RESEARCH ARTICLE	**The Ethics of Care from the Perspective of Virginia Held**
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Abstract

Virginia Held believes that while some propose replacing the term "ethics of care" with "ethics of love" or "relational ethics," the term "ethics of care" remains the most appropriate among these alternatives. In her view, care is a concept tied to the lived realities and practices of people, rather than an idealized or impractical notion. She emphasizes that the ethics of care represents a distinct ethical theory or orientation, not merely a concern that can be added to or integrated within traditional approaches such as Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, or virtue ethics. According to Held, the primary role and focus of the ethics of care lies in attending to and meeting the individual needs of those for whom we are responsible. She argues that the ethics of care holds a more vital role than justice, in contrast to many past and contemporary thinkers. Her firm belief is that while life can remain intact without justice, it cannot endure without care. Justice, she asserts, does not concern itself with children, the elderly, the sick, or the disabled—unlike care. Therefore, she regards care as ontologically prior to justice, despite acknowledging the significant role that justice plays.

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Introduction

The collective and individual memory of Western societies has inherited negative ideas about women, rooted in their depiction in Judeo-Christian heritage—as the origin of sin—as well as in the works and positions of many Western thinkers and philosophers. These perspectives range from *Plato*, who classified women on a lower level alongside slaves, wrongdoers, the insane, and the sick, to later philosophers like *Descartes*, whose dualistic philosophy associates reason with the male and matter with the female. *Kant* described women as inherently weak, particularly in their intellectual capacities. *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, the philosopher of the French Revolution, believed that women existed solely for sex and reproduction. *Freud*, the founder of psychoanalysis, attributed all of women's issues to their suffering from an inferiority complex due to their lack of the male organ.(Al-Rahbi, 2014, pp. 15-16)

Critical reevaluations of the overarching frameworks and methodologies of Western thought led to the development of what is now known as *feminism*. The term was first introduced in 1860, gained significant traction in the 20th century in America, and emerged in Europe after World War II, flourishing in France during the 1960s and 1970s.

Originally, feminism was a political movement aimed at achieving social goals, specifically women's rights and the assertion of their identity and role. It began in the 19th century as a social movement that gave rise to feminist thought, and by the 1970s, it evolved into a feminist philosophy. This philosophy has remained more closely tied than any other to the concrete, the specific, the contingent, the daily, the lived, the ordinary, and the common. Feminism represents both thought and lived reality side by side—so much so that it can be said feminist philosophy emerged as a dialectical synthesis of these two dimensions of the movement, which developed together.(Yumna, 2017, p. 11)

With the advent of the 19th century, feminist thought emerged as a revolutionary force demanding women's rights in response to the oppression they endured throughout history and across religions. Feminists critically examined male authority over women by challenging several concepts, particularly patriarchy, which they saw as a pretext used by men to dominate women by exploiting the physical vulnerability of the female body compared to the male. To achieve balance, women must assert their identity and become active contributors to society.(Mahmoud, 2020, p. 6)

Among the most prominent ethical theories that emerged within the framework of what is known as feminism is the theory of **"Ethics of Care."**So, what is feminism? What is the Ethics of Care? And can the Ethics of Care be considered an alternative to traditional ethical theories?

First: The Concept of Feminism The *Hachette Dictionary* defines feminism as: "An intellectual or behavioral system that advocates for women's interests and calls for the expansion of their rights."(Al-Ghazali, 2005)

The *Webster Dictionary* defines feminism as:**The theory that advocates for the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes, and as a political movement, it seeks to achieve women's rights and interests and to eliminate gender discrimination suffered by women."** (Mahmoud, 2020, p. 14)

The Canadian scholar **Louise Toupin** defines feminism as:**"An initially individual awakening, followed by a collective consciousness that leads to a revolution against the sexual power dynamics and the complete marginalization of women during certain historical moments."**(Mahmoud, 2020, p. 14)

Sara Gamble, in her book *Feminism and Postfeminism*, sees feminism as one of the most controversial movements of the twentieth century. She states that its influence is evident in all aspects of social, political, and cultural life across the world. She emphasizes that feminism exists as a theory—or rather a set of theories—studied and analyzed at the academic level, while at the same time, it is a movement dedicated to transforming the reality outside the walls of academia.

She defines feminism as: **"The belief that women are not treated equally—not for any reason other than being women—in a society that organizes its affairs and sets its priorities according to male perspectives and interests... This outlook places women in a position of passivity and denies them the right to participate in public life and to play a role in cultural fields on an equal footing with men. Hence, feminism can be seen as a movement that seeks to change these conditions to achieve that missing equality."** (Sarah, 2002, pp. 13–14)

Second: The Concept of the Ethics of Care

Definitions of this concept have varied, and it has been difficult to establish a single, unified definition of the Ethics of Care. This is primarily due to the differing perspectives each thinker holds regarding the reality and nature of this ethical approach.

Demythe Bubeck offers one of the most precise definitions of the Ethics of Care. She states: **"Care is the meeting of one person's needs by another person, where face-to-face interaction between the caregiver and the care-receiver is a crucial element in the activity of caring in general. The person in need of care can never meet those needs on their own."**(Held, 2008, p. 49)

Thus, according to Bubeck, the Ethics of Care involves meeting someone's needs through direct interaction with others. She distinguishes between *care* and *service*—between caring for someone and merely providing a service. For example, within the family, when a mother cooks for her young child, she is caring for him. However, if she does the same for an adult who is fully capable of cooking for himself, she is merely serving him. For Bubeck, care responds to a deeper category of human needs—those that make us dependent on others.

Nel Noddings defines the Ethics of Care as:**"A careful concern for the feelings, needs, desires, and thoughts of those we care for, and the skill to understand a given situation from a specific person's perspective. All of these elements are central to caring for someone. Those who care for others serve their interests, but at the same time also care for**

themselves, because without maintaining their own capacities, they would be unable to continue providing care."(Virginia, 2008, p. 47)

Joan Tronto sees the Ethics of Care more clearly and precisely as an *action*. She defines it as: "Everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible. We may care for things, the environment, and for other people."(Virginia, 2008, p. 48)

Sara Ruddick also views the Ethics of Care as an action, but she believes it is more than that. She says: "As much as care is an action, it is also a relationship... At its core, the work of care is relational. It is shaped by and through the relationship between caregivers and care-receivers... And more critically, it appears that some caring relationships hold more significance than the actual tasks those relationships involve."(Virginia, 2008, p. 50)

Bette B. Boudin considers the Ethics of Care to be:"A reflection of important moral paths that express our importance to one another. It elevates interpersonal connectedness to a level beyond mere ontological necessity or instinctual survival."(Virginia, 2008, p. 51)

Third: The Ethics of Care according to Virginia Held

Virginia Held, born on October 28, 1929, is a professor of philosophy at Columbia University in the United States. She specializes in political philosophy, sociology, ethics, and feminist philosophy. She has published numerous books and articles, including *"Public Interest and Private Interest," "Philosophy and Ethics," "Rights and Duties," "Feminist Ethics," "Ethics and Politics,"* and *"The Ethics of Care."*

1 – The Concept of the Ethics of Care: Virginia Held notes that some prefer to replace the term "Ethics of Care" with alternatives like "Ethics of Love" or "Relational Ethics." However, she affirms that "Ethics of Care" remains the most appropriate term among the others. She states:"The Ethics of Care is only a few decades old. Some theorists dislike referring to this ethical approach using the term 'care' and have tried to replace it with 'ethics of love' or 'relational ethics.' But the discussion always returns to 'care,' which, so far, remains the most suitable term among those considered—although some remain dissatisfied with it."(Virginia, 2008, p. 6)

For Virginia Held, *care* is a concept deeply tied to the realities and actions of people, not just an idealized or impractical notion. She argues: "The concept of care has the advantage of not neglecting the work involved in caring for people, nor allowing ethics to be interpreted as something idealistic and unworkable. This is something that defenders of the Ethics of Care often oppose. Care is both a value and a practice."(Virginia, 2008, p. 14)

Virginia Held affirms that the Ethics of Care is a moral theory or ethical approach in its own right—not merely an interest that can be added to or integrated into traditional approaches such as Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, or virtue ethics. She states:"It has been developed as a moral theory closely connected not only to what is called the private sphere—such as family and friendship—but also to the practice of medicine, law, political life, social organization, war, and international relations. Some view the Ethics of Care as a moral theory that replaces dominant moral theories such as Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, and Aristotelian virtue ethics. Others see it as a type of virtue ethics. It has almost always been developed as a theory that emphasizes moral considerations."(Virginia, 2008, pp. 14-15)

2 – Characteristics of the Ethics of Care:

Virginia Held believes that the Ethics of Care is distinguished by a number of key characteristics, including:

A – The primary role and focus of the Ethics of Care is on concern for and meeting the individual needs of those for whom we are responsible. For example, a person's concern for their child may, justifiably and convincingly, take precedence as their foremost moral concern. The *Ethics of Care* acknowledges that: "Human beings rely on others for many years of their lives, and the moral claim of those who depend on us for the care they need is a compelling one. There are profoundly important moral dimensions to the development of caring relationships that allow people to live and flourish. All people need care, at least during the early years of their lives. The prospects for human flourishing and progress fundamentally depend on ensuring that those who need care receive it. The Ethics of Care emphasizes the moral force of the responsibility to respond to the needs of those who depend on us. Many people will fall ill and become dependent on others at some point in their later years. This includes the frail elderly and some who are permanently disabled, who will require care throughout their lives."(Virginia, 2008, pp. 15-16)

B – In performing its caring role, the *Ethics of Care* values emotion rather than rejecting it. This is in order to understand what ethics may recommend, as it is considered the best way to live and behave morally. Virginia Held states: "The Ethics of Care values emotion rather than rejecting it. Of course, not all emotions are valued, but in contrast to dominant rationalist approaches, it sees emotions such as empathy, emotional identification, sensitivity, and responsiveness as types of moral emotions that need to be cultivated—not only to support the dictates of reason but also to more effectively affirm what ethics recommends."(Virginia, 2008, p. 16)

C – The *Ethics of Care* rejects the view held by dominant moral theories that the more abstract the reasoning about a moral issue, the more valid it becomes—on the grounds that the more we can avoid bias and randomness, the closer we are to integrity. Instead, it holds that:"The Ethics of Care respects, rather than distances itself from, the claims of others with whom we share real relationships. It questions the universal and abstract rules of dominant theories. When these theories take into account relationships—such as that between a parent and child—if they address them at all, they consider them metaphorical or treat them as personal choices. Alternatively, they might recognize a universal duty requiring all parents to care for their children, but they never allow real relationships to override the demands of impartiality."(Virginia, 2008, p. 17)

The *Ethics of Care* questions such abstraction and reliance on universal rules, and doubts:"the priority given to them. For most advocates of the Ethics of Care, the pressing moral claim of the other individual may be valid even if it conflicts with the requirement usually imposed by moral theories that call for the universalization of moral judgments, and this is a matter of fundamental moral importance."

D – The *Ethics of Care* has worked to redefine traditional conceptions of the public and private spheres. The traditional dominant view within conventional theories holds that the family is a private sphere beyond politics, and that a government based on consensus should not forcibly intervene in it. The feminist movement has shown that: "the great social, political, economic, and cultural power of men has shaped this (private) sphere without regard to the interests of women and children, exposing them to domestic violence without external intervention, making women often economically dependent on men, and subjecting them to a highly unjust distribution of labor within the family. The law did not hesitate to intervene in women's reproductive decisions, but was reluctant to intervene in men's exercise of coercive power within the fortresses of their homes."(Virginia, 2008, p. 20)

E – Critique of Liberal Individualist Theory by the Ethics of Care: Virginia Held views the Ethics of Care as operating according to a conception of interconnectedness among people and their relationships, rather than seeing them as independent and self-sufficient individuals, as some dominant moral theories such as liberal theory do. She says: "The Ethics of Care usually works according to a relational conception of persons, rather than the conception of individuals as independent and self-sufficient, which is adopted by dominant moral theories. These theories view individuals as independent and self-sufficient; they can be interpreted as importing into moral theory a concept of the person developed primarily for the sake of political and economic liberal theory, where the person is seen as a rational agent who governs themselves, or as an individual who cares for themselves. According to this theory, society is formed of independent, self-governing units that cooperate only when the conditions of cooperation serve the goals of all parties involved."(Virginia, 2008, p. 21)

3 – Ethics of Care and Justice: Virginia Held believes that the Ethics of Care plays a more important role than justice, contrary to many previous and contemporary thinkers. She firmly believes that life's integrity can continue without justice, but it cannot continue without care. Justice does not care for children, adults, the sick, or the disabled, unlike care. For this reason, she sees care as ontologically prior to justice, despite acknowledging the important role of justice. She states: "My personal proposals for integrating care and justice are to maintain an intellectual distinction between these two concepts and to outline frameworks in which each of these concepts holds priority... Most likely, care is the more fundamentally profound value, and it can exist without justice. Historically, limited justice has existed in the family, but life and care have continued without it. However, justice cannot exist without care because without care a child cannot live, and people cannot respect one another."(Virginia, 2008, pp. 26-27)

4 – Ethics of Care and Virtue Ethics: Virginia Held points out that some philosophers consider the Ethics of Care to be a type of virtue ethics. Certainly, in her view, there are similarities between the Ethics of Care and virtue ethics, as both study the practices and moral values embodied by those practices, and both understand that we must cultivate, nurture, and shape ethical practices. She says: "The Ethics of Care is not simply a type of virtue ethics. Virtue ethics particularly focuses on personal traits in individuals, whereas the Ethics of Care is concerned with caregiving relationships, which take priority in the Ethics of Care... The Ethics of Care represents a distinctive moral perspective, differing even from virtue ethics. It certainly has predecessors and theorists in virtue ethics such as Aristotle and Hume, and moral sense philosophers who made important contributions to it. As a feminist ethics, it is certainly not merely a description or generalization of women's attitudes and activities as developed under patriarchal conditions. For it to be accepted, it must be a feminist ethics directed to both women and men alike."(Virginia, 2008, pp. 30-31)

Fourth: Ethics of Care According to Virginia Held from Western and Islamic Perspectives
1 – The Western Perspective: We attempted to discuss Virginia Held's theory of the Ethics of Care through the perspective presented by Murad Wilfried Hofmann (1931–2020), a German philosopher, diplomat, and lawyer. He converted to Islam in 1980. After his conversion, Dr. Hofmann began his writing career. Among his works are: *The*

Empty Self and the Colonized Brains, Diary of a German Muslim, Islam in the Third Millennium, Journey to Mecca, and *Islam as an Alternative,* a book that caused a great stir in Germany.

Hofmann believes that the fundamental concept of the human movement, formulated during the European Renaissance, already summarized the program that contemporary civilization would bring, because: *"Everything will be reduced to the human level and human standards, and therefore it was possible to predict that contemporary civilization would eventually plunge, step by step, to the lowest level of human desires."*(Hofmann, 2011, p. 63)

This is what made him point out that science cannot help us know how to live morally and spiritually. Because its function is to interpret what exists, not what ought to be done. In this sense: "Science cannot provide society with ethics, but it can certainly help to destroy them, and that is exactly what science—due to its misunderstanding and the manipulators of it—has been doing over the last two centuries by undermining the foundations of faith in God through scientific materialism... In general, the legacy of science and pseudoscience from the 19th and 20th centuries has begun to produce an agnostic, utilitarian, consumerist society deeply immersed in individualism and liberalism, meaning a civilization that pursues pleasure to the extreme, which we see up close these days."(Hofmann, 2011, pp. 61-62)

According to Hoffman, the decline and collapse of the family is a bad omen for the imminent collapse of Western civilization. What has happened to the family in the West is no surprise to anyone who follows the conditions under which the family operates. He says: "In the past, the family controlled sex by prohibiting it outside and allowing it inside. All that has disappeared... When sex becomes a commodity displayed in the market, the family will disintegrate, and that is happening at alarming rates, with divorce rates rising everywhere. Worse than that, more and more young people decide never to marry at all from the start."(Hofmann, 2011, pp. 76-77)

No one suffers more severely from the dissolution and breakdown of the family than children, because: "Children who are neglected in broken families look for friends elsewhere—in gangs, in religious sects—and it should not surprise us when they become easy prey for drug addiction. Juvenile delinquency, especially among boys, their turn toward violence, and increasing anger and aggression that find their outlet among people, are born at home, when the home is no longer always a home."(Hofmann, 2011, p. 77)

Hoffman tried to raise a series of questions: "How can any sane person claim that Europe and America are the pioneers of human rights, the most developed civilizations, and the seat of reason? How can any sane person not see that all these infinitely brutal crimes were committed outside the Islamic world? How can a sane person continue to believe that ethics can exist without religion?"(Hofmann, 2011, p. 68)

2 — The Islamic Conception: In truth, there is a fundamental difference in human rights between the conception of the Islamic religion and the conception of Western thought. While human rights in Islam are founded on the fact that God honored human beings above other creatures—an honor linked to servitude to God Almighty—Allah says: *"And We have certainly honored the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea and provided them with good things and preferred them over many of those We created, with [definite] preference."* (Surah Al-Isra: 70)

In contrast, human rights in Western thought are based on the absolute sovereignty of the human being, which is supreme and above all else. Therefore, there are no considerations except for human freedom regardless of behavior; the person is free in and of themselves. This is unlike the Islamic thought, which does not consider the human being free in and of themselves, but rather responsible and accountable for their actions, including their duties toward others.

For this reason, Islam has done justice to humanity and revealed its unique essence, its central position in the universe, and its mission in life. From this unique Islamic conception emerged an ideal model for human society, which can be summarized in one phrase: the sublimation of the human species to be worthy of the honor of the divine commission to worship God Almighty. This sublimation is based on two principles: the unity of the origin of humanity: *"Created man from a clot"* (Surah Al-Alaq: 2),and the unity of the purpose for which it was created: *"And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me."* (Surah Adh-Dhariyat: 56).

Thus, Islam placed humanity in the highest image, the noblest beginning, and the greatest function so that it would be worthy of the honor of vicegerency on earth:*"Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority."* (Surah Al-Baqarah: 30).

Although humans differ in their languages and colors in general, this difference is insignificant and does not detract from their equality in their original human reality. It is like the difference in the colors of roses in a garden or the difference in the clothes a person wears. Islam decisively rejected that this should be a cause for division or separation; rather, it made this diversity a sign of the Creator's great artistry. Allah says:*"And of His signs is the creation of the*

heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and your colors. Indeed in that are signs for those of knowledge." (Surah Ar-Rum: 22)

And for people themselves, this diversity is a cause for acquaintance, not denial, for unity, not difference. Allah says: *"O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted."* (Surah Al-Hujurat: 13)

Human rights in Islam begin with the rights of the child, as Islamic law cares for the child even before birth, indeed before the fetus forms. These rights highlight the difference between two schools of thought: one that seeks pleasure in any form and to the greatest extent without regard to any other value, no matter how important; and another that is based on pursuing the objectives of Shariah, which assist God's servants. Thus: *"The right of the child begins with choosing the wife who will bear the child and the husband who will father it. Here, the status of pleasure declines, although it is not completely neglected but must come within a complete system. Therefore, it is the child's right that his father chooses his wife well, and his mother chooses her husband well, because the child will inherit genetic traits from them, and the environment in which he will grow up and the care he will receive are determined. Among the criteria Islam set for choosing are religiosity, compatibility, and that the spouses be free from repulsive, contagious, or serious hereditary diseases."* (Al-Nabrawi, 2006, p. 25)

Among the rights of the child is that he not be killed after becoming a fetus, hence abortion is forbidden. If abortion is deliberately carried out, the perpetrator must pay blood money (diyya). This ruling reflects the foundation of Islamic law, whereas permitting abortion reflects the principles of Western thought, which prioritize pleasure and personal freedom. Islamic law:*"Does not allow abortion except if the mother's life is at risk if the pregnancy continues; furthermore, it is not permissible to kill a pregnant woman who is sentenced to death unless she gives birth, and the child is capable of eating—that is, after the child is fully weaned."* (Al-Nabrawi, 2006, pp. 27-28)

The child also has the right to affiliation to his parents and the right to financial support either from his father or the state. Shariah has set:*"A period representing the child's ability to become capable of earning a living and having a job opportunity. For girls, their maintenance continues by their father until marriage. If the father is unable to provide, then it becomes the responsibility of the state's institutions. Also, the child has the right to safe custody. Islam grants the mother the right of custody, while the father is responsible for financial support, because it is not permissible to deprive a mother of her child." (Al-Nabrawi, 2006, pp. 37-42)*

Among the human rights in Islam is the right to social care, especially for those in need. Therefore, social solidarity is achieved through: *"The Bayt al-Mal (Public Treasury) for orphans, foundlings, people with disabilities, deviants and delinquents, divorced women, widows, the elderly and the infirm, and those affected by disasters."*

As for zakat, it is spent in its eight prescribed categories mentioned in Allah's words:*"Indeed, charity is for the poor and the needy and those employed to collect [zakat] and those whose hearts are to be reconciled and to free the captives and those in debt and for the cause of Allah and the [stranded] traveler — an obligation [imposed] by Allah. And Allah is Knowing and Wise."* (Surah At-Tawbah: 60)

As for non-Muslim settlers in Islamic countries—if they are eligible for social solidarity—the state must provide for their expenses from the public treasury, because the guarantee of Islam and its social justice must include everyone without discrimination between race or religion. The clearest example of this is when: *"Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) passed by an old man asking people for help, which caught his attention. He asked him: 'Who are you, old man?' He replied: 'A dhimmi' (and he was Jewish), asking for jizya and charity. Umar said to him: 'We did not treat you fairly by taking your youth, then neglecting you in your old age.' Then Umar took him to his house, gave him what he had, and sent a message to the treasurer of Bayt al-Mal saying: 'Look at this man and his peers (i.e., people like him), and allocate from the public treasury what suffices for them and their dependents. Charity is for the poor and needy, and these are among the needy people of the Book.'"* On his way to Syria, Umar also passed by a group of Christian lepers and ordered that they be provided for from the public treasury, and that each of them be assigned someone to serve and care for their needs.

Conclusion

Through our study of feminism and Virginia Held's ethics of care theory, we attempted to draw a series of conclusions, the most prominent of which is that feminism arose as a result of the inferior view of women and their status in the Western world, starting from Greek philosophy, passing through the Jewish and Christian religions, and reaching modern philosophy. Feminism originally began as a political movement aimed at achieving social goals, then evolved into an independent feminist thought and philosophy. In this context, the ethics of care theory emerged,

which represents the meeting of one person's needs by another through direct face-to-face interaction between the caregiver and the cared-for, where an individual cannot fulfill these needs alone, highlighting the interactive and human nature of this theory.

Virginia Held emphasizes that the ethics of care is not an ideal theoretical concept or a mere mental construct but a practical, realistic concept rooted in people's daily lives. Care, in her view, is both a value and a practice that should not be understood through abstract approaches disconnected from reality. However, this practical nature does not mean that ethics in general, and the ethics of care in particular, can be founded solely on science; for science, according to Wilfred Hoffman, concerns itself with explaining what is, but it cannot guide us on what ought to be done. Moreover, excluding religion from the foundation of ethics deprives it of its profound spiritual and human dimension because, as Hoffman believes, ethics without religion cannot exist or continue.

In the same context, the ethics of care theory cannot be considered a practical and realistic theory embodying value and practice without emphasizing the role of the family, which is the basic building block in constructing the system of ethics and care. According to Hoffman, family disintegration and collapse represent a serious indicator of the imminent collapse of Western civilization. Finally, any discussion of ethics in general and the ethics of care in particular must be framed in light of human rights, which in Islam are based on God's honoring of humans and their relationship through servitude to Him. This contrasts with Western thought, which bases human rights on absolute freedom, ignoring individual responsibility for oneself and others, thus highlighting the fundamental difference between these two references in their conception of moral and rights values.

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