

Citizenship and the ethics of care: Feminist considerations on justice, morality and politics by Selma Sevenhuijsen
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Abstract

Citizenship and the Ethics of Care: Feminist Considerations on Justice, Morality and Politics, written by Selma Sevenhuijsen, examines how the ethics of care can enrich contemporary understandings of democracy, citizenship, and public policy. The book critiques the limits of liberal political theory, which rests on the assumption of rational, autonomous individuals and therefore struggles to explain the interdependence of human relationships. Sevenhuijsen does not reject liberalism. She positions care as a normative dimension that complements justice and broadens its meaning, so that justice is understood as a moral practice sensitive to social context and human vulnerability. The book also shifts citizenship from a legal status to a relational ethical practice grounded in responsibility and respect for human dignity, while rejecting the essentialist view that care belongs to women by nature. Its practical value emerges in discussions of family law, child custody, health care, and the welfare state, where care serves as a standard for evaluating public policy. The book has limits: it offers little guidance on institutional implementation, and its empirical illustrations come mostly from European welfare states. Even so, it offers a normative framework that remains relevant for the Indonesian context, especially for reflecting on social protection, gender equality, child protection, and governance oriented towards social justice and human dignity.

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Introduction

The development of feminist theory has brought fundamental changes in how we understand the relationship between morality, justice, and citizenship. While liberal political theory has historically placed individual rights, freedom, and autonomy as axiomatic assumptions of liberal democracy, feminist thinkers have shown that these three axioms of liberal philosophical anthropology are incapable of explaining the fundamental implications of the interdependence of human relationships, leading to the emergence of a natural need for mutual care in democratic political life. One important development in this philosophical debate is the emergence of an 'ethics of care', a concept that places concern, responsibility, and interpersonal relationships as fundamental dimensions of moral and political life. It is within this landscape that Selma Sevenhuijsen's work occupies a significant position, as she has



successfully constructed a reasoning framework that explains the need to expand the application of the ethics of care to applicable themes such as citizenship, law, and public policy. In *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care: Feminist Considerations on Justice, Morality and Politics*, Sevenhuijsen demonstrates that a quality democracy is not only determined by the protection of individual rights typical of liberalism, but also by the ability of society and the state to integrate care practices into public life. This idea is the book's central thesis.

This book review aims to examine Sevenhuijsen's main arguments, assess her conceptual contributions to the development of care ethics theory, and reflect on its relevance to the Indonesian context. Thus, this review goes beyond simply reviewing the content but also seeks to assess the position of Sevenhuijsen's work within the development of contemporary political theory, while identifying its contributions and the limits of its application.

Book Analysis

The ethics of care as a critique of liberalism

Sevenhuijsen's primary conceptual contribution lies in her successful reconstruction of the normative foundations of democracy through an ethics of care perspective. This is achieved through a critique of liberalism. This critique is not directed at a rejection of liberalism, but rather sees liberalism's limitations in explaining the relational dimension of human life. In the liberal tradition, individuals are presumed to be rational, autonomous subjects capable of making independent choices. These axiomatic assumptions underlie liberalism's emphasis on individual rights, formal equality, and the application of universal principles of justice. Despite its significant contribution to the development of modern democracy, this liberal approach tends to ignore the reality that social life is built on interdependent relationships, which in turn give rise to what is known as moral responsibility between humans.

From this critical argumentation, the ethics of care derives its significance. First, by demonstrating the important implications of interdependent relations between humans, it opens up the possibility for Sevenhuijsen to position care not as an alternative to justice, but as a normative dimension that broadens the way justice is understood in a democratic society. From here, the protection of individual rights remains the foundation of a democratic state, but its implementation cannot be separated from concrete experiences, social vulnerabilities, and relational qualities formed within society, all of which lead to one objective truth, namely that human relations are interdependent (in the sense that they cannot always be fully autonomous and free as liberalism assumes the default setting of the human state of nature). Thus, justice is no longer understood solely as the application of abstract and neutral rules, but as a moral practice that considers the real impact of a decision on human life in politics.

This reconstruction also broadens the meaning of moral rationality, as it rejects the dichotomy between rationality and empathy that has characterised debates in political theory. Empathy is understood as a source of moral knowledge that enables people to understand the experiences and needs of others, so that public decision-making is not only based on the logical consistency of a particular principle but also on sensitivity to the social conditions surrounding citizens. This formation of reasoning places 'care' equal with justice as a guiding principle of democratic life.

The significance of Sevenhuijsen's argument lies in her success in demonstrating that inclusive democracy requires a balance between the protection of individual rights and the recognition of the social relations that underpin communal life. This perspective enriches contemporary political theory by positioning care not as a private value, but as a public principle that determines the quality of citizenship and the legitimacy of state policies. Sevenhuijsen's argumentative framework, related to her critique of the liberal ethics of justice, as well as her conceptual proposal to complement it with an ethics of care, can be found in Chapter 1 of this book. Three particularly interesting points from Chapters 2 and 3 of this book will be discussed below.

Care, gender and democratic citizenship

If the critique of liberalism explains the need for an ethics of care, the book's contribution lies in its attempt to reconstruct the concept of citizenship. Sevenhuijsen shifts the understanding of citizenship from mere legal status to an ethical practice built on relationships of care, responsibility, and interdependence. This shift broadens the meaning of citizenship, as the quality of the relationship between the state and citizens is no longer solely determined by the fulfilment of formal rights and obligations, but also by the ability to build a type of relationship grounded in the principle of respect for human dignity. Within this framework, care is understood as a principle that underpins the sustainable maintenance of a democratic system. Citizenship is not simply realised through political participation or obedience to the law, but also through the willingness of individuals and public institutions to assume responsibility for the common good. Thus, democracy is seen as a relational practice that demands a balance between individual autonomy and collective responsibility.

One of the strengths of Sevenhuijsen's argument also lies in its rejection of the essentialist view that identifies care with women. While acknowledging that the development of an ethics of care is rooted in women's historical experiences in caregiving practices, this work also emphasises that caring is not a natural trait inherent in a specific gender. Care is positioned as a moral competence that can be learned, developed, and practiced by all citizens. Thus, an ethics of care not only expands feminist theory but also contributes to the emergence of a more inclusive conception of citizenship. This argument is further strengthened by the concept of situated ethics. This is the perspective that moral decisions always take place within a specific social context. Therefore, the application of principles of justice requires sensitivity to the lived experiences, power relations, and concrete conditions faced by individuals and groups. It should be noted that this approach is not intended to reject the universality of moral values, but to ensure that their application does not ignore the diversity of human experience. With this argumentative construction, Sevenhuijsen successfully connects ethical reflection with democratic practice and demonstrates that empathy and dialogue are prerequisites for just public decision-making.

Another theoretical contribution of this book lies in its success in expanding the concept of citizenship from a legal to a relational dimension. Democracy is understood not only as a system that guarantees citizens' rights, but also as a political space that fosters care, shared responsibility, and respect for human vulnerability. This shift is what makes Sevenhuijsen's work relevant in the development of contemporary political theory. The substance of these ideas is presented sequentially in Chapters 2 and 3 of this book. The author intentionally places both as a foundation for thematic discussions surrounding the application of an ethics of care, particularly within the framework of Dutch welfare state practices, as outlined in Chapters 4 and 5 of this book.

The implementation of the ethics of care in family law and public policy

The practical value of *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care* can be seen when Sevenhuijsen connects the ethics of care to law and public policy. This is where the book goes beyond much of the earlier work on the ethics of care, which focused more on interpersonal moral reflection. Sevenhuijsen shows that care can serve as a normative principle for evaluating how states design, implement, and evaluate public policy. Thus, the ethics of care does not cease to be an ethical framework but develops into a relevant perspective for democratic governance.

This argument is clearly evident in discussions of family law, particularly the issue of child custody. This work critiques approaches that rely solely on formal equality between parents without considering the quality of the parenting relationship and the child's concrete needs. The ethics of care perspective demonstrates that the legitimacy of a legal decision is determined not only by the consistency of its application but also by its ability to protect the most

vulnerable. Thus, justice is understood as a balance between legal certainty and sensitivity to the social context.

The same perspective applies to healthcare and the implementation of the welfare state. Sevenhuijsen cautions that an overly strong focus on administrative efficiency and market mechanisms has the potential to displace the primary goal of public service, which is to meet human needs with dignity. From an ethics of care perspective, the quality of public service is measured not only by performance indicators but also by the institution's ability to build relationships that respect dignity, listen to citizens' experiences, and respond to the needs of vulnerable groups. Thus, care becomes a principle that enriches public administration practices without diminishing the importance of efficiency and accountability.

This book's contribution lies in its success in demonstrating that justice and care are not mutually exclusive principles. Instead, they form a complementary normative framework for the governance of a democratic state. Citizens' rights remain the primary foundation, but the effectiveness of their protection depends on the ability of public institutions to translate these principles into practices that are sensitive to social relations and the concrete experiences of citizens.

Relevance to the Indonesian Context

Although born in the context of the Dutch welfare state, Sevenhuijsen's argument has strong relevance for the development of public policy in Indonesia. This relevance lies not in the possibility of adopting the same institutional model, but rather in its ability to provide a normative framework for assessing the relationship between the state, citizens, and public responsibility. In the Indonesian context, challenges such as social protection, health care, child protection, gender equality, and bureaucratic reform demonstrate that policy success cannot be measured solely by adherence to procedures or achievement of administrative indicators. Policies also need to be assessed by their ability to address the real needs of society and protect vulnerable groups.

At the same time, the application of the ethics of care requires a contextual understanding. Indonesia has different social, political, and institutional characteristics than Western European countries, particularly in terms of institutional capacity, levels of development inequality, and socio-cultural diversity. Therefore, the ethics of care is better understood as a normative perspective that enriches the policy formulation process rather than as a model that can be directly applied. This approach encourages policymakers to consider the relational dimension alongside legal, economic, and administrative considerations.

This relevance is further strengthened when linked to long-standing social values in Indonesia, such as mutual cooperation, solidarity, and communal responsibility. Although born from different intellectual traditions, these values share common ground with the concept of care, which places social relations as the foundation of shared life. The intersection of the ethics of care perspective and local values opens up space for the development of governance that is oriented not only towards efficiency but also towards social justice, compassion, and respect for human dignity. It is in this context that Sevenhuijsen's work offers a contribution that remains relevant to public policy discourse in Indonesia.

Academic Reflections on the Book

The book's primary academic contribution lies in its successful integration of the ethics of care into theories of citizenship, law, and public policy. Sevenhuijsen not only critiques the limitations of the liberal paradigm but also offers a conceptual synthesis that reconciles justice and care as two complementary normative principles. This approach broadens the scope of contemporary political theory by positioning social relations, caring, and shared responsibility as integral elements of democratic life.

Another strength of this book lies in its interdisciplinary approach, successfully bridging moral philosophy, feminist political theory, law, and public administration. This integration ensures that the arguments presented extend beyond philosophical abstraction and have clear implications for institutional analysis and public policy. This makes Sevenhuijsen's book relevant to readers from various disciplines interested in issues of democracy, citizenship, and governance.

However, several critical remarks are necessary. The strong emphasis on the normative dimension leaves the discussion of institutional implementation strategies relatively limited. The book provides a compelling argument for why care is important in public life, but it fails to fully explain how these principles can be translated into operational policy designs across various national contexts. Furthermore, most of the empirical illustrations draw on the experience of European welfare states, requiring adaptation to different social, economic, and political conditions. These limitations, however, suggest that this work is better understood as a conceptual foundation that opens up space for further research rather than as a prescriptive policy guide. Thus, the primary value of this book lies not only in its arguments, but also in its ability to broaden the research agenda on the relationship between democracy, citizenship, and public policy. In this sense, Sevenhuijsen's work remains an important reference for the development of contemporary political theory and public administration studies oriented towards social justice and respect for human dignity.

Conclusion

The book, entitled *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care: Feminist Considerations on Justice, Morality and Politics*, is a significant work in the development of contemporary political theory because it expands the scope of the ethics of care from the realm of interpersonal philosophical ethics to the theory of citizenship, law, and public policy. Through a synthesis of justice and care, Sevenhuijsen shows that the quality of democracy is not only determined by the protection of individual rights, but also by the ability of the state and citizens to build relationships based on concern, responsibility, and recognition of human vulnerability. The book's primary contribution lies not in rejecting liberalism, but in attempting to reconstruct democracy's normative foundations to better respond to complex social realities. This perspective demonstrates that justice and care are not contradictory principles, but rather complementary in building an inclusive political life. Thus, the ethics of care is positioned not as a marginal correction, but as a perspective that enriches modern political theory by presenting a relational dimension that has so far received little attention.

In the Indonesian context, the relevance of this work lies not in providing a ready-to-implement policy model, but in its ability to offer a normative framework for reflection on state governance. Amidst demands for increasingly effective and equitable governance, the ethics of care perspective reminds us that the success of public policy is measured not only by administrative efficiency or compliance with legal procedures, but also by its ability to protect human dignity, respond to the needs of vulnerable groups, and strengthen social solidarity. As an academic work, this book successfully opens a productive dialogue between moral philosophy, feminist political theory, law, and public administration. Although the implementation of the concept of care in various institutional contexts still requires further development, the strength of Sevenhuijsen's argumentation makes this book remain relevant as an important reference for the study of democracy, citizenship, and public policy. Therefore, this work deserves to be seen not only as a contribution to the tradition of ethics of care thought, but also as a reference that enriches the debate on how democracy should be implemented in an increasingly plural, complex, and interdependent society.

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