

[Citizenship & the ethics of care: feminist considerations on justice, morality & politics]

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

This discussion of feminist morality and concepts of justice is situated in an understanding of care as a social practice. Sevenhuijsen argues for the need to develop a broad and diverse perspective on care as a form of human agency. The starting point should be the recognition of conflicting and contested notions of care—a mixture of caring about and caring for, being cared for and respecting the care of others, but centred on key values of attentiveness and responsiveness.

Sevenhuijsen's project is to contribute to the building of a contextual and situated form of feminist ethics that can accommodate both care and justice. The ethics of care should be placed in a context of citizenship so that it acquires significant political meaning without being slotted into identity politics or interest-promotion. In her view, when the ethics of care are located within such a notion of citizenship, discursive space is created for carers to bring their expertise and moral considerations into public debates without their being associated with a fixed caring identity or with associated claims to moral truth or moral goodness.

To move away from the focus on distributive justice and rational choice, we need to allow more discursive space for values associated with trust, respect for differences, and the encouragement of respect. One way to accomplish this is to open up space for reflection and moral deliberation on these values—to listen to and interpret the moral deliberations about care expressed by the providers and receivers of care. In this way Sevenhuijsen subscribes to Jane Tronto's view that care of all is the premise of justice. Care demands that we continually assess the position we occupy as we begin to make judgments.

FULL TEXT

Selma Sevenhuijsen. Trans. from Dutch by Liz Savage. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.

Care and women's emancipation have often been opposed, resulting in the belief that in order to participate fully in political and moral life women need to abandon their caring selves. Selma Sevenhuijsen challenges this opposition, and in so doing, makes a significant contribution to the debates surrounding the whole nature of care and democratic citizenship.

This discussion of feminist morality and concepts of justice is situated in an understanding of care as a social practice. Sevenhuijsen argues for the need to develop a broad and diverse perspective on care as a form of human agency. The starting point should be the recognition of conflicting and contested notions of care—a mixture of caring about and caring for, being cared for and respecting the care of others, but centred on key values of attentiveness and responsiveness.

The context of care as a social practice is highlighted from the start with opening scenes recounting media depictions of caregivers' lives: the daily routine, joys and sorrows, the heavy burdens, stress and loneliness, and an account of caring gone awry where a nurse has killed several of her patients. These scenes are evocative of the fact that women carry out this work with great responsibility but little power.

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The author demonstrates how feminism has become associated with liberal socialism and the political idioms of modern citizenship: the language of freedom and equality, redistribution, autonomy and individualism. She explores the apparent dichotomy between care and justice and makes a strong argument for the need to reflect on, and rethink, this normative framework.

For example, she shows how the ideal of abstract autonomy in fact overlooks what it is that makes care an element of the human condition—that is, the recognition that all people are vulnerable, dependent and finite, and that we all have to find ways of dealing with this in our daily existence and in the values which guide our individual and collective behaviour.

Sevenhuijsen reviews recent writings on possible relationship between ethics of care and justice, and concludes that the two should be integrated in a fundamental way.

Of particular interest to those concerned with legal issues is Sevenhuijsen's provocative argument concerning the problematic concepts of equality. She explores the continuing power of the notion of equality as sameness and the resultant negative evaluation of difference. It is neither an easy nor an inviting proposition for feminism to relinquish the norm of equality, but she concludes that this is not inevitable. Our problems are principally ones of application. As she points out, if there were no differences it would be pointless to take equality as an ideal.

We need not dispense with deliberation on issues of equality, justice, and rights—in fact the opposition of care and justice is precisely one of those fruitless polarizations which need a great deal of rethinking. Feminism would benefit from concepts of justice which are not exclusively framed in distributive terms and which do not automatically lead to taking sameness as the norm where differences would make a better starting point for political argumentation. This model of distributive justice should be replaced with one of social justice for oppressed groups.

To move away from the focus on distributive justice and rational choice, we need to allow more discursive space for values associated with trust, respect for differences, and the encouragement of respect. One way to accomplish this is to open up space for reflection and moral deliberation on these values—to listen to and interpret the moral deliberations about care expressed by the providers and receivers of care. In this way Sevenhuijsen subscribes to Jane Tronto's view that care of all is the premise of justice. Care demands that we continually assess the position we occupy as we begin to make judgments.

Sevenhuijsen applies this integrated framework on care and justice to two issues in Netherlands law and politics: child custody and healthcare policies. These case studies elucidate her approach and provide an interesting

comparison to Canadian experience.

Sevenhuijsen's book provides a stimulating account of the potential of integrating care into conceptions of democratic citizenship and social justice. Fundamentally she argues that a feminist ethic of care offers a radical alternative to the liberal justice idiom—a relational image of human nature, not an atomistic, individualized one. Her book makes an important contribution to legal and healthcare issues and more generally to what it means to live, work and participate in a democratic society.

DETAILS

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