

Seeking Gender Justice in the Home

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### Abstract

Challenging gender injustice is not an easy task especially when it comes to the injustices that are present in the family. Part of the difficulty is that moral and political theory has tended to take what happens in the home as irrelevant to justice. In referencing various feminist philosophers I will critically assess the nature of the injustices that take place in the family and focus on these injustices as they are present in Western liberal societies. In the process of determining how women can be elevated from their positions of inequality in the family, I will critically examine the benefits of using an ethic of care or an ethic of justice to address these issues of inequality.

To begin my analysis I make use of John Rawls' theory of justice and examine how, if at all, his theory can be applied to the family structure. My thesis proceeds by examining Susan Okin's critique of Rawls and her account of how justice should be incorporated into the family. I then outline various accounts introduced by feminist philosophers such as Sarah Ruddick and Joan Tronto who favor using either an ethic of justice or an ethic of care for challenging gender injustice in the home. My thesis offers a critique of these theories and it concludes by arguing that an ethic of care is best suited for addressing issues of gender injustice in the home.

### Introduction

Feminist philosophers have time and time again critically assessed the nature of gender injustice to determine how women can be elevated from their positions of inequality. In the process of conducting this examination much of the attention has been given to the role that women's inequality plays in the public sphere of society with respect to issues of equal access to the workplace and to political participation. I want to argue that in order to better understand the injustices that women face on a daily basis consideration must also be given to the private sphere of the home.

Women who work in the home are traditionally identified as "homemakers" for the domestic labor that they perform. Housework in general is not only unpaid, it is also undervalued. In contrast to men and women who hold paid jobs in the public sphere, homemakers are more vulnerable to financial insecurity, abuse and other such predicaments. Even to this day women perform the majority of housework. Thus, women who carry out crucial domestic duties such as cooking and caring for children are providing an invaluable service to their families, a service it is assumed they will do even if they also work outside the home. Nevertheless, because housework is not paid work, domestic laborers do not have much to gain from their work within the home either by way of pay or respect. Furthermore, seeing as our capitalist society favors wage labor, women who perform housework are at a great disadvantage when compared to their male counterparts. The unequal gendered division of labor that results from this situation poses many problems for women, especially when it comes to power relations between the sexes.

Overall, I will explore various approaches that have been taken to combat these unjust structures and that have the goal of achieving gender justice. In the first three sections of this thesis I will review what an ethic of justice has to offer as an approach for addressing issues of gender injustice in the home. I will also provide a critical examination of justice so as to answer the question of whether justice is applicable to the private sphere of the family. Following this investigation I will evaluate in section IV through section VI what an ethic of care has to offer that an ethic of justice lacks. Finally, I will conclude by examining care's potential for addressing issues of gender injustice that take place both in the domestic/private sphere and in the political/public sphere of society.

### Section I: Justice and the Family

Feminist philosophers have offered many explanations for the injustices and vulnerabilities to injustice that arise in the family. For the most part, these theoretical studies critically examine women's subordinate status in the private and public spheres of society. In promoting an ethic of justice, feminist theorist, Susan Moller Okin, denounces traditional theories that do not consider justice in relation to the family. Given that injustices are present in the home, Okin believes that justice theory has the capacity to address these issues. For instance in, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, Okin draws attention to John Rawls' theory of justice as a means to demonstrate how traditional accounts of justice ignore the family and issues of gender altogether. In his acclaimed work, *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls uses social contract theory to deal with the issue of distributive justice. As presented in his theory, the "original position" and the "veil of

ignorance” are features of a hypothetical device that Rawls utilizes to describe how to arrive at principles for a just society:

...No one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like. I shall even assume that the parties do not know their conceptions of the good or their special psychological propensities. The principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance. This ensures that no one is advantaged or disadvantaged in the choice of principles by the outcome of natural chance or the contingency of social circumstances. Since all are similarly situated and no one is able to design principles to favor his particular condition, the principles of justice are the result of a fair agreement or bargain. (Rawls, 1999, p. 11)

According to Rawls, two principles of justice emerge from the hypothetical situation created by the original position and the veil of ignorance. The first principle of justice ensures equal liberties for all individuals while the second principle allows for the unequal distribution of social and economic goods but only if they benefit the least well-off.<sup>1</sup> For Rawls these principles of justice are meant to “regulate the basic institutions of society” (Rawls, 1999, p. 10).

In critiquing *A Theory of Justice*, Okin argues that Rawls’ account is a biased one since it assumes a male perspective. To illustrate the inherently sexist nature of Rawls’ account, Okin offers the following example: “Examples of intergenerational concern are worded in terms of ‘fathers’ and ‘sons,’ and the difference principle is said to correspond to ‘the principle of fraternity’” (Okin, 1989, p. 90-91). Behind the veil of ignorance Rawls fails to list gender as a feature that determines life prospects. Therefore, it is hard to argue against Okin’s point that Rawls leaves women out of his theory of justice.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999), 53.

<sup>2</sup>Susan M. Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 91.

Moreover, Okin finds fault in Rawls' inability to question whether the family is a just institution. Instead, of considering what role, if any, justice plays in the family, Rawls assumes that the family is a just social institution: "...I shall assume that the basic structure of a well-ordered society includes the family" (Rawls, 1999, p. 405).

One of Okin's most significant criticisms of Rawls deals with his notion of "heads of families." This concept is for the most part based on the idea that those who are in the original position are not just individuals but "heads of families."<sup>3</sup> Heads of families take on positions of authority as they are expected to ensure justice among future generations.<sup>4</sup>

Rawls explores this concept in the following:

The question arises, however, whether the persons in the original position have obligations and duties to third parties, for example, to their immediate descendants. To say that they do would be one way of handling questions of justice between generations. However, the aim of justice as fairness is to try to derive all duties and obligations of justice from other reasonable conditions. So, if possible, this way out should be avoided. There are several other courses open to us. We can adopt a motivation assumption and think of the parties as representing a continuing line of claims. For example, we can assume that they are heads of families and therefore have a desire to further the well-being of at least their more immediate descendants. (Rawls, 1999, p. 111)

While Rawls does not specify the gender of the heads of families he does imply that they are male at various points in his text. To support this claim, Okin refers to Rawls and his statement concerning heads of families who are in the original position: "...Imagining themselves to be fathers, say, they are to ascertain how much they should set aside for their sons and grandsons by noting what they would believe themselves entitled to claim of their fathers and grandfathers" (Rawls, 1999, p. 256). Rawls does not only privilege men with

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<sup>3</sup>Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 111.

<sup>4</sup>See footnote 3 above.

his “heads of families” concept, but he also encourages a public/domestic dichotomy that forms the basis of Okin’s critique of him. Male heads of families dominate the public and political realm of society since they speak for and represent the interests of those in the family. Consequently, women and children are denied a voice in the public sphere and as a result they are restricted to the domestic realm of the home. By creating this divide in society through his “heads of families” concept Rawls simultaneously sustains a public/domestic dichotomy. Keeping this in mind, it is difficult to agree with Rawls’ assumption that the family is a just social institution especially when gender biases are so prevalent throughout his theory.

A hierarchy of unequal power relations becomes further entrenched within the family as a result of the “heads of families” structure. Thus, unlike the male heads of families, wives and children are at risk for facing injustice since they are not granted a voice within the family unit. That being so, Rawls’ assumption that the family is a just institution is seriously undermined. By promoting a traditional patriarchal gender division of labor within the family, Okin believes that Rawls disregards the consequences that such a system imposes: “He [Rawls] does not consider as part of the basic structure of society the greater economic dependence of women and the sexual division of labor within the typical family, or any of the broader social ramifications of this basic gender structure” (Okin, 1989, p. 96). Consequently, issues of justice are ignored within the family. Okin thereby concludes that, “Family justice must be of central importance for social justice” (Okin, 1989, p. 100). A complete and accurate account of justice must therefore consider the pivotal role that women play in the family and the gender injustices that they face.



## Section II: Justice in the Family

According to Okin's theory, gender equality can only be achieved once the assumption that "heads of families" are male is eliminated from the family structure.<sup>5</sup> Okin goes on to claim that "...The public/domestic dichotomy is a misleading construct, which obscures the cyclical pattern of inequalities between men and women" (Okin, 1989, p. 111). This particular dichotomy is shaped by unbalanced power structures that separate the domestic/private sphere from the political/public sphere. In this case, the basic structure of society is gendered by unjust power dynamics that shape these two spheres. For instance, men dominate the political/public sphere of society whereas women are subordinated to the more inferior domestic/private sphere. Gender injustice is without a doubt present in the way that society is structured given that power and rights, among other things, are distributed unequally between the sexes.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, patriarchy serves as the social system that supports the family structure as separate from and irrelevant to issues of justice.

As patriarchs of the traditional household, men are perceived as responsible for providing the family with fiscal resources through paid work outside of the home. Women, on the other hand, tend to perform unpaid domestic work. Such work goes unrecognized since care work does not satisfy a family's financial needs. In the end, injustice dominates the private sphere of the home as care work is devalued and women become vulnerable to such things as poverty, dependency, violence and abuse. According to Okin, this cycle is governed by the gender-structure of marriage and the unjust power

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<sup>5</sup>Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, 110.

<sup>6</sup>Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, 113.

relations that are present between married couples.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the lack of value attributed to care work causes women to become financially dependent on their husbands and it also negatively affects any children that are present in the family:

...Often working part-time or taking time out from wage work to care for family members, especially children, most wives are in a very different position from their husbands in their ability to be economically self-supporting. This is reflected, as we have seen, in power differentials between the sexes within the family. It means also, in the increasingly common event of divorce, usually by mutual agreement, that it is the mother who in 90 percent of cases will have physical custody of the children. But whereas the greater need for money goes one way, the bulk of the earning power almost always goes the other. This is one of the most important causes of the feminization of poverty, which is affecting the life chances of ever larger numbers of children as well as their mothers. The division of labor within families has always adversely affected women, by making them economically dependent on men. Because of the increasing instability of marriage, its effects on children have now reached crisis proportions. (Okin, 1989, p. 173)

In general, this passage is successful in illustrating how the gendered division of labor within the home makes women and children vulnerable to a host of injustices.

Okin goes on to contend that “the personal sphere of sexuality, of housework, of child care and family life *is* political” (Okin, 1989, p. 125). For Okin this means that justice must also play a role in the family. This notion is supported by the following excerpt from *Justice, Gender, and the Family*:

...Domestic life needs to be just and to have its justice reinforced by the state and the legal system. In the circumstances of the division of labor that is practiced within the vast majority of households in the United States today, women are rendered vulnerable by marriage and especially by motherhood, and there is great scope for unchecked injustice to flourish. (Okin, 1989, p. 126)

Injustice in this case stems from the gendered division of paid and unpaid labor that ultimately encourages inequality between men and women. To resolve this injustice, Okin

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<sup>7</sup>Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, 4-5.

proposes that the division of labor within the family be challenged: "...The family *needs* to be a just institution" (Okin, 1989, p. 170). In attempting to solve this predicament, Okin recommends several strategies for bringing justice into the home.

One strategy that Okin proposes consists of having both sexes share the responsibility for performing domestic duties, namely care work and household chores such as cooking and cleaning. If this practice is adopted, then women will no longer have to be the primary care takers. Abolishing the division of labor within the family is another strategy that Okin offers to prevent the range of vulnerabilities to which women and children are susceptible to. For starters, the division of labor within a family can be abolished if both marital partners are entitled equal rights to the financial assets acquired throughout the course of the marriage.<sup>8</sup> "Equal legal entitlement to all earnings coming into the household" prevents one partner from being economically dependent on the other (Okin, 1989, p. 180-181). In addition to granting these legal rights, Okin also proposes that employers split an employee's earnings between the employee and his/her partner who performs domestic duties.<sup>9</sup> This payment policy would guarantee that a family's financial resources are divided equally between both partners.

While these strategies represent what I believe to be the three most valuable recommendations that Okin offers I still find them to be quite problematic. For the most part, I find these strategies to be just since they sufficiently address the financial disparities that exist between men and women in the home by encouraging the equal distribution of financial goods. However, Okin's strategies still fail to address how issues of injustice that

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<sup>8</sup>Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, 180.

<sup>9</sup>Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, 181.

exist in the home are relevant to the public sphere. Therefore, it is in my opinion that her strategies are too particular to the private sphere since they fail to go beyond the family in addressing the gender injustices that are also prevalent in the public sphere. In continuing with our critique of Okin it is necessary that we consider what philosopher, Alison Jaggar has to say about Okin's theory.

### Section III: A Critique of Okin

In her piece, "Transnational Cycles of Gendered Vulnerability: A Prologue to a Theory of Global Gender Justice," Alison M. Jaggar provides some valuable insight into Okin's model of a gendered cycle of vulnerability. As we saw in Section II of this essay, Okin believes that marriage creates a cycle of gendered vulnerability that puts women in a state of economic dependence. Marriage, then, is viewed as a social and political institution that encourages gender injustice since it creates a gendered division of labor in the home. As a result, married women who perform unpaid care work are reliant on their husbands for financial support and as the sole breadwinners men are given supreme authority within the family unit. Power relations are unjust as men dominate their female counterparts, ultimately making women vulnerable to domestic abuse and financial insecurity.<sup>10</sup> Jaggar's support for Okin's theory about marriage is seen in her assertion that, "The gender structure of marriage, the gender socialization and sex typing of jobs associated with the institution make women as a class systematically vulnerable. For Okin, this vulnerability is not a fact of life but an injustice to women as a group" (Jaggar, 2009, p. 39). This

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<sup>10</sup>Alison M. Jaggar, "Transnational Cycles of Gendered Vulnerability: A Prologue to a Theory of Global Gender Justice," *Philosophical Topics Special Issue: Global Gender Justice* 37.2 (2009): 38.

account sheds light on the detrimental effects that marriage has for women in the private and public spheres of everyday life. While Jaggar defends the most fundamental aspects of Okin's theory, she also brings to light a major flaw in Okin's overall argument.

Jaggar's commentary of Okin shifts directions as she finds fault in Okin's target audience. For starters, Okin's theory applies to a particular kind of woman and as a result, women from a certain race, class, and sexuality are left out of Okin's conceptualization of a gendered cycle of vulnerability. Jaggar acknowledges this limitation with the following statement:

Okin's analysis is problematic because it assumes that the typical woman in the United States enjoys certain privileges of race, class, and sexuality. The family that Okin describes as "traditional" in fact characterizes mainly middle-and upper-class life in the United States...Okin has also been charged with privileging the heterosexual nuclear family. (Jaggar, 2009, p. 39)

From Jaggar's point of view, Okin's theory is flawed because of the assumptions she makes about the typical American female. These assumptions pose a problem for Okin by making her theory inapplicable to those women inside and outside of the United States who do not embody the characteristics of a "traditional" and privileged American female. Even though Jaggar is critical of this shortcoming in Okin's work, Iris Marion Young is able to address this criticism while supplementing Okin's account.

Young reclaims Okin's argument by demonstrating how Okin's theoretical framework can be extended so that it applies to all women. She accomplishes this by taking a broader approach to utilizing Okin's model of a gendered cycle of vulnerability: "The gender division of labor in the family that operates as a strong and enforced norm among many newly urbanized women produces and reproduces a vulnerability to

domination and exploitation in wage employment” (Jaggar, 2009, p. 39). While Young finds Okin’s model to be especially applicable to women in first world countries where domestic work is considered to be women’s chief responsibility, she also finds Okin’s work to be helpful in studying the hardships that women from other countries, especially those from rural settings, face when they have to move to urban environments.<sup>11</sup> Rural women who relocate to urban areas are usually forced to join the labor force in order to make a living. However, problems arise when these women are expected to perform care work in addition to the paid work that they perform outside of the home. Having the responsibility of working in the private sphere of the home and in the public sphere of the labor market is no easy task. Thus, it comes as no surprise that women who work in these contexts face the risk of exploitation in the workplace. This situation could be prevented if women were to receive support in performing care work as I have shown Okin to propose in Section II. Overall, Young succeeds in undermining Jaggar’s criticism that Okin’s theory only applies to “traditional” and privileged American women when she shows how Okin’s work is in fact applicable to women who are not Western, white or middle-class. Most importantly, Young’s analysis moves beyond that given by Okin to demonstrate how Okin’s account has the potential to affect a broader range of women.

Both Young and Okin turn to law and public policy as a means for ending the gendered cycle of vulnerability that marriage fosters.<sup>12</sup> Young for instance, believes that men are denied the opportunity to help out with care work since public institutions prevent

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<sup>11</sup>Jaggar, "Transnational Cycles," 39.

<sup>12</sup>See footnote 11 above.

them from doing so.<sup>13</sup> Many feminist economists such as Angela Davis have argued that public institutions benefit from the unpaid nature of housework. Jaggar for one argues that, “Both state institutions and many private enterprises in less-developed countries benefit from the gendered division of family labor because it helps them to avoid internalizing the costs of social reproduction” (Jaggar, 2009, p. 40). All things considered, these unjust policies are powerful enough to ensure the continuation of a cycle of gendered vulnerability.

As Jaggar previously demonstrated there are some critics who criticize major aspects of Okin’s theory. Much of this criticism has to do with Okin’s focus on an ethic of justice. In general, many prominent feminist scholars such as Carol Gilligan and Fiona Robinson discourage using an ethic of justice because of its male bias. Justice as an ethical concept has traditionally not been used to discuss relationships such as those that affect the sexes or the family unit. Therefore, the task remains to find an ethical approach that is both female and family friendly so that injustices and vulnerabilities that are not covered by Okin’s account can be correctly assessed.

#### Section IV: Care and Justice

So far we have examined through Okin what an ethic of justice can do for challenging gender injustice in the home. However, as I previously noted, some feminists are skeptical of applying justice to the private sphere since they claim that an ethic of care has more to offer. With this in mind, it is critical that we examine another approach for dealing with personal caring relationships such as that offered by Nel Noddings who favors

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<sup>13</sup>Jaggar, "Transnational Cycles," 39-40.

a relational approach to care ethics. In her account Noddings offers a critical lens for addressing relationships of inequality that are present in the family. For starters, unlike an ethic of justice that stresses individuality and individual rights, an ethic of care differs in its focus on relationships and interconnection between individuals. Moreover, the attention that Noddings gives to reciprocity is essential in understanding her relational approach to care: “In caring, we accept the natural impulse to act on behalf of the present other. We are engrossed in the other. We have received him and feel his pain or happiness...”

(Noddings, 1995, p. 13). As illustrated in the previous quotation, a selfless relationship is a necessary element for Noddings, as is reflected in the relationship between the “one-caring” and the “cared-for.”<sup>14</sup> Regarding the nature of the care work that the one-caring performs Noddings states that, “The virtue described by the ethical ideal of one-caring is built up in relation. It reaches out to the other and grows in response to the other”

(Noddings, 1995, p. 11). Thus, if there is one thing to stress about Noddings’ theory it is that her focus on personal dyadic relations differs greatly from the individualistic approach taken by an ethic of justice. Additionally, Noddings’ account rivals that of Okin’s since an ethic of care addresses certain values that are fundamental to the family and are absent in Okin’s account of an ethic of justice. Despite the fact that Noddings’ account is valuable in demonstrating how affective an ethic of care is for addressing personal relations, particularly familial relations, her work is still critiqued by other care ethicists who believe that her account is limited due to its focus on personal dyadic relations in the private

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<sup>14</sup>Nel Noddings, “Caring,” in *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Virginia Held (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 11.



sphere. Thus, Noddings does not challenge the private/public dichotomy as Okin proposes but instead she encourages it by focusing solely on the private realm of the family.

Like Noddings, Sara Ruddick is another care theorist who demands our attention. Ruddick defends Okin's argument that justice needs to be incorporated "more securely" into the family while elucidating what is missing in Okin's account of an ethic of justice (Ruddick, 1995, p. 203). Ruddick's project allows for justice to be reconceptualized so that justice is "more suitable to the moral experience and relationships of families" (Ruddick, 1995, p. 204). She does this by choosing to not subordinate an ethic of justice and an ethic of care to one another, as other theorists, such as Okin, have done in their conceptualizations of justice and care as very distinct ethics. The following excerpt explains how Ruddick takes a more inclusive approach to dealing with these two different ethical approaches:

My reading of "care" and "justice" as unassimilable orientations is meant to refute this division. Justice and care each cover the entire moral domain; any institution or relation, no matter how public or private, can be judged from the perspective of justice or of care. This does not mean that there are no distinctions between more public and private domains or that some distinctions between personal and political are not useful. But these distinctions do not match up with the distinction between justice and care. Recognizing its origins within particular relationships, moral theorists have worked to extend and politicize the ethics of care. In a similar spirit, feminists should revise theories of justice originally devised with public institutions in mind, thus making it easier to bring justice home. (Ruddick, 1995, p. 205-06)

As described in the previous passage, Ruddick's framework portrays justice as always being in tandem with care.<sup>15</sup> More importantly, Ruddick denounces the private/public dichotomy when she rejects the separation of the domestic/private sphere from the

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<sup>15</sup>Sara Ruddick, "Injustice in Families: Assault and Domination," in *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Virginia Held (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 217.

political/public sphere. In doing this Ruddick shows that an ethic of care is not exclusive to the private sphere.

Ruddick's argument mirrors that of Okin's in yet another way when she denounces Rawls' assumption that the family is a just social institution. In reviewing Rawls' theory of justice and his "heads of families" concept Ruddick contends that Rawls incorrectly assumes that "just men care for future generations" (Ruddick, 1995, p. 208). As explained by Ruddick's account, Rawls mistakes male heads of families for just individuals who are concerned with the caring of future generations when in fact these men are actually detached from any sort of caring relationship.<sup>16</sup> Male heads of families are therefore not capable of carrying out the duties that their positions require of them. Thanks to Ruddick's analysis yet another flaw is made visible in Rawls' theory.

In addition to defending Okin's critique of Rawls, Ruddick also supports Okin's objective to address issues of injustice that are present in the family. Assault and domination represent two injustices that Ruddick recognizes as problematic for the project of seeking gender justice in the family. To address these injustices Ruddick turns to an ideal of justice that she identifies as "respect for embodied willfulness" (Ruddick, 1995, p. 215). According to this principle, those who assault and/or dominate others demonstrate a profound disrespect for embodied willfulness:

...It is possible, often though not always, to affect a person's will by affecting her body and, more particularly, to undermine her will by inflicting bodily pain or credibly threatening to do so. People who assault with intention to dominate can be said to *exploit* the conditions of embodied willfulness. Conversely, a person who refuses to threaten or inflict pain although she is in a position to do so and

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<sup>16</sup>Ruddick, "Injustice in Families," in Held, *Justice and Care*, 208.

understands the conditions that make exploitation possible exhibits a minimal respect for the embodied willfulness of others. (Ruddick, 1995, p. 215)

The excerpt above provides valuable insight into Ruddick's ideal of embodied willfulness.

Upon situating this principle within the context of the family it is easy to see how disrespect for embodied willfulness is widespread. For starters, domestic abuse and coercion represent two instances of assault and domination that are common in many families. Families need to utilize Ruddick's principle of embodied willfulness as a tool for assessing actions and attitudes that do not promote "a sense of confident willfulness" so as to create an environment that is free of assault and domination (Ruddick, 1995, p. 216).

In summary, Ruddick's reconceptualization of justice makes both an ethic of justice and an ethic of care relevant to the family. Conversely, Okin's account fails to see what care has to offer as an ethical approach for addressing injustice in the private sphere of the home. Nonetheless, both Ruddick and Okin agree that what goes on in the family is political. Ruddick's argument however, differs slightly from Okin's in that she believes that as a political institution, the family must not only consider how gender injustices are sustained in the private sphere but how public policies legitimize gender injustices as well.<sup>17</sup>

In continuing with our discussion of justice and care it is necessary that we reflect on feminist philosopher Virginia Held. Held's approach to confronting injustice in the family differs greatly from that of Ruddick and Okin's since Held favors an ethic of care.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Ruddick, "Injustice in Families," in Held, *Justice and Care*, 218.

<sup>18</sup>Virginia Held, "Feminist Moral Inquiry and the Feminist Future," in *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Virginia Held (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 173.

Her essay, “Feminist Moral Inquiry and the Feminist Future,” argues that feminism must move beyond just seeking justice in the family and look towards the practice of care.

Mothering for instance represents a practice that is of critical importance for Held since she believes that mothering contains many values that go beyond what justice can offer:

...We can at the same time recognize that justice in the family sets little more than the moral minimums to be observed. Bringing this about is no easy matter, still, most of what families should provide is in a range over and above those moral minimums. Building relations of trust and consideration far exceeds what justice can assure. When we consider the activity of mothering we see how many of its values are “beyond justice.” The activity is not a one-way giving that can be divided up equally between women and men, though many of the minimal tasks involved can and should be...Certainly the activity of mothering can be exploitative if women are confined to it or expected to perform it at the expense of pursuing other activities. But the activity itself is potentially among the most humanly promising, as it allows future persons to flourish and satisfying human relationships to grow. (Held, 1995, p. 173)

As demonstrated in the previous excerpt, trust and consideration for others are values that are crucial to particular caring relationships. These values in addition to the responsibility that comes with caring for another person are fundamental features of an ethic of care that are extremely valuable for the family. Instead of using Ruddick’s principle of embodied willfulness families should instead focus on building caring relationships that encourage values that are more applicable to every member of the family. While embodied willfulness is effective in addressing injustices that occur between adults, an ethic of care has the potential of positively impacting every individual in the family, including children. Through the practice of mothering and through interactions with their parents, children are taught the importance of mutuality and reciprocity in caring relationships at a young age.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Held, “Feminist Inquiry and the Future,” in Held, *Justice and Care*, 173.

Held believes that an ethic of care, as it happens in the family and as relevant to caring practices, should be applied to the public sphere where an ethic of justice has prevailed:

We can agree that caring relationships need a floor of justice if they lack it. But what those who seek to develop an ethic of care often suggest is that we should progress beyond mere justice, which has been so dominant a focus of so much traditional moral theory. And we need to do this not only within the family, where care has prevailed and justice has not, but in the society as well. (Held, 1995, p. 173)

To advance this view we must first challenge the notion that we are independent of others by allowing ourselves to be seen in a network of relationships with those around us. From our elderly neighbor to the homeless person we encounter on our walk to work, we must be open to engaging in caring relationships with individuals who are outside of our privileged public sphere of relationships. All things considered, we must apply care to the public sphere. Before we do so however, we must first consider some objections that have been raised to an ethic of care.

#### Section V: Objections to Care

Seeing as our discussion of Ruddick and Held have given us two different yet positive accounts of care ethics it is now critical that we consider some objections to care so as to satisfy the need for an opposing view of care. In doing so, I draw attention once again to philosopher, Alison M. Jaggar, who presents a critique of an ethics of care in her work, "Caring as a Feminist Practice of Moral Reason." Jaggar's analysis of an ethic of care is worth studying because of the objections she raises to care as a form of moral

reasoning that is appropriate for feminism.<sup>20</sup> In general, my goal in reviewing Jaggar's objections to care ethics is to show how some objections to care are inadequate since they fail to capture what care actually has to offer.

Jaggar's critique revolves around the idea that while an ethic of care cannot stand alone as a justifiable form of moral reasoning it can offer something for feminism if it were supplemented by other types of moral reasoning: "...Feminist practical ethics cannot rely exclusively on care but must supplement it with other modes of moral reasoning" (Jaggar, 1995, p. 180). To support her argument Jaggar identifies two aspects of care that she finds problematic for making an ethic of care suitable for feminist ethics: "I am concerned about two of care thinking's apparent blind spots, which hamper and may even disable care from addressing certain questions crucial for feminist ethics" (Jaggar, 1995, p. 189).

The first weakness that Jaggar introduces in her critique of care a suitable mode of moral reasoning has to do with the issue of justification. According to Jaggar an ethic of care lacks moral justification.<sup>21</sup> For further clarification consider the following: "I criticize the care tradition for failing to explain how care thinking may be properly critical of the moral validity of felt, perceived, or expressed needs, so that it can avoid permitting or even legitimating morally inadequate responses to them" (Jaggar, 1996, p. 189). Thus, the lack of justification that Jaggar describes here demonstrates how care is unable to delineate good care from bad care. Jaggar goes on to assert that while some care theorists like Joan

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<sup>20</sup>Alison M. Jaggar, "Caring as a Feminist Practice of Moral Reason," in *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Virginia Held (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 180.

<sup>21</sup>Jaggar, "Caring as a Feminist Practice," in Held, *Justice and Care*, 189.

Tronto have taken good care and bad care into account they have yet to address how an ethic of care should go about seeking justification for moral responses.

Jaggar goes on to describe care's second limitation when she claims that the lack of justification in care ethics results from a more complicated conceptual problem. This deficiency in care is best understood by contrasting care to justice so as to show how both ethics differ in their conceptualizations of the subjects and objects of moral concern:

Justice thinking is impersonal and general because it regards both moral subjects and the objects of their moral concern in terms of their moral status as representatives of humanity or as beings capable of pleasure and pain rather than in terms of their concrete specificity; care thinking is personal and particularized in that both carers and those cared-for regard each other as unique, irreplaceable individuals. (Jaggar, 1995, p, 191)

As Jaggar points, an ethic of care does in fact privilege the personal and the particular as seen in the relationship between the caregiver and the person being cared for. However, Jaggar's problem with care stems from it being a relational account of moral reasoning that lacks the objectivity that is present in justice reasoning.<sup>22</sup> Justice reasoning is impartial between the self and others and objective in its goal of defending universal principles, as illustrated in Rawls' account of justice. Care on the other hand relies too heavily on the decisions that are made between the parties in a caring relationship, which for Jaggar is morally dangerous: "...Appropriate caring is not guaranteed by the intentions of the one who claims to care but that such a guarantee is not supplied even by agreement on the part of the one who is cared-for" (Jaggar, 1995, p. 192). Jaggar goes on to conclude that, "...Claims to care, like other perceptual and moral claims, can be justified only by widening the circle of intersubjective validation" (Jaggar, 1995, p. 193). As we will later

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<sup>22</sup>Jaggar, "Caring as a Feminist Practice," in Held, *Justice and Care*, 190.

see, care theorist, Joan Tronto, addresses Jaggar's concern when she "widens the circle of intersubjective validation" in her own work on care.

In reviewing Jaggar's objections to an ethic of care I argue that she gives too much consideration to the personal and dyadic nature of care which represents only one kind of caring relationship. Instead of extending care outside of the confines of this dyad, like other care theorists have done, Jaggar does not apply care to other contexts and other sorts of caring relationships. Given that an ethic of care goes far beyond the relationship exhibited in the carer/cared-for dyad, it is necessary to see how care pertains to other contexts, such as relationships in the public realm, where care is practiced and caring relations are more complex. Jaggar's failure to take this into account threatens her argument by weakening her claim that care is conceptually limited due to its reliance on dyadic relations.

To comprehend the nature of the second limitation that Jaggar speaks to, it is necessary to acknowledge care's unique ability to focus on the specific details of particular situations. This particular feature of an ethic of care is one that Jaggar finds fault with when she argues that, "...Its [care's] weakness lies in its inability to bring into focus other morally salient features of situations. When some things are foregrounded, others recede into the background; in making some things visible, care obscures others" (Jaggar, 1995, p. 194). All in all, Jaggar is determined to show how care ignores the general components of a care situation by focusing on the individual details of a particular situation instead.<sup>23</sup> For example, when practicing an ethic of care, the caregiver is expected to respond to the needs

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<sup>23</sup>Jaggar, "Caring as a Feminist Practice," in Held, *Justice and Care*, 194.



of the individual being cared for. In doing so, Jaggar claims that the caregiver does not consider the cause of the needs that he/she is reacting to.<sup>24</sup> A better way to look at this problem is through an analogy that Jaggar offers on the topic:

...When an agent is focusing on the concrete specificities of a situation, she is not attending directly to the social institutions that structure it and vice versa. When one is at the center of her consciousness, the other is at the margins. In care thinking, social structure occupies a place comparable to the frame of a picture one is viewing; one must be aware of it in some sense but one pays it little direct attention. (Jaggar, 1995, p. 195)

While the framed picture analogy is helpful in understanding the limitation that Jaggar sees as being present in an ethic of care it also exposes a larger problem in Jaggar's criticism of care. This problem is based on Jaggar's assumption that the frame surrounding a picture and the picture itself cannot be viewed at the same time. This means that a caregiver can in fact respond to the needs of the person being cared for while also responding to the cause of those needs. For instance, in witnessing the abject situation of a homeless person one can practice care by offering them food, which satisfies their immediate needs, while also petitioning the government to provide public housing for homeless people in general.<sup>25</sup> This example illustrates how both an individual's needs and the social structures that create them can be attended to, just as the "picture" and the "frame" can be viewed simultaneously.

Altogether, it is clear that there are some major flaws in the objections to care that Jaggar presents. The upshot is that the two limitations that she identifies in care do not, in the end apply to all versions of care ethics. On the whole Jaggar's claims about care are

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<sup>24</sup>Jaggar, "Caring as a Feminist Practice," in Held, *Justice and Care*, 194.

<sup>25</sup>Jaggar, "Caring as a Feminist Practice," in Held, *Justice and Care*, 197.

unfounded since at least some accounts of care are in fact suitable modes of moral reasoning for feminist ethics.

### Section VI: Providing Good Care

One account of care that is a suitable mode of moral reasoning for feminist ethics is that offered by Joan C. Tronto who like Held, presents a version of care ethics that is applicable to the public sphere. By allowing care to be associated only within the private realm of society, there is no hope for abolishing the private/public divide that Okin advocates. Therefore, it is necessary to make care relevant to the public and political spheres of society as Tronto does in her piece, “Women and Caring: What Can Feminists Learn about Morality from Caring”.

Like Noddings and Ruddick, Tronto finds the family to be very significant for the practice of caring when she states that: “In our society, the particular structures involving caring for grow especially out of the family.”<sup>26</sup> Upon reflecting on the nature of family dynamics it is not hard to see how caring for family members such as children or elderly parents are essential to life and society more generally. Tronto proceeds with her argument by highlighting the gendered nature of care work:

Caring is engendered in both market and private life. Women’s occupations are the caring occupations, and women do the disproportionate amount of caretaking in the private household. To put the point simply, traditional gender roles in our society imply that men care about but women care for. (Tronto, 1995, p. 103)

As seen in the previous quotation, Tronto provides further support for Okin’s argument that gender injustice is present in the family. Gender injustice is constituted in the family in the way that women are forced to take on the burden of care work in the home. Tronto’s

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<sup>26</sup> Tronto, “Women and Caring,” in Held, *Justice and Care*, 103.

analysis also reveals how gender injustice infiltrates the public labor market where women are expected to perform the care work that men disregard. Thus, the gender bias that is present in assumptions about care pose a problem for feminists who want to remove care ethics from its gendered place in the feminized domestic/private sphere. An ethic of care must therefore be made relevant to both the domestic/private sphere and the political/public sphere of society so that gender injustice can be properly addressed.

To begin answering the question of how gender injustices should be addressed we first need an account of what is needed to provide good care so that injustices in the private and public spheres can be alleviated. In carrying out this project it important to look at the insight that Tronto offers on what it takes to provide good care in her essay, "Creating Caring Institutions: Politics, Plurality, and Purpose". Tronto's theoretical account focuses on three elements that must be present in institutions that practice good care: politics, particularity and plurality, and purposiveness.<sup>27</sup> While Tronto emphasizes the importance of these elements throughout her essay, she also demands that a political space be present so that caring institutions can address conflicts such as gender injustice. In the process of reviewing these elements we must examine the role that politics play in caring. For Tronto, the element she identifies as "politics" refers to issues of power and conflict and how they negatively affect caring practices. For starters, she uses paternalism as an example of an injustice that caregivers risk facing. Paternalism in this sense deals with instances of unjust power relations that result when caregivers assume that they are more knowledgeable than the individuals they are caring for when it comes to meeting the cared-

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<sup>27</sup> Joan C. Tronto, "Creating Caring Institutions: Politics, Plurality, and Purpose," *Ethics and Social Welfare* 4.2 (2010): 162.

for's needs. Tronto introduces parochialism as another danger and injustice that results from care practices where the caregiver demonstrates favoritism for "care receivers" who are closest to them.<sup>28</sup> Tronto conceives these two dangers to be problems of "power and particularity" that along with purposiveness demand attention from caring institutions and families as well:

These three elements, then, are: first, a clear account of power in the care relationship and thus a recognition of the need for a *politics* of care at every level; second, a way for care to remain *particularistic and pluralistic*; and third, that care should have clear, defined, acceptable *purposes*. (Tronto, 2010, p. 162)

As Tronto points out in the previous excerpt, these elements are applicable at every level, from the private to the public sphere of society.

Upon identifying the elements that are necessary for institutions to practice good care it is also important to recognize the signs of bad care. Consequently, we must refer to Tronto's list of the "Seven Warning Signs that Institutions are Not Caring Well".<sup>29</sup> According to this account, institutions that exhibit any of the features on Tronto's list also lack the three elements that are needed for good care. The first item on her list targets the assumption that care is only needed in situations of misfortune. Given that this idea is false, since everyone needs care and benefits from it, it is easy to understand why this assumption is associated with bad care. Furthermore, the failure to recognize the process of caring as a whole represents yet another warning sign of bad care. In responding to this issue, Tronto argues that the language of care enforces the public/private dichotomy by disregarding those individuals who participate in the broader aspects of care: "...Any

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<sup>28</sup>Tronto, "Creating Caring Institutions," 161.

<sup>29</sup>Tronto, "Creating Caring Institutions," 163.

account of institutional care that fails to name explicitly the ‘care-attentives’ and the ‘care-responsibles’ allows those people, and their roles in caring, to pass unnoticed” (Tronto, 2010, p. 165). As stated by Tronto in the previous quotation, certain caregivers, especially those within the family, face the possibility of having their care work overlooked. Finally, what I believe to be the most important indicator that Tronto acknowledges in her account of bad care deals with the marginalization of caring as a type of work that is defined by one’s class status, sex, or race.<sup>30</sup> This unjust distribution of care corresponds to the work performed by those individuals who are the most marginalized in society. Women, especially those who take on care-giving roles in the family, serve as an example of a marginalized population that are negatively affected by the gendered nature of care. The characterization of care that Tronto provides in her analysis reinforces the inferior status that caring as a practice has in society.<sup>31</sup> All things considered, the warning signs that Tronto lists for bad care are very helpful in conducting a critical examination of caring institutions, especially when it comes to the institution of the family.

Tronto goes on to argue that conflict is an integral part of any caring institution. In her work she notes that institutions need plans for addressing conflict: “...Care institutions need explicit institutional arrangements to help to resolve conflict as it arises” (Tronto, 2010, p. 168). The changing state of needs is one example of a conflict that is common to caring institutions. Tronto references this problem in the following passage:

They [needs] change over time for particular individuals, they change as techniques of medical intervention change, they change as societies expand their sense of what should be cared for, and they change as groups make new, expanded or diminished

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<sup>30</sup>Tronto, "Creating Caring Institutions," 166.

<sup>31</sup>See footnote 30 above.

demands on the political order. The demands placed upon institutions change. (Tronto, 2010, p. 168)

While “the needs-interpretation struggle” presents a problem for caring institutions, Tronto suggests establishing a “political space” in institutions, such as the family, that would resolve the conflict that needs bring about. This solution encourages deliberation which I find to be effective in addressing matters of conflict, especially in caring situations. Unlike an ethic of justice that stresses individuality, an ethic of care focuses on relationships and it is because of this relational feature that deliberation can be used to address conflict between individuals, especially when it comes to issues of gender injustice in the family. If a space did not exist for addressing issues of conflict in a reasonable and just manner, then institutions would fail miserably at providing effective care.

To show what an ethic of care has to offer to political theory that an ethic of justice does not Tronto devotes attention to exploring the moral dimensions of care. Her critical analysis of care begins with an outline of the three moral dimensions of an ethic of care that include attentiveness, authority/autonomy, and particularity.<sup>32</sup> Tronto asserts the following in describing the moral dimension of attentiveness:

Caring suggests an alternative moral attitude. From the perspective of caring, what is important is not arriving at the fair decision, understood as how the abstract individual in this situation would want to be treated, but at meeting the needs of particular others, or preserving the relationships of care that exist. In this way, moral theory becomes much more closely connected to the concrete needs of others. (Tronto, 1995, p. 105)

Here, Tronto focuses on the relational aspect of an ethic of care to emphasize a feature that political theory, such as that offered by Okin, should embrace. Moreover, attentiveness

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<sup>32</sup>Tronto, “Women and Caring,” in Held, *Justice and Care*, 105.

seeks to stress the importance of one's knowledge of the self and one's knowledge of other selves.<sup>33</sup> In this case, one's relation to others is essential in establishing caring relationships with individuals in our private sphere in addition to those we encounter in the public as well.<sup>34</sup>

It is crucial to understand how justice theory differs from caring in its conception of autonomy. Tronto expands on this difference in her second moral dimension of authority and autonomy. In contrasting an ethic of care and an ethic of justice, Tronto looks at what is assumed by conceptions of the self in each approach. As shown by Rawls, the selves involved in the latter ethic tend to be rational and autonomous beings whereas the selves involved in a care ethic differ significantly in nature.<sup>35</sup> Tronto draws attention to individuals such as children and bed-ridden patients to demonstrate how selves in caring situations differ significantly from the rational and autonomous selves that are present in traditional justice ethics.<sup>36</sup> Relations between the caregiver and the cared-for can become unjust if the caregiver develops an authoritative role. According to Tronto, this moral dilemma can be prevented with care's attention to relationships. An ethic of care has us pay attention to relationships so that individuals are able to see themselves in relationships of interconnectedness with others.<sup>37</sup> The awareness that comes with this approach enables individuals in caring relationships to "share an awareness of the concrete complications of caring" which will prevent relationships of unjust power dynamics from developing

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<sup>33</sup>Tronto, "Women and Caring," in Held, *Justice and Care*, 105-106.

<sup>34</sup>Tronto, "Women and Caring," in Held, *Justice and Care*, 107.

<sup>35</sup>Tronto, "Women and Caring," in Held, *Justice and Care*, 108.

<sup>36</sup>See footnote 35 above.

<sup>37</sup>Tronto, "Women and Caring," in Held, *Justice and Care*, 109.

(Tronto, 1995, p. 108). Gender injustice is therefore elucidated by the account that Tronto offers here of an ethic of care.

Issues of gender injustice in the family, such as the unequal distribution of care work, can be addressed if both men and women agree on the disadvantages and advantages that are associated with performing care work in the home. In summary, Tronto makes the following assessment about this particular moral dimension of care:

Caring challenges the view that morality starts where rational and autonomous individuals confront each other to work out the rules of moral life. Instead, caring allows us to see autonomy as a problem that people must deal with all the time, in their relations with both equals and those who either help them or depend upon them. (Tronto, 1995, p. 109)

The passage above elucidates how an ethic of care focuses on different conceptions of the self and on the different needs that people have, which I believe to differ significantly from the conceptions and needs formulated by Rawls and Okin in an ethic of justice. By defending an ethic of justice both Rawls and Okin assume a conception of the self that is independent and autonomous and limited to the private sphere of the family. Tronto however focuses her account on individuals in the private and public spheres of society as opposed to Okin who only addresses individuals in the private sphere of the home.

Finally, the last moral dimension of care that Tronto discusses in her account is that of particularity. Another way that care differs from justice is that it does not make universal and general moral judgments in the way that Rawls does.<sup>38</sup> Care ethics rejects universal moral principles since care focuses on particular situations and on the particular

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<sup>38</sup>Tronto, “Women and Caring,” in Held, *Justice and Care*, 109.



needs of the individuals that are being cared for.<sup>39</sup> Caring allows us to make moral judgments not by following general moral rules but by making judgments that are based on the particular, relational situations that we are in. All things considered, caring as Tronto points out has the potential to apply to the greater community: “For caring to be an on-going activity, it is necessarily bounded by the activities of daily life because the entire complex of social institutions and structures determine with whom we come into contact on a regular enough basis to establish relationships of care” (Tronto, 1995, p. 111).

### Conclusion

The intellectual investigation that I have engaged in has led me to conclude that an ethic of care is far more effective than an ethic of justice in addressing issues of gender injustice in the home. In the process of conducting a critical assessment of care I have shown, through Noddings, Held, and Tronto’s works that an ethic of care contains many values that are more appropriate than those values offered by justice for assessing what happens in the family. Furthermore, the attention that I have given to care has also allowed me to elucidate the nature of the gender injustices that are present in the home.

As I showed in the first two sections of my thesis, Rawls’ account fails to notice that gender injustice is even a problem for the family while Okin fails to acknowledge that issues of gender injustice that are relevant to the family are also relevant to the public sphere. As a result, Okin’s account does not address how the gendered division of labor within the private sphere of the home also extends to the public sphere of the labor market where women’s work is gendered and limited to caring occupations. The limitations that

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<sup>39</sup>Tronto, “Women and Caring,” in Held, *Justice and Care*, 109.

are evident in these two accounts of justice support my argument that an ethic of justice is not sufficient for addressing issues of gender injustice in the home. Therefore, we must look at an ethic of care for tackling issues of gender injustice that exist in the private and public spheres of society.

In conclusion, an ethic of care succeeds in breaking down the private/public dichotomy by allowing us to see that what happens in the home is relevant to the public sphere. Through Tronto's account of good care we are given a set of guidelines for ensuring that good care is present in the family and in the public. Unlike the strategies that Okin offers for addressing gender injustice in the home Tronto's guidelines are applicable to relationships in both the private sphere of the home and to relationships in the public sphere as well. Thus, Tronto's rules for implementing good care serves as a model for preventing gender injustice since her guidelines demonstrate how the values in an ethic of care are effective in creating lasting and positive relationships that are absent of injustice. Thanks to an ethic of care gender injustice is no longer limited to just the private/domestic sphere of the family, instead it is made relevant to the greater political/public sphere of society.

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