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# **Women and the Ethics of Care: An Alternative Moral Account**

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### **Abstract**

*Ethics, as the science of morality, occupies a paramount import in any philosophical analysis. Morality often works as a yardstick to identify the justifiability of certain arguments, and so, it becomes necessary, time and again, to engage in ethical discourses that have wider socio-philosophical implications. In this article, the model of “Ethics of Care”, as is found in the works of Carol Gilligan, is being explored as an alternative moral system which breaks away from the tradition “reason-centric” accounts and focuses on the not-so-rational concept of Care as the basic component in our moral understanding. The article argues that Women are the best qualified to be the torch-bearers of this care-centric morality, as they are the embodiments of the ideal of “Carers”. The article, thus, makes a stance for an alternative model of morality which is care-centric and which requires women to be in the fore-front to work. But, following the Platonic ground-clearing technique, it begins with an analysis of the concept of Sustainability, which is central to our contemporary ethical understanding, and then proceeds to show the correlation between the ethics of sustainability and the ethics of care. It finally concludes on the note that women, through the ethics of care, can and should be the real insurers of sustainability.*

**Key Words:** *Sustainability, Ethics of Care, Virtue Ethics, Women, Alternative Moral Account.*

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**Introduction:** Since the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all human intellectual endeavours have, more or less, been directed towards the cherished ideal of *progress*, wherein the notion of “development” is taken as the basal concept in all analysis and enquiry. Philosophers too, thus, cannot remain ignorant of development-analysis. Quite interestingly, all issues of development are to be discussed and analysed within the moral framework.

Development, as a concept, is multi-dimensional. It however has three specific aspects - social, economic and environmental. And in all these three aspects of development, the notion of “sustainability” plays a crucial role. All issues of development are centred on the notion of sustainability. This is because, sustainability development

has been identified as the best model of development, but as with all other concepts, the concept of “sustainable development” needs to be properly analysed in order to appreciate its import in today’s world. The following section thus deals with the concept of sustainable development and how it is inter-twined with the basics principles of the ethics of care.

## SECTION - 1

**The Concept of Sustainability:** Sustainability, as a noun, stands out as an independent concept that can be understood in terms of its economic, social and environmental dimensions. But it is usually treated and discussed as an “adjective” that qualifies the concept of “development”. Any analysis of “sustainability”, thus, centres round the analysis of “Sustainable Development” - making it an idealised model of development. It has been, almost conclusively, proved by a number of thinkers that “Sustainable Development” is the best model of development, and so, in this chapter, I take their conclusions as primitive and try, quite unconventionally, to look at Sustainability as an concept by focusing primarily on its environmental dimension. For the sake of convenience and elucidation, the description of sustainability will be sought for from the account of “sustainable development”.

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Thus described, “sustainability” balances the requirements of the present and the future generations, and sustainable development is that type of development which keeps in mind the future generations. If now, “sustainability” be divorced from the concept of development, it would mean the ability of something to retain a specific state of existence that would ensure the dual feature of “progress” and “integrity”. This notion of sustainability surfaces clearly from the environmental dimension of Sustainability.

Concerns about environmental sustainability started from the first quarter of the twentieth century when man began to realise the existence of the whirlpool of environmental crisis that has entangled him. Man also realised that this crisis was a result of his own destructive activities. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in the Synthesis Report (SYR) of its Fifth Assessment Report states that,

*“The SRY confirms that human influence on the climate system is clear and growing, with impacts observed across all continents and oceans. Many of the observed changes since the 1950s are unprecedented over decades to millennia. The IPCC is now 95 percent certain that humans are the main cause of current global warming. In addition, the SYR finds that the more human activities disrupt the climate, the greater the risks of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems, and long-lasting changes*

*in all components of the climate system. The SYR highlights that we have the means to limit climate change and its risks, with many solutions that allow for continued economic and human development.” (IPCC, v).*

These realisations made man to consider “environmental sustainability” as the *only* way out of the pertaining environmental crisis, and scholars began to dissect the concept of “environmental sustainability” so as to provide the theoretical framework for its application. “Environmental Sustainability” can be minimally defined as biological systems’ ability to remain diverse and productive indefinitely. To ensure environmental sustainability, then, there is a need to preserve and respect the diversity of Nature and also not to obstruct Nature’s productivity. This Environmental dimension of Sustainability clearly brings forth its ethical import. Man, as moral being, has some *duty* towards the environment which nurtures him. He must, in other words, *Care for Nature*. And this requires mending the man-nature relationship; the “I – IT” conception of nature has to be transformed into an “I – THOU” conception of nature. This requires recognising Sustainability as an ethical concept, as man’s moral imperative. At a theoretical level, this would mean appreciating and adopting the Ethics of Care. Sustainability, thus, becomes an overtly *ethical concept*.

Sustainability, as the ability to continue an idealised state of affair for an indefinite period of time, attains its potency from being an ethical issue. Achieving the sustainable ideals requires an invocation of the moral conscience of man. It is, thus, the ethical facet of man’s existence that comes into play when the issue of Sustainable development is considered. The concept of Sustainability, therefore, reflects man’s competence to maintain a defined set of behaviour indefinitely, and that behaviour itself is a reflection of man’s care for Nature as well as for others.

## SECTION - 2

**Sustainability and the Transhumanist Project:** Transhumanism is an intellectual movement that has begun in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the aim of enhancing human intellect and physiology that would eventually transform the human constitution and thereby his condition. The term “Transhumanism” was coined by Julian Huxley in 1957, who was a champion of “fulfilment society”, a concept that aimed at the full development of the human potential, which he thought would also serve as a replacement model for “welfare society” in which the concern for others subdued the potentiality of the individual. For Huxley, transhumanism refers to the deliberate effort by mankind to “transcend itself – not just sporadically....but in its entirety, as humanity....Man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature”. (Huxley 17). Some proponents of Transhumanism, like Ray Kurzweil, talk of a point of Singularity which will bring an end to the species of Homo Sapiens and will usher in the era of an autonomous, artificially intelligent species called the Robo Sapiens. With the power of science

and technology, Humans, thus Transhumanists believe, will transform themselves into “Posthumans”, who will possess unprecedented physical, intellectual and psychological capacity, and will be self-programming, potentially immortal, unlimited individuals.

The Transhumanist project, that aims at species-transformation, would mean an advent of the era of artificially intelligent beings and the end of the race of human beings. Such a project is, quite obviously, diametrically opposed to the principle of Sustainability. However, some scholars tend to suggest that these two are not so opposed. For, if the transhumanist project is successful, then it would mean the *continued* existence of the human organism, only in a different form. It will be an instance of sustainability, because the “human consciousness” would be “sustained indefinitely” in a machine. But these scholars are, in my opinion, mistaken, because, they have misconstrued the concept of Sustainability.

Sustainability, primarily requires, a retention of the current state/form of existence of a thing/being. A change of form means a “characteristic or essential” change in something. A change of essence indicates a dissolution of its Integrity; and “dissolved integrity” nullifies the idea of “sustainability”. So, the transhumanist project can hardly be said to be based on the principle of Sustainability. Moreover, the pivotal concern of “sustainable development” is to keep in mind the needs and wellbeing of the future generations. This indicates emphasis on “species-continuation” – the need to protect man’s essence. Sustainability also carries in its veins the ideal of “human development”. An authentic human development won’t be one where the desire to progress will take man to a state of moral oblivion. Transforming consciousness does not ensure “essence-preservation”. It lacks the feature of “care for future generations”, and is, thus, anti-sustainable. So, the transhumanist project does not reflect the principle of Sustainability.

There is also another aspect that underlies the transhumanist project of ambitious enhancement. The bedrock of Transhumanism is the “anthropocentric” morality. Anthropocentric attitude is a man-centred way of understanding morality. It advocates a “man-over-nature” ethical attitude. The result of this is that man treats Nature as IT, a *means* that would serve his ends. But, as has been pointed earlier, environmental sustainability can be ensured only when man remedies his relationship with Nature from I-IT to I-THOU. This is because, preservation of nature’s diversity is possible only when man learns to appreciate and respect Nature. And such appreciation and respect requires man to recognise nature as having an independent intrinsic worth; a recognition that nature is not a means, but an end in itself. The same argument hold for ensuring nature’s indefinite productivity. But another perspective can also be added to solidify the claim by pointing out that only man’s recognising Nature as Thou or as of the same value as himself, will make him surrender all “against-nature” policies and thereby adopt an attitude of “pro-nature”. Once this attitude is developed by man, the tendencies to harm nature will be curbed and with that environmental sustainability can be ensured. Therefore,

Sustainability, as a conceptual and practical principle of human survival cannot go hand-in-hand with the Transhumanist project, and mankind must choose one of two as their strategy of existence.

### SECTION - 3

**Sustainability and the ethics of care:** Having dissected, though not extensively, the concept of Sustainability, through discussions on environmental sustainability and the structural difference between Sustainability and Transhumanism, the next step is to try and provide a foundational framework, supporting which the ideal of Sustainability can find fulfilment. I here, would propose the theory of “Ethics of Care” as Sustainability’s foundation.

The Ethics of Care developed as an alternative moral theory during the last two decades of the Twentieth century. Its primary assertion is to re-evaluate the earlier ideals of morality by taking into considerations the affective aspects of human constitution that plays a vital role in defining our moral attitude. The core of this is “Care”, which is to be understood as our “*Connectedness*” to our life-world. The ethics of care is premised upon the view that humans, as essential moral beings, must develop their moral imperatives by considering the “connectedness” that is integral to their survival. Held writes, “the central focus of the ethics of care is on the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility. Caring for one’s child, for instance, may well and defensibly be at the forefront of a person’s moral concerns.” (10) Care, thus, forms the basis of our moral treatment. But, this “Care” is a complicated notion, having myriad nuances. The advocates of the Ethics of Care, however, view Care as the feeling of connectedness.

*“Nel Noddings focuses especially on the attitudes of caring that typically accompany the activity of care. Close attention to the feelings, needs, desires, and thoughts of those cared for, and a skill in understanding a situation from that person’s point of view, are central to caring for someone. Carers act in behalf of others’ interests, but they also care for themselves, since without the maintenance of their own capabilities, they will not be able to continue to engage in care.” (Held 31)*

With the enforcement of Care in our moral attitude, there emerges an improvised picture of morality, where man develops a feeling of “belongingness”. And I propose to argue that this “Care” is integral to the fulfilment of the ideal of sustainability. This is because, a necessary aspect of Sustainability is to “*care for others*”, where these “others” are not only those who are inhabiting the planet right now, but also those potential beings who are yet to arrive. This “Care” also extends to Nature, in the sense that, man begins to view Nature as “Thou” and thereby cares for Nature. It is this care for Nature that is vital to ensure environmental

sustainability. For, as discussed earlier, only when man recognises himself as being *connected* to Nature, he would stop the exploitative treatment of Nature. So, if we are to search for the foundations of Sustainability, we need to adopt the attitude of Care. The Ethics of Care, thus, serves as the backbone of Sustainability.

Carol Gilligan, who championed the Ethics of Care, pointed out a unique and interesting perspective of women's conception of self and morality, that make them the personifiers of the ethics of care. Her central thesis is that there is an attitudinal difference in man's and woman's conception of morality. And this difference is crucial to the execution of the ethics of care.

*"...women not only define themselves in a context of human relationships but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care. Women's place in man's life cycle has been that of nurturer, caretaker, and helpmate, the weaver of those networks of relationships on which she in turn relies."*  
(Gilligan 17)

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to mention that up till now, the term "man" has been used to signify the "humankind", i.e., both men and women, but from here on "man" would be used to signify "the male", and it would be contrasted with "woman", the female.

Thus, if the ideal of Sustainability is to be realised, then the moral dictates of the ethics of care are to be adopted. And as has been argued, the implementation of such an ethical model requires women to be in the fore front. Women, being the embodiments of *care*, can rightly champion the ideals of care-morality. Care-centric moral engagements fall, by their very nature, within the purview of *virtue-ethics*. Care is a virtue. And as all virtue-ethical theories demand, this care-based ethics also centres around the *character of care*, which is exclusive to women folk. Sustainability as a moral value requires a change of attitude to be achieved. While this alternative perspective comes natural to women, it needs to be cultivated by men. This is because women carry with them the character of care. Women are natural carers, nurturers, while men need to cultivate these qualities. Therefore, the ethics of care, being a variant of virtue-ethics, is entirely women-centric, where the women or *becoming the women* is necessary.

#### SECTION - 4

**Women as insurer of Sustainability:** Gilligan argues that any ethical issue can be viewed from two perspectives – justice and care (love). While man tend to confront ethical issues with the prism of Justice, woman take recourse to the rationale of Care. And this choice issues from their construction of the "self-image" or the conception of the self that differs in man and woman. Gilligan is of the opinion that woman conceive themselves as "Carers", and this leads them to understand morality as an activity of caring. They develop themselves after the image of a

“caring person”, due to their early exposure to gender categorisation in which they see their mothers or grandmothers take part in a different role play than their male counterparts. This self-image of Carers make women more suited than men to appreciate and adhere to the Ethics of Care. Women are, thus, personifiers of the ethics of care.

This exclusivity of women being the sole insurer of sustainability, by virtue of their being the personifiers of the ethics of care, can be understood from Gilligan’s argument of how boys (men) and girls (women) moral perspectives are differently grounded.

*“For boys and men, separation and individuation are critically tied to gender identity since separation from the mother is essential for the development of masculinity. For girls and women, issues of femininity or feminine identity do not depend on the achievement of separation from the mother or on the progress of individuation. Since masculine is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment, male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender identity is threatened by separation. Thus males tend to have difficulty with relationships, while females tend to have problems with individuation.” (Gilligan 8)*

It is this quality of femininity, rooted in attachment, that make women the forerunners of care-based morality.

As has been discussed earlier, the Ethics of Care constitutes the backbone of Sustainability, and Women, being the role models of Care, play the most important role in ensuring sustainability. To actualise the ideals of Sustainability, mankind needs to adopt the ethics of care fundamentally. But this cannot be done within the present societal structure of gender-inequality. The existing societal structure is gender-biased. It puts men at the forefront and gives no recognition to the womenfolk. This biased structural set-up is inadequate to account for sustainability. If humans are to choose Sustainability as the model of economic, social and environmental development, then this gender-biased needs to be forgone and a gender-neutral attitude needs to be adopted. Not only that, Women are to be placed at the forefront as guides to the ethics of care. This is because, it is women who can fully relate to the morality of caring.

Women, thus, can be the true insurers of Sustainability. They can ensure Economic Sustainability, by actualising the gender-neutral policy of “People, Planet, Profit”. They can ensure Social Sustainability by safeguarding diversity and ensuring the quality of life. They can also ensure Environmental Sustainability, because of their ability to related to Nature both negatively as “being exploited by man” and positively as “mothers or carers who nurture life”. So, if the ideals of Sustainability are to be achieved, *women are to be the torchbearers*. But, only half of mankind cannot in practice ensure Sustainability. What is required is a change in man’s

conception of the self and morality. Man must learn to be “Carers” from their female counterparts. If the first step to Sustainability is giving the leadership to Women, the second necessary step is “*becoming the women, the mother, the carer*”. Only then can a sustainable model of development be realised.

To conclude, it may be safely said that the *ethics of care* presents an alternative model of morality, where the emphasise is given on the virtue of care as the model ideal. And this care-centric ethics is grounded primarily on women as its embodiment and fore-runner. Therefore, it is imperative that women be given the charge of the vehicle of sustainable progress that would ensure an all-round development of all.

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