

AN ETHIC OF CARE CRITIQUE

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The foundation upon which ethics should be based is debatable in the field of philosophy. Nel Noddings proposes “An Ethic of Caring” which offers a feminist approach to ethics based on caring. Noddings’ ethic of care is not beneficial to feminism because it encourages caring as the sole basis of ethics, hinders a woman’s ability to become autonomous, and reinforces traditional gender roles. Critiques offered by Victoria Davion, Jean Keller and Virginia Held offer insightful additions and modifications of Noddings’ ethic of care. Noddings’ ethic of care, while beneficial to general ethical guidelines, is not appropriate for feminism because it encourages traditional gender roles for women, ignores virtues besides care, and inhibits a person from becoming autonomous. The ethic of care could be improved by the addition of autonomy and justice into the theory.

Philosophers have long debated a moral foundation on which ethics should be based. In the light of feminism, a code of ethics which encourages women’s liberation is sought as well. While Lawrence Kohlberg (1984) proposed a model for moral development with the basis of justice, many feminists reject this idea for women. Philosopher Nel Noddings (1995) rejects the idea of universal justice because it is based on an idea of sameness, and she believes that most situations are neither similar nor equal; therefore justice is not applicable. Nel Noddings proposes “an ethic of caring” which offers a feminist approach to ethics based on caring. Noddings’ ethic of care is not beneficial to feminism because it encourages caring as the sole basis of ethics, hinders a woman’s ability to become autonomous, and reinforces traditional gender roles (Noddings, 1995).

Noddings believes that ethics are motivated by a sense of duty. The sense of duty that Noddings suggests is the duty to care, and she splits care into two categories, “natural caring” and “ethical caring.” Noddings suggests that natural care is an innate characteristic, citing that even animals take care of their offspring, yet we do not call them moral (Noddings, 1995, p. 9). Her conclusion that ethical care is dependent on natural care is an interesting statement, because it is true that it is sometimes difficult to decipher whether the motivation behind certain actions is due to an innate compulsion to act or a sense of obligation to act. However, suggesting that care is innate is to imply that it is a woman’s nature to be compassionate and caring all the time. The ethic of care ignores the other virtues of a woman and replaces them simply with the virtue of care. In this way, Noddings’ ethic of care is naming the woman as the eternal nursemaid.

Victoria Davion offers an insightful critique of Noddings’ ethic of care, suggesting that moral principles are based on more than the virtue of caring (Davion, 1993, p. 169). She

indicates a variety of reasons why other virtues aside from care are necessary for an outline of ethics. One suggestion is that total engrossment in another individual could be dangerous, as well as a crutch to one's own morals. She gives the example of a woman supporting her Ku Klux Klan husband, thus displacing her own values by supporting his and becoming evil herself. This engrossment is obviously not beneficial to the development of a woman's ethics or to thinking for herself. Jean Keller points out that heterosexual love often involves the woman's adopting her man's ethics as her own, thereby not keeping her own beliefs (Keller, 1995, p. 153). The ethic of care promotes total engrossment and displacement of one's own values in another individual, which is a risky act. Kohlberg defines his highest stage of morality as "following self chosen ethical principles" but if a woman is following another individual's ethical principles, then according to Kohlberg, she will never become completely morally developed (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 177).

Davion also suggests that justice is necessary in an ethical guideline (Davion, 1993, p. 171). Davion discusses Noddings' example of the woman who is torn between standing by her racist family or her black friend who is fighting against her family. She does not want to break the ties with the family, so eventually sides with them (Davion, 1993, p. 171). Ultimately, she is making the choice of acting immorally by displacing her own values for her family. The incorporation of other virtues into her decision-making in the light of certain dilemmas should be included, such as in the case an idea of justice in that all humans are equal. Therefore, Noddings' ethic of care is not very useful in areas such as racism or homophobia (Davion, 1993, p. 163). Another example is if a woman's husband is a homophobe and asks her to vote against same-sex marriage, she is expected under the ethic of care to do as he says in order to not break the caring relationship. The problem is, discrimination against homosexuals is wrong and unjust; therefore it is questionable whether she is really acting ethically by acting caringly.

Davion also offers an insightful suggestion that the one-caring relationship model proposed by Noddings is not suitable for adult relationships. Adult relationships should be based on reciprocity, not one-way caring (Davion, 1993, p. 167). This idea of one-caring entraps a woman into the role of permanent caretaker, with her ethics based on her ability to care. Furthermore, according to Noddings, if a woman is in a relationship that is not reciprocal and she wants to end this relationship, this goal is not ethical because she is terminating a caring relationship. It is not a fair accusation to call someone immoral for ending a relationship in which there is not reciprocity of care. A relationship should also be allowed to be ended when it interferes with one's morals. Davion states, "I believe that what is missing from Noddings' account is an account of the individuals within caring relations as important in themselves" (Davion, 1993, p. 175). In fact, if Noddings had included a higher priority on the position of the individuals, her theory may have been more suitable for feminism, allowing women to claim a self-identity and therefore become autonomous. Noddings does state, perhaps in realizing her lack of reciprocity in the one-caring relationship, that the care ethic "does not separate self and other in caring, although, of course, it identifies the special contribution of the one-caring and the cared-for in caring. (Noddings, 1995, p. 26). She is saying that if all relationships are one-caring, including the relationship with oneself, then self-interest will be kept in mind. This is not necessarily

true, because if one is in a caring relationship that is harmful to health or spirit, according to the ethic of care, it is wrong to end the relationship. The only person benefiting from the relationship is the cared-for, while the one-caring remains as a doormat. It is also ironic that Noddings mentions reciprocity in regard to animals; she does believe we should not have a one-caring relationship with an animal because there is no potential for it to show reciprocity (Noddings, 1995, p. 10). This view is slightly hypocritical, because surely there are people with whom we may engage in a one-caring relationship and who also show no potential for reciprocity, and yet this relationship is still justified by the ethic of care.

Jean Keller's suggesting that care ethics is undermining to women's autonomy is indeed supportive of the claim that Noddings' ethic of care is not suitable for feminism (Keller, 1995, p. 153). Care interrupts autonomy by interrupting a woman's development of being able to think on her own. Under the obligation to care, the ability of a woman to choose her relationships is diminished (Keller, 1995, p. 157). Keller also points out that it is unclear whether women's caring is due to socialization or to innate tendencies, as Noddings suggests. Although it is true that certain hormones in females after birth encourage nurturing behavior, it seems unrealistic to suggest that a female of any other species aside from our own would continue to have responsibility to care for the offspring when it is capable of caring for itself (Flemming et al. 1997, p. 145). Furthermore, if caring in women is merely a development of the socialization process that women go through, it would be difficult to abandon their socialization to "act in accordance with what our authentic self wants," and thus become autonomous, without simultaneously becoming uncaring (Keller, 1995, p. 145). Noddings suggests that the development of the "ideal self" should be "developed in congruence with one's best remembrance of caring and being cared-for" (Noddings, 1995, p. 22). Therefore, she is rejecting the idea of autonomy.

Care ethics also reinforces the idea of traditional roles of women as the homemakers, the caretakers, and the self righteous (Keller, 1995). In an ethic of care, a woman is expected to be the one-caring in all situations, thus forcing her to remain in the position of sole caregiver. By reinforcing these gender roles, the woman is caught in the role of a subservient person, caring for others but not for herself. It also reinforces an obligation to care while forgetting one's own needs. Noddings does state that if a woman is one-caring, she will care for her own needs, yet the ethic of care implies a certain neglect of the needs of the one-caring person. The one-caring is expected to give unconditional caring with the prospect of potential future reciprocity, no matter what her personal desires may be. According to Carol Gilligan, a woman who sacrifices her needs for the needs of others would be at level two of her moral development model for women. Gilligan explains her level two as "defining the self and proclaiming its worth on the basis of ability to care for and protect others (Gilligan, 1977, p. 496). Therefore, according to Gilligan, this woman would not yet be fully morally developed.

Noddings' ethic of care could be greatly enhanced by the addition of other virtues aside from care, such as justice or room for autonomous growth. This expansion would help boost her ethic of care to be an influential philosophy for feminism as well as well-rounded ethical guide for all persons. Her introduction of care into ethics is beneficial, and certainly much of ethics should be based on care. However, the problem with her one-caring model

is that she neglects other aspects of morality. Virginia Held offers a “meshing of care and justice” in order to improve social relations and public policy, stating that the two are both compatible and a useful combination (Held, 1995, p. 128). Noddings, however, cites specifically that justice should not be considered in moral decisions because moral judgments are not absolute, and moral judgments should be driven by obligation, not justice (Noddings, 1995, p. 22). However, a certain amount of justice is necessary, because not every person will feel obligated to care and therefore should rely on a sense of justice. Without justice, issues such as racism would still persist. Furthermore, Noddings tries to sneak some self-worth into her ethic of care, but her theory is mostly encouraging non-autonomous behavior. If women are to be liberated, they must be able to think for themselves and make autonomous decisions. Therefore, the ethic of care needs an element of self-development and autonomy incorporated into it.

In conclusion, Nel Noddings’ ethic of care does make a positive contribution to ethical guidelines, by incorporating care into moral behavior. However, her ethic of care is not appropriate for feminism because it encourages traditional gender roles for women, ignores virtues besides care, and inhibits a person from becoming autonomous. An appropriate aim for feminists’ ethics should focus on the morals of an autonomous woman and equality of men and women in ethics, giving neither the handicap.

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