodiversity, and building a diverse, interactive relationship with nature to achieve a shared presentation of mutual values. Furthermore, human concern for the natural environment should not be like the care of a stronger party for a weaker one, or of an adult for a child; it should be marked by a corresponding sense of reverence, as the forces embedded in the ecological environment often hold great power and destructiveness. Therefore, the ecological community that humans construct should be based on the safety and expansion of living space, emphasizing the stability and balance of the natural environment, as well as the sustainable development and diversity of human values. It is through this process of mutual understanding that people can come to regard the ecological environment as integral to their own lives, ultimately leading the ecological community toward becoming a community of life.

Virginia Held's ethics of care offers a new perspective for modern society, not only focusing on efficiency and rules but also emphasizing the deep emotional connections and moral responsibilities between individuals and society. By applying the ethics of care to the public sphere, we can build a more inclusive and compassionate society, fostering mutual understanding and cooperation among people. The ethics of care not only plays an important role in the private realm but also provides a strong theoretical foundation for moral practices in the public domain, contributing to the realization of fairness and justice in society. In the future, as the ethics of care permeates and develops in more areas, it will offer broader and deeper guidance for global governance, social well-being, and human happiness^[7].

5. Ethics of care and human facing Social and global issues

As a comprehensive moral theory, caring ethics can also provide guidance for global issues such as how to face the threat of international violence, such as terrorism and war. From the perspective of care, terrorism exemplifies the failure of care, as it "not only violates rights but also lacks the sense of human solidarity that we call 'care' for potential victims, and the lack of concern or empathy on the part of terrorists for them". Caring ethics guides us to cultivate the ability to empathize with the victims of violence and requires us to better understand those who resort to violence rather than using the usual way of condemning terrorism through excessive military force. According to Haider, "the most important

factor in dealing with terrorism is understanding how to divert potential recruits away from violence", rather than frequently using force and war, which are themselves forms of violence^[8].

Paying attention to and responding to the needs of others is an inherent value of care. Caring ethics can help us listen and try to understand others' perspectives, using non-violent means to banish violence and commit ourselves to preventing violence rather than eliminating violent individuals. "Sudden reactions of violence in reducing violence are far less effective than the long-term efforts of patience and care." Caring ethics respects the need for peacekeeping and the avoidance of violent conflicts, and focuses on protecting lives and promoting the overall well-being of interdependent human beings. It requires states to commit themselves to preventing and limiting conflicts rather than eliminating and destroying each other when facing conflicts; to handle violence in a way that does not cause unnecessary destruction and harm; to use the minimum necessary force to limit conflicts, thus making it still possible for national reconciliation. As Radzik points out, "many mothers know something that many military activists forget - the ability to destroy can be intimidating and awe-inspiring, but coercing consent is subtle and ultimately collaborative work". Caring ethics encourages states to assume the responsibility for peacefully resolving conflicts and negotiating non-violently to handle disputes. Respecting international law is an important approach that needs to be taken in dealing with terrorism^[9].

6. Conclusion

The ethic of care is not limited to private domains such as family or friendship, but can be extended to broader social and global contexts to provide moral guidance for issues within them. It requires an expansion of care to social and global contexts, not as a special form of care in private domains, but as a sensitive, empathetic response to needs and values such as trust, that understands, evaluates, and guides the moral life of society, and responds to the real needs of others in an effective and responsible way. Furthermore, the ethic of care is not opposed to arguments for justice and rights, but critiques the way that justice arguments, as they have traditionally been, dominate the entire range of moral thinking without leaving any space for other forms of moral thinking^[10].

What Heider's ethic of care is aiming for is that the moral values of caring relationships and responding to needs can have a broader and deeper impact on human moral life. This kind of thinking and approach to dealing with moral problems, in a new theoretical direction that is different from traditional justice theories or virtue ethics, reminds us why we should move forward and in what direction we should move.

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