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## Title: The ethic of care between Axel Honneth and Virginia Held

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### Abstract

This study contributes to the exploration and presentation of contemporary ethical research, highlighting the innovative values these efforts have introduced in seeking appropriate solutions to the Western moral crisis—a crisis brought about by conflicting philosophies. A distinguishing feature of the two thinkers examined in this study, Axel Honneth and Virginia Held, is their strong desire to restore the value of the human being as the essence of existence. They approach ethical issues with a realistic tone, particularly in the domains of justice, rights, and care—approaches aimed at preserving human existence and dismantling long-standing centralities and conflicts. Through this study, we aim to uncover two different models in contemporary moral philosophy and to identify the common ground between them in order to observe new conceptual shifts, while also diagnosing the specificities of each philosophical model under review.

**Keywords:** Ethics of care; solidarity; rights; justice; Honneth; Held.

### Introduction

Contemporary moral philosophy has undergone a critical turning point following the emergence of modern philosophical thought, which took hold of the dynamics of conflict championed by realists who promoted these philosophies and theories, asserting their centrality while dismissing any opposing views—often at the expense of shared human values, which were undermined on political and legal levels. Within these major trajectories, new critical perspectives have emerged, seeking to redefine ethical pathways that uphold human dignity and restore its essential existential value. The contemporary reexamination of moral questions primarily focuses on the value of the human being within existence and the breadth of their relationships in both public and private spheres. This shift has paved the way for new ethical movements that reject the nihilistic and confrontational legacies of previous eras, instead laying the foundation for a mutual and inclusive ethical practice. Modern ethical inquiry thus leads us to

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explore new visions that advocate for a unified society, one that embraces all its members without preconceived judgments regarding being or identity. Among the pioneers of these new paths are the works of Axel Honneth, which continue the critical tradition initiated by the Frankfurt School's first generation—particularly in activating the concept of rights. Similarly, Virginia Held's work explores the relationship between ethics and justice in its renewed form, emphasizing the necessity of launching a critical project for contemporary society. While these critical issues occupy a significant place within the field of modern philosophy, the central questions become: How was the ethical question transformed from a theoretical, rational—or even nihilistic and confrontational—level to one that values care for the other and the establishment of values centered on the other? What are the core focuses of the philosophical projects of Axel Honneth and Virginia Held? What motivates the reconstruction of a theoretical moral vision? In what ways do these two philosophies intersect or diverge? And are they sufficient to ethically guide both the individual and society?

### **The Ethics of Social Solidarity and Care for the Other: Axel Honneth's Approach**

Contemporary ethical research has played a significant role in curbing the lofty and often greedy ambitions of liberalism by addressing the human being directly and reviving a sense of social responsibility. In this context, the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory has focused on developing the practical application of social ethics. It no longer aims to construct a general moral discourse but rather works toward a critical and realistic ethical discourse—one that frames the human condition within the context of shared living, solidarity, and care for the other, regardless of ideological affiliation or biological origin.

Axel Honneth<sup>2</sup> is considered one of the most prominent contemporary figures who contributed to reviving a balanced moral discourse through his work on *recognition* as a social and ethical practice. At the core of this perspective, he laid the foundations for the concept of solidarity in its various dimensions, primarily embodied in the individual's sense of being valued within the fabric of personal and social relationships, given that a human being is always affected by others' attitudes toward them. In this paper, we will explore Honneth's perspective, focusing on social solidarity, mutual care, and the construction of a shared human space.

#### **1-1. Toward Constructing Frameworks of Social Solidarity**

Honneth devoted his efforts to developing a new philosophy of recognition, in which one of its core pillars is the *concept of solidarity*. This concept enables individuals to realize a shared moral self through social interaction and mutual support. However, in modern societies, this solidarity has become contingent—within the fabric of social relationships—on the existence of reciprocal recognition among individuals who have achieved personal autonomy. Yet, a person's sense of being valued and of their own worth fundamentally depends on others—that is, on being recognized by others. (Boumenir & Honneth, 2015, p. 59)

When a person receives recognition, it positively influences their social performance and encourages their participation in solidarity with others. The individual is morally bound by the attitudes of others toward them, which in turn shapes their ethical motivation to care for others across various levels of cooperative behavior.

Indeed, the more an individual absorbs the ethics surrounding them, the more those values impact them. Conversely, receiving negative emotions from the surrounding society may have harmful effects. Therefore, solidarity, mutual support, and care are ethical forms that all individuals must master and apply within the shared social space. Honneth argues that these interactions are interconnected: "To achieve a successful relationship with oneself, an individual needs intersubjective recognition of their capabilities and potential. If this form of social recognition is absent, the individual may experience

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<sup>2</sup> Axel Honneth (1949) is a researcher in philosophy and sociology. He studied at the University of Berlin (Germany) and is currently based at Goethe University in Frankfurt. He has authored numerous works in social philosophy, most notably *The Struggle for Recognition*, *The Society of Disrespect*, *A Critique of Power, Reification*, among others.

psychological pain and negative emotions such as anger, frustration, and others.”(Honneth, 2000, p. 2002)

Honneth adds, in this context, that social experience does not merely require adherence to legal norms in its interactions; rather, it is the presence of human elements and capacities that lays the foundation for meanings of mutual support, care, and the exchange of social recognition—always grounded in shared and unifying values, understood as ethical qualities among coexisting individuals.

According to Honneth, social values are once again linked to the degree of contribution toward fostering a supportive society imbued with the spirit of solidarity. This solidarity is defined as “that active relationship in which individuals care about the personal trajectories of others who participate with them in interaction, because they have established bonds of social recognition with them.”(Boumenir & Honneth, p. 61)

These bonds of recognition, in fact, are tied to the capacities and potentials of others. Rather than adhering to a hierarchical view of society, the ethical relationship shifts toward a form of collective behavior grounded in appreciation for the other.

Honneth does not refer to “capacities and potentials” merely in terms of material or economic conditions. Instead, he emphasizes their ethical dimension. Justice, solidarity, mutual support, and care, according to him, now require the establishment of a moral framework among individuals—one that enables a life built on mutual recognition, appreciation, and sincere collaboration with others. It is through these interconnected ideas that reciprocal recognition among individuals is ultimately achieved.(Axel, 1996)

It is clear that Honneth’s approach to the issue of recognition and its value goes beyond the perspectives that focus on economic justice or even social justice in their material dimensions, as is often found in Anglo-Saxon ethical discourses (such as those of John Rawls or Nancy Fraser). This divergence may be related to the very context of the philosophical tradition in which Honneth operates, as he adopts the path and methodology of German moral philosophy—whether in its critical engagement with contemporary ethical concepts or its establishment of an ethical outlook that leans somewhat toward a transcendent idealism.

Instead of engaging, for example, in debates about the contemporary notion of justice, Honneth chooses to center the discussion on the concept of *recognition*. Justice typically falls within the domain of legal and rights-based discourse, whereas recognition takes on a moral, value-based, and human dimension—focused on empathy for the other and encompassing a spiritual aspect as well.

An individual may not feel obligated to care for a bedridden patient based solely on legal or rights-based concepts of justice. However, through recognition, solidarity, love, mutual support, and the interactive capacities between individuals, one is led to contribute ethically—motivated by the moral principle and sense of self-worth gained from society—in the act of caring for others. Thus, social recognition and solidarity form the foundation for an individual who actively participates in building a spirit of mutual support with others.

In order for an individual to reach this stage of reciprocal solidarity, Honneth proposes that recognition be granted based on the social perspective of the individual. Society influences the individual either positively or negatively. "Such reactions are psychological symptoms through which an individual can become aware that they are unjustly deprived of their right to social recognition. This is because recognition is a fundamental element for the human being. The latter, in order to achieve a successful relationship with themselves, needs intersubjective recognition of their abilities, potentials, and actions. However, when this recognition is not realized at the social level, the individual suffers psychologically, feeling insulted and angry."

Thus, in order to achieve an active individual within the social system, we always need to recognize their efforts and accomplishments. This is the only way to make them an ethical individual, connected with others in the shared public space.

Through the concept of solidarity, which Honneth presents earnestly and integrates within his theory of recognition, the motivation for what is known as the "ethics of care" or concern for the other is realized. While Honneth expands this research across all social dimensions, healthcare, as a specific example, becomes part of the process of social solidarity, as it is an ethical trait that an individual acquires when they feel valued by others.

Solidarity is a foundational principle for care and concern for others, as an ethical trait that Honneth sought to revive within the framework of the theory of recognition, developing it on both personal and collective levels—especially after what societies endured as a result of wars and destruction, leaving behind ideological, ethnic, and racial conflicts. The realization of the solidaristic individual and the emphasis on caring for others begins with their recognition and the avoidance of surrounding them with negative emotions that could affect their psychological and moral experience.

## **1.2 The Principle of Right and Its Role in Establishing the Ethics of Care**

The principle of right is considered one of the cornerstones of the social philosophy presented by Axel Honneth to overcome the crises that have led contemporary society to ethnic and racial fractures. It is the path that revisits the structural ethics of society in terms of recognition between individuals. In his view, this principle is grounded in the legal aspect, which focuses on protecting public and private rights, regardless of the affiliations, origins, races, and religions coexisting within the framework of a unified society.

For Honneth, the principle of right is the most fundamental for ensuring social moral harmony. It is the means through which a universal and global ethical perspective can be achieved among all individuals and communities. "The right is what imposes moral responsibility on all members of society," (Honneth, 2000, p. 139) meaning that progress in the practice of the principle of right, and its application to the ethical vision of society, ensures general stability on political and civil levels.

The ethical vision of society ensures general stability on political and civil levels. Honneth points out that members of society are obligated to understand the ethical rules governing their conduct, as they are always bound by a set of duties that they must recognize. Thus, the process becomes reciprocal among all individuals, as each person commits to their rights and duties towards others and society at large. "It is important to note that we cannot consider members of society as bearers of rights unless these individuals simultaneously recognize that they have normative obligations towards others." (Boumenir & Honneth, 2015, p. 56) The theoretical perspective must be linked to the practical in order to achieve social sufficiency through the ethical vision, as a prerequisite for mutual care among all members of society, regardless of their personal backgrounds.

Honneth disagrees with the previous perspective of positivist ethics, which assigned rights based on membership in a particular group – with a specific sense of identity. Instead, he seeks to achieve a universal goal for ethics through the interaction between individuals within a unified ethical framework, beginning with recognition and leading to a holistic ethics that cares for all. Rights cannot be guaranteed solely through legal and juridical mechanisms; they require a set of ethical values within society and its members to enter into the realm of recognition and ethical interaction in a way that ensures care for both the self and the other in a unified manner that combines rights and duties, without being divided by affiliations and backgrounds. This results in a social role focused on mutual ethical care among all individuals.

From this, the legal system has become a reflection of the interests that are universal to all members of society, such that no exceptions or preferences are accepted. Partners in interaction can no longer follow legal norms unless they agree and accept them as free and equal individuals, subjecting themselves to the law. Consequently, they recognize each other as persons capable of making an independent rational judgment about ethical standards. The law, which has evolved according to the requirements of recognition and incorporates the principle of rights as a core component of a unified ethical system, has become a guarantor of both public and private rights. It plays its role as an arbitrator among all individuals, regardless of preconceived judgments related to any form of conflict, thus achieving a universal ethics that calls for care for all elements of society. (Boumenir & Honneth, 2015, p. 57)

It is clear that Honneth criticizes the remnants of centrality, control, theories of power, and nihilism by reviving the project of the social movement. However, the perspectives and concepts he presented remain dependent on the performance of societies that are still suffering from the aftereffects of wars and conflicting ideas. Achieving Honneth's perspective truly requires a new culture of solidarity and recognition at all levels of shared living, which appears to be extremely complex and difficult in today's world. Nevertheless, the contribution of the idea of solidarity at the level of care may serve the purpose, as the fundamental principle it is based on is that of a mutual ethical framework between individuals within a single society.

## 2-Ethics of Care: Virginia Held's Approach

Contemporary moral philosophy has focused on attempting to activate practical theories on human action, rather than merely relying on theoretical ethical discourse. Contemporary ethical theories have introduced new conceptual foundations and called for practical applications that align with the human condition of today.

In this research, we will briefly discuss the concept of moral care as presented by Virginia Held, one of the key founders of this concept, through her studies that aim to define in detail the importance of care and its extended relationships across various fields.

### 2.1 The Concept of Care

In terms of its technical meaning, which some have referred to as "nurturance" or others as "care," there is no inherent difference, as the ethical concept ultimately relates to practices themselves rather than the idealized ethical theory.

Virginia Held<sup>3</sup> sees ethics of care as the interconnected relationships of individuals who are necessarily linked and depend on each other both ethically and epistemologically. This dependency remains fundamental throughout life. In this way, the liberal life of society required the creation of a practical ethical perspective, rather than the theoretical one that sought virtue distant from the realities of society, which believed that ethics could always be pursued away from reality. Instead, Held emphasizes the necessity of practicing ethics within the scope of individuals' needs for it. (Held, 2005, p. 76)

According to Held, the ethics of care is not implicitly subject to legal and rights-based frameworks; instead, it is a form of ethical cooperation that individuals innately draw from the small family unit and then extend into a broader social realm. "Not all feminists share the view that there is such a thing as a separate and distinct 'ethics of care,' but many feel confident that there is a stance, and whatever stance we take on justice in the situation, it can be replaced by care, or that no ethics can be sufficient unless it includes a strong element of care, among the ethical considerations that are identified as belonging to an ethics of care." (Held, 1995, p. 03)

In fact, Held initially entered the ethics of care through her focus on the feminist movement in her early research and placed considerable emphasis on it, later expanding this interest to individuals more generally in her broader work on care ethics as a theoretical framework.

Furthermore, Virginia Held does not consider that the ethics of care requires a spiritual or religious dimension, nor is it merely an extension of it. It is not an ethical theory from the modern era, which stripped the study of ethics from reality. Rather, the ethics of care is an ethical practice born out of the

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<sup>3</sup> Virginia Held (1929) is an American scholar in the fields of ethics, politics, and social philosophy. She is implicitly affiliated with the feminist movement (Feminist philosopher) and has focused her academic research on redefining the concept of care and proposing a new role for women in contemporary society. Among her most important works are *The Public Interest and Individual Interests, Rights and Goods: Justifying Social Action*, *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics*, and *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*, in addition to other research published in various articles.

necessity for a set of relationships in which different individuals share. It needs to be distinguished by its new concept: "The ethics of care differs from these theories in its assumptions, goals, and methods. It is closer to virtue ethics, which has enjoyed a recent revival, and is sometimes thought of as a type of virtue ethics (...). However, the ethics of care differs enough from virtue ethics, as well as other theories that could be considered, in my opinion, as a new and distinctive form of ethical theory (contractual, forthcoming). Of course, it has predecessors, but it is based on different foundations and has developed in distinctive ways." (Held, 2004, p. 143)

Virginia Held tries to define the concept of ethics of care without relying on legal frameworks, ethical theories, or religious advocacy, while attempting to find a realistic concept that originates from the relationships between individuals and makes ethical practice between them necessary as a form of need and urgent requirement.

## **2-2 Justice, Feminism, and Care.**

Virginia Held questions the effectiveness of ethical theories extending from Kant to the early twentieth century, and even in ancient Greek ethical theories, as these theories did not celebrate women as equal beings to men but rather diminished their conceptual value. Consequently, care will not be achieved, and the intellectual foundation, according to her, seems to resemble injustice from the outset. "This has, of course, had a major impact on the history of philosophy and ethics. The division between reason and emotion is one of the most common philosophical concepts. The call for reason to 'control' wild emotion, and for rationality to direct responsible human action against the blindness of emotion, has a long and highly influential history, which is almost as familiar to non-philosophers as it is to philosophers. Certainly, we must now be alert to the ways in which reason has been associated with male endeavors, and emotion with female weakness, in ways that are not merely incidental." (Held, 1990, p. 322) The issue of initial classification raises a series of objections and human inquiries for Virginia Held regarding the validity of this hierarchy, which elevated the individualism of men and granted them the trait of reason, while diminishing the femininity of women and labeling them with overwhelming emotion.

Held elaborates on the feminist understanding of the concept of justice as it spreads among beings, describing it as the ability to view various beings with heightened care and without the emotional inclinations that previous ethical theories had ascribed to them. Thus, legal and rights concepts should not overlook the evaluative qualities of feminism and should offer a sharp critique of how well the legal aspects of women's rights are addressed within what are considered laws regulating contemporary society. "The ethics of rights and justice can be interpreted as generalizations of the entire moral and social evaluation of ways of thinking that were established within the contexts of law and public policy. Such expansions in legal approaches must be resisted by feminists. These ways of thinking are inappropriate for many contexts, and many of the contexts that are now thought to be best handled by justice and rights should be changed so that the care approach can be used and seen as more appropriate." (Held, 2005, p. 68)

Thus, care is the true ethical perspective that must be cultivated within a society of mutual recognition, where positive law does not obstruct it nor is it a goal to be achieved. Instead, it is a set of necessary behaviors whose values are derived from the innate natural justice of society.

Care and justice are two distinct paths, where care involves emotional and intimate bonds related to love, solidarity, and the exchange of feelings, while justice is that rational model based on abstract principles of public and private rights. This raises a new question: which should be prioritized, justice or care? And can they be adopted as a singular practice?

Held always believes that justice is derived from rational ethical theories, especially research related to Kant and the influence it had on Europeans. In contrast, she views the ethics of care as a way to transcend this perspective, which previously denied the role of women as beings lacking full rationality.

The ethics of care might be seen as merely a justification for feminist thought, but Held proposes it as a means by which feminism itself will contribute to the development of care and responsibility for others

within society, especially when it receives such attention. Care surpasses justice in that it must take into account women and reject the implications of previous theories of justice, considering care as a new, more advanced concept compared to justice, as the latter was not fully integrated, both theoretically and practically.

### Study Results:

The elements of similarity that we derive from comparing Axel Honneth and Virginia Held are that both addressed the legal rights aspect as a foundation for building an ethical system, in which the individual maintains balance within society. The justification for this is that the emotional laws that were previously dominant, along with the ruptures, wars, and conflicts, led to significant legal inclinations favoring gender, race, religion, and ideological background. To rebuild the ethics of a unified society, one that could be universally applicable, is essentially about establishing a legal rights system where all members of society are equal, to achieve ethics of care for others from the standpoint of rights and justice. Both represent an attempt to move beyond previous ethical theories that relied on religion, reason, power, etc., in an abstract and sometimes rigid manner, while their call is for building a moral bond that applies equally to all elements in terms of principle and action. It is a realistic moral ethics that allows everyone to participate in critiquing it and improving its performance within society. It is not merely subject to legal formalism but seeks to embody the spirit of a society that shares the same concerns and aspires to look at the future with balanced visions, where all perspectives meet in a spirit of acceptance rather than rivalry.

Axel Honneth refers to the principle of solidarity, while Virginia Held refers to the principle of care. These two concepts must intersect in the emotional and intimate understanding of social bonds, or the call for a social spirit. What maintains coherence among the elements of society, whether ordinary or even universal, is the necessity of additional bonds that reflect love, intimacy, acceptance, solidarity, contribution to good actions, and the renunciation of bad actions. Thus, these two studies converge on the need to start from a solid legal foundation and reach the peak of an ethical society in which individuals care for themselves and others, regardless of the differences that divide them.

It seems that both researchers' works stem from the desire to rationalize ethics or to rely on mental ethical theories, while adding a degree of independence to them in terms of practice and goals. If we look at the philosophical ethical accumulation of the modern and contemporary era, we encounter the dominance of Kantian rational theory, which is observable in the works of the researchers, with a touch of newness that aligns with the realism of contemporary society and its post-modern requirements.

Both Honneth and Held initiate a stark opposition to nihilistic, existential, gender-based, and evolutionary ethical philosophies, which contributed to heightening the conflict between humans, treating them as mere numbers to be sacrificed. In contrast, Honneth's work emerged from major critical surveys in post-World War II Germany, focusing on the need to improve individual ethical behavior and accept differences within society. This is the same issue that Held addresses, emphasizing the need to care for women as a fundamental element of society. Her approach not only reflects a pure feminist philosophy but also extends to restoring the position of women within society, combating the distorted image they were given during the major European and global conflicts.

As for what can be described as a difference, it stems from a set of other factors inherent in both philosophies. Honneth's work is centered within the framework of critical theory, and in a way, he seeks a social philosophy specifically for post-World War II Germany, dealing with the moral devastation caused by the rise of nihilistic, existential, and other similar theories. Meanwhile, Held is clearly influenced by the contemporary feminist movement, which gradually gained prominence within the democratic American society.

While Honneth believes that rights should be universal and equal, Held argues that the element of woman, in particular, still lacks justice in its entitlement. Here, we notice the distinction between a

critical ethical philosophy seeking broad applications and a realistic philosophy that focuses on the demand for improved ethical and care conditions for a specific group.

## Conclusion

In summary, whether we explore the depth of the connection between the two philosophies or the differences between them, the ethical research they adopted appears to be an urgent need for contemporary society, which has experienced major trials of tension and conflict, the signs of which are still visible. Honneth and Held may not escape criticism, both at the theoretical and practical levels of their attempts. On the theoretical level, the renewed elevation of independent reason and the transcendence of everything that can contribute to ethical research does not seem to be a sound approach for establishing ethical theory. Additionally, the backgrounds of both researchers should also be questioned, considering the nature of contemporary society's tendencies and its immersion in the surge of postmodern currents.

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