

EVA FEDER KITTAY: THE ETHICS OF CARE AND DISABILITY

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Eva Feder Kittay's ethical framework, emphasizing the intersection of care, disability, and social justice. Building on the foundations of the ethics of care, as developed by thinkers such as Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, Kittay reconceptualizes moral philosophy by centering dependency and caregiving as fundamental dimensions of human existence. She challenges traditional ethical paradigms rooted in abstract notions of autonomy, rights, and justice—arguing that these often neglect the lived realities of dependent individuals, particularly those with disabilities. Through a critical analysis of Kittay's work, including *Love's Labor* and *When Caring Is Just and Justice Is Caring*, the article examines the moral significance of caregiving labor, highlighting its social, political, and economic undervaluation. Kittay's notion of relational personhood foregrounds interdependence as a normative ethical principle, redefining dignity not as mere independence but as recognition of vulnerability and moral worth within relational contexts. The article also considers the implications of Kittay's framework for contemporary debates in healthcare ethics, disability policy, and social justice, while engaging with critiques regarding potential tensions between care obligations and individual autonomy. Ultimately, Kittay's philosophy demonstrates that ethics must account for human fragility, relationality, and the moral imperative to support those who are dependent, thereby bridging care and justice. By situating disability at the center of ethical reflection, Kittay provides a robust normative foundation for rethinking social policies, caregiving practices, and moral responsibilities in a pluralistic society.

Keywords: Ethics of care, disability, dependency, caregiving, justice, dignity, relational personhood.

INTRODUCTION

In recent philosophical discourse, Eva Feder Kittay has emerged as a central figure reinvigorating the ethics of care through a sustained engagement with questions of dependency, disability, and justice. While early care ethics originated with Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, who challenged dominant abstract models of moral agency grounded in independence and impartiality, Kittay pushes these insights further by insisting that dependency is an intrinsic part of human life that moral theory must take seriously rather than marginalize or conceal. Contemporary care ethicists such as Virginia Held and Joan Tronto have developed care ethics into a robust critique of justice-based frameworks, but Kittay uniquely situates disability at the heart of ethical reflection, arguing that dependency relations historically seen as deficient reveal the limits of

autonomy-centric moral theories. Kittay's work, particularly in *Learning from My Daughter: The Value and Care of Disabled Minds*, reframes care not merely as a private practice but as a normative ethical category that highlights the moral obligations embedded in asymmetrical relationships between caregivers and care recipients. Her notion of care attends to the "genuine needs" and "legitimate wants" of both parties, thereby integrating dignity, relational selfhood, and moral agency into care ethics in ways that justice-based models often neglect.

This reconceptualization critiques traditional justice-based moral theories notably those that equate dignity with independence and calls for a broader understanding of what constitutes ethical obligation and social justice. Kittay's philosophical contribution resonates with disability scholars such as Joel Michael Reynolds, who argue for ethical frameworks that center disability and interdependence, and with thinkers like Elizabeth Barnes, whose work on the social meaning of disability challenges prevailing analytic assumptions about harm and independence. Accordingly, this article argues that Kittay's framework reconceptualizes moral obligation, social justice, and human dignity by foregrounding the ethical significance of care, especially in relation to disability. By situating disability within ethical theory, Kittay not only expands the reach of care ethics but also demands that contemporary moral philosophy confront the realities of human vulnerability, relationality, and interdependence.

PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND: ETHICS OF CARE

The ethics of care represents a transformative approach in contemporary moral philosophy, emerging as a critical response to the dominance of justice-centered ethical paradigms that abstract moral reasoning from the concrete realities of human relationships. Its historical roots lie in the pioneering work of Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, who highlighted the moral insights embedded in relationality, attentiveness, and care. Gilligan's research revealed that conventional models of moral development, such as Kohlberg's, systematically undervalue the ethical reasoning arising from care and responsibility, especially as expressed in women's experiences. By foregrounding the moral voice of care, Gilligan argued that ethical evaluation should not rely solely on principles of justice and rights but must also consider context, relational obligations, and the lived experiences of those involved (Gilligan, 2015). Similarly, Noddings developed an ethics grounded in the phenomenology of caring relationships, emphasizing receptivity, empathy, and responsiveness as the primary determinants of ethical action. Noddings' framework insists that ethical behavior arises from genuine engagement with others' needs, highlighting the asymmetrical and relational nature of human life.

Central to care ethics are several interdependent principles. Relationality affirms that individuals are fundamentally constituted through their networks of relationships, challenging the modern ideal of moral agents as independent, self-sufficient individuals. Empathy and emotional attunement are not merely affective experiences but epistemic tools for understanding others' needs, perspectives, and vulnerabilities (Held, 2006; Sevenhuijsen, 2015). Interdependence is recognized as an ethical reality: human flourishing is possible only within social contexts where care is both given and received. Moral responsiveness involves acting in ways that respect the particularities of those in one's care, integrating moral sensitivity, judgment, and responsibility into the evaluation of ethical action. Contemporary theorists such as Virginia Held and Joan Tronto

have expanded these ideas to link care to social and political structures, arguing that the ethical significance of care giving extends beyond private life into public policy, justice, and democratic governance.

Care ethics stands in critical contrast to traditional ethical paradigms. Kantian deontology, with its emphasis on universal duties, risks abstracting moral obligation from the lived contexts of dependency. Utilitarian frameworks, which measure actions by aggregate outcomes, may undervalue the moral claims of specific individuals in asymmetrical relationships. Rawlsian theories of justice, premised on impartial principles such as fairness behind a veil of ignorance, can inadvertently marginalize dependent or vulnerable populations by treating them as exceptions rather than as integral participants in ethical and social life. By highlighting relationality, emotional engagement, and the moral relevance of dependency, care ethics offers a normative corrective to these models, insisting that moral philosophy must address both the structural and interpersonal realities of human existence (Kittay, 2019; Tronto, 2020).

In this philosophical landscape, Eva Feder Kittay advances the ethics of care by explicitly centering disability and dependency, arguing that the moral recognition of dependency is not only ethically required but also socially transformative. Her approach demonstrates that care is not merely an individual virtue but a societal imperative that undergirds moral responsibility, dignity, and justice. By situating dependency as a normative concern, Kittay extends care ethics beyond the private sphere, challenging philosophers to reconsider autonomy, relationality, and justice in light of human vulnerability.

KITTAY'S CONTRIBUTION: DISABILITY AND DEPENDENCY

Eva Feder Kittay's philosophy represents a pivotal advancement in care ethics by explicitly situating disability and dependency as central concerns in moral and social theory. Unlike traditional frameworks that idealize self-sufficiency and abstract rationality, Kittay foregrounds the ethical and social realities of human vulnerability, arguing that moral theory must begin with the recognition of interdependence rather than autonomy as its baseline. In Kittay's framework, disability is not merely a biological or cognitive condition but a socially and ethically illuminating phenomenon. It exposes the structural and relational dimensions of human life that are often neglected by conventional theories of justice and moral responsibility (Kittay, 1999; Kittay, 2019). Disability, in this sense, functions as a critical lens for understanding relational moral obligations, revealing the ways in which societies undervalue both the needs of dependent individuals and the labor required to meet those needs (Barnes, 2016; Reynolds, 2018).

Central to Kittay's thought is the universality of dependency. She contends that all human beings experience dependency at multiple stages during infancy, illness, aging, and disability. Dependency is therefore not an exception to moral agency but an inherent aspect of the human condition. By acknowledging this, Kittay challenges ethical paradigms that treat dependence as a moral deficit or social anomaly. The recognition of dependency requires philosophers to reconsider notions of dignity, autonomy, and justice in relational terms. Kittay emphasizes that caregiving,

far from being a secondary or private concern, is a fundamental moral responsibility, one that demands social recognition, structural support, and ethical legitimacy (Tronto, 2013; Held, 2015).

A significant aspect of Kittay's contribution is her conceptual distinction between "dependency work" and the societal undervaluation of caregiving labor. Dependency work encompasses the complex, often demanding tasks necessary to sustain those who cannot fully care for themselves, ranging from physical assistance to emotional support and moral guidance. Despite its ethical centrality, this work is frequently marginalized and economically devalued, reflecting broader societal biases that privilege independence, productivity, and individualism over relational responsibility. Kittay's analysis highlights that the failure to recognize the moral and social significance of caregiving constitutes a form of structural injustice, particularly toward women, caregivers, and disabled persons whose needs and labor are systematically neglected (Sevenhuijsen, 2015; Kittay, 1999; Reynolds, 2018).

By placing disability and dependency at the center of ethical reflection, Kittay reconceptualizes moral philosophy around relationality and interdependence. She demonstrates that ethical obligation extends beyond individual action to include social, institutional, and political responsibilities. The moral imperative of care, in Kittay's view, is both personal and societal: the well-being and dignity of dependent individuals are a measure of justice, and societies are ethically accountable for the structures that support or undermine caregiving. In doing so, Kittay transforms disability from a condition often associated with deficiency into a normative lens for evaluating the moral texture of human life, the distribution of social resources, and the recognition of dignity. Her work compels philosophers, ethicists, and policymakers to confront vulnerability as a universal human condition, challenging normative theories to integrate care, relationality, and dependency into their conception of moral and social justice (Barnes, 2016; Tronto, 2020; Kittay, 2019).

Kittay's contribution, therefore, is both theoretical and practical: she provides a rigorous philosophical framework for understanding care as a moral and social imperative, while also highlighting the structural and institutional reforms necessary to uphold the dignity and well-being of those who are dependent. In a contemporary context where disability rights, gendered labor, and social justice intersect, Kittay's ethics of care offers a profound normative foundation for rethinking both moral philosophy and public policy.

MORAL PHILOSOPHY OF CARE AND JUSTICE

A cornerstone of Eva Feder Kittay's ethical philosophy is her critique of abstract, rights-based theories of justice, which dominate much of contemporary moral and political thought. Traditional frameworks, particularly those influenced by John Rawls, presuppose moral agents as autonomous, rational, and self-sufficient individuals, capable of equally exercising rights and participating in fair social arrangements. While such models offer elegant theoretical constructs, Kittay argues that they are morally and socially incomplete, as they fail to account for the relational and dependent dimensions of human life. By emphasizing formal equality and procedural justice, these frameworks often neglect those whose existence is fundamentally shaped by dependence,

such as children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. In effect, these theories abstract away from the very conditions that make justice meaningful in practice: interdependence, vulnerability, and the moral significance of caregiving (Barnes, 2016; Reynolds, 2018).

Kittay responds to this lacuna by proposing a normative integration of care and justice, arguing that ethical obligations toward dependent individuals are central to moral and social life rather than secondary or optional. She reconceptualizes justice as inherently relational and context-sensitive, emphasizing that the treatment of dependents is a primary metric for evaluating the moral legitimacy of social institutions. In her framework, moral responsibility is not confined to private care giving relationships but extends to the social, political, and economic structures that sustain or undermine care. By placing dependency at the center of ethical reflection, Kittay demonstrates that societies cannot claim to be just while marginalizing caregiving or devaluing the lives of those who require sustained support (Tronto, 2013; Sevenhuijsen, 2015).

A particularly influential aspect of Kittay's philosophy is her analysis of "dependency work", which she distinguishes from the broader undervaluation of caregiving labor. Dependency work encompasses the complex, relationally demanding tasks required to meet the physical, emotional, and cognitive needs of dependent individuals. Despite its essential moral and social significance, this labor often performed by women and unpaid family members is systematically undervalued, underpaid, and socially marginalized. Kittay highlights the ethical and distributive injustice inherent in this societal neglect, arguing that true justice requires both moral recognition and institutional support for caregiving (Held, 2015; Tronto, 2020; Kittay, 1999). By framing care as both a personal and societal moral imperative, she bridges the traditional divide between ethics and public policy, insisting that the ethical treatment of dependency is inseparable from social justice. The implications for public policy and institutional design are profound. In healthcare, Kittay's framework challenges the privileging of procedural or rights-based criteria over relational and context-sensitive care, advocating for systems that respond to the holistic needs of dependent patients. In social services, her approach demands structural reforms to recognize, resource, and dignify caregiving labor, ensuring that both the caregivers and the dependent individuals are morally and materially supported. Similarly, in the realm of disability rights, Kittay's philosophy insists that legal recognition alone is insufficient: justice requires ethical and social responsibility, manifested through policies and institutional arrangements that sustain dignity, relational flourishing, and human well-being (Reynolds, 2018; Barnes, 2016).

By integrating care and justice, Kittay offers a comprehensive ethical framework that redefines both concepts. Justice is no longer an abstract exercise in rights distribution or impartiality; it is measured by how societies treat their most dependent members. Care is no longer a private virtue or domestic obligation; it is a normative principle with social, political, and moral weight. In this synthesis, Kittay not only extends the ethics of care into the domain of justice theory but also provides a blueprint for ethical and institutional reform in contemporary societies. Her work thus challenges philosophers, ethicists, and policymakers to reconceptualize moral responsibility, distributive justice, and human dignity in ways that fully account for dependency and interdependence (Kittay, 2019; Tronto, 2020; Barnes, 2016).

DISABILITY, DIGNITY, AND MORAL PERSONHOOD

A central concern in Eva Feder Kittay's ethical philosophy is the reconfiguration of human dignity and moral personhood through the lens of care and dependency, particularly as they relate to disability. Traditional moral theories, grounded in liberal and Kantian frameworks, often equate personhood with autonomy, rationality, and self-sufficiency, thereby implicitly marginalizing those who are dependent or cognitively disabled. Kittay challenges this assumption, arguing that personhood and dignity are relationally constituted. That is, individuals achieve moral recognition and the realization of their ethical value not in isolation but within the context of interdependent social networks. This perspective destabilizes the conventional link between independence and moral worth, demonstrating that ethical and social evaluation must account for relational and dependent realities.

In Kittay's framework, disability serves as both a normative and ethical lens, revealing the moral and social obligations that arise from human interdependence. Disability is not conceptualized as a deficit or a limitation on personhood; rather, it exposes the structural and relational contexts that enable or impede dignity. Scholars such as Elizabeth Barnes and Joel Michael Reynolds emphasize that disability should be understood as a condition that foregrounds social justice concerns rather than as an intrinsic harm to moral status. In this sense, disability functions as a critical site for ethical reflection, compelling societies to recognize and respond to the needs of dependent individuals while simultaneously validating the labor and moral contribution of caregivers. Kittay's approach thus moves beyond abstract theorizing, linking the ethical status of the dependent directly to social and institutional responsibility.

A key concept in Kittay's analysis is relational personhood, which reconceives human identity and moral agency as constituted within networks of ethical engagement. Moral agency, in her view, is inseparable from relational contexts: to be a person ethically recognized is to be situated within caring relationships that affirm one's dignity and value. The moral and social neglect of dependent individuals, particularly those with disabilities, constitutes a denial of relational personhood. Kittay insists that this neglect is not merely a personal failing but a structural and societal injustice, observable in undervalued caregiving labor, inadequate social policies, and insufficient institutional support. As such, the ethical significance of caregiving extends beyond the private sphere and demands public acknowledgment, resource allocation, and social accountability (Tronto, 2013; Sevenhuijsen, 2015).

Moreover, Kittay integrates the concept of dignity with practical and institutional dimensions, arguing that moral recognition must be translated into policies and social structures that protect, sustain, and validate both dependent individuals and their caregivers. Healthcare systems, social services, and disability rights frameworks are not merely administrative mechanisms; they are moral instruments through which society enacts its recognition of dignity and relational personhood (Barnes, 2016; Reynolds, 2018; Tronto, 2020). Ethical theory, in Kittay's view, cannot remain abstract or isolated from these structural realities. Dignity, she asserts, is realized only when the needs, capacities, and vulnerabilities of all individuals including the dependent are ethically and institutionally affirmed.

Kittay's philosophy thus offers a profound reconception of moral personhood: it is neither purely individualistic nor solely cognitive, but inherently relational, ethical, and socially mediated. Dependence is reframed as a normative foundation for evaluating ethical practice, social justice, and institutional responsibility. By emphasizing that dignity is produced and maintained within networks of care, Kittay challenges societies to reimagine both moral philosophy and policy, asserting that the measure of a just society is reflected in how it sustains the dignity of its most dependent members (Kittay, 2019; Barnes, 2016; Reynolds, 2018). Her framework demonstrates that care, disability, and relational recognition are inseparable from any meaningful conception of human dignity, moral personhood, and social justice.

CONCLUSION

Eva Feder Kittay's ethical philosophy offers a profound reconceptualization of moral theory, justice, and human dignity by placing care, dependency, and disability at the forefront of ethical reflection. Her work reveals that conventional theories of justice whether Kantian, utilitarian, or Rawlsian often fail to account for the lived realities of dependency and relational vulnerability. By challenging the presumption that moral worth and personhood are grounded solely in autonomy and rational independence, Kittay demonstrates that ethical reflection must begin with the recognition of human interdependence (Kittay, 2019; Tronto, 2020). This shift is not merely semantic or conceptual; it has profound implications for how societies value care, structure institutions, and conceive justice itself.

At the heart of Kittay's philosophy is the insistence that caregiving is not a secondary or incidental ethical concern but a central moral responsibility. The labor of care, especially in the context of disability, is morally significant and socially indispensable, yet it is often marginalized economically, politically, and culturally. By highlighting the moral and distributive undervaluation of dependency work, Kittay exposes a structural injustice in contemporary society: the ethical and social contributions of caregivers are systematically underrecognized, while the dignity of dependent individuals is frequently undermined (Barnes, 2016; Reynolds, 2018; Sevenhuijsen, 2015). Her philosophy thereby demonstrates that justice cannot be abstracted from relationality, care, and social responsibility; ethical and political theory must integrate these dimensions to remain meaningful.

Kittay further redefines human dignity and moral personhood in relational terms. Disability, far from diminishing personhood, reveals the ethical centrality of interdependence and the moral obligations it generates. Moral recognition is realized only through relationships that affirm both the dependent and the caregiver, and through social institutions that uphold and support these relational practices. In this sense, Kittay bridges the philosophical and the practical: moral theory, social policy, and institutional design are inseparable in the pursuit of justice. Ethical responsibility extends beyond the private sphere, demanding public recognition of care as both a moral and civic imperative (Tronto, 2013; Held, 2015).

Philosophically, Kittay's framework challenges the individualistic and rationalist assumptions of mainstream moral theory, insisting that vulnerability, dependency, and relationality are not

obstacles to moral reasoning but foundational conditions for it. Care is a normative principle as essential as autonomy or rights, and a society that neglects its obligations to dependent individuals fails ethically, politically, and morally. In linking care and justice, Kittay provides a robust conceptual and practical lens through which ethical, social, and institutional structures can be evaluated, revealing that human dignity, relationality, and social justice are mutually constitutive.

In an era increasingly attentive to inclusion, equity, and the ethical recognition of vulnerability, Kittay's work remains both timely and indispensable. She demonstrates that the measure of a just and ethical society lies not in abstract rules or formal rights alone, but in how it recognizes, supports, and sustains the dignity of its most dependent members. Her integration of care ethics with distributive justice, social policy, and the recognition of disability provides a normatively compelling framework for rethinking moral philosophy, ethics, and institutional responsibility. By foregrounding dependency as morally significant, Kittay transforms the understanding of ethical obligation, human dignity, and social justice, offering a philosophically and practically indispensable foundation for both theory and practice.

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