

# Justice And Care: Essential Readings In Feminist Ethics

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JUSTICE AND CARE  
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*Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*

edited by

Virginia Held

*Hunter College and the Graduate School*

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Contents

[List of Credits](#)

[Introduction](#)

[PART 1 DELINEATIONS OF CARE](#)

[1 Caring \[1984\], Nel Noddings](#)

[2 Moral Orientation and Moral Development \[1987\], Carol Gilligan](#)

[3 The Need for More than Justice \[1987\], Annette C. Baier](#)

[Part 2 Doubts and Reservations](#)

[4 Beyond Caring: The De-Moralization of Gender \[1987\], Marilyn Friedman](#)

[5 Gender and Moral Luck \[1990\], Claudia Card](#)

[Part 3 Extensions and Affirmations](#)

[6 Women and Caring: What Can Feminists Learn About Morality from Caring? \[1989\], Joan C. Tronto](#)

[7 Black Women and Motherhood \[1991\], Patricia Hill Collins](#)

[Part 4 Moral Epistemologies](#)

[8 Moral Understandings: Alternative "Epistemology" for a Feminist Ethics \[1989\], Margaret Urban Walker](#)

[9 Feminist Moral Inquiry and the Feminist Future \[1993\], Virginia Held](#)

## [Part 5 New Integrations](#)

[10 Caring as a Feminist Practice of Moral Reason \[1995\]](#), *Alison M. Jaggar*

[11 Injustice in Families: Assault and Domination \[1995\]](#), *Sara Ruddick*

## [About the Book](#)

## [About the Contributors](#)

## [Index](#)

For my daughter Julia, whose motherly caring and dispensing of justice inspire me, and for my son Philip, who turns ordinary events into occasions of joy and laughter. For their spouses also, who show how marriages can work, and for my grandchildren. Finally, for Robert, who delights his varied audiences and with whom I share the years.

### [Credits](#)

## [Chapter 1](#)

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## [Introduction](#)

Virginia Held

The topics of justice and care have been at the center of what can now be thought of as feminist ethics. Beginning with strong critiques of the nearly exclusive focus on justice, abstract rationality, rights, and individual autonomy in the dominant moral outlooks of recent decades, and recognizing the masculine bias of such a concentration, feminists have explored an alternative focus on care. A focus on justice has sometimes been seen as characteristic of men's ways of thinking about morality and a focus on care as characteristic of women's.

Within philosophy, feminists developed during the 1980s what was most often thought of as a morality of caring. Their views were encouraged by Sara Ruddick's early work analyzing the practice of mothering and supported by the empirical inquiries of Carol Gilligan and other psychologists who claimed that many girls and women tend to interpret moral problems differently from the way boys and men tend to interpret them. For girls and women, caring

relationships are often primary; for boys and men, morality is more apt to be seen in terms of individual compliance with rational rules concerning rights. The philosophical attempt to see in caring an alternative ethic rather than merely an empirically present tendency among women was in part a reaction to the overwhelming dominance that the concept of justice, with its associated abstract moral rules, had been accorded in the moral theory taught and discussed in philosophy and fields influenced by it in the previous decade and throughout most of the history of moral theory. Attending to the experience of women, an ethic of care recognizes that caring for children and dependent persons is an important activity involving moral values; it sees persons as interdependent rather than as independent individuals and holds that morality should address issues of caring and empathy and relationships between people rather than only or primarily the rational decisions of solitary moral agents. The first set of readings in this volume shows the early outlines of an ethic of care.

Some feminists, however, have had doubts about substituting an ethic of care for an ethic of justice, since women so clearly need and deserve more justice and fairness than we have received in political life, on the job, at school, and especially at home in the division of labor in the household. Where care is perhaps most prominent—within the family and in the contexts of health and welfare—justice is surely needed as well. And perhaps an ethic of care only indicates what women pressed by patriarchal traditions into doing most of the caregiving tend to think. As the second set of readings suggests, feminists may do well to be cautious about accepting the values of caring. And doubts can be raised about whether care can be relevant for political life as well as in the household and about the cultural and historical limitations of the outlook suggested by an ethic of care. The third set of readings suggests the relevance of caring to issues of social and political institutions and the importance of care in the distinctive practices of African American communities.

Feminists seeking to develop moral epistemologies more fruitful than the traditional ones have also attended to care as a moral consideration that ought to inform our processes of moral inquiry. The fourth set of readings illustrates this approach. In contrast with the view that moral understanding is largely a matter of knowledge arrived at rationally and impartially, feminist moral theorists have often seen caring as having an important place in our methods of arriving at progressively better moral theory and moral practice or reformulated.

The final two essays are published for the first time in this volume. Two leading feminist theorists reconsider justice and care in the light of what has been learned from previous discussions. They evaluate the arguments and consider how the values of care and justice can be integrated or reformulated.

As the readings in this collection indicate, feminists have been engaged in lively and ongoing debates about care and justice. The issues are by no means resolved, the debate continues, but considerable progress has been made in developing feminist views of morality. A series of questions can be raised about these central concepts of justice and care: Are they compatible? Are they alternative and incompatible ways of interpreting the same moral situations, and if so, how can we decide which should guide us? Are care and justice both indispensable for adequate moral understanding? Should care supplement justice, or justice supplement care—is one or the other the more fundamental? Do they appropriately apply to different domains or do both apply to all or most domains? Can either one be included within the other as a special case, and if so, which is the more comprehensive?

These are the sorts of questions being raised. There is considerable disagreement on how they should be answered. Not all feminists share the view that there is something like a separate and different “ethic of care,” but many are convinced that there is and that whatever position we hold about justice—for instance, that it can be replaced by care or that it cannot—any adequate

morality must include as a strong component the kinds of moral considerations that have come to be identified as belonging to a morality of caring.

In recent years the most important discussions have been concerned with how justice and care can appropriately be combined from a feminist point of view. How does the framework of justice-equality-rights-obligations mesh with the network of care-relatedness-trust? To suppose that justice and care should predominate in different domains—justice in the public sphere and care in the private—seems unsatisfactory, since most feminists reject the traditional public-private distinction itself. Feminists certainly favor regions of privacy, but they recognize that deciding who will have which kinds of privacy is a political issue.

Clearly, justice within the household is needed to protect its members from domestic violence and to ensure that women are not exploited in the provision of care. At the same time, more care is needed in social arrangements and in public policy decisions about a wide variety of matters. Those concerned with health and welfare may be the most obvious, but such matters are by no means the only ones where more of the considerations emphasized by a caring approach are needed. Cultivating more caring, sensitivity, and trust in political life, in legal approaches, and in international affairs should be among our goals.

A satisfactory morality should, if possible, offer guidance for moral concerns in any context. One may have a view that context is highly relevant to any adequate moral evaluation and that different approaches are best for different contexts. One will still look to a general moral approach to indicate which types of contexts to handle in which ways and to recommend how existing contexts ought to be transformed and rearranged. For instance, Western liberal political theories make law and the state central to society and make arrangements for the raising of children and for producing culture peripheral. A feminist morality might reorder these priorities drastically as well as transform arrangements within such contexts as the law or the household.

Another possible way of trying to reconcile justice and care is to think of justice as setting moral minimums beneath which we ought not to fall, or absolute constraints within which we may pursue our different goals, whereas care deals with questions of the good life or of human value over and above the obligatory minimums of justice. Traditional moral theorists, with a few exceptions, often see morality as composed of constraints that limit our pursuits of what we desire. Feminist moral theorists, in contrast, often stress the value of good relationships—whether personal or civil—and of good parenting and emotions conducive to leading admirable lives. And we stress that these are moral values. But as a way of resolving the conceptual conflicts between justice and care, thinking of justice as composed of moral minimums and of care as concerned with the good life above them can be questioned. Justice can be ever more attainable in the sense of gaining an increasingly sensitive understanding of rights, equality, and respect; to think of justice in terms of the necessary constraints of morality may be misleading. And certainly there are minimums of care that must be provided for persons to reach adulthood and to live, though good care will be above these minimums. There are few constraints as nearly absolute as responding to the needs of our children for basic care.

Feminist moral theorists are developing ways of dealing with actual problems through considering the appropriate claims of, at least, care and justice. These readings will show why these approaches are needed, how the debates concerning them have developed, and what some of the prospects are for feminist morality.

## [PART ONE](#)

### [Delineations of Care](#)

It is generally agreed that ethics is the philosophical study of morality, but we also speak of “professional ethics” and “a personal ethic.” When we speak in the second way, we refer to something explicable—a set of rules, an ideal, a constellation of expressions—that guides and justifies our conduct. One can, obviously, behave ethically without engaging in ethics as a philosophical enterprise, and one can even put together an ethic of sorts—that is, a description of what it means to be moral—without seriously questioning what it means to be moral. Such an ethic, it seems to me, may or may not be a guide to moral behavior. It depends, in a fundamental way, on an assessment of the answer to the question: What does it mean to be moral? This question will be central to our investigation. I shall use “ethical” rather than “moral” in most of our discussions but, in doing so, I am assuming that to behave ethically is to behave under the guidance of an acceptable and justifiable account of what it means to be moral. To behave ethically is not to behave in conformity with just any description of morality, and I shall claim that ethical systems are not equivalent simply because they include rules concerning the same matters or categories.

In an argument for the possibility of an objective morality (against relativism), anthropologist Ralph Linton makes two major points that may serve to illuminate the path I am taking. In one argument, he seems to say that ethical relativism is false because it can be shown that all societies lay down rules of some sort for behavior in certain universal categories. All societies, for example, have rules governing sexual behavior. But Linton does not seem to recognize that the content of the rules, and not just their mere existence, is crucial to the discussion of ethicality. He says, for example: “... practically all societies recognize adultery as unethical and punish the offenders. The same man who will lend his wife to a friend or brother will be roused to fury if she goes to another man without his permission.”<sup>1</sup> But, surely, we would like to know what conception of morality makes adultery “wrong” and the lending of one’s wife “right.” Just as surely, an ethical system that renders such decisions cannot be equivalent to one that finds adultery acceptable and wife lending unacceptable.

In his second claim, Linton is joined by a substantial number of anthropologists. Stated simply, the claim is that morality is based on common human characteristics and needs and that, hence, an objective morality is possible. That morality is rooted somehow in common human needs, feelings, and cognitions is agreed. But it is not clear to me that we can move easily or swiftly from that agreement to a claim that objective morality is possible. We may be able to describe the moral impulse as it arises in response to particular needs and feelings, and we may be able to describe the relation of thinking and acting in relation to that impulse; but as we tackle these tasks, we may move farther away from a notion of objective morality and closer to the conviction that an irremovable subjective core, a longing for goodness, provides what universality and stability there is in what it means to be moral.

I want to build an ethic on caring, and I shall claim that there is a form of caring natural and accessible to all human beings. Certain feelings, attitudes, and memories will be claimed as universal. But the ethic itself will not embody a set of universalizable moral judgments. Indeed, moral judgment will not be its central concern. It is very common among philosophers to move from the question: What is morality? to the seemingly more manageable question: What is a moral judgment? Fred Feldman, for example, makes this move early on. He suggests:

Perhaps we can shed some light on the meaning of the noun “morality” by considering the

adjective “moral.” Proceeding in this way will enable us to deal with a less abstract concept, and we may thereby be more successful. So instead of asking “What is morality?” let us pick one of the most interesting of these uses of the adjective “moral” and ask instead, “What is a moral judgment?”<sup>2</sup>

Now, I am not arguing that this move is completely mistaken or that nothing can be gained through a consideration of moral judgments, but such a move is not the only possibility. We might choose another interesting use of the adjective and ask, instead, about the moral impulse or moral attitude. The choice is important. The long-standing emphasis on the study of moral judgments has led to a serious imbalance in moral discussion. In particular, it is well known that many women—perhaps most women—do not approach moral problems as problems of principle, reasoning, and judgment.... If a substantial segment of humankind approaches moral problems through a consideration of the concrete elements of situations and a regard for themselves as caring, then perhaps an attempt should be made to enlighten the study of morality in this alternative mode. Further, such a study has significant implications, beyond ethics, for education. If moral education, in a double sense, is guided only by the study of moral principles and judgments, not only are women made to feel inferior to men in the moral realm but also education itself may suffer from impoverished and one-sided moral guidance.

So building an ethic on caring seems both reasonable and important. One may well ask, at this point, whether an ethic so constructed will be a form of “situation ethics.” It is not, certainly, that form of act-utilitarianism commonly labeled “situation ethics.”<sup>3</sup> Its emphasis is not on the consequences of our acts, although these are not, of course, irrelevant. But an ethic of caring locates morality primarily in the pre-act consciousness of the one-caring. Yet it is not a form of agapism. There is no command to love nor, indeed, any God to make the commandment. Further, I shall reject the notion of universal love, finding it unattainable in any but the most abstract sense and thus a source of distraction. While much of what will be developed in the ethic of caring may be found, also, in Christian ethics, there will be major and irreconcilable differences. Human love, human caring, will be quite enough on which to found an ethic.

We must look even more closely at that love and caring.  
From Natural to Ethical Caring

### **An Ethic of Caring**

David Hume long ago contended that morality is founded upon and rooted in feeling—that the “final sentence” on matters of morality, “that which renders morality an active virtue”—“... this final sentence depends on some internal sense or feeling, which nature has made universal in the whole species. For what else can have an influence of this nature?”<sup>4</sup>

What is the nature of this feeling that is “universal in the whole species”? I want to suggest that morality as an “active virtue” requires two feelings and not just one. The first is the sentiment of natural caring. There can be no ethical sentiment without the initial, enabling sentiment. In situations where we act on behalf of the other because we want to do so, we are acting in accord with natural caring. A mother’s caretaking efforts in behalf of her child are not usually considered ethical but natural. Even maternal animals take care of their offspring, and we do not credit them with ethical behavior.

The second sentiment occurs in response to a remembrance of the first. Nietzsche speaks of love and memory in the context of Christian love and Eros, but what he says may safely be taken out of context to illustrate the point I wish to make here:

There is something so ambiguous and suggestive about the word love, something that speaks to memory and to hope, that even the lowest intelligence and the coldest heart still feel something of the glimmer of this word. The cleverest woman and the most vulgar man recall the relatively least

selfish moments of their whole life, even if Eros has taken only a low flight with them.<sup>5</sup>

This memory of our own best moments of caring and being cared for sweeps over us as a feeling—as an “I must”—in response to the plight of the other and our conflicting desire to serve our own interests. There is a transfer of feeling analogous to transfer of learning. In the intellectual domain, when I read a certain kind of mathematical puzzle, I may react by thinking, “That is like the sailors, monkey, and coconuts problem,” and then, “Diophantine equations” or “modulo arithmetic” or “congruences.” Similarly, when I encounter an other and feel the natural pang conflicted with my own desires—“I must—I do not want to”—I recognize the feeling and remember what has followed it in my own best moments. I have a picture of those moments in which I was cared for and in which I cared, and I may reach toward this memory and guide my conduct by it if I wish to do so.

Recognizing that ethical caring requires an effort that is not needed in natural caring does not commit us to a position that elevates ethical caring over natural caring. Kant has identified the ethical with that which is done out of duty and not out of love, and that distinction in itself seems right. But an ethic built on caring strives to maintain the caring attitude and is thus dependent upon, and not superior to, natural caring. The source of ethical behavior is, then, in twin sentiments—one that feels directly for the other and one that feels for and with that best self, who may accept and sustain the initial feeling rather than reject it.

We shall discuss the ethical ideal, that vision of best self, in some depth. When we commit ourselves to obey the “I must” even at its weakest and most fleeting, we are under the guidance of this ideal. It is not just any picture. Rather, it is our best picture of ourselves caring and being cared for. It may even be colored by acquaintance with one superior to us in caring, but, as I shall describe it, it is both constrained and attainable. It is limited by what we have already done and by what we are capable of, and it does not idealize the impossible so that we may escape into ideal abstraction.

Now, clearly, in pointing to Hume’s “active virtue” and to an ethical ideal as the source of ethical behavior, I seem to be advocating an ethic of virtue. This is certainly true in part. Many philosophers recognize the need for a discussion of virtue as the energizing factor in moral behavior, even when they have given their best intellectual effort to a careful explication of their positions on obligation and justification.<sup>6</sup> When we discuss the ethical ideal, we shall be talking about “virtue,” but we shall not let “virtue” dissipate into “the virtues” described in abstract categories. The holy man living abstemiously on top of the mountain, praying thrice daily, and denying himself human intercourse may display “virtues,” but they are not the virtues of one-caring. The virtue described by the ethical ideal of one-caring is built up in relation. It reaches out to the other and grows in response to the other.

Since our discussion of virtue will be embedded in an exploration of moral activity we might do well to start by asking whether or under what circumstances we are obliged to respond to the initial “I must.” Does it make sense to say that I am obliged to heed that which comes to me as obligation?                      Obligation

There are moments for all of us when we care quite naturally. We just do care; no ethical effort is required. “Want” and “ought” are indistinguishable in such cases. I want to do what I or others might judge I ought to do. But can there be a “demand” to care? There can be, surely, no demand for the initial impulse that arises as a feeling, an inner voice saying “I must do something,” in response to the need of the cared-for. This impulse arises naturally, at least occasionally, in the absence of pathology. We cannot demand that one have this impulse, but we shrink from one who never has it. One who never feels the pain of another, who never confesses the internal “I must” that is so familiar to most of us, is beyond our normal pattern of understanding. Her case is

pathological, and we avoid her.

But even if I feel the initial "I must," I may reject it. I may reject it instantaneously by shifting from "I must do something" to "Something must be done," and removing myself from the set of possible agents through whom the action should be accomplished. I may reject it because I feel that there is nothing I can do. If I do either of these things without reflection upon what I might do in behalf of the cared-for, then I do not care. Caring requires me to respond to the initial impulse with an act of commitment: I commit myself either to overt action on behalf of the cared-for (I pick up my crying infant) or I commit myself to thinking about what I might do. In the latter case, as we have seen, I may or may not act overtly in behalf of the cared-for. I may abstain from action if I believe that anything I might do would tend to work against the best interests of the cared-for. But the test of my caring is not wholly in how things turn out; the primary test lies in an examination of what I considered, how fully I received the other, and whether the free pursuit of his projects is partly a result of the completion of my caring in him.

But am I obliged to embrace the "I must"? In this form, the question is a bit odd, for the "I must" carries obligation with it. It comes to us as obligation. But accepting and affirming the "I must" are different from feeling it, and these responses are what I am pointing to when I ask whether I am obliged to embrace the "I must." The question nags at us; it is a question that has been asked, in a variety of forms, over and over by moralists and moral theorists. Usually, the question arises as part of the broader question of justification. We ask something of the sort: Why must I (or should I) do what suggests itself to reason as "right" or as needing to be done for the sake of some other? We might prefer to supplement "reason" with "and/or feeling." This question is, of course, not the only thorny question in moral theory, but it is one that has plagued theorists who see clearly that there is no way to derive an "I ought" statement from a chain of facts. I may agree readily that "things would be better"—that is, that a certain state of affairs commonly agreed to be desirable might be attained—if a certain chain of events were to take place. But there is still nothing in this intellectual chain that can produce the "I ought." I may choose to remain an observer on the scene.

Now I am suggesting that the "I must" arises directly and prior to consideration of what it is that I might do. The initial feeling is the "I must." When it comes to me indistinguishable from the "I want," I proceed easily as one-caring. But often it comes to me conflicted. It may be barely perceptible and it may be followed almost simultaneously by resistance. When someone asks me to get something for him or merely asks for my attention, the "I must" may be lost in a clamor of resistance. Now a second sentiment is required if I am to behave as one-caring. I care about myself as one-caring and, although I do not care naturally for the person who has asked something of me—at least not at this moment—I feel the genuine moral sentiment, the "I ought," that sensibility to which I have committed myself.

Let me try to make plausible my contention that the moral imperative arises directly.<sup>7</sup> And, of course, I must try to explain how caring and what I am calling the "moral imperative" are related. When my infant cries in the night, I not only feel that I must do something but I want to do something. Because I love this child, because I am bonded to him, I want to remove his pain as I would want to remove my own. The "I must" is not a dutiful imperative but one that accompanies the "I want." If I were tied to a chair, for example, and wanted desperately to get free, I might say as I struggled, "I must do something; I must get out of these bonds." But this "must" is not yet the moral or ethical "ought." It is a "must" born of desire.

The most intimate situations of caring are, thus, natural. I do not feel that taking care of my own child is "moral" but, rather, natural. A woman who allows her own child to die of neglect is often considered sick rather than immoral; that is, we feel that either she or the situation into which she has been thrust must be pathological. Otherwise, the impulse to respond, to nurture the living

infant, is overwhelming. We share the impulse with other creatures in the animal kingdom. Whether we want to consider this response as “instinctive” is problematic, because certain patterns of response may be implied by the term and because suspension of reflective consciousness seems also to be implied (and I am not suggesting that we have no choice), but I have no difficulty in considering it as innate. Indeed, I am claiming that the impulse to act in behalf of the present other is itself innate. It lies latent in each of us, awaiting gradual development in a succession of caring relations. I am suggesting that our inclination toward and interest in morality derives from caring. In caring, we accept the natural impulse to act on behalf of the present other. We are engrossed in the other. We have received him and feel his pain or happiness, but we are not compelled by this impulse. We have a choice; we may accept what we feel, or we may reject it. If we have a strong desire to be moral, we will not reject it, and this strong desire to be moral is derived, reflectively, from the more fundamental and natural desire to be and to remain related. To reject the feeling when it arises is either to be in an internal state of imbalance or to contribute willfully to the diminution of the ethical ideal.

But suppose in a particular case that the “I must” does not arise, or that it whispers faintly and disappears, leaving distrust, repugnance, or hate. Why, then, should I behave morally toward the object of my dislike? Why should I not accept feelings other than those characteristic of caring and, thus, achieve an internal state of balance through hate, anger, or malice?

The answer to this is, I think, that the genuine moral sentiment (our second sentiment) arises from an evaluation of the caring relation as good, as better than, superior to, other forms of relatedness. I feel the moral “I must” when I recognize that my response will either enhance or diminish my ethical ideal. It will serve either to increase or decrease the likelihood of genuine caring. My response affects me as one-caring. In a given situation with someone I am not fond of, I may be able to find all sorts of reasons why I should not respond to his need. I may be too busy. He may be undiscerning. The matter may be, on objective analysis, unimportant. But, before I decide, I must turn away from this analytic chain of thought and back to the concrete situation. Here is this person with this perceived need to which is attached this importance. I must put justification aside temporarily. Shall I respond? How do I feel as a duality about the “I” who will not respond?

I am obliged, then, to accept the initial “I must” when it occurs and even to fetch it out of recalcitrant slumber when it fails to awake spontaneously.<sup>8</sup> The source of my obligation is the value I place on the relatedness of caring. This value itself arises as a product of actual caring and being cared-for and my reflection on the goodness of these concrete caring situations.

Now, what sort of “goodness” is it that attaches to the caring relation? It cannot be a fully moral goodness, for we have already described forms of caring that are natural and require no moral effort. But it cannot be a fully nonmoral goodness either, for it would then join a class of goods many of which are widely separated from the moral good. It is, perhaps, properly described as a “pre-moral good,” one that lies in a region with the moral good and shades over into it. We cannot always decide with certainty whether our caring response is natural or ethical. Indeed, the decision to respond ethically as one-caring may cause the lowering of barriers that previously prevented reception of the other, and natural caring may follow.

I have identified the source of our obligation and have said that we are obligated to accept, and even to call forth, the feeling “I must.” But what exactly must I do? Can my obligation be set forth in a list or hierarchy of principles? So far, it seems that I am obligated to maintain an attitude and, thus, to meet the other as one-caring and, at the same time, to increase my own virtue as one-caring. If I am advocating an ethic of virtue, do not all the usual dangers lie in wait: hypocrisy, self-righteousness, withdrawal from the public domain? We shall discuss these dangers as the idea of an ethical ideal is developed more fully.

Let me say here, however, why it seems preferable to place an ethical ideal above principle as a guide to moral action. It has been traditional in moral philosophy to insist that moral principles must be, by their very nature as moral principles, universifiable. If I am obligated to do *X* under certain conditions, then under sufficiently similar conditions you also are obligated to do *X*. But the principle of universifiability seems to depend, as Nietzsche pointed out, on a concept of “sameness.”<sup>9</sup> In order to accept the principle, we should have to establish that human predicaments exhibit sufficient sameness, and this we cannot do without abstracting away from concrete situations those qualities that seem to reveal the sameness. In doing this, we often lose the very qualities or factors that gave rise to the moral question in the situation. That condition which makes the situation different and thereby induces genuine moral puzzlement cannot be satisfied by the application of principles developed in situations of sameness.

This does not mean that we cannot receive any guidance from an attempt to discover principles that seem to be universifiable. We can, under this sort of plan, arrive at the doctrine of “prima facie duty” described by W. D. Ross.<sup>10</sup> Ross himself, however, admits that this doctrine yields no real guidance for moral conduct in concrete situations. It guides us in abstract moral thinking; it tells us, theoretically, what to do, “all other things being equal.” But other things are rarely if ever equal. A and B, struggling with a moral decision, are two different persons with different factual histories, different projects and aspirations, and different ideals. It may indeed be right, morally right, for A to do *X* and B to do not-*X*. We may, that is, connect “right” and “wrong” to faithfulness to the ethical ideal. This does not cast us into relativism, because the ideal contains at its heart a component that is universal: Maintenance of the caring relation.

Before turning to a discussion of “right” and “wrong” and their usefulness in an ethic of caring, we might try to clear up the problem earlier mentioned as a danger in any ethic of virtue: the temptation to withdraw from the public domain. It is a real danger. Even though we rejected the sort of virtue exhibited by the hermit-monk on the mountaintop, that rejection may have been one of personal choice. It still remains possible that an ethic of caring is compatible with the monk’s choice, and that such an ethic even induces withdrawal. We are not going to be able to divide cases clearly. The monk who withdraws only to serve God is clearly under the guidance of an ethic that differs fundamentally from the ethic of caring. The source of his ethic is not the source of ours, and he might deny that any form of human relatedness could be a source for moral behavior. But if, when another intrudes upon his privacy, he receives the other as one-caring, we cannot charge him with violating our ethic. Further, as we saw in our discussion of the one-caring, there is a legitimate dread of the proximate stranger—of that person who may ask more than we feel able to give. We saw there that we cannot care for everyone. Caring itself is reduced to mere talk about caring when we attempt to do so. We must acknowledge, then, that an ethic of caring implies a limit on our obligation.

Our obligation is limited and delimited by relation. We are never free, in the human domain, to abandon our preparedness to care; but, practically, if we are meeting those in our inner circles adequately as ones-caring and receiving those linked to our inner circles by formal chains of relation, we shall limit the calls upon our obligation quite naturally. We are not obliged to summon the “I must” if there is no possibility of completion in the other. I am not obliged to care for starving children in Africa, because there is no way for this caring to be completed in the other unless I abandon the caring to which I am obligated. I may still choose to do something in the direction of caring, but I am not obliged to do so. When we discuss our obligation to animals, we shall see that this is even more sharply limited by relation. We cannot refuse obligation in human affairs by merely refusing to enter relation; we are, by virtue of our mutual humanity, already and perpetually in potential relation. Instead, we limit our obligation by examining the possibility of completion. In connection with animals, however, we may find it possible to refuse relation itself on the grounds of a species-specific impossibility of any form of reciprocity in caring.

Now, this is very important, and we should try to say clearly what governs our obligation. On the basis of what has been developed so far, there seem to be two criteria: the existence of or potential for present relation, and the dynamic potential for growth in relation, including the potential for increased reciprocity and, perhaps, mutuality. The first criterion establishes an absolute obligation and the second serves to put our obligations into an order of priority.

If the other toward whom we shall act is capable of responding as cared-for and there are no objective conditions that prevent our receiving this response—if, that is, our caring can be completed in the other—then we must meet that other as one-caring. If we do not care naturally, we must call upon our capacity for ethical caring. When we are in relation or when the other has addressed us, we must respond as one-caring. The imperative in relation is categorical. When relation has not yet been established, or when it may properly be refused (when no formal chain or natural circle is present), the imperative is more like that of the hypothetical: I must if I wish to (or am able to) move into relation.

The second criterion asks us to look at the nature of potential relation and, especially, at the capacity of the cared-for to respond. The potential for response in animals, for example, is nearly static; they cannot respond in mutuality, nor can the nature of their response change substantially. But a child's potential for increased response is enormous. If the possibility of relation is dynamic—if the relation may clearly grow with respect to reciprocity—then the possibility and degree of my obligation also grows. If response is imminent, so also is my obligation. This criterion will help us to distinguish between our obligation to members of the nonhuman animal world and, say, the human fetus. We must keep in mind, however, that the second criterion binds us in proportion to the probability of increased response and to the imminence of that response. Relation itself is fundamental in obligation.

I shall give an example of thinking guided by these criteria, but let us pause for a moment and ask what it is we are trying to accomplish. I am working deliberately toward criteria that will preserve our deepest and most tender human feelings. The caring of mother for child, of human adult for human infant, elicits the tenderest feelings in most of us. Indeed, for many women, this feeling of nurturance lies at the very heart of what we assess as good. A philosophical position that has difficulty distinguishing between our obligation to human infants and, say, pigs is in some difficulty straight off. It violates our most deeply cherished feeling about human goodness. This violation does not, of course, make the position logically wrong, but it suggests that especially strong grounds will be needed to support it. In the absence of such strong grounds—and I shall argue in a later chapter that they are absent—we might prefer to establish a position that captures rather than denies our basic feelings. We might observe that man (in contrast to woman) has continually turned away from his inner self and feeling in pursuit of both science and ethics. With respect to strict science, this turning outward may be defensible; with respect to ethics, it has been disastrous.

Now, let's consider an example: the problem of abortion. Operating under the guidance of an ethic of caring, we are not likely to find abortion in general either right or wrong. We shall have to inquire into individual cases. An incipient embryo is an information speck—a set of controlling instructions for a future human being. Many of these specks are created and flushed away without their creators' awareness. From the view developed here, the information speck is an information speck; it has no given sanctity. There should be no concern over the waste of "human tissue," since nature herself is wildly prolific, even profligate.<sup>11</sup> The one-caring is concerned not with human tissue but with human consciousness—with pain, delight, hope, fear, entreaty, and response.

But suppose the information speck is mine, and I am aware of it. This child-to-be is the product of love between a man deeply cared-for and me. Will the child have his eyes or mine? His stature or mine? Our joint love of mathematics or his love of mechanics or my love of language? This is not

just an information speck; it is endowed with prior love and current knowledge. It is sacred, but I—humbly, not presumptuously—confer sacredness upon it. I cannot, will not destroy it. It is joined to loved others through formal chains of caring. It is linked to the inner circle in a clearly defined way. I might wish that I were not pregnant, but I cannot destroy this known and potentially loved person-to-be. There is already relation albeit indirect and formal. My decision is an ethical one born of natural caring.

But suppose, now, that my beloved child has grown up; it is she who is pregnant and considering abortion. She is not sure of the love between herself and the man. She is miserably worried about her economic and emotional future. I might like to convey sanctity on this information speck; but I am not God—only mother to this suffering cared-for. It is she who is conscious and in pain, and I as one-caring move to relieve the pain. This information speck is an information speck and that is all. There is no formal relation, given the breakdown between husband and wife, and with the embryo, there is no present relation; the possibility of future relation—while not absent, surely—is uncertain. But what of this possibility for growing response? Must we not consider it? We must indeed. As the embryo becomes a fetus and, growing daily, becomes more nearly capable of response as cared-for, our obligation grows from a nagging uncertainty—an “I must if I wish”—to an utter conviction that we must meet this small other as one-caring.

If we try to formalize what has been expressed in the concrete situations described so far, we arrive at a legal approach to abortion very like that of the Supreme Court: abortions should be freely available in the first trimester, subject to medical determination in the second trimester, and banned in the third, when the fetus is viable. A woman under the guidance of our ethic would be likely to recognize the growing possibility of relation; the potential is clearly dynamic. Further, many women recognize the relation as established when the fetus begins to move about. It is not a question of when life begins but of when relation begins.

But what if relation is never established? Suppose the child is born and the mother admits no sense of relatedness. May she commit infanticide? One who asks such questions misinterprets the concept of relatedness that I have been struggling to describe. Since the infant, even the near-natal fetus, is capable of relation—of the sweetest and most unselfconscious reciprocity—one who encounters the infant is obligated to meet it as one-caring. Both parts of this claim are essential; it is not only the child’s capability to respond but also the encounter that induces obligation. There must exist the possibility for our caring to be completed in the other. If the mother does not care naturally, then she must summon ethical caring to support her as one-caring. She may not ethically ignore the child’s cry to live.

The one-caring, in considering abortion as in all other matters, cares first for the one in immediate pain or peril. She might suggest a brief and direct form of counseling in which a young expectant mother could come to grips with her feelings. If the incipient child has been sanctified by its mother, every effort must be made to help the two to achieve a stable and hopeful life together; if it has not, it should be removed swiftly and mercifully with all loving attention to the woman, the conscious patient. Between these two clear reactions is a possible confused one: the young woman is not sure how she feels. The one-caring probes gently to see what has been considered, raising questions and retreating when the questions obviously have been considered and are now causing great pain. Is such a view “unprincipled”? If it is, it is boldly so; it is at least connected with the world as it is, at its best and at its worst, and it requires that we—in espousing a “best”—stand ready to actualize that preferred condition. The decision for or against abortion must be made by those directly involved in the concrete situation, but it need not be made alone. The one-caring cannot require everyone to behave as she would in a particular situation. Rather, when she dares to say, “I think you should do X,” she adds, also, “Can I help you?” The one under her gaze is under her support and not her judgment. \*

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This book, an essential tool for anyone studying the state of feminist thought in particular or ethical theory in general, shows the outlines of an ethic of care in the distinctive practices of African American communities and considers how the values of care and justice can be reformulated.

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