

## HOW TO CARE? AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL ISSUES THROUGH THE LENS OF CARE ETHICS

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**Purpose:** This article aims to analyze the ethics of care and how it can help mitigate some of the negative impacts of social risks for vulnerable groups.

**Design/methodology/approach:** We analyze various books, documents and academic articles that provide essential information about care ethics, autonomy, justice, dignity, human rights, socially excluded groups and social risks. Overall, we aim to identify how the ethics of care can help prevent and protect the socially excluded from the negative impacts of social risks and contemporary issues.

**Findings:** Our article found that care ethics provides significant benefits while formulating policies for socially excluded and vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities. We have also identified several factors while care ethics provides original inputs for the new and reformulated social policies.

**Research limitations/implications:** The future research could expend on the ability of care ethics to introduce the concept of vulnerability in a specific policies aimed at improving living conditions, overall quality of life, upholding of human rights and dignity.

**Social implications:** We hope our article will impact political laws, support vulnerable groups, and help reduce discrimination against people with disabilities. Our paper should support the debate about broader consideration of dependency and vulnerability within social policies.

**Originality/value:** We have analyzed a significant theory that deals with vulnerable groups in society and places value on relationships and the dependency of all human beings. Our analysis tries to bring in the vulnerability of all human beings and how we should consider that while formulating any kind of governmental policy.

**Keywords:** ethics of care, vulnerability, ethics, human rights, capability approach.

**Category of the paper:** Research paper (ethical/human rights analysis/philosophy).

## **Introduction**

Ethics of care is a controversial approach toward human beings as it focuses on the weaknesses of all humans. The specific character of care ethics does not lie in a simple acknowledgement of human vulnerability. It lies in a completely new approach toward sensitive topics within society. It is not common to find an understanding of human beings in more vulnerable aspects, as they seem not to rely on the accomplishments and superiority of humanity. Care ethics seems to deal with more reality-based concerns rather than relying on an idealized understanding of human life. The present circumstances (climate change, wars, economic crisis, shortage of resources) have already shown us that there are new challenges and obstacles we need to face constantly. Governments can adopt social policies to combat harmful and long-term effects on citizens. The best practice is to adopt mechanisms that include the real-life scenarios of citizens and provide support that reflects the vulnerability and fragility of human life. In our article, we want to demonstrate that care ethics provide an adequate argumentative foundation for social policies and measures. We will first discuss the harmful effects of contemporary issues and the role of care ethics in social policies. In the next part of the article, we define different aspects related to care ethics and how it relates to all human beings and not only the most vulnerable (autonomy, dignity, freedom, justice). The third will conclude our analysis and focuses on the specific case of people with disabilities and how ethics of care can target policies to combat contemporary social issues. Contemporary social issues show us how vulnerable citizens are to several factors (environmental, economic, political, etc.). Many socially excluded groups suffer heavily during turbulent periods. We argue that all citizens suffer in crisis; however, we must particularly focus on the most vulnerable groups because they must deal with the worst impacts on their everyday functioning. Our primary focus group are people with disabilities because they suffer from all sorts of negative impacts, such as poverty, unemployment, poor quality of education, undignified living conditions etc.

## **Ethics of care and its place in developing social policies**

Ethics of care present a significant addition to our perception of justice, dignity and freedom of all human beings. Through the lens of ethics of care, we can perceive human beings as realistically as possible while developing any theoretical position concerning justice, equality, dignity, freedom or human rights. The notion that all human beings are vulnerable to different external (societal, political, environmental, etc.) and internal (disability, bodily, family, etc.) factors enhances our capacity to form arguments and conclusions regarding the organizational structure of society. We pay special attention to the vulnerable groups that rely on various social

measures to help with specific needs (socially excluded groups, people with disabilities, the elderly, etc.). We will specifically focus on the rights of people with disabilities, as ethics of care often provides interesting remarks regarding their needs and appropriate social support by the government. We chose to focus on people with disabilities because they tend to suffer many negative consequences from inadequate social policies.

Contemporary social issues show us how vulnerable citizens are to several factors (environmental, economic, political, etc.). Many socially excluded groups suffer heavily during turbulent periods. We argue that all citizens suffer in crisis; however, we must particularly focus on the most vulnerable groups because they must deal with the worst impacts on their everyday functioning. Our primary focus group are people with disabilities because they suffer from all sorts of negative impacts, such as poverty, unemployment, poor quality of education, undignified living conditions and etc.<sup>1</sup>.

The state's role is to provide policies that combat social issues and prevent people from being socially excluded. We argue that poverty, lack of employment or similar factors can cause social exclusion. Therefore, the state should adopt policies to help citizens to counter an increase in prices, unemployment, and lack of resources. The three named factors are a few examples of what citizens could face in a crisis. We see how different events create these sorts of issues for all citizens. Still, we see a lack in creating adequate social policies or policies in general that would support citizens, especially the most vulnerable. Many authors write on the topic of rules and laws. Some specialize in the field of social justice. Zuzana Palovičová, an expert on ethics and social issues, argues that the state has a responsibility to enforce social rules that protect the rights holder, and these rules are legally binding to all citizens (Palovičová, 2017, p. 162). Social rights and rules are fundamental for any society and the quality of life within that society. They are closely related to employment and poverty within the country as they provide the necessary support to all citizens. These policies offer necessary support against social exclusion to the most vulnerable. Palovičová argues that rights and rules are social constructs, and so we are free to invent and reinterpret our current ones (Palovičová, 2017, pp. 162-175). We mentioned the terms social exclusion and socially excluded. These are crucial because they explain what happens when a citizen is not being protected by proper governmental measures for various social risks (poverty, unemployment, housing and others).

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<sup>1</sup> For description of different social risks and modernization impacts on citizens see Ján Keller and his two works "Nová sociální rizika a proč se jim nevyhneme" (2011) and "Teorie modernizace" (2007). Here, he, in detail, explains why the states should react to the new changes in employment, environment and culture. He describes negative impacts on vulnerable groups and warns about the long-term consequences of government avoidance and reluctance.

## **Social exclusion, dignity, autonomy, human rights and their connection to care ethics**

The term social exclusion is broad and involves various issues. Different authors tried to identify specific aspects of social exclusion. Experts on the topic of exclusion, Tania Burchardt, Julian Le Grand and David Piachaud, wrote that "an individual is socially excluded if he or she does not participate in key activities of the society in which he or she lives" (Burchardt et al., 2002, pp. 30-31). They argue that exclusion is "relative, that is, to the time and place in question. It is not restricted to citizens of a particular state" (Burchardt et al., 2002, p. 31). So socially excluded people are disadvantaged against others because they are excluded from crucial societal activities. Poor people, people with disabilities, minorities or other similar groups suffer most from social exclusion, especially during a crisis. World Health Organization (WHO) states that "exclusion consists of dynamic, multi-dimensional processes driven by unequal power relationships interacting across four main dimensions – economic, political, social and cultural – and at different levels including individual, household, group, community, country and global levels" (World Health Organization...). Social exclusion is a real problem for many groups and endangers all citizens, especially the most vulnerable.

Employment serves an essential function in our existence. It provides us with money and options to live in dignified living conditions and, most importantly, be independent. Besides simply providing a decent living, employment also allows us to feel like a part of society (a sense of belonging). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights says that "everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights...). Our understanding of care ethics also focuses on vulnerable groups (often socially excluded) with worse employment conditions. For instance, people with disabilities have many obstacles depending on their specific disability. They may face physical, environmental or other barriers that limit their ability to get employed. The main issue is that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees us the same "just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against the unemployment" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights...). People with disabilities<sup>2</sup> are often excluded from good work conditions. We need to ensure that it is not the case as we are obliged by different human rights documents to hire all groups without discrimination and treat them as equals. This approach requires new policies protecting the fundamental rights of vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities. For instance, governments can make different preparations, support mechanisms or financial contributions to employers to hire people with disabilities in suitable positions. Many employers can be

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<sup>2</sup> For more sources on people with disabilities and human rights, see the publication "Sedová, Tatiana (ed.). 2019. *Lidské práva osob so zdravotným postihnutím: Od ideí k realite*". The book contains significant chapters regarding employment, education or other aspects regarding people with disabilities.

reluctant to hire a person with a disability because they cannot provide sufficient work conditions.

Similarly, different experts argue that poverty is the most threatening factor for many vulnerable groups, and economic participation must be ensured (Levitas et al., 2007, p. 9). European Commission states that "employment: raise significantly the share of persons with disabilities working in the open labour market. They represent one-sixth of the EU's overall working-age population, but their employment rate is comparatively low" (Persons with disabilities...). The employment of people with disability is a global problem that requires further discussions and systematic solutions. For our purpose, it demonstrates that many groups are vulnerable to recent changes, especially regarding employment, education, living conditions, etc.

Ethics of care provides an alternative to traditional thinking about intervention and support for various socially excluded groups. For instance, Eva Feder Kittay interprets care ethics as a critique of modern liberal theories of justice that often rely on idealized definitions of human beings. Ethics of care provides a different perspective on human life, justice, rights, and diversity and reflects the harsh realities that many theories choose to ignore. Kittay says that vulnerability and dependency start from the very beginning of our lives and continue through the different stages as we grow older (Kittay, 1999, p. 29). Kittay focuses on a new element in her analysis, and that is the relationship between caregiver and care receiver, as she understands the care work as a form of employment (Kittay, 1999, p. 30). The importance of the relationship between the caregiver and care receiver is often underestimated. Author Laura Davy argues in her article that we cannot simply ignore the relationship because we cannot simply define our own self and identity. We are always in relation to other people, and our stories are connected to other human beings (Davy, 2019, p. 111). Davy argues that having a disability and being dependent on others is not a burden but a normal part of the human experience (Davy, 2019, p. 107). Another expert on the topic of ethics of vulnerability and relational autonomy, Catriona Mackenzie, says that we cannot simply ignore the fact that human beings are self-determining and need to be also recognized as autonomous human beings (Mackenzie, 2014, p. 41). Mackenzie also emphasizes the fact that all human beings are inherently vulnerable. All human beings need nutrition, shelter, clothing, good quality of life, social interactions and much more (Mackenzie, 2014, p. 54). Ethics of care does point out such factors as crucial, and any reasonable social policy should reflect on these needs and much more. For instance, if we develop a policy regarding dignified living conditions. We must consider that people with disabilities can have limited access to decent incomes to secure proper housing. Therefore, either government must provide adequate housing to all or financial funds. These must be easily accessible and available without discrimination or unnecessary bureaucratic procedures.

We mentioned autonomy within the context of a relationship with other people. German philosopher Axel Honneth writes in his works that all humans need to be respected as diverse individuals with their own needs, desires and self (Honneth, 1995, pp. 131-132). Honneth

argues that we need to have control over our bodies, and we cannot violate this control by force or other means (Honneth, 1995, p. 133). We need to respect the rights of others because we also want our rights to be respected by others (Honneth, 1995, p. 133). Honneth is not the only expert that perceives autonomy as crucial for all human beings. In a study from 2003, authors argue that modern culture relies too much on individualism and places too much responsibility on the individual (Riddell-Watson, 2003, pp. 6-7). We realize that we want a person to be autonomous as possible. On the other hand, we cannot place too much responsibility on individuals because there are things beyond one's control. For instance, a person with a disability cannot be responsible for adjusting the environment to their specific needs. The government needs to make particular adjustments to fully integrate the person with a disability according to their specific needs. Different authors argue that we need to secure social rights for all people as they are crucial for the 21st century. Judith Wyttenbach writes in her analysis of social rights that the role of government is to ensure that every person can achieve a decent standard of living necessary for dignified existence (Wyttenbach, 2017, p. 332). Wyttenbach points out that we constantly face the threat of new social risks that can negatively impact many socially excluded individuals (Wyttenbach, 2017, p. 332). We mentioned dignity<sup>3</sup> several times in our article because it is a crucial term related to human rights and belongs to every human being. A human being is vulnerable and can suffer if his rights are violated. Human dignity is essential to human rights because, without it, we could not even begin to understand what human rights are (Menke, 2017, p. 172). We need to respect the freedom of every human being to make their own choices because that is the core of their dignity (Menke, 2017, p. 175). The article's primary aim is to analyze how ethics of care relate to contemporary social issues and what insights it can provide to help mitigate various negative impacts. We have shown that ethics of care is often used when analyzing human rights, human dignity, autonomy, justice, freedom or equality.

## **People with disabilities, care ethics and social policies**

Our article mentions how care ethics focuses on different aspects of our lives (dignity, freedom, vulnerability, and dependency). We have also noted how some social policies might be changed through ethics of care and mentioned employment because it can benefit from the perspective of care ethics, especially how it understands people with disabilities and their dependent position on government support. In our analysis, we want to mention that ethics of care does not simply focus on vulnerable aspects of life but also provides us with focus through

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<sup>3</sup> The study "Analyzing dignity: a perspective from the ethics of care" by Carlo Leget (2012) provides some interesting insights into the connections between different historical understandings of dignity and how they relate to care ethics with interesting insights on modern authors.

different theories that lack these elements when analyzing how to build a socially just society. For instance, in the capability approach introduced by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, we can see how such a concept fits within their understanding of just society. Sen's just society aims to maximize the real opportunities of an individual to live such a life as he deems worthy. An individual should do things that he thinks are important for him and his wellbeing. We should respect different life forms and personal choices of lifestyle (Sen, 2000, p. 75). Sen's understanding strongly correlates with notions introduced through analysis of care ethics as he places value on individual quality of life. Sen's approach does not exclude any groups as he believes we should provide real opportunities even for those most unfortunate. He thinks that we should respect the rights of the excluded groups and provide them with the same opportunities (Sen, 2010, pp. 226-227).

Similarly, Martha Nussbaum<sup>4</sup>, in her interpretation of the capability approach, connects the idea of human dignity and flourishing as something central for all human beings (Nussbaum, 2007, p. 182). Nussbaum, in her concept, specifically mentions people with disabilities because they are often excluded when dealing with an understanding of justice society. In our analysis, that means that when a government is developing a policy, it should consider the specific needs of vulnerable or excluded groups and form the policy to address the specific requirements. For instance, if we were to make changes regarding housing policy, we should consider which groups live in the most unsatisfactory conditions. If people with disabilities cannot afford to live independently and have one of the poorest quality of life, government policy should consider them first and propose adequate solutions. Nussbaum claims that many theories of justice simply ignore the specific needs of people with disabilities. The capability approach places a central role in considering all people equals within the society, and we should not neglect the option to let them live a productive life (Nussbaum, 2007, p. 98). Both Nussbaum and Sen agree that people should live dignified lives and that society should create just conditions for them to flourish. For our analysis, it is sufficient to say that the capability approach uses many elements from ethics of care as it reflects on all human beings' vulnerability and dependency and considers it a natural characteristic of human existence.

## Conclusion

To conclude our analysis, we have tried to demonstrate that the contemporary issues, whether related to COVID-19 consequences (Kuzior et al., 2021, 2022) new employment challenges (Kuzior et al., 2022), the invasion of Ukraine, climate change (Barchielli et al., 2022)

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on Nussbaum's understanding of the capability approach, see her other work, "Capabilities, Entitlements, Rights: Supplementation and Critique" (2011) or "Creating capabilities: the human development approach" (2011).

rising prices and many others, need to be addressed thoroughly and effectively to avoid any long-term adverse effects. Especially regarding the most vulnerable groups, as they are the ones who suffer the most substantial consequences. For instance, people with disabilities are among the most vulnerable, and governments should take measures to minimize these new challenges' negative impacts. We understand this is a complex issue to be solved with just philosophical analysis. However, ethics of care shows us that we often tend to ignore the harsh reality of vulnerability and dependency of all human beings on different policies and means of support. The ethics of care offers provides a helpful tool that seeks to identify which groups to focus on and what sort of help we should provide to counter the negative impacts of contemporary issues. Our analysis supports new research aimed at proving the fragility and instability of human existence and specific social and political measures that aim to prevent further discrimination and social exclusion.

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