

ETHICS OF CARE AND ITS APPLICATION IN SOCIAL POLICY IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF CAROL GILLIGAN

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Abstract

*The ethics of care, as articulated by Carol Gilligan, represents a significant paradigm shift in moral philosophy by challenging the dominance of abstract, justice-oriented ethical frameworks. This paper critically examines Gilligan's care ethics and explores its relevance and application in contemporary social policy. Drawing from her seminal work, *In a Different Voice*, the study argues that moral reasoning is fundamentally relational, context-sensitive, and grounded in human interdependence. Unlike traditional models that emphasize autonomy, impartiality, and universal principles, care ethics foregrounds empathy, responsiveness, and the moral significance of relationships. The paper further analyzes how this framework can reshape key areas of social policy, including healthcare, education, welfare, and gender policy, by promoting more humane, inclusive, and contextually responsive approaches. It contends that care ethics provides a robust normative foundation for addressing structural inequalities and social vulnerabilities, particularly in pluralistic and developing societies such as Nigeria. By integrating care-based values into policy design and implementation, social institutions can better respond to the lived realities of individuals and communities. However, the study also engages with critical debates surrounding care ethics, including concerns about partiality, gender essentialism, and practical applicability in large-scale policy systems. Ultimately, the paper proposes a synthesis of care and justice as a more comprehensive ethical framework for social policy. This integration offers a transformative pathway toward fostering social cohesion, equity, and human dignity in contemporary governance.*

Keywords: Ethics of Care; Social Policy; Moral Development; Human Interdependence

Introduction

Moral philosophy has traditionally been dominated by justice-oriented ethical frameworks that emphasize universality, rationality, and impartiality as the hallmarks of moral reasoning. Classical and modern thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill articulated influential systems grounded respectively in deontological duty and utilitarian calculation, both of which privilege abstract principles over concrete human relationships. However, the dominance of justice-based ethics has not gone unchallenged. The emergence of the ethics of care in the late twentieth century, particularly through the pioneering work of Carol Gilligan, represents a critical intervention in moral philosophy. In her groundbreaking text, *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan argues that prevailing models of

moral development, such as those proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg, are implicitly biased toward a justice perspective that marginalizes alternative moral voices, especially those rooted in care, empathy, and relational interdependence (Gilligan, 1982). Care ethics thus emerges as a corrective framework that emphasizes the moral significance of relationships, contextual sensitivity, and the responsibility to respond to the needs of others. Rather than rejecting justice outright, it calls for a reconfiguration of ethical reasoning that acknowledges the embeddedness of individuals within networks of care.

This study, therefore, aims to critically examine the ethics of care as developed by Gilligan and to explore its application in the formulation and implementation of social policy. The specific objectives are to analyze the philosophical foundations of care ethics, to evaluate its critique of traditional moral theories, and to demonstrate its relevance as a normative framework for more humane and inclusive social policy. By engaging both theoretical and practical dimensions, the study seeks to contribute to ongoing debates on the ethical grounding of public policy. Methodologically, the paper adopts an analytical and critical philosophical approach, involving a close examination of primary texts and key secondary literature. The paper also proposes a synthesized framework integrating care and justice. The conclusion reflects on the broader philosophical and practical significance of adopting a care-based approach to social policy.

2. Philosophical Foundations of the Ethics of Care

The development of the ethics of care must be understood against the backdrop of dominant traditions in Western moral philosophy, particularly the deontological framework of Immanuel Kant and the utilitarian ethics of John Stuart Mill. These traditions prioritize rationality, universality, and impartiality as the defining features of moral judgment. Kantian ethics, for instance, grounds morality in the categorical imperative, which demands that actions be guided by universally applicable maxims irrespective of personal relationships or emotional considerations (Kant, 1785). Similarly, utilitarianism evaluates actions based on their consequences, specifically the maximization of overall happiness, often requiring the subordination of particular attachments to the greater good (Mill, 1861).

While these frameworks have provided robust systems for ethical analysis, they have been criticized for their abstraction and detachment from the concrete realities of human life. Feminist philosophers, in particular, have argued that such models neglect the moral significance of care, emotion, and relational interdependence. This critique exposes a deeper issue of gender bias in moral theory. Traditional ethics has historically privileged traits culturally associated with masculinity such as autonomy, independence, and rationality while undervaluing qualities associated with femininity, including empathy, nurturing, and responsiveness (Held, 2006). As a result, moral experiences more commonly associated with women's social roles, especially caregiving, have been marginalized within philosophical discourse.

A decisive turning point in this critique is found in the work of Carol Gilligan, whose influential book *In a Different Voice* challenges the universality of dominant moral development theories. Responding particularly to the stage theory of Lawrence Kohlberg, Gilligan argues that the prevailing model of moral reasoning is not gender-neutral but reflects a bias toward a justice-oriented perspective that privileges abstract reasoning over relational understanding (Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan introduces the ethics of care as an alternative moral framework that emphasizes the importance of relationships, empathy, and responsibility. She distinguishes between an “ethics of justice,” which focuses on rights, rules, and fairness, and an “ethics of care,” which centers on attentiveness to the needs of others and the maintenance of relationships. Rather than positioning these as mutually exclusive, Gilligan suggests that they represent different but complementary moral voices. Gilligan reconceptualizes moral development not as a linear progression toward increasingly abstract reasoning, but as a relational process shaped by interpersonal connections and social contexts. Moral maturity, in this view, involves the capacity to balance care for oneself with responsibility toward others, thereby rejecting hierarchical models that rank moral reasoning solely in terms of logical abstraction.

At the heart of the ethics of care are several interrelated concepts that redefine moral philosophy. First is the notion of care itself, understood not merely as an emotion but as a moral practice involving attentiveness, responsibility, and active engagement with the needs of others. Care entails empathy and responsiveness, requiring individuals to be perceptive to the particular circumstances and vulnerabilities of those within their relational sphere (Noddings, 2003). Care ethics emphasizes relationships and interdependence as fundamental to human existence. Contrary to the individualistic assumptions of traditional ethical theories, care ethics posits that persons are inherently relational beings whose identities and moral responsibilities are constituted through their connections with others.

3. Ethics of Care in Dialogue with Other Ethical Theories

The ethics of care stands in critical dialogue with Kantian deontological ethics, particularly regarding the nature and grounding of moral obligation. Kant's moral philosophy is rooted in the primacy of duty, defined through adherence to the categorical imperative, which requires that moral actions be guided by universalizable principles independent of personal inclinations or relationships (Kant, 1785). In this framework, moral worth is derived from acting out of duty rather than from emotion or relational attachment. By contrast, the ethics of care, as articulated by Carol Gilligan, challenges the exclusion of emotion and relationality from moral consideration. Care ethics argues that moral responsibility is not merely a matter of abstract duty but is deeply embedded in concrete relationships. Instead of prioritizing universal rules, it emphasizes relational responsibility, where moral agents respond to the needs of particular others within specific contexts. While Kantian ethics seeks impartiality and detachment, care ethics values attentiveness, empathy, and responsiveness as morally significant (Held, 2006). Care ethics critiques the rigid formalism of Kantian morality for its inability to adequately address situations involving dependency, vulnerability, and emotional bonds.

A similar tension arises in the comparison between care ethics and utilitarianism, particularly in relation to the principle of impartiality. Utilitarianism, as developed by Mill, holds that moral actions are those that maximize overall happiness or utility, requiring individuals to treat all persons' interests equally without privileging personal relationships (Mill, 1861). This commitment to impartiality often demands that moral agents transcend their particular attachments in favor of the greatest good for the greatest number. Care ethics, however, questions whether such strict impartiality is either realistic or morally desirable. It argues that partiality, understood as a legitimate moral preference for those with whom one shares close relationships, is not only inevitable but ethically justified. Human beings are situated within networks of care that generate special responsibilities toward family members, friends, and communities. According to Gilligan one to ignore these relational ties in the name of impartiality risks undermining the very fabric of moral life (Gilligan, 1982).

The development of care ethics has been significantly enriched by feminist philosophers, notably Nel Noddings, who expanded and systematized the insights introduced by Gilligan. Noddings places the concept of care at the center of ethical theory, defining it as a relational practice grounded in the encounter between the “one-caring” and the “cared-for” (Noddings, 2003). For her, ethical life is fundamentally about maintaining and nurturing relationships through attentiveness, receptivity, and responsiveness.

4. Carol Gilligan's Conception of Moral Development

Carol Gilligan's conception of moral development emerged as a critique of Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Gilligan argued that Kohlberg's theory placed too much emphasis on justice, rights, rules and abstract principles, while giving insufficient attention to the moral experiences of women and the importance of relationships, responsibility, empathy and care. Her major work, *In a Different Voice*, was published in 1982. Gilligan proposed what is commonly called the “ethic of care.” Rather than viewing moral maturity only in terms of applying universal rules, she argued that moral reasoning can also involve understanding people's needs, maintaining relationships and avoiding harm. Thus, morality may be expressed through a care perspective as well as through a justice perspective.

Pre-conventional Level: Orientation to Individual Survival

At the first level, the individual is primarily concerned with self-interest, survival and personal needs. Moral decisions are largely based on what is best for oneself. Gilligan describes this as an orientation toward individual survival. For example, a person may ask: “What will happen to me if I make this decision?” The major concern is the protection of the self rather than the needs of others (Gilligan, 1982).

Transition 1: From Selfishness to Responsibility

The first transition occurs when the individual begins to recognize that other people also have legitimate needs. The person moves from an exclusively self-centred position toward an understanding of responsibility for others. At this point, caring for others becomes morally important, although the individual may still struggle to balance personal needs with the needs of others (Gilligan, 1982).

Conventional Level: Goodness as Self-Sacrifice

At the second level, morality is associated with selflessness, goodness and caring for others. The individual places considerable importance on meeting the needs of family members, friends and other people. However, this can result in self-sacrifice, where the person's own needs are regarded as less important than those of others. Gilligan therefore regarded this stage as an important development but not the highest form of moral maturity.

Transition 2: From Goodness to Truth

During the second transition, the individual recognizes that one's own needs are also morally important. The person begins to understand that genuine care cannot require constant self-sacrifice. Consequently, moral reasoning moves toward finding a balance between caring for oneself and caring for others. This represents a movement from simply being “good” through self-sacrifice to making honest and responsible moral choices.

Post-conventional Level: Morality of Non-violence

At the highest level, Gilligan proposed a morality of non-violence and universal care. The individual recognizes the equal importance of the self and others and seeks solutions that minimize harm. Moral maturity therefore involves responsibility, compassion, care, self-respect and concern for others. The mature moral person does not simply sacrifice herself for others but seeks to protect both herself and other people from unnecessary harm.

5. Application of Ethics of Care in Social Policy

The ethics of care, as developed by Carol Gilligan and further expanded by Nel Noddings, offers a transformative framework for rethinking social policy. By prioritizing relationality, empathy, and responsiveness to human needs, care ethics provides a normative basis for designing policies that are not only efficient but also humane and context-sensitive. Its application across key sectors of social policy reveals its potential to address structural inequalities and foster inclusive social development. In the domain of welfare policy, the ethics of care calls for a fundamental reorientation from bureaucratic and impersonal systems toward human-centered approaches that recognize the dignity and lived experiences of beneficiaries. Traditional welfare systems often operate within rigid frameworks that categorize individuals based on eligibility criteria, sometimes neglecting the complexity of their circumstances. A care-oriented approach seeks to humanize welfare systems by emphasizing attentiveness to individual needs, flexibility in policy implementation, and the cultivation of supportive relationships between service providers and recipients. This involves moving beyond mere distribution of resources to fostering

empowerment, trust, and social inclusion. Moreover, care ethics directly addresses issues of vulnerability and dependency, challenging the stigma often associated with reliance on social support. Rather than viewing dependency as a weakness, it recognizes it as an inherent aspect of the human condition. Policies informed by care ethics thus aim to create structures that support individuals in vulnerable situations while respecting their agency and dignity (Tronto, 1993).

Healthcare policy represents a critical area where the ethics of care has profound implications. A care-based approach promotes patient-centered care, which prioritizes the holistic well-being of individuals rather than treating them as mere cases or statistics. This involves recognizing patients as persons embedded in relationships, with emotional, social, and cultural dimensions that influence their health outcomes. Ethical responsiveness in healthcare requires practitioners to engage with patients empathetically, listening to their concerns and tailoring interventions to their specific contexts. This aligns with the concept of relational autonomy, which contrasts with the traditional emphasis on individual autonomy by acknowledging that decision-making is shaped by relationships and social conditions. Care ethics underscores the importance of equity and compassion in healthcare delivery. It calls for policies that address disparities in access to care, particularly for marginalized populations, and that prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable. In this way, healthcare becomes not only a technical service but a moral practice grounded in care and responsibility.

The application of care ethics to gender and family policy highlights the need to recognize and value unpaid care work, which has historically been performed predominantly by women and often remains invisible within economic and policy frameworks. Feminist scholars, including Carol Gilligan, have emphasized that caregiving is a fundamental social activity that sustains families and communities. Care ethics advocates for policies that support caregiving roles, such as parental leave, childcare services, and flexible work arrangements. These measures not only promote gender equality but also acknowledge the social importance of care work. Additionally, care-based policies seek to redistribute caregiving responsibilities more equitably across society, challenging traditional gender roles and fostering shared responsibility. By integrating care into the public sphere, such policies bridge the divide between private and public life, ensuring that caregiving is recognized as a collective social good rather than a private burden.

6. Toward a Care-Based Framework for Social Policy

The growing recognition of the limitations of purely justice-oriented frameworks has led to renewed philosophical interest in constructing a more holistic approach to social policy—one that meaningfully integrates the insights of care ethics with the normative strengths of justice theory. A care-based framework does not seek to replace justice but to complement and deepen it, ensuring that social policy reflects both fairness and human responsiveness. The perceived tension between care and justice often framed as emotion

versus reason, or partiality versus impartiality can be philosophically reconciled through a more expansive understanding of moral life. While justice, as articulated by thinkers such as John Rawls, emphasizes fairness, rights, and equality, the ethics of care, developed by Carol Gilligan, foregrounds relationships, empathy, and contextual sensitivity. Rather than existing in opposition, these perspectives can be seen as mutually reinforcing dimensions of ethical reasoning. Integrating care with justice involves recognizing that abstract principles of fairness must be applied within the concrete realities of human relationships. Justice ensures that individuals are treated equitably within institutional frameworks, while care ensures that such treatment is attentive to particular needs, vulnerabilities, and social contexts. This synthesis moves beyond rigid universalism toward what may be termed relational justice a model that combines structural fairness with interpersonal responsiveness. Such an approach is particularly relevant in pluralistic societies, where diverse social conditions demand both principled consistency and contextual flexibility. It also aligns with communitarian and African philosophical traditions, which emphasize the interconnectedness of persons and the moral significance of community.

Building on this integrated framework, several policy recommendations can be advanced: First, social policies should be designed with a human-centered orientation, prioritizing the lived experiences of individuals rather than relying solely on abstract metrics. This requires participatory policy-making processes that include the voices of those directly affected by policy decisions. Second, there is a need to recognize and support care work as a fundamental social good. Governments should implement policies such as paid family leave, accessible childcare, and caregiver support programs, thereby affirming the social and economic value of caregiving. Also, policy frameworks should adopt a context-sensitive approach, allowing for flexibility in implementation to address diverse social realities. Standardized policies must be complemented by mechanisms that enable responsiveness to local and individual needs.

Again, institutions should promote equitable access to resources while ensuring that marginalized groups receive targeted support. This reflects the integration of justice (fair distribution) with care (attentiveness to vulnerability). Professional training in sectors such as healthcare, education, and social services should incorporate ethical formation in care, equipping practitioners with the skills of empathy, listening, and relational engagement.

For a care-based framework to be effective, its principles must be embedded within institutional structures and practices. This involves the institutionalization of empathy not as a mere personal virtue but as a guiding principle of organizational culture and policy implementation. Institutions must cultivate environments in which attentiveness, respect, and responsiveness are systematically encouraged and rewarded. Equally important is the concept of relational accountability, which expands traditional notions of accountability beyond procedural compliance to include responsibility for the quality of relationships and the well-being of affected individuals. Public officials and service providers should be

evaluated not only on efficiency and outcomes but also on their capacity to engage ethically with those they serve.

This shift requires the development of new evaluative frameworks that incorporate qualitative indicators such as trust, inclusion, and social cohesion. It also calls for interdisciplinary collaboration, drawing insights from philosophy, sociology, psychology, and public administration. Ultimately, institutionalizing care entails a transformation of both mindset and structure redefining success in social policy not merely in terms of outputs, but in terms of the depth and quality of human flourishing it enables. By embedding empathy and relational accountability into the fabric of governance, a care-based framework offers a sustainable and morally grounded pathway for addressing the complex challenges of contemporary society.

7. Conclusion

This study has undertaken a critical philosophical examination of the ethics of care and its relevance for the formulation and implementation of social policy. By interrogating the dominance of justice-based ethical paradigms particularly those associated with Immanuel Kant's deontological universalism and John Stuart Mill's utilitarian calculus it has exposed the limitations inherent in moral frameworks that privilege abstraction, impartiality, and rational autonomy at the expense of relational and contextual dimensions of human life. While these traditions have provided indispensable tools for articulating rights, duties, and distributive fairness, they often fail to adequately account for the moral significance of dependency, vulnerability, and the concrete realities of lived experience. Against this backdrop, the ethics of care, as developed by Carol Gilligan and further enriched by Nel Noddings, emerges as a philosophically robust and normatively compelling alternative. It reorients ethical inquiry from the primacy of abstract principles to the centrality of relationships, from detached reasoning to empathetic engagement, and from individual autonomy to relational interdependence. This shift is not merely methodological but ontological, as it reconceives the human person as fundamentally embedded within networks of care and mutual responsibility. In doing so, care ethics expands the moral horizon, incorporating affective, social, and contextual elements that have historically been marginalized within mainstream ethical theory.

The application of care ethics to social policy, as demonstrated throughout this study, reveals its transformative potential. In contrast to technocratic and impersonal policy models, a care-based approach foregrounds the lived realities of individuals and communities, emphasizing responsiveness to need, attentiveness to vulnerability, and the cultivation of trust and social cohesion. This care Ethics be it in welfare systems, healthcare delivery, educational structures, or gender and family policies, the integration of it fosters a more humane and context-sensitive mode of governance. Importantly, this does not entail the abandonment of justice but rather its reconfiguration. The proposed synthesis of care and justice what may be termed relational justice offers a more comprehensive normative

framework in which fairness is inseparable from compassion, and rights are complemented by responsibilities grounded in human connectedness.

Ethics of care resonates with broader communitarian and African philosophical traditions, which emphasize the primacy of community, solidarity, and shared humanity. The ethics of care and African philosophy of communication are closely connected because both emphasize human relationships, mutual responsibility, empathy, community, and the preservation of human dignity. Ethics of care argues that moral life should not be understood only in terms of abstract rules, rights, or individual interests, but also through relationships and the responsibility people have toward one another. African philosophy of communication similarly views communication as a relational and communal activity through which people express concern, build relationships, resolve conflicts, and promote social harmony. This connection can particularly be understood through the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasizes human interconnectedness and the idea that one's humanity is realized through relationships with others (Murove, 2024). The ethics of care is therefore compatible with the African understanding of the person as a relational being. In many African philosophical perspectives, the individual is not understood as completely isolated from the community; rather, personal identity and well-being are shaped by relationships with family, neighbours and the wider community. Recent scholarship on Ubuntu identifies interconnectedness, interdependence, solidarity, compassion, respect and human dignity as important moral values (Eyesan, 2025). These values closely correspond with the central concerns of care ethics, particularly its emphasis on empathy, attentiveness and responsibility for the well-being of others.

Communication provides the practical means through which this ethic of care is expressed. Genuine communication requires listening, understanding, respect and sensitivity to the experiences of others. From an African perspective, communication is therefore not merely the transmission of information but a process of creating and maintaining meaningful human relationships. Recent research on Ubuntu and communication argues that Ubuntu-based communication can enhance connection, understanding and relational engagement in African contexts (Madondo & Dhobha, 2025). In this sense, caring communication involves listening to others, recognizing their dignity, responding to their needs and avoiding forms of communication that humiliate, exclude or dehumanize them. The two perspectives are also connected through dialogue and reconciliation. When conflict occurs, the ethics of care encourages attention to the feelings, needs and relationships of the people involved. African communal approaches to communication similarly emphasize dialogue and restoration of harmonious relationships rather than simply focusing on individual victory. (Murove, 2024). There is a need for deeper theoretical engagement with the intersection of care ethics and other normative frameworks, including theories of justice, human rights, and development ethics.

From a policy perspective, the adoption of a care-based framework entails a paradigmatic shift in both orientation and practice. It requires the institutionalization of empathy as a public value, the recognition of care work as a cornerstone of social sustainability, and the

development of evaluative metrics that capture qualitative dimensions of well-being. Moreover, it calls for a reimagining of political responsibility not merely as adherence to procedural norms, but as an ethical commitment to the well-being of others within an interconnected social fabric. The ethics of care offers a profound and necessary rethinking of moral philosophy and social policy. By integrating care with justice, it provides a more holistic and human-centered framework capable of addressing the complexities of contemporary society. Its emphasis on relationality, empathy, and contextual responsiveness not only enriches ethical theory but also holds significant promise for the transformation of public life. As such, care ethics stands as a vital resource for constructing a more compassionate, equitable, and sustainable social order.

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