



Revisiting Gilligan's Ethics of Care: Critical Reflections and Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Carol Gilligan's Ethics of Care, contextualising her work within both historical and contemporary moral discourse. While appreciating Gilligan's basic contributions, the study questions its theoretical boundaries and practical application in today's complicated ethical situation. Drawing on post-2015 literature and worldwide views, the research combines multidisciplinary ideas from environmental ethics, AI ethics, and pandemic-era care practices to highlight the growing importance of care ethics. In this article, a systematic comparison is made between the relational focus that is inherent in Gilligan's work and Kantian moral formalism. The comparison has been made using a wide range of academic literature as well as real-world examples from the fields of education and healthcare. The study compares Gilligan's concepts with Kantian moral theory, not only to differentiate deontological rigour from relational ethics but also to highlight points of compatibility and criticism. Gilligan's approach places an emphasis on empathy, contextual awareness, and the cultivation of interpersonal connections as vital components of an ethical existence. This study also examines some less-discussed criticisms of Gilligan's model, including its ability to be applied to larger groups, its fairness to all, and its compatibility with all cultures.

Keywords: Ethics of Care, Carol Gilligan, Empathy, Moral Development, Relationality

Introduction

During the late twentieth century, the field of moral philosophy experienced a profound shift as Gilligan (1982) mentions that "The ideal of care is thus an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone" (p. 73). Historically, the field of moral philosophy has

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been dominated by views that are logical, and abstract, and put emphasis on universality and responsibility. Gilligan's approach provides a crucial and beneficial substitute for conventional moral theories by grounding morality in interpersonal interactions and lived experiences. Therefore, in Gilligan's view, care prioritizes relationships. Care is a kind act toward others. It acknowledges—and Gilligan elaborates upon—that life is a kind of interconnectedness inside a network of interactions.

Key features of the ethics of care

Traditional moral theories, particularly those that are founded in rationalist traditions such as Kantian ethics, emphasise abstract thinking, impartiality, and universality. On the other hand, care ethics puts emphasis on human interconnectivity, emotional intelligence, and the moral value of context. In order to get a complete understanding of the unique contributions that care ethics has made, it is necessary to dissect its fundamental characteristics. These include the following:

1. Relational Selfhood: In Gilligan's view, care ethics views persons as intrinsically relational creatures whose identities and moral obligations are influenced by the networks of interactions they inhabit, including family, social, communal, and ecological links. This is in contrast to the traditional notion of people as autonomous moral agents who act in isolation. As an example, moral responsibilities do not originate from contracts or abstract duties in the context of caring relationships, such as the one that exists between a parent and a child. Instead, these obligations are derived from the experienced dependency and emotional links that exist between the persons involved. The act of providing care for a sick kid is not performed out of a sense of impersonal obligation, but rather out of a profound comprehension of the child's requirements, emotions, and personality. In a similar vein, a teacher who stays after school to assist a student who is having difficulty academically is not driven by general guidelines but rather by the one-of-a-kind bond that she has developed with that kid.

2. Contextual Moral Reasoning: A fundamental tenet of care ethics is the rejection of the notion that moral judgements can or ought to be arrived at by applying general, abstract rules in a vacuum. On the other hand, care ethics acknowledges that real-world moral conundrums are sometimes profoundly enmeshed in personal histories, cultural backgrounds, and emotional depth. This is in contrast to Kantian ethics, which emphasises the categorical imperative as a law that applies equally to every rational being regardless of circumstance. Consider, for example, a scenario in which a nurse is faced with the decision of whether or not to let an old patient return

home despite the potential for adverse medical effects. A Kantian approach can place an emphasis only on norms concerning the autonomy of patients or the duties of professionals. On the other hand, a care ethicist would take into consideration a number of different aspects, including the patient's potential anxiety about passing away alone in a hospital, the patient's emotional well-being, the family's ability to provide assistance, and the nurse's own relational grasp of the patient's values.

3. Empathy and Responsiveness: With care ethics, empathy and emotional sensitivity are elevated to core components of moral reasoning, as opposed to being seen as secondary or even destructive, as is the case with some rationalist systems. Care is the capacity to empathize with others. For Gilligan and other feminists, emotions such as compassion, guilt, worry, or love are not seen to cloud judgement; rather, they are regarded as assisting individuals to comprehend the requirements of others and to respond correctly to those requirements. When it comes to occupations that include providing care, such as nursing, social work, or teaching, empathy is often the most effective instrument for taking effective ethical action. It gives practitioners the ability to interact with patients or clients as human beings as a whole, rather than only as cases or as abstract holders of rights. To put it another way, care ethics challenges the long-standing philosophical tendency that considers feelings to be unreliable or ethically meaningless.

4. Moral Particularism: The concept that moral judgements must always adhere to general principles or universal laws is rejected by moral particularism, which is a kind of ethics that is endorsed by practitioners of care ethics. On the contrary, it says that the most effective way to develop moral comprehension is to pay attention to the specifics of each situation. When it comes to this strategy, flexibility and sensitivity are prioritised above strict uniformity. The moral dilemma that a teacher has when selecting whether or not to offer a deadline extension to a student who has consistently handed in work late is something that should be taken into consideration. In response to the request, a Kantian may reply that the rules should be applied in the same manner to all of the pupils. In contrast, a care ethicist would do further research, including the following: Is the student experiencing personal difficulties, problems with their mental health, or the responsibility of providing care for someone else? Has the instructor taken note of the student's genuine effort, notwithstanding the poor results? From this point of view, making an exception is not a sign of moral weakness or contradiction; rather, it is a reaction that is compassionate and conscious of the situation in which it is being made.

Developments in Care Ethics (Post-2015): A Global and Interdisciplinary Overview

The ethics of care, founded on relationality, context, and attention to actual needs, provides an alternative moral framework with far-reaching ramifications. While care ethics originated in feminist moral philosophy, it has grown into a versatile and context-sensitive theory with potential applications outside the interpersonal realm. The multidisciplinary links demonstrate the flexibility of care ethics and its potential to address significant ethical issues of our day. Since 2015, care ethics has developed into a more transdisciplinary and internationally applicable paradigm. Researchers have used its relational and responsive methodology to address several current issues, including environmental degradation, artificial intelligence, global justice, and public health concerns. This discussion will examine the significant intersections of care ethics with environmental ethics, technological ethics, and cross-cultural ethics, highlighting its importance in global moral debate.

1. Environmental Ethics and the Ethics of Care: The integration of care ethics into environmental philosophy has been one of the most significant developments. Environmental ethics typically concentrates on the moral status of the non-human world, including animals, ecosystems, and future generations. The ethics of care provides a relational and affective foundation for environmental concern, emphasising the importance of caring for the natural world as a web of interdependent life forms, in addition to individuals. Traditional environmental ethics often emphasise duties to future generations or biodiversity, while care ethics highlights the urgency and emotional significance of current responsibilities. This makes it possible to take more emotionally and contextually appropriate environmental action.

- Example: In her book *The Perils of the One: Philosophical Essays in Feminism and Nonviolence*, Josephine Donovan (2017) emphasises the need for empathetic, non-exploitative interactions with non-human nature. The concept of ‘design for care’ in ecological systems emphasises the significance of examining environmental impacts from a care-centred perspective. This is evident in climate justice movements, which employ the language of caring to underscore global and intergenerational responsibilities.

2. Technology Ethics and the Ethics of Care: Care ethics has been used to build and manage AI systems, notably in the eldercare, childcare, and mental health sectors. Technological breakthroughs, particularly in artificial intelligence and automation, create new moral issues that existing frameworks may be unable to face. The ethics of care offers a framework for assessing technology, emphasising human relational needs rather than only efficiency or rights. It

necessitates the design and implementation of technology that honours emotional well-being, dignity, and the nuances of human experience.

- Example: Can a machine care? AI caregiving systems, such as elder-care robots in Japan, are constructed to aid in daily activities, oversee health conditions, and provide companionship. Care ethics compels designers to reflect on aspects beyond mere efficiency, emphasising the importance of emotional resonance, relational authenticity, and the preservation of dignity within machine-human interactions. Shannon Vallor (2016) provides a paradigm in *Technology and the Virtues* that envisions coming technology upholding and enhancing virtues such as empathy and caring.

3. Cross-Cultural Ethics and the Ethics of Care: The literature emerging after 2015 increasingly highlights the diverse and intercultural possibilities inherent in care ethics, resonating with ethical traditions beyond the Western paradigm. Critics contend that care ethics, rooted in Western female discourse, may lack worldwide applicability. Nevertheless, numerous non-Western and Indigenous ethical frameworks embody analogous principles—interdependence, reciprocity, and contextual sensitivity—albeit expressed in distinct manners. Investigating these interrelations expands the domain of care ethics and contextualises it within diverse moral frameworks. Cross-cultural perspectives demonstrate that care ethics is not solely a Western invention, but a universal moral resource that is articulated through a variety of traditions.

- Example: The African ethical concept of Ubuntu, expressed in the adage ‘I am because we are’ (or ‘a person is a person through other persons’), emphasises relationality, social peace, and reciprocal caring. This worldview regards the self not as a separate, autonomous entity, but as essentially entrenched in a web of interactions. This viewpoint reflects the key principles of care ethics. In their foundational work, *Feminist Freedom Warriors: Genealogies, Justice, Politics, and Hope* (2018), Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Linda E. Carty underscore the necessity of comprehending and incorporating non-Western paradigms of care—especially those originating from Indigenous, African, and East Asian traditions—to foster inclusive and compassionate feminist movements.

4. Care Ethics in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic: The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the essential significance of care ethics in public health and policy. The pandemic exposed the profound interdependence among people, disrupting the notion of individualism, particularly in Western societies. The crisis underscored the undervaluation of caregiving labour and systemic inequalities, leading to the call for a care-centred approach to pandemic ethics. This

perspective emphasises the importance of care ethics during global crises by advocating for policies that acknowledge interdependence, provide support to carers, and address the moral and affective aspects of healthcare. The virus demonstrated that the well-being of one is inextricably linked to the well-being of others, spanning from healthcare systems to supply chains. In response to this reality, care ethics posits that moral responsibility is derived from our concrete, lived relationships, rather than from detached rational duties.

- Example: The lockdown in India during 2020 had a significant and uneven impact on migrant workers, who found themselves devoid of essential resources such as transportation, sustenance, and financial means. A care-ethical perspective would emphasise the importance of support systems—such as housing, healthcare, and transportation—for vulnerable populations, acknowledging that justice is inherently relational and requires a responsive framework. Joan Tronto highlighted these ideas in her article “Long COVID and Seeing in the Pandemic Dark” (2022), which was co-authored with Michael Fine and published in the *International Journal of Care and Caring*. Scholars such as Eva Feder Kittay and Joan Tronto provide an important moral framework that emphasises human connection, societal fragility, and the need to create egalitarian networks of mutual assistance. As the globe heals and rebuilds, this viewpoint is critical for creating more equitable and compassionate communities.

5. Artistic and Cultural Expressions: Care Ethics in Practice: The use of care ethics in contemporary art and curating has evolved as a way to address social and environmental issues. Care ethics-informed artistic practices emphasise interconnectedness, shared vulnerability, and empathy development, and thus function as a catalyst for social change and communal healing. This integration emphasises the power of art to represent and spread care-centered principles across various populations. Art, literature, music, film, and performance function as significant avenues for expressing ethical considerations regarding empathy, vulnerability, and the connections that exist among humans and beyond.

- Example: Toni Morrison’s novels, such as *Beloved*, underscore the intergenerational and emotional responsibilities of care within Black communities, emphasizing historical trauma and maternal sacrifice. Her literary imagery embodies care as a means of both healing and resistance within repressive environments. Mierle Laderman Ukeles is esteemed for her ‘Maintenance Art,’ which acknowledges and elevates the significance of quotidian acts of

care, especially those carried out by sanitation workers and carers. These artistic and cultural modes do not simply signify care ethics; rather, they actively embody and enact them.

Ethics of Care vs. Kantian Ethics

Gilligan's ethics of care and Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics are fundamentally different from one another in that they have different conceptions of the moral actor, different approaches to moral reasoning, and different underlying philosophical assumptions about the nature of morality itself. On the other hand, Gilligan advocates for a morality that takes into account lived experiences, emotional intelligence, and relational awareness, in contrast to Kant's pursuit of universal truths that are founded on reason. This difference not only influences how moral decisions are formed but also determines what constitutes ethically significant.

1. Moral Agent

Ethics of care: As Gilligan describes it in her book, the moral agent is understood as a being situated within a web of social interactions, where their identity and obligations are influenced by their affiliations with others.

Kantian Ethics: The moral agent is conceptualised as a rational, autonomous individual endowed with the capacity for moral reasoning that operates independently of external factors.

2. Basis of Morality:

Ethics of care: The foundation of morality lies in the capacity for empathy, responsiveness to others, and the intrinsic desire to foster and sustain human connections.

Kantian Ethics: The ethical value of an action is determined by its conformity to rational obligations and the principles of universal moral law.

3. Moral Decision-Making:

Ethics of care: Moral decisions emerge through a careful examination of the specific context, the emotional realities at play, and the unique needs of the individuals involved.

Kantian Ethics: The process of decision-making adheres to rational principles that ought to be universally applicable across contexts.

4. Role of Emotion:

Ethics of care: Emotions like empathy, compassion, and love are not just ethically significant; they are fundamental to moral understanding.

Kantian Ethics: Emotions are often viewed as inconsistent indicators of moral conduct due to their inherently subjective nature, variability, and vulnerability to bias.

5. Emphasis:

Ethics of care: Highlights interdependence, human frailty, and the maintenance of social connections.

Kantian Ethics: Highlights autonomy, logical coherence, and individual rights.

The Practical Relevance of Care Ethics

The ethics of care, originally grounded in interpersonal relationships, has developed into a substantial moral framework that carries profound implications for public policy, institutional reform, and global justice. This perspective presents a nuanced understanding of morality that is intricately attuned to the complexities of context, the nuances of emotion, and the cultivation of human connections. Verena Tschudin (2003) opines that “the act of care is said to comprise moral attention, sympathetic understanding, relationship awareness, accommodation, and response” (p. 2)

1. Healthcare: Centering Empathy and Patient-Centered Care: In the sphere of healthcare, the ethics of care has driven a change away from methods that are merely clinical or procedural and towards ways that prioritise the emotional and psychological needs of patients. Care ethics urges carers to pay attention to the lived experiences, concerns, and hopes of people who are under their care, as opposed to considering persons as cases that need to be treated in accordance with established procedures.

2. Education: Cultivating Moral Development through Relational Pedagogy: The concept of care ethics plays a significant role in both educational theory and practice. It emphasizes the significance of cultivating connections between educators and students, shifting away from systems that are focused only on transactions or examinations and towards settings that are emotionally sensitive and supportive of student growth.

3. Politics and Law: Toward Compassionate and Inclusive Governance: In the realms of politics and law, care ethics critically examines the conventional liberal emphasis on autonomy,

individual rights, and procedural justice. Rather, it promotes policies that recognize interdependence and seek to safeguard the most at-risk individuals within the community. Social welfare programs that offer child care, elder care, or paid family leave, serve as tangible manifestations of care ethics within the realm of public policy, acknowledging the significance of caregiving labour as fundamental rather than relegated to the private or secondary sphere.

4. Addressing Systemic Injustices: From Personal to Global Ethics: Care ethics offers a robust framework for engaging with structural injustices and addressing global crises. The focus on interdependence and moral responsibility across diverse distinctions renders it particularly pertinent in addressing challenges such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation. Rather than only measuring cost-benefit ratios for the majority, a care-ethical approach to climate policy would give priority to the views of Indigenous people, children, and those most impacted by environmental damage.

5. Everyday Morality and the Moral Significance of Care Work: Our perspective of ordinary morality is profoundly altered by the concept of care ethics. It adds ethical prominence to realms that have previously been considered as private or ‘non-moral,’ such as parenting, friendship, or caring. It has been shown that these realms, which are often feminized and undervalued, form the cornerstone of moral existence. Daily moral decisions—balancing needs, demonstrating patience, suffering hardship—are made by a caregiver at home attending to a sick relative, but orthodox ethical theory hardly acknowledges such work.

Limitations of Care Ethics in Large-Scale Moral Judgments

Although care ethics presents a persuasive alternative to abstract, rule-based moral frameworks by highlighting love, empathy, relationality, and the significance of context, it is not devoid of its shortcomings. One of the most commonly highlighted obstacles is the difficulty of providing precise standards for moral judgement on a larger or systemic scale. Because it is based on specific connections and emotional reactivity, care ethics may not have universalisable norms, which are essential for assessing policies, institutional practices, or large-scale ethical challenges in situations where there is little to no personal connection or none at all. As an example, when it comes to tackling concerns such as climate justice, human rights, or global poverty—contexts that include millions of individuals with whom we do not have direct emotional ties—care-based thinking may have difficulty providing a framework that is consistent and unbiased. Furthermore, the absence of a standardised framework in care ethics might make conflict resolution problematic in situations with opposing demands and connections. On the other

hand, deontological theories such as Kantian ethics, which place a focus on duty, universalizability, and autonomy, are able to provide more consistent standards for judging moral conduct on a social or institutional level. Even though emotional closeness and personal knowledge are essential components of care ethics, they have the potential to unintentionally result in favouritism or moral inconsistency, especially when it comes to favouring people with whom one has relationships over those who are distant or unfamiliar. Furthermore, placing a heavy emphasis on emotional reactions such as empathy or compassion may sometimes mask important moral differences. This is the case in situations when caring for a close person is in conflict with justice or fairness on a larger scale. In this manner, care ethics may have difficulties in preserving its objectivity, particularly in pluralistic communities where a variety of values and connections cross with one another. This is not meant to downplay the importance of care ethics. Instead, it highlights the necessity for a diverse ethical viewpoint—one that respects the emotional richness and human empathy inherent in care ethics, while simultaneously leveraging the systematic precision found in principle-based frameworks.

Kant's Later Ethics: A Move Toward Practical Moral Life

Kant's early ethical writings, particularly *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) and the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), are frequently criticised for their abstract, formalistic approach, whereas his later work, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), reflects a more nuanced and practically engaged ethical perspective. In this advanced stage, Kant endeavoured to reconcile universal moral principles with the tangible circumstances of moral life, demonstrating a heightened consciousness of the critiques his prior writings provoked.

1. The Doctrine of Virtue and the Importance of Moral Emotion: Kant, in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, recognises that moral motivation transcends mere abstract rationality; it necessitates the development of moral sentiments, including respect, sympathy, and gratitude. He no longer disregards the psychological aspects of moral life, even if he still believes that duty must be the driving principle.

2. Duties of Love and Respect: The Turn Toward Relational Ethics: Kant's distinction between duties of love and duties of respect is a key advance in the *Doctrine of Virtue*. These are not sentimental affections; rather, they are moral obligations to regard others as individuals who are worthy of moral concern. Kant explicitly acknowledges that ethical life entails intricate interpersonal relationships and responsibilities that necessitate contextual awareness. The concept of duties of love refers to the act of actively participating in the well-being of other

people. Duties of respect prevent people from exploiting others as a tool to an end, supporting human dignity in reality rather than theory.

3. Moral Education and the Cultivation of Virtue: Kant's mature ethics emphasises moral education, habituation, and the internalisation of ethical concepts. He knew that it is not enough for people to only be aware of their responsibilities; they must also have the moral fortitude (virtue) to live up to those responsibilities. This demonstrates a clear change from rigorous rule-following to moral development, which is consistent with subsequent ideas like care ethics and virtue ethics.

4. From Abstract Duty to Concrete Application: Kant's later essays explain how moral laws may be applied to real human behaviour and institutions. He delineates particular responsibilities—toward oneself, towards others, and towards society—encompassing obligations of beneficence, gratitude, self-respect, and the injunction against servility or arrogance.

5. Legal and Political Applications: Kant establishes a connection between morality and the frameworks of law and politics in the *Doctrine of Right*. He engages with concepts of justice, rights, property, and the state in a manner that renders his philosophical enquiries profoundly pertinent to the realm of public life. Consequently, the ethical framework proposed by Kant is not merely a matter of personal obligation; it also holds considerable structural importance for institutional contexts.

Conclusion

In revisiting Gilligan's Ethics of Care, this work has evolved from a strictly positive to a more critical and multidisciplinary engagement with her moral theory. Gilligan's initial challenge to abstract, rule-based ethical frameworks focused emphasis on the importance of empathy, connections, and context in moral decision-making. The importance that she places on voice, care, and responsiveness continues to be useful, particularly in fields where moral reasoning interacts with human vulnerability and emotional labour. Nevertheless, this paper has illustrated that care ethics, although fundamental, possesses limitations that necessitate a critical reevaluation, especially in the context of global, structural, or technologically mediated moral dilemmas.

One key limitation explored is the scalability of care ethics. Although successful in fostering interpersonal and community-level connections, the underlying principles may encounter

limitations when confronted with expansive ethical quandaries, such as algorithmic bias in artificial intelligence, resource distribution during pandemics, or pervasive environmental injustices. These difficulties often need frameworks that go beyond the local settings of relationships and call for issues of universality, justice, and structural power—areas in which care ethics has traditionally lagged behind. Through the synthesis of perspectives from environmental ethics, AI ethics, and cross-cultural moral theory, the ethics of care may develop into a more comprehensive and contextually sensitive moral framework. This enhanced framework preserves Gilligan's core focus on empathy, relationality, and moral responsiveness while broadening its application to tackle intricate, large-scale ethical challenges within varied sociocultural and technological contexts. This integration not only increases care ethics' theoretical flexibility but also validates its promise as a globally relevant moral paradigm capable of directing behaviour in an increasingly linked and morally heterogeneous society.

In addition, this paper also investigated the relationship between Kantian moral theory and Gilligan's Ethics of Care. Gilligan's approach is frequently regarded as a counterpoint to Kant's moral theory, which emphasizes universal principles, moral obligations, and the equitable treatment of all individuals. In contrast, care ethics underscores the significance of intimate relationships, emotional nuances, and the particularities inherent in each context. Such a dichotomous framework, however, runs the danger of oversimplifying both traditions. At the time that Kant was writing *The Metaphysics of Morals*, he had already made significant progress in integrating the formality of obligation with the richness of moral experience attained via actual experience. Despite the fact that he did not investigate these concepts to the same extent that care ethicists or Aristotelians did, he eventually came to the realisation that moral character is developed via the process of practice, emotions, and relationships. Accordingly, it is oversimplified to say that Kant's ethics are completely abstract or emotionally detached. It is clear from his later work that he was a philosopher who struggled with the complexities of human moral life. He sought to find a way to combine logical autonomy with moral sensibility, virtue, and interpersonal duty. Even though care ethics expands on these concepts, Kant's subsequent works demonstrate how his perspective on ethics was evolving. He began to focus more intently on the significance of individuals' circumstances, their inherent traits, and the influence of emotions in the process of ethical decision-making.

In summation, Gilligan's Ethics of Care stands as a significant contribution to moral philosophy; however, it necessitates ongoing reinterpretation and recontextualization to effectively engage with the dynamic requirements of our moral landscape. By adopting a more critical,

multidisciplinary, and internationally aware perspective, care ethics may evolve into a comprehensive framework for addressing modern ethical dilemmas, in addition to serving as a philosophy of relational morality. This continual evolution is crucial for moral theory to sustain its responsiveness, inclusivity, and practical utility in the 21st century. An ethically balanced perspective could integrate the relational understanding inherent in care ethics with the normative precision characteristic of Kantian or rights-based frameworks, thereby presenting a more comprehensive conception of moral life that honours both individual circumstances and universal principles of justice. In this way, care ethics can enrich, but not replace, more rigid moral theories when it comes to dealing with the complicated moral issues that arise in modern society.

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