A Feminist Account of Global Responsibility

What model of global responsibility might feminist ethics propose? What critical purchase can care ethics provide for assessing the adequacy of cosmopolitan justice? In response to the relative lack of discussion of global care, I examine the relevance of care ethics to philosophical debates on cosmopolitanism and global responsibility. I begin by assessing current theories of cosmopolitanism, criticizing the shortcomings of cosmopolitan justice from the perspective of cosmopolitan care. Next, I establish a moral foundation for a feminist conception of global responsibility through exploration of several central themes in feminist ethics, and more specifically in care ethics: human interdependence, vulnerability, and need. In a move that distinguishes my account from the few earlier takes on global care, I argue that care understood as a cosmopolitan obligation adds a vital element to the current justice-dominated discourse. I also provide a detailed discussion of the main features of the cosmopolitan care model of global responsibility.

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3The notion that care ethics could be a useful resource for issues of globalization is not an entirely new idea, although it stands as a surprisingly underdiscussed possibility. Sara Ruddick identified the relevance of maternal thinking for analyzing the politics of war at an early stage of care ethics. Ruddick criticized accounts that restricted international ethics to the role of conflict resolution, finding instead that the care ethics perspective held promise of international ethics amounting to more than the adjudicating of competing claims. See Sara Ruddick, Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), and “The Rationality of Care,” in Jean Bethke Elshtain and Shelia Tobias (eds.), Women, Militarism and War (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), pp. 229-54.
have shied away from the importance of obligation for cosmopolitanism. I challenge these accounts by maintaining that obligation should play a pivotal role in cosmopolitan care. The global duty to care that I propose features the responsibility to care for vulnerable, dependent, and needy persons at a distance.

1. Cosmopolitanism Reconsidered: The Need for Cosmopolitan Care

Cosmopolitan theories of justice have dominated contemporary philosophical discussions of global responsibility, but distinctively feminist approaches to questions of global responsibility have been curiously absent from such conversations. My main task in this article is to explore the possibility of a feminist conception of global responsibility as part of a cosmopolitan theory of care. I understand the relationship between global responsibility and cosmopolitanism to be as follows: cosmopolitanism (and specifically moral cosmopolitanism, which I discuss below) functions as a framework in which to determine the nature and extent of our global responsibilities. But before setting forth the details of cosmopolitan care, it may be helpful to sketch the contours of contemporary cosmopolitan theory, in order to situate my project in relation to predominant theories. Equally important is the second aim of this introductory discussion: to justify the need for an alternative version of cosmopolitanism informed by feminist theory. With several other theories of cosmopolitanism and global responsibility available, one might wonder, why propose another? In answering this question, I hope to make the main motives for this effort clear.

The landscape of cosmopolitan theory is an increasingly complex one. In it, philosophers assign multiple meanings to the term “cosmopolitanism” that correspond with different areas of cosmopolitan thought. Several main varieties of cosmopolitanism will not be the focus of my

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5Notable exceptions to this statement can be found in the literature. See Engster, *The Heart of Justice*; Held, *The Ethics of Care*; Robinson, *Globalizing Care*; Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*, and “Global Caring, Global Justice.”
present effort. These include political cosmopolitanism, economic cosmopolitanism, and cultural cosmopolitanism. A brief characterization of each will help delimit the area of my interest. Political cosmopolitanism focuses on the nature of international political organization, recommending different arrangements with varying degrees of global oversight, from an overarching, centralized world state to a federated alliance under a global governing body with more limited power to global political institutions with jurisdiction corresponding to specific issues, such as climate change or war crimes. Cultural cosmopolitanism is primarily a view about cultures and the self. Cosmopolitans about culture argue for the “ubiquity of cultural change” and the “fluidity of individual identity.” They are wary of strong varieties of nationalism, while heartily endorsing cultural diversity. Economic cosmopolitanism focuses on the development and proper regulation of global economic systems and features, including the financial markets and free trade.

Instead of political, cultural, or economic cosmopolitanism, my main interest is in a fourth variety, namely, moral cosmopolitanism. Moral cosmopolitans endorse particular moral commitments designed to justify certain obligations, actions, and institutions. In general, they adopt principles of equal moral worth (among humans) and impartiality. A more detailed picture of the nature of their moral commitments will vary somewhat depending upon the specific version of moral cosmopolitanism under consideration. Prominent varieties of moral cosmopolitanism include those employing a utilitarian framework, a Kantian frame-

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6There are several ways to categorize the main approaches to cosmopolitanism. My discussion is most closely informed by the categorizations that the following sources provide: Pauline Kleingeld and Eric Brown, “Cosmopolitanism,” in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 ed.), ed. Edward N. Zalta; Pauline Kleingeld, “Six Varieties of Cosmopolitanism in Late Eighteenth-Century Germany,” Journal of the History of Ideas 60 (1999): 505-24; Samuel Scheffler, Boundaries and Allegiances (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Tan, Justice without Borders.

7Kleingeld and Brown, “Cosmopolitanism.”

8Scheffler, Boundaries and Allegiances, p. 113. Scheffler offers a primary distinction between cosmopolitanism about justice and cosmopolitanism about culture. Cultural cosmopolitanism develops from the latter.


10Charles Beitz introduces the distinction between cosmopolitanism as a moral ideal and cosmopolitanism as an institutional ideal, on which Kok-Chor Tan usefully elaborates. I am drawing on both discussions here. See Charles Beitz, “International Liberalism and Distributive Justice: A Survey of Recent Thought,” World Politics 51 (1999): 269-96; and Tan, Justice without Borders, p. 10.

work, a Rawlsian framework, and a capabilities framework. We can distinguish these views by detecting which universal characteristic of humanity each takes to be most morally salient and therefore to play a significant role in establishing the foundation of moral obligations. For moral cosmopolitans of a utilitarian ilk, hedonistic happiness (pleasure and the absence of pain) will be essential to moral deliberation. For Kantian moral cosmopolitans, practical reason, freedom, and autonomy are the most morally salient aspects of our humanity. Rawlsian moral cosmopolitans—a variety of Kantian moral cosmopolitans—focus more specifically on distributive justice and a thin conception of the good. Moral cosmopolitans who adopt a capabilities framework focus on certain human capacities necessary for human well-being or flourishing.

A more extensive account of each of these varieties of moral cosmopolitanism, as well as an evaluation of their individual weaknesses, is beyond the scope of the present article. But consideration of the features they share in common is particularly relevant. Providing a general account of moral cosmopolitanism, as well as a discussion of the limitations of this view, especially from a feminist moral perspective, will pave the way for an alternative understanding of moral cosmopolitanism as cosmopolitan care. The cosmopolitan care account and the feminist idea of global responsibility it entails respond to the limitations of the cosmopolitan justice model.

In a well-known essay on cosmopolitanism and patriotism, Martha Nussbaum asserts that the cosmopolitan’s “allegiance is to the worldwide community of human beings.” But this allegiance to humanity is, in fact, the product of a prior, “first allegiance” to “what is morally good—and that which, being good, I can commend as such to all human beings.” Nussbaum displays the moral universalism at the core of moral cosmopolitanism: the primary allegiance of any moral cosmopolitan is to the good and the right, or, as Nussbaum puts it, to “the substantive universal values of justice and right.” This last quote makes plain the pivotal role that the justice perspective plays in moral cosmopolitanism: in

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16Ibid., p. 5.
17Ibid.
contemporary moral theory, many if not all varieties of moral cosmopolitanism embrace justice as a foundational value. In short, moral cosmopolitanism is cosmopolitan justice.18

Thomas Pogge details three additional key features that all cosmopolitan positions contain: individualism, universality, and generality.19 I take these claims to express the basic moral commitments that proponents of moral cosmopolitanism share. For Pogge, the individualism at the heart of moral cosmopolitanism establishes that individual human beings are the ultimate units of moral concern. Groups, such as families, nations, and cultures may only be indirect units of moral concern.20 Universality for Pogge refers to the idea that all persons have equal standing as ultimate units of moral concern.21 Finally, generality refers to the idea that “this special status has global force. Persons are ultimate units of moral concern for everyone—not only for their compatriots, fellow religionists, or such like.”22 Combining these three features into one overarching statement, we can see that moral cosmopolitanism holds that all (universality) individuals are ultimate units of moral concern (individualism) for all moral agents (generality).

One final feature of moral cosmopolitanism deserves emphasis. This feature is impartiality. In determining their moral obligations, moral cosmopolitans discount all extrinsic factors. For the moral cosmopolitan, partiality stemming from forms of loyalty and allegiance that we feel toward our families, cultural groups, or nations (and perhaps especially nations) is morally questionable. Moral cosmopolitans thus shun ethical particularism, which they might understand to be a form of parochialism. Those of the more extreme variety view the moral claims of affiliation with a degree of suspicion.23 Ties, be they a matter of proximity (local ties), identity (ties of a religious, ethnic, or ideological nature), or emotion (ties to family, friends, and so on) have less moral salience.

Moral cosmopolitanism has been the object of strong critical review, debate, and even rebuke. Theorists from multiple perspectives have taken it to task for a host of shortcomings.24 In offering the following critique

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18I use the terms “moral cosmopolitanism” and “cosmopolitan justice” interchangeably in this article.
20Ibid.
21Ibid.
22Ibid., pp. 48-49.
23I am referring here to Scheffler’s distinction between extreme and moderate cosmopolitanism. See Scheffler, Boundaries and Allegiances, pp. 111-30.
of moral cosmopolitanism, I focus on weaknesses of special interest to feminist ethicists in general, and to care ethicists in particular. The shortcomings are those one can readily identify from a feminist moral perspective (though other moral theorists may share their concerns). The main, overlapping criticisms of moral cosmopolitanism that I wish to discuss are hyper-individualism, idealization, abstraction, and acontextuality. After developing these four points, I will briefly discuss the alternative concepts that cosmopolitan care offers, in an effort to demonstrate that which cosmopolitan care can add to the justice-dominated moral cosmopolitanism discourse. I provide a full development of these features of cosmopolitan care, as reflected in the global duty to care, in section 4.25

Philosophers concerned with the moral importance of relationships might describe moral cosmopolitanism’s individualism as a form of hyper-individualism. By rendering the individual the ultimate unit of moral concern, moral cosmopolitans deny care ethicists’ belief in the primary moral significance of human relationships and implicitly endorse a disconnected social ontology featuring atomistic individuals. In contrast, care ethicists argue that a more accurate picture of our social ontological circumstances is one of intersubjectivity and attachment. It is this view that informs cosmopolitan care, which stems from a relational social ontology. The moral self, from this perspective, is best understood as a self-in-connection. This depiction of the moral self challenges the cosmopolitan justice idea that individuals isolated from their relationships can serve as the ultimate units of moral concern. Proponents of cosmopolitan care would charge that cosmopolitan justice at best underemphasizes and at worst ignores an essential component of humanity, namely, our interdependence. While moral cosmopolitanism may be able to grant that relationships have some moral importance, it will always be secondary, a view that cosmopolitan care ethicists find wanting. In contrast with the way cosmopolitan obligations of justice arise from the individual as the ultimate unit of moral concern, the global duty to care develops from human interdependence identified as the most morally salient feature of humanity.

A second shortcoming of cosmopolitan justice involves a tendency to idealize human abilities at the expense of a moral realistic vision. One good example of this propensity can be found in a dominant strain of moral cosmopolitanism, Kantian moral cosmopolitanism. An idealistic vision of independent human rationality and autonomy rests at its core.26 In contrast, cosmopolitan care begins from an acknowledgment of human

25Throughout this discussion, readers familiar with the justice-care debates should detect some well-known tensions between the justice and care perspectives, played out on the cosmopolitan level.

26See O’Neill, Bounds of Justice.
dependence and of dependency relations as that which makes rational agency possible in the first place. With the global duty to care, the idealization of autonomous individuals who are general members of humanity gives way to the nonidealized reality of interdependent, vulnerable moral agents with inevitable needs. As embodied and finite, humans share a susceptibility to suffering and needing.

Other critics have taken issue with moral cosmopolitans’ insistence on abstraction, as well as the closely related feature of impartiality, with its resulting acontextual moral reasoning. Given the intertwined nature of the two final criticisms of abstraction and acontextuality, I will discuss them together. To be clear, however, the concern regarding abstraction is primarily a concern about the subject of cosmopolitan obligations of justice. The concern regarding acontextuality is primarily a concern about the nature of moral deliberation that cosmopolitan justice entails.

Recall Nussbaum’s claim regarding the cosmopolitan’s allegiance to the community of human beings in the world. In light of our abstract, shared humanity, human beings have certain duties toward one another. Gertrude Himmelfarb’s response to Nussbaum’s claim is instructive, and nicely captures an aspect of the cosmopolitan care complaint with abstraction and impartiality:

what cosmopolitanism obscures, even denies, are the givens of life: parents, ancestors, family, race, religion, heritage, history, culture, tradition, community—and nationality. These are not “accidental” attributes of the individual. They are essential attributes. We do not come into the world as free-floating, autonomous individuals. We come into it complete with all the particular, defining characteristics that go into a fully formed human being, a being with an identity.

Himmelfarb emphasizes the moral importance of both relationships and identity in her reply. Without these attributes, the moral self becomes a thin shell of moral abstraction. Moreover, care ethicists will contend that abstraction yields a flawed view of moral agency and of others as sources of moral obligations. The cosmopolitan justice perspective also fundamentally misconstrues the nature of moral responsibility by adopting impartial moral reasoning and hence systematically undervaluing contextual elements crucial to moral assessment. Impartiality demands that concrete, supposedly extrinsic features of persons be kept external to moral deliberation.

But often it is these contextual features of moral patients and moral situations that prove most important for responding well. In contrast to the cosmopolitan justice approach, cosmopolitan care incorporates contextual awareness and sensitivity in several regards. Cosmopolitan care

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understands moral patients—the subjects of the global duty to care—as embodied persons with context-specific needs situated, very importantly, in a nexus of relations of power and domination. Moreover, cosmopolitan care registers the importance of contextual sensitivity for skills of moral perception and moral judgment, as well as for adequately carrying out one’s moral obligation in particular situations. For these reasons, a relatively thick sense of situatedness—of moral agents and moral patients—enters moral deliberation from a cosmopolitan care perspective.

Having examined the four main criticisms, proponents of cosmopolitan justice might claim that although not the main focus of the theory, cosmopolitan justice can accommodate cosmopolitan care’s concerns and incorporate the positive moral suggestions cosmopolitan care offers in response. That is, the response might be that theorists of cosmopolitan justice can take account of the criticisms and oversights I register, or that in any case, their approach does not preclude space for development of these views. Writing two decades ago in the midst of the justice-care debates, Cheshire Calhoun provides a response to this claim that is still highly relevant and incisive:

Although we can and should test the ethics of justice by asking whether it could consistently include the central moral issues in the ethics of care, we might also ask what ideologies of the moral life are likely to result from the repeated inclusion or exclusion of particular topics in moral theorizing.29

In raising this challenge, Calhoun points to what she calls the “nonlogical implications” of the justice tradition, including giving theoretical priority to concepts such as impartiality, rationality, individualism, and autonomy, concepts, in short, that form the core of cosmopolitan justice.

Calhoun continues:

Starting from the observation that the ethics of justice has had centuries of workout, I want to ask what ideological implications a concentration on only some moral issues might have and which shifts in priorities might safeguard against those ideologies. This particular tack in trying to bring the ethics of care to center stage has the double advantage of, first, avoiding the necessity of making charges of conceptual inadequacy stick, since it does not matter what the ethics of justice could consistently talk about, only what it does talk about; and, second, of avoiding the question of what, from an absolute, ahistorical point of view moral theory ought to be most preoccupied with.30

We can apply Calhoun’s approach to the current justice-dominated cosmopolitanism scene. Following Calhoun, I want to argue that whether or not cosmopolitan justice can accommodate the criticisms of cosmopoli-

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30 Ibid., p. 453.
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tan care, a shift in theoretical priorities with the aim of safeguarding against dominating ideologies of global moral theory is warranted. What might cosmopolitan care call forth that cosmopolitan justice, guided by the intellectual constraints of the justice perspective, has underemphasized or altogether missed?

Those aware of the justice-care debates might rightfully press at this point for a detailed account of the relationship I propose between cosmopolitan justice and cosmopolitan care. Do I intend cosmopolitan care to supplant cosmopolitan justice or perhaps merely to modify it? Absent a complete theory of cosmopolitan care, such proclamations are not possible. And establishing cosmopolitan care as a full-fledged alternative to cosmopolitan justice would require additional work that I cannot complete here. What I can offer, however, is one prominent feature of cosmopolitan care, namely, care understood as an obligation through the global duty to care. I develop the global duty to care with Calhoun’s tack in mind, while aiming to respond to cosmopolitan justice’s shortcomings of hyper-individualism, idealization, abstraction, and acontextuality with a relational, nonidealized, contextual, oppression-informed account of feminist global responsibility.

2. The Duty to Care

In contrast to other prominent formulations of care ethics, such as sentimentalist or virtue-based conceptions, an alternative viable moral articulation of care is as an obligation, that is, as the duty to care. The idea of understanding care as a duty arises at the crossroads of three concepts that arguably form the core of care ethics discourse: vulnerability, dependence, and need. In examining human vulnerability, care ethicists underscore an inescapable aspect of human existence: as finite creatures, we are necessarily vulnerable to a host of dangers, such as disease and physical and psychological injury. While the impact of vulnerability may not be evenly distributed across the human population—a person of con-

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31See Slote, The Ethics of Care and Empathy.
siderable means can afford protection against some of life’s ills in a way that the destitute cannot—even the most powerful person cannot ensure her total invulnerability. The second core concept, dependence, is the resulting condition of vulnerability. Our vulnerability renders us dependent on others for their support. Our lives begin in a state of radical dependence from birth. And, subsequently, throughout our lives, we experience varying degrees of interdependence, as we must rely on one another to meet our needs from everything from food to emotional sustenance to education. Like vulnerability and dependence, need is unavoidable and inevitable. When certain needs go unmet, our lives falter and we fail to flourish. If faced with unmet dire needs, we may even fail to survive. Needs fall into multiple categories and have different moral implications (if they have any at all). While some needs are merely instrumental and normatively inconsequential, others carry with them a stronger moral sense. Some needs can even threaten the development or maintenance of human agency. These needs, which I call fundamental needs, require a moral response. It is through the normative force of fundamental needs, conjoined with our unavoidable interdependence (which, in turn, arises from our inevitable vulnerability) that the duty to care emerges.34

Instead of rendering care mainly a matter of emotional connection or intimate attachment, the duty to care demonstrates how caring can be understood as a moral requirement. Under the duty to care, moral agents must to respond to others’ fundamental needs. Universal in scope, the duty to care makes caring a moral obligation for all people rather than a natural or socially conditioned predisposition of select people. It does not, however, overburden them, as it must be balanced with duties to the self. This means that moral agents engaging the duty to care are not to do so in a fashion that results in the significant compromise of their own agency. This requirement is fostered by its status as an imperfect duty, which permits a degree of flexibility and advises moral agents to engage skills of moral judgment in order to determine when and how to fulfill it. In this fashion, the duty is designed to guard against both moral exhaustion and self-harm to the agent in the face of the seemingly infinite needs of the world, while still mustering much needed additional moral focus for those whose needs are systematically ignored at present.

As I noted above, the focus of this caring obligation is a certain set of needs, namely, needs that endanger or circumscribe human agency so seriously that when experiencing them, humans can no longer live their lives in a typical human fashion. Those enacting the duty to care respond

34I explore the concept of fundamental needs and the duty to care in Miller, “A Kantian Ethic of Care?” and “Need, Care and Obligation.”
to persons experiencing such needs with the aim of bolstering their agency and establishing (or restoring, as the case may be) their self-determination.35 Thus, there is a strong conceptual connection between fundamental needs and agency. Some examples of fundamental needs that must be met for human agency to be developed, maintained, or restored include the perhaps obvious physical needs of adequate nutrition and access to clean water. Less obvious ones include some psychological and social needs, such as the need for social recognition and affective involvement with and attachment to others. Agency, as I understand it, is a person’s ability to accomplish her self-determined ends by acting in the world in accordance with the values she deems significant. Achieving self-determined ends happens not only through rational abilities, but also the relational and emotional abilities that an agent may have at her disposal. The self-determination featured in this account bears emphasis: moral agents fulfilling the duty to care must not do so paternalistically, but instead in accordance with that which will promote the ends that those in need set for themselves. Not all ends are morally permissible, however. Those performing the duty to care may not assist others with their ends if they are immoral.

One striking feature of the duty to care is that it does not require moral agents to have an emotional connection with those to whom they respond. Undoubtedly, such a connection is ideal and often important to encourage in moral contexts, but it cannot be established through obligation. In other words, one cannot be morally required to feel a certain emotion toward another. For caring that happens over great distances, as is often the case with global caring, this feature registers as a strength of this normative account.

Contrasting the duty to care with a duty of justice to aid needy others may be instructive. If we think about an obligation in terms of its ground, scope, and content, the distinction becomes clear. The duty to care and the duty of justice to aid needy others share the same universal scope and in this respect are similar. They differ, however, with respect to both ground and content. The duty to care is grounded in human interdependence in the sense that interdependence, as a universal characteristic of humanity, plays an essential role in our moral deliberations and is that in light of which we are obligated to care for one another. While a duty of justice to aid needy others could be grounded in a variety ways, philosophers have frequently grounded it in practical reason. From a justice perspective, practical reason, as a universal characteristic of humanity, plays

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35It is important to note that there are individuals who do not have the ability to be self-determining. The account that I am offering does not address this population. This does not mean that such individuals do not experience needs that are morally significant, but that a different account will be needed to address their needs.
an essential role in our moral deliberations and is that in light of which we are obligated to respect one another, which can result in a duty of justice to aid needy others. In short, the difference in terms of ground is a difference of what the theory deems the most morally salient feature of humanity to be. The content of the duty, in the particular sense of how the duty is enacted in the real world, also distinguishes the two. (I believe this will become apparent in section 4, where I develop this aspect of the duty to care further and where I show that while a moral agent could enact a duty of justice to respond to others’ fundamental needs, the content of the duty to care renders it the better option.)

3. Toward a Feminist Theory of Global Responsibility

I now consider the implications of the duty to care for global responsibility. The underlying question of this section is how an emphasis on human interdependence, vulnerability, need, and care might transform the current justice-dominated discourse of global responsibility. Fiona Robinson accurately captures the shift in perspective that takes place when starting from care rather than justice in global matters.36 She argues that our starting point for global social justice must not be that impoverished states and people lack resources (either through their own doing, or through our doing) to meet their needs; rather, it must be the conviction that the giving and receiving of care is fundamental to all interdependent human lives.37

Thus, while care aims to meet needs, therefore bolstering agency, global care begins from the idea of care as a moral requirement for fundamentally dependent human beings. This echoes Daniel Engster’s identification of one way to distinguish care theories in general (and his particular obligation-based theory of care in particular) from traditional justice theories. “Justice theories,” he writes “have generally aimed to promote equality, autonomy, freedom, fraternity, the good life, and other such

36There are a few additional recent works that address care and globalization. See Engster, “Rethinking Care Theory,” and The Heart of Justice; Held, The Ethics of Care; Slote, The Ethics of Care and Empathy, and “Global Caring, Global Justice.”
37Fiona Robinson, “Care, Gender and Global Social Justice: Towards a Moral Framework for Ethical Globalization,” paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, June 2-4, 2005, pp. 13-14. See also Fiona Robinson, “Care, Gender and Global Social Justice: Rethinking ‘Ethical Globalization’,” Journal of Global Ethics 2 (2006): 5-25. On a related point, although I agree with Robinson’s general assessment that the liberal tradition in international ethics has brought with it its fair share of problems and limitations, I respond not with suspicion of the concept of obligation as one of the liberal tradition’s mainstays, but rather by attempting to show how the duty to care can avoid such troubles.
values, but rarely the decent care of all.” Engster reminds us that not only are caring practices a basic element of all human lives, but also that adequate care for all represents an important normative global goal. Robinson and Engster delineate two significant respects in which a cosmopolitan care approach to global responsibility will fundamentally differ from cosmopolitan justice approaches. Robinson advocates a departure from the justice perspective when she locates the starting point of global care in the realization that care is a central component of our interdependent lives, rather than in the acknowledgment that persons lack resources to sustain their lives. Engster reworks not the starting point of a global care ethics, but rather its aim. For Engster, the normative goal of a global ethics of care is none of the standard values associated with justice (e.g., autonomy, freedom, equality). Instead, the guiding normative goal is ensuring that all are cared for well. Both of these key differences are reflected in the present account of the global duty to care.

A review of the recent philosophical literature on global responsibility quickly reveals how discussions of justice have dominated discussions of care. The narrow focus may stem from lingering doubts about the pertinence of care ethics to public normative matters. Following the path determined by earlier accounts of the ethics of care, some theorists still consider care ethics to be a moral approach solely appropriate for the ethics of personal relationships. But multiple care ethicists have established that it is incorrect to understand care as a moral mode applicable only to the private sphere. When we understand care as the practice of

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38Engster, “Rethinking Care Theory,” p. 70.
39A few recent examples include Caney, Justice beyond Borders; Moellendorf, Cosmopolitan Justice; Charles Jones, Global Justice: Defending Cosmopolitanism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Thomas Pogge, Global Justice (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2001); and Tan, Justice without Borders.
42Eva Feder Kittay uses the term doula to make a case for a public ethic of care in Love’s Labor. See Eva Feder Kittay, Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency (New York: Routledge, 1999). See also Nel Noddings, “Caring and Social Policy,” in Maurice Hamington and Dorothy C. Miller (eds.), Socializing Care (Lanham,
taking responsibility for others’ needs in the context of dependency relations and of cultivating moral attunement to the vicissitudes of their lives, the relevance of the ethics of care to ethical, social, and political spheres at the national and international level emerges. The global duty to care reveals one distinctive contribution that feminist philosophy can make to normative analyses of global relations and responsibilities.

In what follows, I discuss the central characteristics of the duty to care, underscoring its contribution to a conception of global responsibility. Thus, I set forth one element of cosmopolitan care by demonstrating how the duty to care can be understood as a global obligation. In doing so, I answer Calhoun’s call to safeguard against current dominating ideologies of global moral theory by moving beyond considerations of whether cosmopolitan justice can accommodate cosmopolitan care, instead depicting what a shift in theoretical priorities in cosmopolitan theory might look like, at least with regard to moral obligation.43

Before describing the global duty to care, an important challenge to the core connection of my approach—between care and duty—requires attention. Care ethicists might object that rendering care as a cosmopolitan duty risks discounting or even distorting the distinctive insights and advantages that care ethics offers. To conceptualize care as a duty, the objection might run, is to taint care ethics with a theoretical approach incapable of appreciating care ethics’ emphasis on the moral importance of emotions and relationships. Moreover, for care theorists interested in international relations,44 care ethics provides a vital critical purchase important for challenging the justice perspective’s defective analysis of global ethics in conceptual terms such as independence, abstraction, im-


44See Robinson, Globalizing Care, and “Care, Gender and Global Social Justice; Held, The Ethics of Care, and “Gender Identity and the Ethics of Care in a Globalized Society.”
partiality, and autonomy, as discussed above. (Indeed, this is an ability of care ethics that I wish to draw on, as well.) Such care theorists might wonder whether mixing a care perspective with a more canonical deontological perspective risks dulling care’s critical edge. In addition, they might be suspicious of the justice perspective’s reliance on the concept of obligation, perhaps because of the potential to reduce emotionally warm, caring relations to ones of onerous moral requirement. They would therefore most likely object to a duty-based formulation of global care. While some degree of wariness regarding obligation-oriented formulations is warranted, I hope to demonstrate that the duty to care brings important insights to ethical relations at the global level, while avoiding the pitfalls that concern care theorists.

4. Care as a Global Duty

4.1. I begin by addressing a pressing question: who must carry out the global duty to care? The question is vital because of long-standing moral concerns about the burdensome nature of duties of aid and the astonishing nature of global needs. Does the global duty to care require too much self-sacrifice from moral agents? While the universal scope of the global duty to care does span all moral agents, there are limits on the extent of self-sacrifice required to meeting others’ needs. When meeting others’ needs, moral agents fulfilling the duty to care must not come to experience excessive need or diminished well-being as a result of the care they provide. This aspect of the duty to care becomes all the more important in the face of the seemingly boundless needs of the global community. Global needs could quickly overwhelm moral agents committed to fulfilling the duty to care if they attempt to meet every fundamental need of which they have knowledge. Recall that the imperfect nature of this duty means that moral agents will engage skills of moral judgment to determine how, when, and to what extent they must meet others’ needs. For example, if a moral agent finds herself in life circumstances that render her deeply needy and thus in a state of significantly compromised agency, she would be required to meet few, if any, needs present in others, because doing so would quickly obliterate her own agency. It is morally impermissible for her to sacrifice herself in this way both because doing so would not allow her to sustain herself as an agent and because she would be rendered unable to pursue her own self-determined ends and happiness.

4.2. The global duty to care contains an ostensibly paradoxical feature, namely, the appreciation it evidences for the importance of local understandings of care, need, and well-being. Care as a practice is always situ-
ated in a complex social-political setting. What it means to care will fluctuate somewhat in accordance with local understandings and practices. Fulfilling the global duty to care by helping people at a distance will often involve not meeting their needs directly, but rather finding ways to bolster the culturally specific forms of care in which they engage. The global duty to care begins not simply from what others need; instead, its main focus also includes the indirect approach of determining what can be done to improve the abilities of moral agents on the ground to care for one another.

How people care for one another varies greatly not only within a particular culture, but between cultures. In recognition of the variety of caretaking practices, the global duty to care aims to respect and promote diversity in caring. This entails that cross-cultural care must actively respect the cultural particularity of those requiring care. Doing otherwise would not represent a good form of care.

When direct need meeting is what is called for, local interpretations of needs, including how best to meet them, should be central to acts of care. Local determination of which needs are most important, as well as how “the threshold between morally important needs and morally neutral states is drawn,” can be a matter of rational public deliberation, as Soran Reader notes. Thus, moral agents carrying out the global duty to care assess the state of well-being of concrete others in their distinct cultural situations and through local understandings. This is in keeping with care ethics as an ethical theory that emphasizes the importance of the concrete rather than generalized other.

A resemblance to Nussbaum’s capability theory may seem apparent here, as she includes a degree of contextual sensitivity in her moral framework. Nussbaum renders the items on her list of “Central Human Functional Capabilities” intentionally abstract and general, while encouraging governments to cultivate capabilities in culturally specific ways. While both theories incorporate contextual sensitivity, I believe that the overall similarity is of a limited nature. The duty to care begins from the concrete needs of specific individuals in particular circumstances in de-

46This does not mean, however, that all forms of need meeting are morally praiseworthy, or even acceptable, or that the global duty to care rests upon a foundation of moral relativism. Certain “caring” practices may meet needs while deeply demeaning the one in need of care. Such actions do not fulfill the duty to care.
determining what must be done. Nussbaum begins instead from an abstract and general list of human capabilities in order to determine what a just society and governments should provide to their citizens. As such, capabilities-related obligations focus first on the political and social realms. In contrast, the duty to care starts from the perspective of ethical obligation for individual moral agents, although it certainly has political and social ramifications.

4.3. The thick context sensitivity of the duty to care guides moral agents in two key moral processes: discovering that others are experiencing needs through moral perception and determining how best to respond to those needs through moral action. The duty to care requires caregivers to understand and respond to others experiencing needs not as abstract moral agents, but instead as persons with complex, unfolding identities embedded in specific circumstances. This point appears especially salient given the distinct dangers of treating others as abstract moral agents that arise in the context of global ethical dilemmas. This is one insight that a feminist nonideal approach to global responsibility contributes. Through the lens of nonideal theory, caring agents do not conceptualize individuals experiencing fundamental needs merely theoretically, but instead concretely through their specific identities contextualized by local norms. In this way, the global duty to care as a moral relationship between agent and patient comes into full view.

By promoting local understandings of need and forms of care, moral agents help achieve the goal of responding to needy others in a way that acknowledges their dignity. Through its expressive function, good care can bolster the dignity of others, affirming and preserving the sense of their worth in their own eyes and in the eyes of others in the process. For instance, it is not enough to advocate for intervention into a conflict situation such that civilians receive the sort of protection from violence that is demeaning, even if it is designed to sustain their lives. While

49Cf. Tronto, Moral Boundaries.


52Cf. Engster, "Rethinking Care Theory."

technically this action will meet the need that their insecurity and lack of bodily integrity represents, how that form of care is delivered will prove vitally important to both their agency and their sense of moral worth. Sensitivity to how obligations are carried out, to the manner of meeting needs, has not been a forte of cosmopolitan justice formulations of global responsibility, though certainly nothing about the cosmopolitan justice perspective precludes this possibility.

Absent a form of moral sensitivity to others’ life situations, which we might call moral attunement, moral agents will be unable to fulfill the responsibilities comprising the duty to care (outlined above). Through moral development, moral attunement as a skill of moral perception is cultivated in caregivers. Thus, the global duty to care is not solely a duty to perform actions that meet others’ needs (e.g., sending a $100 check to Oxfam). It has a broader focus on the circumstances surrounding the detection and meeting of needs in others, and as such requires caregivers to possess greater attunement to the circumstances of others’ lives. For example, moral agents might deepen their knowledge of the lives of distant needy persons, gaining greater experiential insight into their daily existence. Knowledge of this nature is necessary for the promotion of respectful varieties of care at a distance, especially cross-cultural care. Respectful cross-cultural care entails that when learning about strangers from other cultures, one guard against the epistemic hubris and cultural arrogance that can arise, exhibiting instead some sense of epistemic humility. Hence, although universal in scope and embodying a moderate moral cosmopolitan approach, a particularist strength also resides at the core of the global duty to care: the duty is enacted through recognition of the priority of understanding individual identity and of respecting difference. These particularist characteristics can inform even the most international levels of discourse, for example, when designing global recommendations on climate change. Of course, when global organizations such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change make recommendations, they are unable to give specific attention to each individual human and his or her particular identity profile and circumstances. Grace Clement, however, notes that the particularist features of care ethics translate into policy recommendations that tend to the distinguishing characteristics of groups. Nevertheless, some caution regarding this recommendation may be appropriate in order to ensure that identification of any group’s distin-

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55 See Scheffler, Boundaries and Allegiances.
guishing characteristics takes place with a strong awareness of the potent interplay between power and conceptions of difference.

In addition, good care relations do not merely involve response to crises of need, but also promote broader moral involvement. Globally, this could take the form of a commitment to build communities and institutions designed to eradicate currently intractable patterns of dire neediness. Such measures will obviate the occurrence of many forms of need because planning will provide adequate caring resources in advance, rather than in a crisis-oriented fashion after desperate needs arise. Another way to articulate this facet of the global duty to care is to say that it entails a responsibility to effect global institutions that enact principles of care and which therefore foster local, sustainable systems of care.57

4.4. It would be grossly inadequate for a moral agent exercising the global duty to care to believe her duty to be discharged by meeting others’ needs alone, absent a critical awareness of power structures that create such needs. Beyond meeting existent needs, care as an obligation entails a responsibility to unmask institutional structures of dependency relations that privilege the well-being of the global elite at the expense of the well-being of the global masses. In short, critical analysis of overlapping systems of oppression that sustain exploitation is required.58 This requirement may be compatible with cosmopolitan justice formulations, but generally speaking, moral cosmopolitans have not linked the duty to aid with a requirement that moral agents analyze their participation in patterns of domination, an importantly revealing connection.

It is clear that the global duty to care involves a requirement to respond when needs arise, and in this way it is similar to related duties to aid. But the global duty to care goes beyond this perhaps more standard formulation to require moral agents to recognize and eliminate the circumstances of oppressive dependency that predictably generate needs and threaten well-being in certain populations. It follows, then, that the global duty to care requires the individual moral agent first to ascertain the role she plays in perpetuating forms of global oppression,59 and then to mitigate the extent of her involvement in such forms of domination.60

57The global duty to care challenges any distinctions between the ethical and the political, as this paper more generally shows. Although at core it is an ethical obligation, it responds to political situations, and will often advocate social and institutional reform.


60Iris Young’s social connection model of global responsibility serves as an interesting point of comparison here. See Iris Marion Young, “Responsibility and Global Labor Justice,” The Journal of Political Philosophy 12 (2004): 365-88, and “Responsibility and
Such a requirement presupposes that moral agents already possess skills of moral perception that facilitate their awareness of the interaction of need and power on the international level. (Of course, if moral agents are lacking such abilities, they are obliged to develop them.) Ultimately, the goal of such analysis is not only to end abusive and oppressive situations that create needs and destroy well-being, but to ensure that destructive oppression is prevented in the first place. As Fiona Robinson explains, one way to reveal oppressive dependency relations is to ask who is and who is not being cared for in the global sphere.\textsuperscript{61} Which groups of people tend to have their needs met, while others’ needs are systemically neglected? Moreover, it is crucial to reveal who tends to shoulder the burden of caring and how local communities understand the status of care as labor.\textsuperscript{62}

4.5. In understanding how care as an obligation might function globally, it is important to stipulate that such obligations are often \textit{inherited obligations} or “obligations that are satisfied by persons other than those who originally bear them.”\textsuperscript{63} Cases in which the duty to care is employed to respond to need at a distance will involve situations, for example, in which a state is unable or unwilling to provide for the well-being of its own citizens or to support their ability to care for one another. Such inability may result from systematic injustice or corruption. In situations of this nature, it is only because the primary obligation has not been fulfilled that the global duty to care comes into play. In considering implications of inherited obligations for the duty to aid (similar in some respects to the duty to care), Barbara Herman further explains:

If a class of need first imposes moral obligations on local social institutions (claims of justice), and general obligations to meet distant need are inherited from them (secondary beneficence), it is not likely that the inherited obligation will have the shape of open-

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{61}Robinson, \textit{Globalizing Care}, p. 31. \\
\end{flushleft}
ended, universal beneficence. The shape of the secondary duty of beneficence will depend on, among other things, whether inheritance here preserves the scope and stringency of the primary obligation in justice, and whether it makes any difference if the failure that triggers the inherited obligation is moral (injustice, corruption) or merely practical (resource insufficiency, earthquake).\(^{64}\)

Incorporating this insight into our understanding of the duty to care and global responsibility, we see from the start that the enactment of this obligation will be contextually determined. Depending on the factors that precipitated the failure to fulfill the duty, the issue may be a matter of justice and not of care, which would be true in cases in which local economies were wrecked by earlier, destructive humanitarian aid efforts.\(^{65}\) In line with this observation, Herman further stipulates that if our obligations to need at a distance are inherited, one thing we do know is that the delivery of aid should not interfere with sound local institutions; and where those do not exist, we should not act in ways that make their development less likely.\(^ {66}\)

Rendering this insight in terms of dependency relations as a main concern of the duty to care reinforces the idea that a feminist conception of global responsibility will involve a promotion of local understandings of care.

Finally, understanding the global duty as an inherited duty enables this perspective to avoid charges that it is overly demanding in the sense that it requires moral agents to neglect personal caring relations involving family and friends. Moral agents engaging the global duty to care are able to balance caring for distant persons with caring for those with whom they stand in close relation.\(^ {67}\) As their local caring relations are primary rather than inherited obligations, they will often take precedence. In striving to balance their personal obligations with awareness of and action regarding the dependency situation of distant others, moral agents engaging the global duty to care will rarely tend exclusively to relations in their own households and communities.

5. Conclusion

In the end, one might still wonder what exactly the global duty to care requires of moral agents in terms of the minutiae of response. Does it

\(^{64}\)Ibid., p. 250.

\(^{65}\)On the issue of negative duties and structural injustice, see Pogge, World Poverty and Human Rights; and Iris Marion Young, “Responsibility and Global Justice.”


\(^{67}\)Michael Slote provides one example of how such an approach of balancing humanitarian and intimate care might function. See Michael Slote, Morals from Motives (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 69-79.
require that we provide resources such as medicine, goods, and money to those with fundamental needs? Or solidarity-oriented moral support for local need-meeting initiatives? Or perhaps activist-initiated awareness-raising campaigns regarding the structural conditions that predictably produce need in vulnerable populations? I have limited my focus here to clearing the ground for a global duty to care. Future research designed to test its application to current, real-world need situations is an interesting prospect, and one that would offer the opportunity to provide concrete response recommendations.

By establishing some principled reasons for employing concepts of care at the global level and providing initial suggestions for the content of a feminist account of global responsibility based on the global duty to care, I have sought to provide a much-needed response from cosmopolitan care to the justice-dominated discourse on global responsibility. It represents, however, only one moment in a larger dialogue. Future development of a full-fledged theory of cosmopolitan care, in conversation with both champions and critics, would be an exciting and worthy venture.68

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