

# The Unhappy Marriage of Care Ethics and Virtue Ethics

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*The proposal that care ethic(s) (CE) be subsumed under the framework of virtue ethic(s) (VE) is both promising and problematic for feminists. Although some attempts to construe care as a virtue are more commendable than others, they cannot duplicate a freestanding feminist CE. Sander-Staudt recommends a model of theoretical collaboration between VE and CE that retains their comprehensiveness, allows CE to enhance VE as well as be enhanced by it, and leaves CE open to other collaborations.*

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Recent literature in care ethic(s) (CE) shows a growing tendency on the part of ethicists to conceptualize care as a virtue and to situate CE under the more established moral tradition of virtue ethic(s) (VE) (Noddings 1984; Spelman 1991; Slote 1998a; Rachels 1999; McLaren 2001; Tessman 2001; Halwani 2003a, 2003b). The typical motivations for this merger are that the similarities between CE and VE allow them in combination to form a strong contender to other approaches to ethics, and that CE will benefit by a more systematic treatment of justice while still retaining some of its important features. However, it is appropriate to ask whether this is likely to be yet another instance of an “unhappy marriage” between theories reminiscent of the critiques made famously by Heidi Hartman and others.<sup>1</sup> Such critiques have posited that when two or more theoretical frameworks are fused it can be to the detriment or obfuscation of one.

The idea that care can be construed as a virtue is not novel within the care ethic tradition that originated with the work of Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (1984). Although Noddings originally considered and rejected the idea that we can understand care as a virtue, I believe that we can and that the concept of virtue is important in the practice and normative assessment of

care. The more central questions for my task are whether there are substantial differences in the notion of CE as distinct from VE, and whether care is ever best understood as something other or more than a virtue. While remaining open to the potential fruitfulness of a union between CE and VE, I critique attempts to merge these moral theories that are premised on the claim that CE is untenable on its own and that VE offers a complementary supplement. I examine proposals given by Michael Slote, Raja Halwani, and Margaret McLaren in order to show what is promising and problematic about merging CE with VE. I contend that CE has the potential of being a more comprehensive moral theory on its own when it is critically situated in social and political contexts, such as sex and gender, and that the addition of feminist ethics (FE) gives CE a second way of dealing with concerns of justice. I then explain why, although similar, CE differs from VE in its definition of care as a practice, its pragmatism, and its ontological scope. Using the relational ontology of CE as a metaethical framework, I explain why the ideal relationship between CE and VE (and FE) is one of critical collaboration, rather than of submersion or assimilation.

#### THE COMPATIBILITY OF CE AND VE

Slote, Halwani, and McLaren agree that a union between CE and VE is desirable because of the compatibility of the two theories, and that CE becomes a more comprehensive and defensible theory when aligned with VE. While they do not emphasize the same details, these authors have noted the goodness of care as a motive and end, and the importance of relationships to a virtuous and flourishing life. All concur that CE and VE are compatible enough to merge without substantial loss, but each author has a unique way of conceptualizing the merger, thus showing that not every attempt to unite CE and VE promises the same degree of compatibility.

For Slote, the main point of commonality between CE and VE is that the theories share an emphasis on caring motivation as the most basic feature of moral theory (1998a). Slote contends that the morality of caring is best understood as a form of “agent-based” virtue ethics, which takes the claim that care is morally good as a fundamental, intuitive judgment from which others derive (173). By “agent-based” Slote means that the measure of virtue is rooted in “*aretic* qualities,” such as the motivations, dispositions, and character traits of moral agents, and that the virtues of collectives reduce to the virtuous motives of the individuals that make them up. Slote stipulates that a moral approach “counts as virtue ethical if and only if it focuses more on agents than on their actions, and treats ‘*aretic*’ notions like admirability and moral goodness as prior to ‘deontic’ ones like permissibility and wrongness” (172). Slote contends that CE is in fact an agent-based theory, because “the very expression ‘morality of caring’ implies the primacy of motivation” (172–73).

McLaren agrees that CE and VE are similar enough to facilitate an easy union because both theories stress overlap between ethical and political concerns, as well as between private and public spheres (2001, 108). She observes that CE and VE similarly understand the self as relational, stress contextual particulars of moral assessment, and assert the importance of social and political considerations (110). Halwani highlights yet other points of relational compatibility. He states that by interpreting care as a virtue the most valuable elements of CE can be preserved: its appeal to partiality, application to intimate relations, valuation of emotive components, and relevance to areas in moral life that have been traditionally neglected (2003a, 160–61). However, as much as they agree about the general compatibility of CE and VE, these authors disagree on four theoretical details, revealing important and contentious variables in the possible alliance between CE and VE.

#### DEFINING CARE AS A VIRTUE: MOTIVES OR CONSEQUENCES?

Slote, Halwani, and McLaren disagree about whether to define care as a virtue in terms of motives or consequences. Halwani and McLaren seem more compatible with predominant versions of CE, because unlike Slote, they include both motives and consequences in their assessment of virtue. Halwani and McLaren define care as a virtue in the traditional Aristotelian sense, as a state involving choice and lying in a mean, with the mean relative to the individual, and conducive to flourishing (Halwani 2003b, 70). Borrowing from Linda Zagzebski, Halwani adopts a second definition of virtue that involves motives and ends: “[virtue is] a deep and enduring acquired excellence of a person, involving a characteristic motivation to produce a certain desired end and reliable success in bringing about that end” (Zagzebski quoted in Halwani 2003b, 70). McLaren states: “instead of focusing solely on the act, the way utilitarianism does, or the intention, the way Kant’s deontology does, virtue theory considers both the action and intention important” (2001, 106). In adopting these definitions, both authors depart from Slote’s understanding of care as a virtue defined solely by a moral agent’s motives. This point is significant because many care ethicists emphasize the importance of right intent, but also competency and completion in the practice of care.

While Halwani and McLaren agree that care as a virtue should be defined as both a motive and a practical competence, their tendency to adopt gender neutral definitions of virtue such as that offered by Zagzebski prevent them from highlighting the gender sensitive distinction between care as a motive and end. Defining care as a virtue that involves both motives and completion is especially relevant for feminists seeking to reconfigure gender based understandings of care as a virtue and practice. Typically, male virtue is associated with care as a motivation, or “caring about,” while female virtue is associated with

caring completion, or “caring for.” Stipulating a general dimension of practical activity associated with the virtue of care does not remedy this problem, since the motive of care can support practices other than caring for actual people in a hands-on way. Many individuals and institutions claim to be motivated to care about the needs of women as caregivers and receivers, but fail to do so effectively or broadly.

#### THE WEIGHT OF CARE AS A VIRTUE

Slote, Halwani, and McLaren further disagree about how much weight should be placed upon care within VE. Merging CE with VE in a way that affords care a central place is an important indication of whether care will be done justice in the final reading. Slote affords care a much more primary place than does McLaren or Halwani, and does a better job of retaining the status given to care in CE. Slote adopts Virginia Held's view that care is the most primary of virtues, from which all other virtues derive (Slote 1998b, 27; Held 1995a, 131). Slote considers care as a moral motivation to be the central component of not only CE and VE, but any possible moral theory. Care is the underlying force of ethics itself, because any desire to be moral presumes a motivational posture of caring about self and others. Be it concern for oneself, one's duty, or the greatest good, if one does not care an ethic fails to get off the ground. By giving substantial weight to the motivational primacy of care, Slote contends that VE offers CE a superior foundation, making CE a more comprehensive theory than it could be otherwise.

Halwani objects that Slote's conception of care is overly broad, and that “care” is strapped with more conceptual work than it can handle (2003b, 76–79). Halwani concedes that care as a virtue is inextricably joined with other virtues, such as justice, courage, and honesty, but recommends that these virtues be kept conceptually distinct from that of care: “while care is an important disposition and virtue, it should not be burdened with the work better left to other virtues and moral concepts” (79). We can speculate that Halwani undercuts the weight of care because he desires to retain analytical clarity between traditionally distinct ideas, but it is not clear that he is right to trade off on the comprehensiveness of CE. Construing care as the most primary of virtues, as Slote does, challenges dominant worldviews that privatize and background care, while meaningfully retaining some distinction between such concepts as care and justice.

McLaren also construes care as only one virtue among others, but from a feminist line of reasoning that focuses on the overlap of ethics and politics. Unlike Slote and Halwani, McLaren seeks to fuse VE with feminist ethics (FE), allowing her to retain the focus on gender that is characteristic of CE, but with an added critical edge. She notes that the relationship between care and

virtue is complicated for feminists because care is associated with the virtue of women in a way that perpetuates sexist stereotypes and essentialist biases, but care is also vital in a world that needs individuals to do more than the moral minimum (2001, 108, 112). Ambiguous about how we ought to weigh virtues correspondingly, McLaren does not identify care as the most primary virtue, but describes it as one among others. She envisions a feminist virtue theory that counts “appropriate care” as a feminist virtue, alongside other feminist virtues, such as justice, feistiness, self-respect, playfulness, openness, self-awareness, and courage (112).

That McLaren passes on the possibility that a comprehensive CE could generate similar ideals without VE is explicit in an endnote: “Rather than exploring whether care ethics can deal with considerations of justice, I am proposing another alternative—that we think of both care and justice as compatible virtues within a virtue theory framework” (114n10). While it may be that we can view care and justice as compatible virtues in a feminist VE, it is not equally certain that we should or must. Diminishing the conceptual centrality of care is problematic for reasons central to both CE and FE, because both care and women have been historically marginal to moral and political theory. It is possible that a fusion of CE and FE is adequate to address these concerns, and would do so in ways significantly different from when situated within VE.

#### THE SCOPE OF CARE AS A VIRTUE

The third point of disagreement for these authors concerns whether care as a virtue should be limited to relations characterized by particularity and partiality or extended to relations characterized by generality and impartiality. Halwani defends Noddings’s propensity to limit care to private and partial relations. On the contrary, Slote and McLaren apply standards of caring virtue not only to individuals, but also to institutions, collectives, and whole societies. Slote claims that a virtuous person is one who emotionally cares deeply for intimate others, but also broadly for others more generally, and that humans are capable of bringing care to bear upon political and social activities. “If individuals can care deeply and broadly about other human beings,” he notes, “they can also care about (the good of) their country . . . and other countries as well” (2003a, 181). McLaren queries, “Why should care be limited to particular individuals? . . . Care can be directed toward politics and principles that make the world a better place” (McLaren 2001, 111). Slote and McLaren grant care a broad conceptual scope that is drastically reduced in Halwani’s proposal, making their VE more compatible with politicized and feminist versions of CE. Halwani objects that broadening the definition of care in this way destroys something unique and interesting about CE. However, this justification is weak. As McLaren points out, caring for particular others can make one aware of systemic

injustice (112). More strongly put, the virtuous expectations, ends, and practices of care and justice intertwine such that CE cannot afford to ignore political relations, because they shape and impede caring relations. If necessary, political comprehensiveness is worth the price of uniqueness on this point.

#### RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY

Fourth and finally, these authors diverge in their theoretical understandings of relationship as ontologically basic. While both Slote and McLaren imply that CE and VE share an ontological commitment to relationship, Halwani explicitly rejects this claim. By making care the most primary virtue from which all others derive and emphasizing care as a virtue appropriate to all kinds of relationships, Slote implicitly gives ontological priority to relationship in his VE. McLaren also seems to embrace relational ontology in VE when she states: "Virtue theory sees moral agents as social and political, defined in part by their social roles. Gilligan, too, views the self as relational, defined in part through social roles and a web of relationships to others" (McLaren 2001, 110). Whether or not McLaren is committed to the ontological *priority* of relationship depends upon how she teases out being "in part" defined by relationship. Different forms of virtue ethics and feminisms offer distinctive constructions of being, not all of them equally compatible with the strong relational ontology of CE. Halwani, for example, rejects the need for a VE to commit to the ontological priority of relationship because he sees no need to commit to such a controversial claim (Halwani 2003b, 40). And even though McLaren and Slote embrace the idea that the self is relational in their VE, the central focus they give to virtue as a character trait of individual moral agents retains a mode of individualism that some versions of CE will challenge.

Relational ontology is an important point of compatibility between CE and VE, impacting how we understand the development of virtue and the amount of attention given to care in this process. Some accounts of virtue minimize the role of care in the achievement of virtue and flourishing. They emphasize the moral agent as a product of moral luck rather than of intentional and prolonged caring processes, or as a rightful "owner" of virtues earned through habitual self-discipline, entitling the possessor to certain social privileges. Care ethicists often insist upon a relational ontology to keep mindful that the need to give and receive care is an essential part of life, yet is unfairly distributed and rewarded. A theory of virtue that adopts relational ontology is more apt to explore the relational aspects of virtue, but it may not challenge the unfair distribution of care work. However, the outright lack of commitment to relational ontology, as in Halwani's proposal, indicates a VE framework that is far askance from the spirit of CE.

In summary, these three authors have hypothesized that CE and VE are similar enough to make them compatible candidates for synthesis. They disagree, however, in how they define and weigh virtue, whether they apply care to impartial relations, and how they construe being and the self. Before returning to assess these proposals further and to consider whether these authors are right to think CE can be assimilated with VE without any loss, it is important to review the second motivation for merging CE with VE, the perceived injustices of care.

#### THE JUSTICE CRITIQUES OF SLOTE, HALWANI, AND McLAREN

Slote, Halwani, and McLaren agree that on its own CE reflects and promotes a number of injustices. There are many ways of phrasing this problem, but for simplicity I refer to it generally as the “justice critique.” Each author has his/her own justice critique, but all allege that it can be avoided when CE is assimilated to VE. None pays adequate attention to whether CE can respond to the justice critique on its own.

Slote begins by observing the debate over whether a morality of caring can provide a total framework for moral thought and action, given that it emphasizes intimate relations with particular others over large-scale public relations with strangers. Slote finds CE in a better position than critics have supposed because VE can provide needed elements of justice. He states that caring “is best articulated in a specifically virtue-ethical manner,” and that once one does there “is a specifically virtue-ethical way to widen its concerns” (1998a, 171). Slote takes himself to be articulating “the theory of justice of an ethic of caring,” and finds that his approach sits well with CE while offering reasonable conditions for a theory of justice (195). By merging with VE, CE receives a way to deal with relationships between strangers, namely, through caring for intimate others we become more broadly concerned for those distant from us. In this way, the virtue of care can lead to the virtue of justice, as well as be applied to more public states of affairs (181).

Halwani cites two additional versions of the justice critique. Working from Claudia Card and Victoria Davion’s objections to Noddings, Halwani argues that CE is unable to provide for conditions of justice. Noddings’s concepts of “engrossment” and “motivational displacement” have the potential for injustice because they command a moral agent’s attention to relations with intimates. According to Noddings, “engrossment” is characterized by one-caring moving away from self-centeredness toward noticing and attending to needs of a proximate other, while “motivational displacement” describes how one-caring adopts the goals of the cared for, promotes them, and allows herself to be transformed by the other (Noddings 1984, 15–20, 33–34).

Card's justice critique (1990) looked at how "engrossment" can lead us to neglect obligations to unknown others. Davion (1993) took issue with the concept of "motivational displacement" because of how one-caring can be exploited or become an accessory to evil deeds. Davion noted that Noddings's account of care contained a concept of reciprocity, but that it was too weak to prevent this kind of problem because it did not demand mutuality—the cared for reciprocates by growing and pursuing personal projects. Davion found that while this one-sidedness may be appropriate for relationships between parents and children (a point in itself debatable), it is not appropriate for adult relationships because "in . . . relationships between equals, something is wrong when one person does all the caretaking and the other receives all the care" (167). Neither are caring engrossment and motivational displacement good if they make one an accessory to evil deeds. Davion located these problems in a failure to recognize absolute value in anything other than caring and a belief that all caring relations are good (171). She offered integrity and autonomy as two values that might supplement CE, presuming that these traits are not integral to caring in the first place, but reside in a sense of separateness from caring relationship: "in making decisions about continuing caring relationships and forming new ones, one acts out of a sense of oneself as being separate from others" (174). Davion recommended a stage prior to care that allows scrutiny of a person to determine whether her projects are supportable.

Halwani concludes that Noddings's CE succumbed to these critiques, but seeks to retain the insights of CE by subsuming it within VE. VE provides CE with a normative framework to address these concerns because a virtuous person, equipped with practical wisdom and the virtues of care and justice, is able to evaluate the desirability of intimate relations and adjudicate between partial and impartial relationships (2003a, 176). Without the help of VE, though, Halwani finds CE inadequate. Referring to the critiques of Card and Davion, Halwani concludes "any ethics that attempts to build itself simply on the concept of care is bound to face some severe difficulties" (163).

McLaren's justice critique raises questions about feminine virtue and the lack of attention to social and political contexts in CE. Keeping in line with her desire to render a satisfactorily feminist ethic, she emphasizes the ways that care as a feminine virtue has facilitated the unjust caricaturing of women: "Care ethics reinforces stereotypical 'womanly virtues' because it draws on the idea of women as caretakers and nurturers." She argues that CE fails to be a feminist ethic, and "is less attentive to the social and political context than virtue theory is" (2001, 110). Although Aristotle's account of virtue had the limitation of viewing men and women unequally, McLaren reports that a neo-Aristotelian virtue theory can meet the qualifications of FE by critically attending to the social and political contexts of care, providing CE a way to address its problems. A feminist VE can help CE avoid injustice by disassociating women from the



virtue of care, emphasizing the importance of social institutions in promoting virtue, and recognizing the inseparability of the ethical and political.

#### THE JUSTICE CRITIQUE AS BASED ON A NARROW READING OF CE

The portrayal of CE as a moral theory blind to justice concerns does not capture the entire scope of CE literature. Both Halwani and McLaren cite Joan Tronto as one who developed a more comprehensive CE by conceptualizing care as a political ideal, but they find her attempt lacking. Tronto defined care broadly as “a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (1993, 103). This definition improved upon Noddings’s by not being limited to partial or proximate relations and it easily met Card’s objection that care is unable to ground relations with strangers. McLaren notes that Tronto’s definition of care challenged sexist stereotypes because it was gender neutral, and promoted justice because care for others can lead to concern for justice (McLaren 2001, 111). Nonetheless, both Halwani and Slote reject Tronto’s account as a viable alternative to VE.

In footnotes, Halwani rejects Tronto’s definition of care on the same grounds as he does Slote’s—that it is overly broad and insubstantial: “If caring is indeed a virtue, then it might not be plausible to require of it to handle the problems that Tronto wants to deal with” (2003b, 265n21, 268n44). Although Halwani claims that this way of expanding the concept of care overburdens it to the point of exhaustion, his concern is unwarranted. Like justice or love, care is a very general and flexible ideal, capable of application to many domains and situations. Indeed, the breadth and numerous senses of care poses an accelerated need for conceptual clarity in discussions of CE, because “care” refers all at once to complex sets of practices, motivations, ideals, dispositions, occupations, burdens, duties, expectations, emotions, ends, and more. By accepting Noddings’s version of CE over Tronto’s, Halwani ensures by definition that CE is unable to deal with justice, because norms of feminine care have developed dichotomously to norms of justice.

McLaren faults Tronto for not addressing adequately the justice critique according to the standards of feminist ethics. She finds that Tronto’s definition of care “reinforces the status quo” and “does not provide moral critiques of actions that perpetuate women’s subordination, nor prescribe morally justifiable ways of resisting such actions and practices” (2001, 108–9). McLaren states that Tronto has to flesh out what is meant by maintaining our world “as well as possible” in order to determine whether this definition is sufficiently feminist. Tronto’s definition of care showed that care can be applied to politics and perhaps lead to considerations of justice. But because CE is “less attentive to social and political context than virtue theory is,” McLaren concludes

that “understanding care within virtue ethics framework shores it up against some criticisms” (110–11). Given that Tronto’s definition of care avoids the failings cited by McLaren in her explanation of why the CE falls short as a normative theory (it perpetuates feminine stereotypes and relegates care to private relations), the conclusion that CE needs a normative framework from VE is tenuous.

McLaren is right that when Tronto’s definition of care is taken out of context it does not explicitly address injustice, and specific work remains to be done by care ethicists about how best to resist oppressive practices. However, placed within the critical framework Tronto developed, it is clear that she construed care as a political ideal in order to begin the process of challenging injustice in social and political contexts. Tronto distinguished her approach to CE by an “insistence that we cannot understand an ethic of care until we place such an ethic in its full moral and political context” (1995a, 125). She centrally defined care not as a virtue, disposition, or emotion, but as a practice (118–19, 176). Care as a practice is marked by injustices along the lines of gender, race, and class, in that care work is typically performed in most societies by members who are least well off—slaves, servants, and women (112–13). She argued that care as a practice is a divided form of labor characterized by power (114–15). Tronto clearly intended her definition of care to challenge the status quo: “To call attention to care is to raise questions about the adequacy of care in our society. Such an inquiry will lead to a profound rethinking of moral and political life” (111).

Tronto was not the only care ethicist who affirmed that care is a broad enough concept to generate an internal sense of justice. Dietmut Bubeck (1995), Grace Clement (1996), Selma Sevenhuijsen (1998), Eva Feder Kittay (1999), and Fionna Robinson (1999) have explored how care can extend to concerns of justice in terms of personal autonomy, dependency work, international relations, and citizenship. These accounts have built a political philosophy of care and have confirmed Slote’s understanding of care as a concept that broadens to include the full spectrum of human relations. While assessing all of these accounts is more than I can do here, it seems rash to conclude that CE is incapable of addressing the justice critique and that VE offers the requisite supplement. Not every VE attends to the social and political contexts of gendered care, and many struggle to conceptualize the virtues of justice and care in a way that resists practical gender dominance. If neo-Aristotelian VE can reform traditional ideas, why not CE?

#### DEVELOPING A SENSE OF JUSTICE WITHIN CE

There are at least two ways that CE can internally respond to critiques of justice, both of which depart from Noddings in important ways. First, CE can generally emphasize the need to navigate a web of relationship that includes all relationships, including a relationship with oneself, and others distant and unknown;

not only relationships characterized by affection, but also neutrality or hostility. This is possible because private relations are embedded in public relations, as well as the reverse. A CE that is critically situated in political and social contexts illuminates how justice and care are mutually entwined ideals and practices that have taken on certain spurious tendencies of distinction. Far from being unable to respond to concerns of justice, a broad, politically situated CE *must* seek to promote justice in order to achieve care. This is because a caring relationship marked by injustice or evil is not caring. The unjust do not care about those they wrong and unjust acts such as rape, abuse, or murder, damage caring relationships. Moreover, caring practices that are unjust have a harder time achieving goals considered central to care. Thus, a morally consistent CE cannot turn a blind eye to injustice, but it will challenge common understandings of justice.

When care is defined as broadly extending to both partial and impartial relations, as Tronto and Slote have envisioned, it generates a sense of justice and reciprocity that responds to Davion's concern that care makes one vulnerable to exploitive attachments with others who are possibly evil. Davion is right that values such as autonomy and integrity are important checks on relations with others, but these values can originate within CE based on Gilligan's understanding of moral maturity as a balance between relations of care and self-sacrifice. This balance is nurtured by caring about oneself, what is often called "self-esteem," and includes a sense of being separate from others. It is possible to understand Davion's stage of cautious scrutiny as an appropriate and ongoing form of caring for oneself and others, one that seeks to protect a self who is not only intrinsically valuable, but who is also the product and receiver of caring relationship and a potential or actual giver of care to others. While scrutinizing relationships goes against some common intuitions, such as the belief that mothers should love their children unconditionally, this ongoing stage of scrutiny is appropriate even between mothers and children, especially as children age and become more autonomous.

Nor must these ideals emerge from outside of CE. For most individuals, self-esteem is nurtured by prior and existing caring relations with supportive others. Modeling clear self boundaries and respecting one's own sense of integrity is part of caring for others because it models appropriate self care, and sets standards for reciprocating care. While a relationship with another who is truly evil might have some genuinely caring aspects, it is possible to argue that this relationship is tainted care that does not seek the highest well-being of either cared for or caregiver, nor the well-being of others threatened by the cared for's propensity for evil. Thus, the first way that CE can internally respond to injustice is by characterizing injustice as an obstacle to ideal care.

The second way CE can generate an internal sense of justice is by developing its potential as FE. Although there is no guarantee that any given CE or VE will be feminist, an ethic of care, like VE, is capable of generating feminist qualities by situating care in its social and political contexts, one of which is sex

and gender. Furthermore, feminist CE will highlight certain aspects of practical reasoning that feminist VE may not. For instance, care as an ideal virtue might be gender neutral, but caring practice is not. When CE develops its potential as FE, it can reveal the disparate impact that a theoretical merger between CE and VE might have for women. For instance, Halwani brackets the concern that virtue ethicists will continue to ignore the concerns of women caregivers once CE is subsumed to VE, on the grounds that this is a problem with the political practice of philosophers, and not moral theory (Halwani 2003b, 25). A feminist CE must insist that virtue be assigned to moral theories and theorists alike.

This second way of dealing with the justice critique is a more specific version of the first, because sex/gender is one of many social and political contexts of care where injustice can be found. The sex- and gender-based maldistribution of care work is a serious problem for CE and VE. But feminist CE has the potential to diagnose and respond to McLaren's justice critique differently than feminist VE. For example, McLaren and other virtue ethicists claim to adopt a "gender-neutral" account of care because they recognize that both men and women can and should develop the virtue of care. But the feminist distinction between sex and gender, put in the political context of caring practice, shows the need for finer distinctions. What these ethicists in fact adopt is a "sex-neutral" account of care that does little to challenge the injustices of care based on gender, such as the preference for "strong" over "gentle" virtues, and the parasitic flourishing of "masculine" men and women over "feminine" men and women. Feminist CE can object that such a scheme fails to achieve reciprocal care for care workers, generally conceived beyond the categories of sex. Feminist VE could also reject this scheme for not being virtuous or conducive to just schemes of flourishing, but not every feminist VE has the same commitment to care in how it defines virtue and flourishing, and so may not resolve the dilemma in the same manner as feminist CE.

While it is possible that the need to nurture a feminist sense of justice in CE might expire because the practices of care and justice are no longer segregated according to sex or gender, the internal need for sensitivity to power differentials in CE will never expire. Issues of power difference are significant and always need close monitoring. The potential for unjust caring relationship is great in dealings with intimates and non-intimates because care so often involves unequal terms of power, and injustice thwarts caring completion. Thus, CE is capable of developing an internal commitment to justice understood in a characteristically care-ethical manner, and is in a better position than even Slote supposes. While it may be possible for CE to assimilate to VE, it is not urgently necessary for CE to do so on the grounds that CE is unjust. Having defused this motivation, I now propose terms for the union of CE and VE, and simultaneously argue for the value of retaining CE as a distinct ethic.

## PRENUPTIAL AGREEMENTS: STANDARDS FOR CONSIDERING CE AS VE

Although it is not necessary for CE to be part of VE in order to address questions of justice, it may be that combining CE and VE creates a stronger contender to other moral theories like Kantian deontology. Assuming for the moment that this motive is credible, what is the best way to conceptualize the integration of these theories in a manner satisfactory to feminist CE? As I have shown, not every account of VE is the same as or compatible with every CE. From a feminist perspective, the most amenable match to CE is VE that defines virtue in terms of both motives and consequences, and is willing to attribute virtue to both individuals and collectives, in order to achieve better relationships for women as caregivers and care-receivers.

Furthermore, care should be construed as a broad virtue that applies to all forms of relationships, including those that are impartial and public. When care is construed as a virtue applying only to private relations, the pursuit of caring excellence does not meaningfully extend to the more public caring activities (education, nursing, welfare, and so on) or to public practices of justice that affect and configure intimate relationships (restrictions on marriage, adoption, custody, and the like). There also is no need to rethink public ideals to generate better forms of caring practice, as many care ethicists wish to do. Clement (1996), for example, redefines "citizenship" to include private and public forms of care, while Kittay (1999) defends a dependence-based notion of "equality" that provides public and institutional care services based on the concept of a "doulia," or one who cares for a caregiver.

Finally, a more compatible VE with CE will honestly scrutinize its own checkered history of valorizing the oppression of women as caregivers. Susan Moller Okin has noted that many proponents of VE claim care as a virtue but generally ignore the unjust nature of care work that women perform while simultaneously assuming that it will continue (1996, 229). She rightly questions whether acknowledging care as a virtue does not require revising core traditional accounts of virtue itself. Lisa Tessman (2001) makes an important step in this direction when she develops a critical VE that exposes how oppression causes moral damage to individuals that inhibits their flourishing, and how they are then often blamed for this condition. She notes that oppression reduces access to "external goods" needed to live well, such as freedom, material resources, political power, and respect, and that one's own character can be shaped such that it stands in the way of the good life (80). Virtue ethicists seeking to assimilate CE benefit from Tessman's analysis because it allows them to acknowledge how the virtue of care constrains women, while still upholding the imperative need to care as well as possible. Without blaming caregivers, virtue ethicists can offer more liberating ways of practicing care that achieve greater balance between self-interest and care for others.

In my view, McLaren is right that VE benefits from the addition of FE because feminist thinking challenges the privileging of men and masculine virtues in VE. But the diversity of FE requires explication before the compatibility of feminist VE and CE can be fully measured. While McLaren rejects the Aristotelian view that care is a virtue of women that is diminutive to the virtue of men, she does not consider how liberal and radical feminists disagree about how to refute Aristotle and his practical legacy. Liberal feminists might emphasize care as a gender-neutral virtue of an individual that should be chosen autonomously, while radical feminists might emphasize care as a social and individual virtue that partakes in dichotomous understandings of sex and gender and that requires revision. Radical and liberal feminisms also tend to stress different forms of political and moral agency. Liberal feminists highlight formal agency and individual autonomy against a background of social relations (which may or may not include care), while radical feminists highlight informal agency and misogynist social relations against a background of socially embedded individuals.

Although Tessman claims to develop a critical VE rooted in radical thinking, she retains an individualistic understanding of moral agency that is characteristic of liberal feminism. Tessman notes that an individual is constructed in part by social relationship, but her commitment to relational ontology slips when she understands moral damage as a harm done to individuals as members of a community, but not also as a harm done to communities through relational selves. Although recognizing that the virtues of communities fighting oppression are different from those not so committed, the oppression Tessman envisions feminists fighting seems not to extend to care when she states: "More radical virtues might include things like courage for taking on the hardest battles and paying the consequences—anything from going to jail, to losing a job, to being socially ostracized" (95). In CE, these virtues might well be vices, when the price to be paid is construed not as an individual one, but one that innocent and dependent others also pay, to the possible extent of causing new and unintended moral damage.

However, Tessman's analysis is useful for how it opens the door to examining the various possible community standards of CE, VE, and FE. Like Tessman and Tronto (1995b), I find great promise in the collaboration between CE and radical feminism. Together with VE, they can declare individuals and collectives vicious when they depend upon caregiving but do not support the needs of caregivers. Such an alliance allows ethicists to challenge the idea that women autonomously avoid public positions because as caregivers they choose different and necessarily incompatible priorities. By scrutinizing how public activities are structured to be incompatible with practices of care, they can emphasize care as a social imperative. But even as they work together, CE serves VE better as an independent and comprehensive moral theory. This is not because VE cannot address similar points, but because it does so differently from CE.

## THE POTENTIALLY DISTINCT QUALITIES OF CE AND VE

Even if VE meets all of the above criteria, giving care a wide berth and central place as the most primary of virtues in radical feminist VE, CE has at least three important points of distinction that make it worth retaining as an independent and comprehensive ethic. First, the central concepts of CE and VE are ultimately different—the concept of care features in CE in a way that it does not in VE, where the broader concept of virtue occupies the prominent position. This is not to say that CE is not interested in achieving virtuous care or thinking about care as a virtue. But CE scrutinizes virtue in the context of how best to achieve the goals of care, while VE scrutinizes care in the context of how best to achieve virtue and a flourishing life. This difference is substantial because for many individuals, especially those with social privilege, a flourishing life precludes caring responsibilities that are burdensome, dirty, or tedious, whereas CE is committed to the practice of care on all levels. The flourishing of some individuals, including many women, is purchased by the caring servitude or employment of others, most of who are comparatively disadvantaged women, but all of whom may nonetheless be judged virtuous by *some* community standards.

The different role that care as a practice plays in VE as distinct from CE is tied to the distinction between practical reasoning and care as an actual practice. Attention to care as a practice in VE is tied to its role in practical reasoning as an epistemic tool for assessing virtue and vice contextually. Although Aristotle claimed that virtues must be practiced and not just possessed, there is no guarantee that every application of caring virtue will be tied to a certain dimension of caring practice. According to Aristotle, individual virtue is in part determined by social positioning. Given this, privileged men (and women) are judged to exhibit the virtue of care without being responsible for the more thankless aspects of caring practice. Indeed, the virtue of the socially privileged and powerful is often defined to preclude such activity. Even if care is defined as the most central of virtues, and one that must be practiced on all levels to be fully met, the competing focus on other virtues and virtue ethical concepts means that VE is likely to take longer than CE to highlight the imperative and injustice of caring practices.

Second, CE is likely to be more pragmatic about care than VE. CE that is distinct from VE underscores the imperative of caring practice to human life, and the relative tenability of care as a virtue. For those responsible for caring for others, thinking about ideal virtue is a luxury that has little to do with what is actually expected of them, in that employers and dependents are rarely interested in a caregiver's opinions about ideal care. Moreover, the emphasis on virtue can fuel unrealistic expectations placed on caregivers by themselves and others. The reality of care as an increasingly harried practice creates the need for

a conception of care that is realistic, manageable, and justly dispersed. The pragmatism of CE seeks to expose social structures that don't support the reasonable facilitation of caring practice or practitioners, or are excessively high.

Finally, even when VE adopts a relational ontology, the role such ontology plays in VE differs from the one it plays in CE. The relational ontology of VE emphasizes the relational aspects of being in terms of individual virtue development, whereas CE emphasizes the relational aspects of being in a much broader sense. The relational ontology of CE construes the entire self as constituted, known, and maintained through relationship, and construes virtue as a quality that nurtures relationships appropriately. CE has the potential to apply relational ontology much more broadly than VE, with a focus on the relational aspects of familial and communal identities, human and nonhuman existence, and even moral theory itself. By applying the insights of relational ontology to moral theory, an independent CE offers a unique metaethical framework for understanding such basic moral concepts as good and evil (Noddings 1989). But it can also offer a framework for ideal theoretical relations. As a metaethic, CE not only speaks in favor of its status as a moral theory worthy of distinction, but also provides further guidelines for future efforts to join CE and VE.

#### RELATIONSHIP COUNSELING FOR MORAL THEORIES: CARE AS A METAETHIC

Many of the relational problems that plague people also trouble relations among moral theories. There can be the propensity to dominate, overly criticize, be too accepting of bad qualities, or seek to possess and consume the other. Many of the same relational ideals that improve relations among people also can be used to improve theoretical relations. For example, as Davion recommends, it behooves moral theorists as well as caregivers to engage in a phase of cautious scrutiny to assess the possible risk of any entanglement. For theories that share a degree of compatibility, the concepts of engrossment and motivational displacement are also appropriate, in the sense that any theory which seeks to merge with another ought to be prepared to change as a result of this union, and be willing to take on the goals and projects of the other. However, as in personal relationships between people, it makes sense for moral theories to retain a unique and distinct identity, especially when something of value will be lost.

One possible loss is a reduced potential for theoretical alliances and collaborations with yet other theories. In the case of CE merging with VE, it would be regrettable to foreclose on promising relations with other moral theories such as Confucianism, phenomenology, Marxism, pragmatism, and perhaps even Kantian deontology. Although Gilligan and many other care ethicists have used CE to argue against Kantian deontology, and forming a strong contender against Kantianism motivates the unification of CE and VE, an alliance between CE



and some aspects of deontological ethics is conceivable. The best relationship between CE and VE might thus be characterized as an open marriage, rather than an exclusive partnership.

Another possible loss is the reduced potential for conceptual distinctions that facilitate theoretical critique. CE proposes a metaethical approach to understanding relationships between moral theories in terms of collaboration and critical partnership, rather than antagonism or assimilation. A more suitable VE will treat CE as a critical partner rather than a deferential adjunct. This approach brings CE the support of VE, but not at the expense of losing the potential in CE to spotlight potential shortcomings in VE, such as the traditional hierarchy of the virtue of justice over care. If CE merges entirely with VE in a reductive or diminutive manner, then it will be harder for CE to serve as a critical supporter to VE, and this theoretical relation will only mirror the practical hierarchies between male and female virtues. Ethicists should also explore what value there might be in understanding VE as a kind of CE.<sup>2</sup> The VE most compatible with CE is one that posits an independent and consistent version of CE, because only then can the promise of such a merger be clearly ascertained and fulfilled.

CE is not alone in positing the strength of a collaborative model—there have been similar calls in the fields of psychology, physical science, and philosophy of science to move to collaborative approaches in order to recognize the overlap and mutual enhancement of theories that traditionally have been perceived as competitive, such as creationism and evolutionism (Martin 1972; Burian 1975; Koertge 1983; Kalmar and Sternberg 1988). Feminists, too, argue that there should be no one “star” in feminist theory (Frye 1990). But CE might introduce this idea further to moral theory, and seems uniquely suited to do so, given its general emphasis on relationship. This metaethical stance speaks in favor of CE’s comprehensiveness as a moral theory, but at the same time speaks against merging CE to VE in an assimilative way.

In assessing the prospects for a happy union between CE and VE, there can be no doubt that CE benefits from thinking about care in the context of VE, and that both theories benefit from the addition of FE. Virtues are important to care, and care can be fruitfully understood as a feminist virtue. However, I contend that the reasons for merging these theories are overstated. While the marriage between CE and VE carries a potential for mutual benefit, it also opens the door for the early decline and obfuscation of CE. Put in a virtue-ethical manner, the happiness of this marriage depends upon the ability of moral theorists to ally CE and VE in a way that is consistent with the theoretical autonomy of CE and to explore how VE might derive from CE. Put in a care-ethical way, the marriage of these theories requires a more equitable balance between the need to care about virtue and the need to care about care. Ultimately, a fruitful union of CE and VE is possible, but not under conditions that are unnecessarily diminutive, assimilative, or exclusive.

## NOTES

Many renditions of this essay were reviewed by a manuscript group and I would like to thank Owen Anderson, Shari Collins-Chobanian, Jackie Gately, Linda Stryker, and Elaine Yoshikawa for their thoughtful commentary.

1. Feminists have developed numerous such critiques against collaborations such as Marxist feminism (see Hartman 1981), multicultural feminism (see Lugones and Spelman 1983), and lesbian feminism (see Calhoun 2000).

2. Presumably, VE has much to gain from incorporating CE, but this possibility is hardly mentioned by Halwani, McLaren, or Slote. None of these authors considers how CE might supplement VE by offering substantive criteria for normative accounts of justice and virtue.

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