ABSTRACT

CARE AND THE ROLE OF EQUALITY

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The ethics of care is one of the most important directions in feminist ethics. From the very beginning of its emergence the care ethics has raised heated debate both amongst feminist philosophers and between feminists and non-feminists. Non-feminist philosophers concerned with justice have argued that care ethics is parochial, partial and inadequate for public institutions. Feminists have pointed out that praising care carries the danger of locking women into their age-old subordinated social status.

My paper locates these expressed discomforts within a discussion of the value of equality in ethics and political philosophy.

I argue that equality is prioritised differently by the ethics of care and by justice-based approaches, making conflict between care and justice possible. While theories of justice are concerned with procedural equality, and equality of outcomes, care, due to its focus on human needs, is more concerned with preserving the relationships that can provide for these needs. Care ethics can bring a forceful claim against theories of justice: that in some sense these are forms of utopia, commanding unattainable political standards. Political philosophers have recognised that many factors influence people’s access to equal opportunities and have sought for institutions that redistribute essential goods such as wealth, health or education. However, certain goods, most importantly those nurtured by care (such as sustained love and working relationships), cannot be socially redistributed. As a consequence, equal opportunities - the main ideal of justice theories – are to a certain extent beyond the reach of just institutions.

The conclusion of my argument is twofold. First I recognise the need for cooperation between caretakers and social institutions. Second, I argue that this is not enough; feminists may want
to encourage a civic capacity to assume responsibilities proportional to one’s good luck and a preparedness to give others the care one has received oneself.