A Care-Based Approach to Borders and Nations: Toward a More Compassionate World

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Abstract: The ethics of care, rooted in feminist philosophy, challenges traditional moral theories that prioritize abstract principles over relational interdependence. When applied to the concepts of borders and nations, this perspective invites a critical rethinking of nationalism and its ethical implications. Borders, often seen as fixed makers of sovereignty, are human constructs that regulate belonging and exclusion. Feminist ethics of care, however, foregrounds the interconnectedness of individuals and communities, urging us to consider the moral responsibility we have for those beyond our national boundaries. Nationalism, in its conventional form, tends to prioritize the interests of the nation-state, often at the expense of marginalized groups, particularly women, migrants and refugees. For example, migration policies that separate families or deny asylum seekers refuge demonstrate a lack of ethical responsibility toward vulnerable populations. Feminist ethics of care challenges these policies by emphasizing empathy, relationality and shared humanity. This perspective highlights the gendered dimensions of nationalism. Nationalist narratives often rely on idealized notions of women as bearers of cultural identity or as symbols of national purity. These roles reinforce patriarchal structures and reduce women's agency. The ethics of care disrupts these narratives, advocating for a more inclusive and equitable understanding of nationhood.

A care-based approach to borders and nations envisions a world where compassion and cooperation replace exclusion and division. It calls for policies that prioritize human dignity, address global inequalities and acknowledge our shared responsibilities. Feminist ethics of care not only questions the morality of borders but also inspires a vision of solidarity that transcends national lines, fostering a more just and compassionate world. This approach compels us to rethink how we navigate the moral complexities of borders and nations in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: *Feminist Ethics, Nationalism, Borders, Relationality, Marginalized, Solidarity*

Introduction

Traditional political theory and practice treat borders and nation-states as immutable and essential frameworks for organizing human societies. This perspective is anchored in a realist conception of political sovereignty that prioritizes control, authority, and territorial integrity a worldview that has dominated international relations since the Peace of Westphalia. Such an approach systematically elevates national interests above shared human concerns, resulting in policies and practices that are inherently exclusionary. By naturalizing borders as fixed, eternal, and necessary for order, this logic actively curtails the imagination of alternative political communities and tends to marginalize those who do not conform to rigid, state-sanctioned categories of belonging (Anderson 12). This naturalization process is not merely descriptive but profoundly normative, embedding a particular vision of political life that equates legitimacy with bounded territorial control.

These frameworks ostensibly create order and stability by regulating citizenship, migration, and social belonging. Yet, a closer examination reveals they simultaneously engender profound systemic exclusion by marginalizing specific groups and restricting their access to fundamental rights, legal recognition, and social participation. In doing so, they perpetuate and deepen pre-existing socio-political inequalities and global power asymmetries. Rather than guaranteeing universal inclusion and stability, such constructs often actively deprive the most vulnerable populations—refugees, the stateless, undocumented migrants—of legal identity and protection. This condition, as Hannah Arendt poignantly analyzed, fosters a permanent state of rightlessness, exacerbating social injustice and creating a hierarchy of human worth tied directly to nationality (Arendt 295). The stateless person, stripped of political membership, exists in a precarious limbo, a condition that exposes the dark underside of a world order built on sovereign nation-states.

From an ethical standpoint, these rigid territorial and political divisions contravene fundamental, cross-cultural values of global justice, equality, and shared moral responsibility. They represent a failure to recognize the fundamental interconnectedness of humanity and the corresponding ethical duty to treat all individuals with fairness, dignity, and respect, regardless of the "accident" of their birthplace. The moral arbitrariness of birthplace as a determinant of life chances stands as a stark challenge to any credible theory of global justice. In response to this challenge, philosophers like Martha Nussbaum advocate for a robust cosmopolitan ethics designed to transcend parochial loyalties and emphasize a common human belonging. This outlook encourages individuals and institutions to perceive themselves not merely as members of particular nations or cultures, but as integral parts of a broader, indivisible global community. By underscoring shared human capacities, responsibilities, and inherent dignity, Nussbaum contends that moral concern must not be truncated by borders or cultural distinctions. Her assertion that "we are all citizens of the world" reflects the core cosmopolitan notion that ethical obligations extend to every person, irrespective of nationality or geographic origin

(Nussbaum 3). Such a cosmopolitan approach aims to cultivate mutual respect, advance global justice, and foster genuine solidarity, urging societies to acknowledge their deep interconnectedness and to act with consistent compassion and responsibility toward humanity as a collective whole.

Parallel to and enriching this cosmopolitan vision, the care-based approach grounded in the feminist ethics of care pioneered by Carol Gilligan and expansively developed by theorists like Nel Noddings, Joan Tronto, and Virginia Held offers a distinct yet complementary critical lens. It underscores the ontological and ethical significance of human relationships, mutual dependence, and sustained attentiveness to others. This paradigm maintains that meaningful ethical action entails recognizing the concrete reality of human interconnectedness and responding sensitively and responsively to the needs and vulnerabilities present within any community, local or global. By valuing emotional understanding, contextual judgment, and narrative particularity, the care-based approach presents a fundamental challenge to traditional, dominant ethical frameworks often deontological or utilitarian that prioritize abstract autonomy, impartiality, and universal, rule-based principles. Instead, it advances a more compassionate, situated, and inclusive moral outlook that is profoundly attentive to lived experiences, the sustenance of social bonds, and the responsibility to nurture and maintain relationships over time (Gilligan 30; Tronto, *Moral Boundaries* 102). It shifts the moral question from "What are my abstract duties?" to "How should I respond responsibly within this network of relationships?"

This care-ethical framework directly contests the moral and political absolutism often claimed by doctrines of unfettered sovereignty and exclusionary nationalism. It does so by reimagining political community not as a territorially bounded, monolithic entity defined by exclusion, but as a dynamic, porous space of ongoing ethical responsibility and compassionate engagement. As political philosopher Seyla Benhabib argues, the recognition of distant others as moral equals in a globalized world fundamentally demands a rigorous critique of exclusionary practices and a positive affirmation of the rights of the "other," whose fate is increasingly intertwined with our own through flows of capital, communication, and people (Benhabib 20). This perspective necessitates a re-evaluation of the very institutions that regulate belonging.

Conceptually, a care-based model proposes a more sustainable, peaceful, and ethically coherent approach to global coexistence. It prioritizes respect for universal human dignity over narrow territorial ambitions and fosters the cultivation of empathy, responsibility, and mutual understanding among nations and peoples. By intrinsically valuing cooperation over conflict and inclusion over exclusion, this model supports peaceful interaction, diplomatic engagement, and collective problem-solving in the face of shared global challenges. Rather than relying on, and thereby reinforcing, divisive, hierarchical power structures, it promotes collaborative, dialogical frameworks aimed at addressing common human needs—from climate change and public health to economic justice and refugee protection. Such

an approach not only diminishes the potential for conflict but also significantly enhances moral accountability and responsiveness in international relations, offering a more humane, just, and viable path toward enduring global harmony. It represents a paradigm shift from a politics of fear and control to a politics of responsibility and care.

Deconstructing the Border: From Naturalized Divisions to Contingent Constructs

The concept of the political-territorial border is frequently perceived within public discourse and much traditional political theory as a natural, inevitable, or immutable aspect of geopolitical reality. It is assumed to be a legitimate, neutral line demarcating national authority, identity, and jurisdiction. However, sustained philosophical and historical scrutiny reveals borders to be quintessential socially constructed artefacts. They are devised, negotiated, implemented, and perpetually upheld by human institutions states, legal systems, militaries to serve specific and shifting political, economic, and socio-cultural functions. They are neither geographically inevitable nor morally universal, but historically contingent arrangements, born from war, treaty, colonization, and political bargaining, and as such, they remain perpetually subject to moral interrogation and historical critique (Anderson 149). The work of scholars like Benedict Anderson reminds us that the nation itself, which the border purportedly protects, is an "imagined community," and the border is a key tool in that act of imagination, defining who is inside and who is outside the collective self-portrait.

Logically, the legitimacy of border control often hinges on a functionalist presumption: that borders are essential to ensure domestic order, stability, and security for a defined citizenry. Yet, this commonplace reasoning conveniently overlooks or deliberately obscures the profoundly arbitrary and historically contingent nature of countless borders across the globe. This is particularly evident in borders drawn during the era of European colonial expansion and the subsequent partitions, which were frequently imposed by external powers with a blatant disregard for pre-existing cultural, ethnic, linguistic, or ethical realities on the ground. The Sykes-Picot agreement in the Middle East or the Radcliffe Line in South Asia stand as potent testaments to borders crafted in distant imperial capitals, whose tragic legacies of conflict and displacement continue to unfold (Said 66). These borders were not organic developments but acts of political cartography that served imperial interests, creating nations and minorities overnight. Therefore, to appeal to the "naturalness" or immutability of such lines is to engage in a form of historical amnesia that serves powerful status quo interests.

Ethically, borders present a profound and enduring paradox: while institutionally intended to protect the sovereignty of states and the rights of citizens within, they often operationally perpetuate systemic exclusion, discrimination, and injustice, especially targeting refugees, stateless individuals, and undocumented migrants. The very mechanism designed to provide security for some routinely produces profound insecurity for others. Political philosopher Martha Nussbaum powerfully critiques

such exclusionary practices in her seminal argument for cosmopolitan justice, asserting that "accidents of birth should not determine the scope of one's moral concern" (Nussbaum 21). From a care-ethical perspective, this accident of birth is the ultimate morally irrelevant characteristic, yet it functionally dictates life chances, access to resources, and legal protection on a global scale. The border thus becomes a site where the universalist claims of morality clash violently with the particularist claims of political sovereignty.

Traditional philosophical justifications for robust border control stem primarily from the classical theories of state sovereignty and the social contract, which together have furnished the dominant moral and political basis for a state's asserted authority over its territory and population. From the standpoint of sovereignty, most starkly articulated by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*, the state emerges as a supreme, indivisible power created by collective agreement (or imposition) to avert the disorder, violence, and insecurity of the putative "state of nature." Individuals, rationally motivated by fear of this chaos, are theorized to cede certain natural freedoms to a central authority (the Sovereign) in exchange for peace, protection, and the conditions for societal life. Within this Hobbesian framework, controlling borders becomes an essential, non-negotiable function of the sovereign state, as the regulation of entry and exit is deemed intrinsically tied to maintaining internal security, political stability, and a predictable social order. The sovereign's exclusive capacity to determine who may enter or remain within its territory is therefore viewed not as a policy choice, but as a necessary, definitive expression of sovereign power itself (Hobbes Ch. 17). To question border control, from this vantage point, is to question the very logic of the sovereign state.

Social contract theory, particularly as developed by John Locke, provides a more liberal but still justificatory reinforcement. Locke posits that legitimate political authority derives from the consent of free and equal individuals who unite to form a political community (a government) for the primary purpose of protecting their natural rights, namely life, liberty, and property. Because the state is conceptually created through this collective agreement of its founding members and their descendants (through tacit consent), it is argued to bear special, primary obligations toward those citizens who are, directly or indirectly, parties to this social contract. Border control, from this Lockean perspective, is justified as a primary mechanism through which the state fulfils its fundamental fiduciary duty to safeguard the rights, interests, and welfare of its contracting members. It is an act of trusteeship for the national community (Locke 137). The rights of non-members, or outsiders, feature only peripherally, if at all, in this contractualist imagination.

Taken together, these canonical theories suggest that nation-states possess a strong, perhaps overriding, moral right to regulate immigration and to prioritize the welfare and rights of their own citizens. Regulating territorial entry is thus viewed not as an arbitrary or morally neutral exercise of power, but as a legitimate, even necessary, responsibility inextricably linked to the preservation of

security, the enforcement of laws, and the maintenance of the social cohesion and trust upon which the contract depends. Consequently, traditional Western political philosophy has largely endorsed the view that border control is a morally permissible, and often obligatory, aspect of legitimate state authority. However, as critical theorists and postcolonial scholars emphasize, such justifications frequently operate in a historical and geopolitical vacuum. They ignore the dense realities of global interdependency and the deep ethical implications of historical injustices—such as colonialism, economic exploitation, slavery, and environmental degradation processes orchestrated by now-affluent states that disproportionately impoverished and destabilized populations in the Global South, creating many of the conditions that drive migration today (Mignolo 82). To assert a right to exclude without acknowledging this history of entanglement and appropriation is to engage in a profound moral inconsistency.

From a critical ethical perspective situated within liberal theory itself, philosophers like Joseph Carens mount a powerful internal challenge to the moral justification of closed borders in liberal democratic states. Carens argues that restrictive, nationality-based migration controls fundamentally conflict with the core egalitarian and libertarian values that liberal societies profess to uphold. According to Carens, the practice of limiting freedom of movement based on the circumstance of birth closely resembles the antiquated, now universally condemned logic of feudal systems, where social status, rights, and life prospects were rigidly fixed by hereditary caste. Just as feudal privilege is considered morally indefensible for denying individuals equal opportunity and respect, Carens contends that exclusionary border policies unjustly privilege some (citizens of wealthy states) while severely restricting others (those born in poorer states) for reasons entirely beyond their control. In this sense, Carens views closed borders not as a neutral policy tool but as an arbitrary, anachronistic, and ethically problematic practice that actively undermines the foundational moral commitment of liberal democracies to individual freedom and equal respect for persons (Carens 226). His work forces a confrontation between liberal principles at home and illiberal practices at the border.

The Paradox of Nationalism: Cohesion and Exclusion in the Imagined Community

Nationalism remains one of the most potent political forces of the modern era, predicated on the intertwined principles of popular sovereignty and collective self-determination. It grants states as the political embodiment of the nation the asserted authority to define borders, legislate citizenship, and set social and cultural priorities. Benedict Anderson's seminal formulation conceptualizes nations as "imagined communities," wherein members, who will never know most of their fellow members personally, nonetheless perceive a deep, horizontal comradeship and shared identity (Anderson). This act of collective imagination is powerful and can foster solidarity and a sense of common purpose. However, as Anderson and others note, this imagined unity can simultaneously obscure and legitimize internal hierarchies, structural exclusions, and systemic violence against those deemed outside or

insufficiently aligned with the dominant national narrative. The very process of defining "us" inevitably creates a "them."

Contemporary theorist Yoram Hazony presents a robust defence of nationalism as a constructive and morally desirable political framework. He argues that nationalism strengthens social cohesion, political order, and moral purpose by uniting people around a shared culture, historical memory, and collective identity. According to Hazony, a nation bound by common traditions, values, and experiences naturally cultivates mutual loyalty, trust, and responsibility among its members. This shared national consciousness fosters practical solidarity, cooperative endeavour, and a willingness to make sacrifices for the common good. Hazony further suggests that nationalism, when grounded in historical continuity and cultural inheritance, provides essential political stability and helps societies preserve their unique identities and practices in an increasingly homogenizing, globalized world (Hazony). From this perspective, nationalism is not a pathology but a prerequisite for a functional, meaningful political life, offering a bounded space for democratic deliberation and social welfare.

In contrast, the seminal work of Hans Kohn offers a more critical and differentiated understanding by introducing a crucial distinction between "civic" and "ethnic" nationalism. Civic nationalism, in Kohn's analysis, is based on shared political values, constitutional institutions, and legal citizenship rather than on common ancestry or bloodlines. It emphasizes principles of equality, inclusiveness, and voluntary participation in the political community, theoretically allowing diverse ethnic and cultural groups to coexist within a common political framework based on a shared commitment to the law and civic ideals. Ethnic nationalism, however, is rooted in myths of common descent, shared language, and inherited culture. It often defines national belonging in narrow, ascriptive, and rigid terms, viewing the nation as an extended family or biological community. Kohn argues persuasively that this ethno-nationalist form inherently tends to exclude, marginalize, or assimilate those who do not fit the dominant ethnic or cultural profile, thereby fostering discrimination, xenophobia, and social division (Kohn). The history of the 20th century stands as a grim testament to the destructive potential of ethnic nationalism in its most virulent forms.

While Hazony highlights nationalism's integrative and virtue-promoting potential as a source of social unity and mutual commitment, Kohn warns compellingly against its darker, exclusionary manifestations, especially when national identity becomes inextricably tied to ethnicity. For Kohn, the great political danger lies in the transformation of nationalism from a principle of political organization into an exclusionary, often aggressive, ideology that prioritizes ethnic homogeneity and purity over pluralistic, shared civic principles. Together, their perspectives provide a balanced, albeit tense, understanding of nationalism as a deeply complex and ambivalent political phenomenon—capable of promoting social cohesion and democratic mobilization, yet equally prone to generating conflict,

oppression, and genocide if defined in restrictive, ethnic, or racial terms. The same force that can inspire liberation struggles can also justify brutal oppression.

Gendering the Nation: Women as Symbols and Subjects

Nationalist ideologies and movements have consistently assigned women highly symbolic, yet politically circumscribed, roles, portraying them as the essential carriers and living repositories of national identity and honour. Through social expectations powerfully linked to motherhood, family life, reproductive choices, and everyday cultural practices, women are frequently cast as responsible for preserving, embodying, and transmitting the nation's core values, traditions, languages, and moral codes to future generations. Rather than being recognized as full, autonomous political actors and citizens, they are often rhetorically and practically depicted first and foremost as nurturers, guardians, and symbols of the collective heritage and its biological continuity. Sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis provides a foundational analytic framework by identifying five primary, often overlapping, ways in which women are functionally integrated into nationalist projects: (1) as *biological reproducers* of the nation's ethnic or civic population; (2) as *cultural transmitters* and socializers, teaching children the national language, customs, and beliefs; (3) as *symbolic markers* of the national group's boundaries, representing ideas of purity, virtue, and difference vis-à-vis other communities; (4) as *active participants* in national struggles, whether in combat, resistance, or political mobilization; and (5) as *signifiers* of the national collective itself, often in allegorical form (Yuval-Davis and Anthias). These roles reveal the fundamental, yet paradoxical, reliance of nationalist projects on women's bodies, unpaid and paid labor, and social identities, while simultaneously limiting their personal and political agency by confining them within these prescribed, symbolic functions. The nation is often personified as a woman (Mother India, Marianne, Britannia), but real women's political voices are frequently muted.

Feminist international relations scholar Cynthia Enloe deepens this critique by arguing that nationalism is frequently shaped and fuelled by what she incisively describes as "masculinized memory, humiliation, and hope." Within this gendered framework, national histories, traumas, and collective aspirations are constructed predominantly through the lens of male-centered experiences, values, and narratives military valour, political founding, and economic production. Consequently, women are systematically positioned in secondary, supportive, or symbolic roles rather than being acknowledged as central, decisive political agents and narrators of the national story. Their contributions, when acknowledged, tend to be confined to auxiliary functions as comforting mothers, inspiring symbols of honour, or biological reproducers of soldiers and citizens rather than as lawmakers, leaders, or thinkers. This discursive and practical process powerfully reinforces existing patriarchal norms by normalizing male dominance in the public, political, and military spheres, which are presented as the authentic arenas of national destiny. Enloe's analysis highlights how these

gendered constructions of nationalism actively restrict women's autonomy, bodily integrity, and political participation, thereby entrenching unequal power relations and severely limiting the possibilities for genuine gender equality within both nationalist movements and the state-building projects they spawn (Enloe). The nation is often imagined as a brotherhood, leaving the sisterhood in a supporting, symbolic role.

The Migrant and the Refuge: Ethical Challenges to Nationalist Sovereignty

The Nationalist policies, particularly in an age of securitization, routinely function to marginalize migrants and refugees by dogmatically prioritizing perceived national security and cultural integrity over established humanitarian obligations and universal human rights. This prioritization frames the outsider as a potential threat economic, cultural, or security rather than as a person in need. From a utilitarian ethical standpoint, as articulated by philosophers like James Rachels, such exclusionary policies are fundamentally indefensible. Utilitarianism, in its classical form, suggests that morally right actions are those that promote the greatest overall happiness or well-being for the greatest number of sentient beings. From this consequentialist perspective, policies that inflict severe, documented harm on vulnerable populations such as indefinite detention, family separation, or refoulement to dangerous conditions while offering often exaggerated or speculative benefits to citizens, fail the utilitarian calculus. They cause profound suffering for a vulnerable minority while the benefits to the majority are questionable at best (Rachels). When subjected to a clear-eyed cost-benefit analysis that fully accounts for the intense suffering of the displaced, restrictive policies often appear not as prudent safeguards but as cruel and irrational indulgences of prejudice and fear.

The Feminist Ethics of Care: A Paradigm Shift in Moral Reasoning

The feminist ethics of care offers a profound and comprehensive philosophical challenge to the dominant paradigms of moral and political reasoning, especially in the context of nationalism, borders, and migration. Rooted in the groundbreaking work of psychologists and philosophers like Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, this approach launches a systematic critique of the traditional overreliance on abstract, universal, and impartial principles such as justice, autonomy, and rights—principles that have been canonized in Kantian deontology and liberal contractarianism. Instead, the ethics of care underscores the ontological primacy and moral significance of relationality, emotional responsiveness, empathy, and the concrete reality of human interdependence. It argues that we are fundamentally relational beings, embedded in networks of care and responsibility, long before we are autonomous, rights-bearing individuals.

Carol Gilligan, in her transformative work *In a Different Voice*, challenged the androcentric foundations of dominant moral psychology and philosophy. She argued that prevailing ethical frameworks had been constructed primarily around values and modes of reasoning historically

associated with masculine socialization and social roles abstract rules, logical deduction, impartiality, and a focus on individual rights and fairness. Consequently, these influential theories tended to overlook, dismiss, or undervalue alternative moral perspectives, often associated with feminine socialization, that emphasize relationships, narrative context, emotional connection, responsibility, and attentiveness to particular needs. Gilligan identified and named this alternative perspective the "ethics of care." She did not argue for the superiority of care over justice, but rather for their complementarity, insisting that both a justice perspective (focusing on equality, fairness, and rights) and a care perspective (focusing on relationship, response, and responsibility) are essential for a mature, holistic, and adequate understanding of the moral life. Her work exposed the partiality of traditional theories and called for a more inclusive, pluralistic moral framework (Gilligan 19-63).

Philosopher Nel Noddings, in her seminal text *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, built upon this foundation to argue that ethical decision-making should not be grounded primarily in the application of rigid rules or deduction from abstract moral principles. Instead, she posited caring relations as the very foundation of ethics. According to Noddings, morality emerges from the reality of our interdependence and the human capacity for "engrossment" and "motivational displacement" in response to the perceived needs of another. The one-caring receives the other receptively and feels a motivational shift toward the other's well-being. Moral action, therefore, should be shaped by this empathetic connection, a sense of situated responsibility, and a responsive attentiveness rather than by a detached sense of universal duty. By focusing on the particularities of lived experience and the concrete dynamics of interpersonal connections, Noddings presented a powerful alternative ethical framework that values context, emotional understanding, and the maintenance of caring relationships as central moral goals (Noddings, *Caring* 24-38). For Noddings, the fundamental moral question is not "Is this just?" but "How must I respond to this person in this situation to nurture and sustain our relationship?"

When applied to the domains of nationalism and migration, the ethics of care reveals with striking clarity the ethical poverty of policies rooted solely in exclusionary sovereignty and national self-interest. Whereas conventional nationalism frequently constructs and reinforces a rigid, antagonistic binary opposition between citizen and outsider a defensive "us" versus a threatening "them" a care-ethical perspective emphasizes the global entanglement, interdependence, and shared vulnerability of human lives. This outlook resonates powerfully with Virginia Held's assertion that care is not merely a private, interpersonal virtue but an essential, foundational political value and a public necessity in an interconnected world (Held 133-156). From this vantage point, migration policies that deliberately fragment families, deny refuge to those fleeing persecution or catastrophe, or subject asylum seekers to degrading treatment represent not just policy failures but profound moral failures of care, responsiveness, and responsibility. The ethics of care demands that policymakers and citizens'

alike account for the lived experiences, narratives, and specific vulnerabilities of displaced individuals and communities, moving beyond the cold calculus of economic utility or the rigid formalism of narrow legal categories. This aligns seamlessly with Joan Tronto's political argument that care must be recognized as a fundamental public value that can and should challenge systemic inequalities and reshape political priorities (Tronto, *Moral Boundaries* 106-121). By persistently posing questions such as "Who is harmed by these rigid border policies?" and "What relational responsibilities do affluent nations, whose past and present actions shape global flows, have toward those displaced by structural violence, environmental degradation, or colonial legacies?", the ethics of care decisively shifts the terrain of ethical deliberation from nationalist self-preservation toward a more inclusive, empathetic, and responsible global morality.

Global Care Chains: Migration, Gender, and the Invisible Labour of Social Reproduction

The feminist critique of nationalism extends powerfully beyond questions of symbolic identity and political exclusion into the concrete domain of global labour dynamics, particularly within the transnational care economy. Care ethicists and political economists have drawn critical attention to how gendered reproductive labour especially that performed by millions of migrant women from the Global South is systematically devalued, rendered invisible, and exploited under contemporary nationalist and neoliberal global regimes. These women often migrate under constrained and precarious conditions to wealthier nations in the Global North (and within the Global South) to work as domestic helpers, nannies, caregivers for the elderly, and nurses roles that are absolutely central to sustaining the daily life, social reproduction, and public health of the receiving society. In a cruel irony, they are frequently forced by economic necessity and immigration restrictions to leave behind their own children, elderly parents, and kin networks, creating transnational "care chains" that transfer care resources from poorer to richer nations. Nel Noddings's philosophical requirement for genuine care that it involves presence, mutual recognition, and responsiveness highlights the inherent contradiction and ethical cost of these arrangements, as the conditions for such authentic care are structurally undermined by the terms of migration and employment (*Caring* 112-127). The migrant care worker is often legally and socially prevented from being fully present for her own family while providing essential, intimate care for another.

Sociologist Bridget Anderson, in her critical work on domestic labour, argues that nationalist immigration policies in receiving countries are often deliberately designed to exploit these migrant workers. Policies such as temporary work visas tied to a single employer, lack of pathways to permanent residency or citizenship, and the exclusion of domestic workers from full labour protections create a legally precarious, disempowered workforce. Such policies reinforce global hierarchies of citizenship, race, and gender, rendering migrant women simultaneously *essential* (to the functioning of host economies and households) and *disposable* (easily deportable and replaceable) (Anderson, *Doing*

the Dirty Work? 45-76). Their labour supports the liberation of higher-income women in the Global North to pursue careers, while their own life choices remain severely constrained a modern-day stratification of feminist gains.

Ethically, this global situation raises grave concerns about distributive justice, social recognition, and human dignity. As Virginia Held argues, care work must be radically reimagined not as a private, supplemental, or "natural" female activity, but as foundational, valuable work that underpins all social, political, and economic life (Held 84-109). To do so requires that policymakers and societies shift from a narrow, transactional rights-based or economic logic to a care-centered political ethic one that fully accounts for the emotional, relational, and physical burdens borne disproportionately by racialized migrant women. From a philosophical standpoint, a consistent care ethics framework would demand the implementation of policies that actively uphold the dignity and rights of migrant care workers. This includes providing secure legal status, enforcing fair wages and working conditions, enabling family reunification, and fostering broader cultural and political recognition of all care work as skilled, essential labour crucial for human flourishing. Joan Tronto's concept of a "caring democracy" extends this argument, asserting that truly democratic societies must ensure the equitable distribution of the responsibilities and benefits of care, both within and across national borders (Tronto, *Caring Democracy* 141-164). A just world would not be built on the systematic extraction of care from the global poor.

Reimagining Community: Care Ethics as a Post-Nationalist Political Vision

Feminist care ethics provides a compelling philosophical basis for rethinking and challenging nationalism's inherently divisive and exclusionary tendencies. Traditional conceptions of nationalism rely on fixed territorial and identity boundaries, constructing hierarchical distinctions between citizens and non-citizens that ignore the complex, fluid interdependencies economic, ecological, social that characterize contemporary human life. In stark contrast, a care-based approach, as articulated by its key proponents, reconceives community and identity not as rigid or exclusionary properties, but as relational, processual, and inclusive, fundamentally grounded in the realities of mutual dependency and moral responsiveness (Noddings, *Caring* 12-35). It suggests that our obligations arise not from shared nationality, but from our shared vulnerability and capacity to affect one another.

This care ethics framework powerfully highlights that human well-being, security, and flourishing are intrinsically transnational phenomena, deeply shaped by global networks of care, labour, investment, communication, and ecological exchange. As Virginia Held argues, ethical and political systems worthy of the name must recognize the value and necessity of care as a central, organising principle in both domestic and global policy contexts (Held 136-151). Migrant workers and especially women caregivers from the Global South are the living embodiment of this transnational

interdependence. They constitute the indispensable backbone of global care economies, yet their vital contributions are routinely rendered invisible, undervalued, or met with hostility. Bridget Anderson's research documents how migrant caregivers are frequently subjected to exploitative labour regimes while being denied the full social membership and legal recognition that would allow them to claim rights and respect (Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work?* 55-88). They are included in the economy but excluded from the polity.

Within a nationalist paradigm that privileges the rights and interests of citizens above all other moral considerations, the profound significance of these global care chains and ecological debts is systematically ignored or dismissed. Joan Tronto emphasizes that a just and decent society must attend equitably to the care needs of all, and this responsibility does not stop at the water's edge (Tronto, *Moral Boundaries* 105-129). From this ethical standpoint, migration and foreign policies should not only aim to secure fair labour conditions for migrant workers but must also actively promote their social inclusion, political voice, and dignity as full moral agents within a global society. The goal is not merely less exploitation, but the creation of political communities defined by mutual care rather than mutual fear.

The profound limitations and ethical failures of a nationalist frame are further exposed in the urgent arena of climate justice. Climate change driven overwhelmingly by the historical and ongoing industrial activities of wealthier, industrialized nations, disproportionately devastates the most vulnerable populations in the Global South, many of whom are now and will increasingly be forced to migrate due to rising seas, desertification, and extreme weather events. Yet, as postcolonial feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues, these climate-displaced populations often face the same hostile, fortified borders and exclusionary immigration policies, revealing a catastrophic failure of moral responsibility on the part of the affluent states most responsible for the crisis (Mohanty 133-158). The nations that contributed most to creating the problem are often the most resistant to sharing the burden of the solution, including through providing refuge.

From the perspective of care ethics, such responses are not merely politically contentious but ethically untenable. Interdependence, in a care framework, entails robust moral obligations that extend far beyond minimalist legal entitlements. When nations have benefited, and continue to benefit, economically and ecologically from processes that impoverish and destabilize others, they are ethically bound to acknowledge and address the consequences of those actions. This is not charity, but a matter of corrective justice and relational responsibility. In this sense, a care-based global framework demands not only reactive humanitarian aid after disasters but proactive, institutionalized solidarity rooted in principles of global justice, reparation, and mutual care to prevent displacement and to share the world's resources and burdens fairly.

Solidarity Beyond Borders: Towards a Global Ethics of Care

At its normative core, a care-based political approach envisions a world where solidarity, compassion, and responsibility actively transcend the inherited lines of national boundaries. It categorically rejects the powerful, often unchallenged, notion that our ethical responsibility diminishes or halts at geopolitical borders. Instead, it advocates for the cultivation of a global ethics firmly grounded in the practices and dispositions of care, empathy, and cooperation. This vision is not naively utopian nor does it seek to erase the current reality of nation-states as powerful actors. Rather, it offers a sustained critique of the ways in which nation-states currently construct belonging, responsibility, and security, and it proposes an alternative moral compass for guiding their actions and interactions.

As Joan Tronto succinctly puts it, "caring is both a practice and a disposition that links people together" beyond the confines of formal political and national affiliations (Tronto, *Moral Boundaries* 103). A care-based global ethic, therefore, calls for the cultivation of an inclusive moral orientation that extends to all human beings, with a particular attentiveness to those in situations of acute vulnerability, such as during wars, natural disasters, or economic collapse. For instance, during humanitarian emergencies whether caused by conflict, climate, or pandemic a care-ethical approach would prioritize our shared humanity and interconnected fate over short-sighted, narrow national interests. This ethos is already visible, albeit often in marginalized forms, in grassroots solidarity movements with refugees, in transnational citizen aid efforts, and in the advocacy for more inclusive policy frameworks that extend compassion and protection to displaced persons. As Nel Noddings reflects, care ethics helps us see "the moral potential when grounded in receptivity and responsiveness" to the needs of others, near and far (Noddings, *Starting at Home* 45). These emerging practices exemplify care ethics in action, demonstrating in concrete terms that compassion, cooperation, and responsibility need not and, from a care perspective, should not be artificially constrained by national borders. They point toward the possibility of a post-national political imagination.

Conclusion

The feminist ethics of care offers a deeply meaningful, critically incisive, and genuinely transformative lens for reconsidering the enduring phenomena of borders and nationalism in a world increasingly defined by inescapable global interdependence. By emphasizing the foundational importance of relationships, contextual moral responsibility, and unwavering respect for human dignity, this ethical approach relentlessly questions the exclusionary nature and moral costs of many traditional political arrangements. Moving beyond the abstract, often distant, formalism of universal rules or the defensive parochialism of rigid national interests, care ethics places concrete human experiences, vulnerabilities, and mutual dependence at the very center of ethical and political deliberation.

When public policies from immigration and asylum to trade and climate agreements are viewed and evaluated through a care-based perspective, societies are challenged and encouraged to adopt more inclusive, humane, and sustainable approaches to migration, community, and global belonging. This framework actively challenges the pervasive, often politically manipulated, tendency to draw strict, securitized divisions between "us" and "them," instead highlighting the shared vulnerability, interdependence, and common humanity of all people. It recognizes that ethical responsibility is not truncated by lines on a map but extends robustly to those who are marginalized, displaced, or in desperate need of protection precisely because of global inequalities.

A care-centered approach urges individuals, communities, and states alike to move beyond the cramped confines of narrow nationalist boundaries and to acknowledge their manifold ethical obligations within an indivisible global community. It promotes compassion, empathy, and solidarity not as optional virtues for the private sphere, but as essential, guiding moral and political values for addressing the defining challenges of our time: migration, displacement, inequality, and ecological crisis. By focusing politically on care and connection rather than on exclusion and control, this perspective holds the potential to reshape how belonging, security, and political responsibility are understood and institutionalized in the 21st century.

The ethics of care presents a powerful, alternative vision of morality and politics grounded not in territorial claims, ethnic purity, or abstract principles alone, but in the lived reality of humane relationships and our shared, fragile humanity. It affirms that a viable ethical life and a viable global order is sustained not through walls and weapons, but through mutual concern, responsible action, and ongoing cooperation. It serves as a vital reminder, in an age of resurgent nationalism and border walls, that we are all, ineluctably, part of a single, interconnected human community, and our futures are irrevocably tied together.

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