Rehabilitating Self-Sacrifice: Care Ethics and the Politics of Resistance

Amanda Cawston & Alfred Archer


To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2018.1489648

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Published online: 09 Aug 2018.

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Rehabilitating Self-Sacrifice: Care Ethics and the Politics of Resistance

Amanda Cawston and Alfred Archer

Department of Philosophy, University of Tilburg, Tilburg, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT
How should feminists view acts of self-sacrifice performed by women? According to a long-standing critique of care ethics such acts ought to be viewed with scepticism. Care ethics, it is claimed, celebrates acts of self-sacrifice on the part of carers and in doing so encourages women to choose caring for others over their own self-development. In doing so, care ethics frustrates attempts to liberate women from the oppression of patriarchy. Care ethicists have responded to this critique by noting limits on the level, form, or scope of self-sacrifice that work to restrict its role in their theories. While we do not here take issue with the initial feminist critiques of self-sacrifice, we suspect that the strategies offered by Care ethicists in response are importantly flawed. Specifically, these responses undervalue the positive roles that self-sacrifice can play in fighting patriarchal oppression. As a result, in attempting to restrict an oppressive norm, these responses risk foreclosing on valuable means of resistance. Our aim is to explore these positive roles for self-sacrifice and thereby rehabilitate its standing with feminists.

KEYWORDS Self-sacrifice; resistance; care ethics; feminism; patriarchy

1. Introduction

Due to its attempts to do justice to women’s moral experience, it is common to view care ethics as a feminist approach to ethics. However, some feminists have criticized care ethics for promoting an ethics of self-sacrifice among women, which they see as detrimental to the aim of helping women overcome patriarchal oppression. In response, care ethicists have proposed a number of ways in which to defend their theory against this charge. These responses seek to restrict the amount, type or scope of self-sacrifice that care ethics would prescribe. Our aim in this article is to argue that these strategies offered by care ethicists in response to the feminist critique are incomplete. Specifically, these responses undervalue the positive roles that self-sacrifice can play in fighting patriarchal oppression. As a result, in attempting to restrict an oppressive norm, these responses risk overlooking a valuable means of resistance. Our aim is to explore these positive roles for self-sacrifice and thereby rehabilitate its standing with feminists.
Our discussion will proceed as follows. We start, in Section One, with an introduction to care ethics. We will then, in Section Two, explain the self-sacrifice objection that has been raised against care ethics. In Section Three we will outline the existing responses that have been made to this challenge. We will then provide a new response to this challenge by arguing that self-sacrifice has a positive role to play in the fight against patriarchy. We will first, in Section Four, outline the positive role that self-sacrifice can play generally in the fight against injustice. We do this by via exploring the communicative, transformative and illustrative roles of self-sacrifice in resistance action. Finally, in Section Five, we argue that self-sacrifice has a particularly valuable role to play in non-violently combatting gender based oppression and is thus especially important for those committed to an ethics of care.

2. Care Ethics

Care ethics developed out of a critique of traditional approaches to normative ethics, such as Kantianism and contract theory. These approaches, which assign a central role to impartial principles and justice, were claimed to ignore or belittle an approach to morality that is more prevalent among, though by no means restricted to, women. Carol Gilligan’s (1982, 5–23) In a Different Voice argued that the existing theories of moral development, in particular the work of Sigmund Freud and Lawrence Kohlberg, placed too great an emphasis on the importance of principles to morality and subsequently wrongly classified men as possessing higher levels of moral development than women. Based on her own studies of women’s moral development Gilligan claims that there is a distinctive moral outlook that is more common among women than men. Gilligan (1982, 100) describes this outlook in the following way:

The moral imperative that emerges repeatedly in interviews with women is an injunction to care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate the ‘real and recognized’ trouble of this world. For men, the moral imperative appears rather as a injunction to respect the rights of others and thus to protect from interference the rights to life and self-fulfillment.

This moral outlook places caring for others at the heart of morality. According to Gilligan, this moral outlook is just as legitimate a form of moral reasoning as one that prioritizes rules and principles and should be given equal recognition in theories of moral development.

The contrast between a caring approach to morality and a justice focused approach is exemplified in the responses of two of the child interviewees in Gilligan’s study. Both children were asked how to make a choice when their own interests conflict with the interests of others. Jake, an archetype of the justice approach, responded by saying: ‘You go about one-fourth to the others
and three-fourths to yourself’ (Gilligan 1982, 35–36). Amy, on the other hand, an archetype of the caring approach, provided the following answer:

Well it really depends on the situation. If you have a responsibility with somebody else, then you should keep it to a certain extent, but to the extent that it is really going to hurt you or stop you from doing something that you really, really want, then I think that maybe you should put yourself first. But if it is your responsibility to somebody really close to you, you’ve just got to decide in that situation which is more important, yourself or that person, and like I said, it really depends on what kind of person you are and how you feel about the other person or persons involved. (Gilligan 1982, 35–36)

While Jake provides a principle to settle this question, Amy’s response focuses on the particular relationships between the people who could be impacted by such a decision.

A number of philosophers have sought to develop this caring moral perspective into a distinct moral theory. Nel Noddings (1984/2013) developed an ethical theory in which, ‘human caring and the memory of caring and being cared for […] form the foundation of ethical response’ (1). Caring, according to Noddings, involves a relationship between the one-caring and the cared-for. Caring involves, first of all, being engrossed in the situation of the person being cared for. This engrossment involves ‘apprehending the others’ reality, feeling what he feels as nearly as possible’ (Noddings 1984/2013, 16). This in turn, motivates the one caring to act on behalf of the person they care for. According to Virginia Held (2006, 10), this view of caring for particular others as the foundation of morality is the central focus of care ethics.¹

The initial feminist case in favour of care ethics seems relatively straightforward. Care ethics can be seen as articulating a distinctive moral viewpoint that, if Gilligan’s empirical claims are correct,² is prevalent amongst women. Care ethics then can be seen as paying attention to the moral experience of women in a way that traditional moral theories do not (Jagger 1991, 90). Moreover, by emphasizing the importance of caring work, care ethics highlights the value of ethical reflection on these areas of labour that are disproportionately carried out by women.

3. The Self-Sacrifice Objection

Despite its feminist origins and the initial feminist case in favour of it, one of the most persistent criticisms of care ethics has come from fellow feminists. According to feminist critics, care ethics offers an ethical ideal that will entrench the oppression of women rather than challenge it. The basic criticism is that care ethics endorses an ideal of self-sacrifice that is harmful to the aims of the feminist movement. In this section, we will
investigate this objection and its implications for our discussion of how feminists should view self-sacrifice.

This objection targets the caring ethical ideal that lies at the heart of care ethics. According to Catharine MacKinnon, women who promote this ideal are endorsing their own oppression. In her words:

For women to affirm their difference, when difference means dominance, as it does with gender, means to affirm the qualities and characteristics of powerlessness [...] Woman value care because men value us according to the care we give them [...] Women think in relational terms because our existence is defined in relation to men. (MacKinnon 1987, 39)

MacKinnon’s point is that the caring moral outlook is the moral outlook of a dominated group who have reconciled themselves to their own oppression.

Jean Hampton expresses a similar worry about the potential for care ethics to entrench gender-based oppression (though unlike MacKinnon she does not fully endorse these criticisms). In her discussion of Amy and Jake, the two children involved in Gilligan’s study discussed above, Hampton (1993, 231) is struck by the ways in which their responses are perfectly suited for their respective places in the gender hierarchy.

What happens when archetypal Jake and Amy grow up? If they were to marry, wouldn’t Amy take it upon herself to meet the needs of Jake and do the work to maintain their relationship [...] And wouldn’t Jake naturally take it for granted that his interests should predominate [...] and be ignorant of many of the needs of others around him that might prompt a caring response? I find it striking that these children’s answers betray perspectives that seem to fit them perfectly for the kind of gendered roles that prevail in our society. In their archetypal forms, I hear the voice of a child who is preparing to be a member of a dominating group and the voice of another who is preparing to be a member of the group that is dominated. Neither of these voices should be allowed to inform our moral theorizing if such theorizing is going to be successful at formulating ways of interacting that are not only morally acceptable but also attack the oppressive relationships that now hold in our society.

According to Hampton, Amy’s caring approach to morality will encourage her to put other’s interests ahead of her own, and is thus ideally suited for perpetuating the continued oppression of women.

There are two points worth drawing out from these criticisms. First, the caring approach to morality is a symptom of the oppression of women. One way in which the oppression of women manifests itself is through the expectation that women will sacrifice their own interests for the interests of men. Women reconcile themselves to this situation by internalizing this expectation into an ethical ideal. As Sarah Hoagland (1992, 157) puts the point:

We appeal to altruism, to self-sacrifice, and in general, to feminine virtuousness in a desperate attempt to find grace and goodness within a system
marked by greed and fear. Although these virtues may herald for us the possibility of ethics – the possibility of some goodness in an otherwise nasty world – they are the virtues of subservience.

The caring ethical ideal then is no more than a coping strategy that helps women to reconcile themselves to their own oppression.

Second, the caring approach to morality also contributes to the continued domination of women. By adopting the caring ethical ideal women are more likely to sacrifice their own interests for those of others. Take, for example Virginia Woolf’s description of ‘the angel of the house’ in the following:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult art of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken she took the leg: if there was a draught she sat in it – in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. (Woolf 1942/2012)

This example shows a woman sacrificing her own interests for those around her and who will fail to consider her own rights and entitlements, prioritising instead the interests of other people. In a society where women’s interests are routinely given a lower priority to men’s there seems good reason to think that celebrating such an ethical outlook will contribute to the continuation of men’s interests being promoted at the expense of women’s. It is for this reason that Hoagland (1991, 259) claims that: ‘to pursue this sense of female agency, is to pursue oppression’.

In summary, according to these feminist critics, care ethics endorses a morality of self-sacrifice. This self-sacrificial ideal is both a symptom of and a contributing factor to the continued domination of women. In order to promote feminist aims then, feminists should reject the caring approach to morality.

Why is care ethics so frequently criticized by feminists in this way? After all, it is far from the only moral theory that seems to encourage acts of self-sacrifice. Consequentialism, for example, is frequently criticized for demanding excessive levels of self-sacrifice but this criticism is rarely if ever seen as one that should be of special interests to feminists. There are, at least, three reasons for feminists to be particularly concerned about the criticism that care ethics encourages a morality of self-sacrifice. First, care ethics is a view that is explicitly endorsed by many as the feminist moral viewpoint. It would be particularly damaging then if this view turned out to subvert feminist aims. Second, if Gilligan’s claims about the comparative prevalence of women’s caring perspective are correct, then care ethics articulates a view that many women already hold. This gives feminists special reason to worry about this view, as it is likely to be more appealing
to women than other views that endorse an ethics of self-sacrifice. Finally, it might be thought that promoting an ethics of self-sacrifice ignores the ways in which feminists have successfully advanced the position of women in society. According to Ruth Groenhout (2003, 153), these gains have been made by women who reject the ideal of feminine self-sacrifice. For those who think that progress in gender equality has been made by women standing up for their interests and fighting for their rights, an ethical theory that encourages self-sacrifice is unlikely to be viewed as helping the cause.

4. Existing Responses

Care ethicists have offered three forms of response to the self-sacrifice objection. The first response is to claim that care ethics does not require problematic levels of self-sacrifice. The second response is to argue that care ethics does not require problematic forms of sacrifice. The final response is to restrict the scope of care ethics such that it does not offer a complete account of morality. We will investigate each of these responses in turn.

4.1 Self-Sacrifice and Self-Care

The first response is to claim that care ethics properly understood does not require problematic levels of self-sacrifice. One way to support this claim is to appeal to the relational account of human nature that care ethicists endorse. According to Groenhout (2003, 167–168), if we accept that human nature can only be understood in relational terms then the call to care will begin to look less self-sacrificial. First because the care that I give to others will strengthen the community that I am a part of. It will benefit me to be part of a stronger more caring community. Second, because I am part of a caring community, the call to care includes a demand to engage in self-care. This is because I am a member of the community like everyone else and any harm to me harms that community. Similarly, Tove Pettersen (2012) claims that a mature conception of care will recognize the need to engage in self-care. Finally, the levels of self-sacrifice required by care ethics is further limited by the need to allow others to develop the ability to care for themselves and others. Giving up too much of myself to the caring of others will impede their ability to develop the skills required for caring. A mother who does everything for her children, for example, runs the risk of raising children who are entirely dependent upon her. Appreciating these three points about our relational nature makes the call to care appear far less self-sacrificial. Caring does not require that I give up all of my interests for those of other people.

The second way to support the claim that care ethics does not require problematic levels of self-sacrifice is to provide a care ethical account of evil,
as developed, for example by Noddings (1989) and Groenhout (2003, 168–170). Recognising the existence of evil draws our attention to the fact that others may not be caring. This is important as these people may exploit the benefits of the care that other people give to them in order to cause harm to others. Moreover, they may view a caring response to the harm they impose on others as justifying the infliction of further harm. If my care is going to be used in either of these ways then the care I have for myself and others ought to lead me to cease providing care for those who will exploit it.

Care ethicists need not endorse problematic levels of self-sacrifice, then, as a mature, relational account of care will not endorse this and an account of evil can explain why it can be wrong to give care to those who will exploit it.

4.2 Self-Sacrifice as Self-Donation

Kalynne Pudner (2007) offers an alternative response to the objection that distinguishes between different kinds of self-sacrifice. According to Pudner, there are a number of ways in which self-sacrifice can be understood and not all of these are problematic in the way the feminist critics of care ethics suggest.

Pudner (2007, 241) sees the problem of self-sacrifice for care ethics as a problem of autonomy. In caring for another, someone can become so engrossed in the other’s needs that she both loses opportunities to pursue her own interests and threatens her autonomy. According to Pudner, self-sacrifice should be understood as, ‘the autonomous act, orientation or disposition to renounce one’s own autonomous will’ (2007, 243). On this account of self-sacrifice, it is not hard to see why self-sacrifice might be thought to violate autonomy: the decision to engage in self-sacrifice is a decision to relinquish one’s own autonomy.

However, Pudner claims that this account allows for four different versions of self-sacrifice. The first version is self-immolation, which Pudner (2007, 244) describes as, ‘the self’s renunciation of its autonomous will by destruction’. For example, someone who chooses to undergo brain-washing. The second version is self-annunciation, which involves the giving up of one’s will in deference to the will of another. This Pudner (2007, 245–246) claims is often done with the hope of gaining something in return. Unlike self-immolation, the self is not destroyed in this form of sacrifice, as autonomy will return once it ceases to be delegated to the other. However, Pudner claims that for as long as the self is given up in obedience to another it cannot be autonomous. The third version of self-sacrifice is self-effacement, the devaluation of the autonomous will. On this form of self-sacrifice, the agent’s autonomous will is viewed to be defective or damaged in some way and so unworthy of consideration. While self-effacement does not prevent the self from having autonomy, it does prevent people from valuing their own needs, projects and desires. This damages
the ability to act autonomously (Pudner 2007, 246–247). All three of these forms of self-sacrifice represent unacceptable loss of autonomy and so fail to respond to the objection that self-sacrifice is not always autonomy violating.

There is though, one form of self-sacrifice, namely self-donation, that Pudner (2007, 247) claims is compatible with autonomy. Self-donation involves making a gift of one’s self to another and is ‘purposive and self-affirming’. Someone who makes a gift of her self to another implicitly endorses her own value by deeming it worthy of being gifted. Moreover, according to Pudner, this form of sacrifice does not compromise autonomy. As Pudner (2007, 247) puts the point:

Self-donation entails seeking to discover the other’s good [...] autonomously endorsing that good, determining appropriate means for attaining the good, and effectively choosing those means. These are actions the agent avows as directed by her own autonomy, not that of the other.

Self-donation does not involve destruction or devaluing of the self nor does it involve deference to another. Rather, it involves autonomously deciding to promote the interests of another in a way that does not undermine the agent’s own autonomy.

These distinctions provide a second response to the feminist critique. Care ethicists can accept that their ethical outlook is one that requires self-sacrifice whilst holding that the form of self-sacrifice required by their view is fully compatible with an agent retaining her autonomy. So long as people engage in the self-donation form of self-sacrifice, then their sacrifice will not undermine their autonomy.

4.3 Care and Justice

The final response to the self-sacrifice objection is to claim that care ethics should not be viewed as a complete moral theory but rather as articulating one important part of morality. As several philosophers have noted, an ethics of justice need not be seen as a rival to an ethics of care.4 We might instead think that a complete moral theory requires both moral perspectives. This may be because both are equally fundamental moral viewpoints. Alternatively, we might think that one moral viewpoint is contained within the other. Either position would allow us to say that a complete view of morality would incorporate both perspectives.

If we accept that both the caring and the justice perspectives are part of morality, then a new response to the feminist critique of care ethics becomes available. The care ethicist can accept that an exclusive focus on the caring approach to ethics may lead to excessive self-sacrifice. This though, need not commit the care ethicist to endorse this level of self-
sacrifice. Instead, it can be argued that the caring approach to morality must be balanced with an ethics of justice. This allows the care ethicist to say that a concern for justice can ensure that a caring person also pays attention to her rights. This will allow her to avoid engaging in excessive levels of self-sacrifice.

We have then, three strategies for restricting the role of self-sacrifice in care ethics: the Self-care, Self-donation, and Justice strategies. Each tries in its way to negotiate a perceived tension between the feminist value of celebrating care and recognition of others’ needs, and the disvalue of endorsing a norm of subservience. We do not dispute the existing critiques of self-sacrifice – we agree that there are legitimate worries about its role in supporting patriarchy. We take issue, however, with how care ethicists have tried to avoid these worries. In their haste to avoid its ills, they may have forgone its benefits. In the following, we explore these benefits before revisiting the care ethicist stance on self-sacrifice.

5. The Value of Self-Sacrifice

The previous sections have introduced the feminist worry that an emphasis on care perpetuates gendered oppression through its promotion of self-sacrifice. This section aims to show that this worry reflects an overly narrow characterization of self-sacrifice as a virtue of subservience. We will argue that a more comprehensive study suggests self-sacrifice may be an essential component of effective opposition to oppression, including to gendered oppression.

The notion of self-sacrifice has a long association with political resistance. Soldiers, for instance, give their bodies (and sometimes their lives), while citizens ration resources in defence of sovereignty or to fight against tyranny and injustice. More recently, self-sacrifice has also been associated with the political violence of suicide terrorists, who inflict violence on themselves and others in pursuit of their causes. Finally, self-sacrifice also has played a central role in notable historical instances of non-violent resistance, including Gandhi’s activities towards Indian independence and Martin Luther King Jr.’s actions as part of the American civil rights movement. In the following subsections, we outline three roles that self-sacrifice can play in political resistance, including communicative, transformative and illustrative roles.

5.1 Communicative

One major role self-sacrifice can play in political resistance is communicative. In her anthropological analysis of self-sacrifice, Karin Fierke (2013, 39) notes a shift in the primary purpose of political self-sacrifice: ‘[c]
ontemporary self-sacrifice is not for the purpose of giving a gift to the gods […] but, rather, is about communicating a political message.\(^5\) In particular, Fierke (2013, 37) suggests we understand political self-sacrifice as the inverse of an Austinian illocutionary speech act – that is, as a way of saying something by doing something.\(^6\) For Fierke (2013, 37), self-sacrifice is ‘an “act of speech” in which the suffering body communicates the injustice experienced by a community to a larger audience’. Moreover, she argues such acts also have perlocutionary force, in that they aim to persuade, convince or prompt certain emotions in their audiences.

Fierke’s communicative understanding of self-sacrifice is in line with communicative theories of related acts of punishment and civil disobedience. Communicative theorists of punishment argue that the infliction of hard treatment serves to express the community’s moral disapproval and aims to prompt reflection and remorse in the offender.\(^7\) Moreover, in accepting punishment, i.e. the taking on of hard treatment, the offender engages in reparations and gives force or substance to an apology. Similarly, Kimberly Brownlee (2007) suggests that the civil disobedient’s willingness to undergo punishment signals her opposition to an offending law, the sincerity of her conscience, and helps to persuade others to act to change the law. Fierke’s communicative analysis of self-sacrifice seems the logical extension of these prior accounts.

While Fierke focuses on the general communicative function of political self-sacrifice, prominent theorists of non-violence, including M.K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., have focused on the particular messages and meanings that self-sacrifice can convey as part of non-violent resistance.\(^8\) Gandhi (1920/1999, 135), for instance, insists on a fundamental connection between self-sacrifice and non-violent resistance such that, ‘[n]on-violence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering’. As Joan Bondurant (1965, 27) explains, Gandhi intends this suffering to be a purposive, positive component of his theory. The sacrifice must be voluntary, without fear, and be an expression of love (ahimsa).

Gandhian self-sacrifice performs a number of functions, including the distinctly communicative aim of evoking sympathy and respect, and prompting cooperation. As with Brownlee’s analysis of civil disobedience, Gandhi argues that a willingness to accept suffering can express the resister’s commitment to her principles as well as her rejection of personal gain, and hence reflects a ‘sincerity of purpose […] that helps to persuade one’s opponent that this objective is being pursued for the sake of justice and mutual benefit and not out of self-interest at their expense’ (Atack 2012, 19).\(^9\)

Gandhian self-sacrifice also has a perlocutionary dimension – i.e. a kind of force. Gandhi uses the term ‘soul-force’ to describe this phenomenon, which he argues helps overcome the limited persuasive power of rational discourse, which he takes to be a serious barrier in our fight against
injustice. Our openness to reason, thinks Gandhi, is closely tied to the openness of our hearts, hence the need to pair appeals to reason with appeals to the heart. This insight forms the theoretical core of Gandhi’s particular form of non-violent resistance, *satyagraha*, which can be defined as ‘truth-force, or, the [Gandian] technique for social and political change, based on truth, non-violence, and self-suffering’ (Bondurant 1965, 260).

When supporters of injustice refuse to listen to reason:

The only effective way of bringing about a change in his attitude is *satyagraha*. It is a divine law that even the most hard-hearted man will melt if he sees his enemy suffering in innocence. The satyagrahi volunteers to suffer in this way. (Gandhi 1913/1999, 290)

And while it may be overly optimistic to claim that every individual will be sensitive to another’s sacrificial suffering, Gandhi correctly identifies an important obstacle and proposes a method that takes that obstacle seriously.

Barbara Deming (1971/2002) makes a similar claim about the perlocutionary aims of non-violent resistance. For Deming (1971/2002, 149–150), the non-violent resister ‘tries to shake [the enemy] out of former attitudes…’. Similarly, Emmeline Pankhurst (as quoted in Purvis 2002, 146), describing the perlocutionary power of sacrifice, says that:

the willing endurance of suffering in order to gain the power to help the helpless, always has been, and always will be, the most powerful appeal to the sympathy and imagination of the great mass of human beings.

Self-sacrifice, then, can play a valuable communicative role in resisting oppression, especially for non-violent resistance. Moreover, it offers a potentially powerful way of prompting valuable emotional responses that could aid its uptake.

### 5.2 Transformative

Self-sacrifice can also play a transformative role in political resistance; that is, it can prompt a substantive change, in the resister or in others, and it can transform the nature of an act into an act of resistance. Gandhi, for instance, suggests that self-sacrifice is an essential component of a (non-violent) opposition to injustice. He insists that genuine social and political revolution requires individuals forgo the benefits or advantages that the existing unjust system offers them. In other words, they must sacrifice the benefits they would otherwise enjoy if they are to achieve the social transformation they seek. For example, rather than importing contemporary (for the time) British textiles, Gandhi advocated adopting *swadeshi* (home production), which included the home-spinning of a simple fabric
for locally made garments (Bondurant 1965, 106, 180). Gandhi acknowledged that many felt that wearing these local garments rather than modern British fashion and fine textiles constituted a sacrifice. But the imported cloth not only financially contributed to Britain’s rule over India; it also represented the adopting of British ‘civilization’. Further, shifting to locally-made cloth provided socially productive employment, thereby combatting poverty. For these reasons, Gandhi argued, swadeshi ought to be recognized as a step towards Swaraj (self-rule). Continuing to buy imported clothes involved perpetuating and participating in injustice while swadeshi conversely marks the refusal to enjoy the benefits or the products of injustice.

For Gandhi, this is more than a temporary tactical measure – to the extent that the benefit is an integral part of an unjust system, forgoing that benefit is a step towards creating a replacement. The associated sacrifice marks revolution, in the form of transitioning to a new system, which cannot be attained without giving up or forgoing the privileges and accustomed comforts of the old. This pre-figurative component of Gandhian self-sacrifice constitutes the revolutionary rejection of dominant forms of socio-political organization based on violence, and marks it, in Iain Atack’s (2012, 96) terminology, as transformative nonviolence.

There is one further sense in which self-sacrifice can be transformative and thereby assist in fighting oppression. As Gandhi notes, self-sacrifice is not always easy. While Gandhi thinks many have a natural ability to self-sacrifice, engaging in self-sacrifice when needed is not simply a matter of agency and force of will, it is also a matter of having a cultivated disposition. Engaging in self-sacrifice works to train this disposition such that you find it easier to self-sacrifice in the future. This is valuable not only for instrumental reasons, but on Gandhi’s view, is also a central component of personal self-rule and wider social justice. Controlling one’s desires and attachments, and reducing the boundaries of the self, bring one closer to the truth of our connected and relational condition.

Martin Luther King Jr. describes this as the ‘redemptive’ power of non-violence. King is explicit about the connection between non-violence and self-sacrifice, defining non-violence as the acceptance of ‘suffering without retaliation’ where standing for justice requires ‘willingness to suffer and sacrifice’ (Washington 1991, 9–10). As with Gandhi, King does not advocate suffering and sacrifice out of deference or passivity, rather it is integral component of his method of redemption through non-violence. This redeeming power is bi-directional for King, transforming both the resistor and oppressor. For the resistor, self-sacrifice restores the self-respect and sense of dignity that had been damaged by racist oppression and degradation. He claims:

the impact of the nonviolent discipline has done a great deal toward creating in the mind of the Negro a new image of himself. It has literally exalted the
person of the Negro in the South in the face of daily confrontations that scream at him that he is inferior or less than because of the accident of his birth. (Washington 1991, 125)

Redemption is also enabled for the oppressor, and for the wider society. In his essay on ‘The Ethical Demands of Integration’, King notes the limited power of law and punishment to ‘bring an end to fears, prejudice, pride, and irrationality, which are the barriers to a truly integrated society’ (Washington 1991, 124). Rather, the requisite change in social attitudes needed to support genuine emancipation must be initiated another way, namely, through love and a willingness to suffer. Barry Gan (1990/2002) argues that this attitudinal conversion is tied to the ability of self-sacrifice to elicit feelings of shame and embarrassment in one’s opponent, without the express intent to provoke these emotions. Shame and embarrassment, claims Gan, can be evoked only when one believes one’s actions to be wrong which is unlikely if one attributes one’s actions to provocation, i.e. if you feel someone has forced you to act a certain way. Gan claims that through her willingness to suffer, the non-violent resister is better able to avoid the perception that they have provoked shameful action, and hence reveal the oppressor’s own responsibility for her choice and thus enable conversion. As King writes:

The nonviolent resister does not seek to humiliate or defeat the opponent but to win his friendship and understanding […] It is merely a means to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor but the end is reconciliation, the end is redemption. (Washington 1991, 12)

The above remarks identify four distinct ways in which self-sacrifice can play a transformative role in non-violent resistance. First, self-sacrifice can be instrumental in social transformation, in the sense that resources are redirected towards resistance efforts. Second, the self-sacrifice associated with forgoing the benefits of an oppressive system can be pre-figurative, and thus be constitutive of socio-political transformation. Third, one can engage in self-sacrifice as a way to transform oneself by developing dispositions and habits of self-control that are intrinsically valuable as well as instrumental in facilitating future sacrifices. As King notes, self-sacrifice as part of non-violent resistance can also help restore dignity and transform one’s sense of worth. And fourth, self-sacrifice can prompt the feelings of shame and embarrassment that aid conversion, and hence provide a route to redemption.

5.3 Illustrative

Finally, self-sacrifice can play an illustrative role in fighting oppression, that is, it can help to make injustice visible and concrete. Injustice is often
upheld or perpetuated via commonplace institutions or practices that appear to enjoy widespread support. That is, the violence that underpins our participation in these practices is implicit or obscured.\(^{13}\) Resisting these practices thus requires making their violent enforcement visible. This can often be achieved by refusing to cooperate with the norm, accepting the resulting consequences, and thus highlighting the source of the violence.

Relatedly, Fierke argues that self-sacrifice can work to transform bodies into social artefacts that give substance to ideological conflict. It can constitute an embodied resistance to, or rejection of, the dominant regime’s attempt to determine the meaning of contested immaterial concepts such as freedom, justice, or equality. As Fierke (2013, 90) argues, self-sacrifice ‘allows otherwise disembodied beliefs […] to be reconnected with the force and power of the material world’. In this way, self-sacrifice physically demonstrates the workings of power and its material significance. For example, take Pankhurst’s characterization of the suffragettes’ hunger-strike while in prison:

> Human life for us is sacred, but we say if any life is to be sacrificed it shall be ours; we won’t do it ourselves, but we will put the enemy in the position where they will have to choose between giving us freedom or giving us death. (as quoted in Purvis [2002, 216])

Pankhurst’s comments reveal the suffragettes’ attempts to determine the meaning of their sacrifice, and to materialize the nature of their unfreedom. The comments also indicate that one aim of the protest was to locate the perpetrators of injustice. The suffragettes’ actions demonstrate where the choice lies, or who is making the choice between freedom and death. It is not the suffragettes who are looking to ‘cause trouble’ or are making demands, rather their actions point, or direct our attention towards others as the orchestrators of conflict.

A second way in which self-sacrifice can be illustrative comes from Cheyney Ryan’s (1994) interpretation of Dorothy Day’s view on non-violence, and in particular, how to understand self-sacrifice as shared suffering. Ryan explores Day’s position through discussion of a specific form of self-sacrifice, namely, self-immolation. According to Ryan (Ryan 1994, 32), Day takes self-immolators as trying to ‘endure the sufferings inflicted on others. In this way, their acts ought not be taken as infliction of self-harm, but rather as ‘taking violence upon oneself’ (25) as a form of non-violent resistance. This endurance of suffering is not an act of compassion, but rather of identification; that is, it is not ‘suffering for the Vietnamese [but] sharing their sufferings, so that their sufferings just are her sufferings too’ (Ryan 1994, 32). Identification for Day is not purely conceptual nor affective, but is rather an embodied ‘oneness’.\(^{14}\) As Ryan (1994, 34) explains, ‘[i]n Dorothy Day’s views, [to] say that we each
instantiate the same “body” is to say that each of our lives can exemplify the fact of human suffering’. So, by taking violence upon themselves, self-immolators exemplify the suffering of others, suffering that otherwise may have been overlooked or ignored. To clarify, such acts (on Day’s view) do not simply convey or communicate the suffering of others, they show this suffering via their self-sacrifice. Thus, self-sacrifice can play at least three illustrative roles: first, suffering that results from non-cooperation with oppression can reveal injustice and how it works. Second, self-sacrifice can give concrete reality to the abstract and contested values that inform the conflict. Finally, self-sacrifice can demonstrate oneness and make others’ suffering visible.

5.4 Summary

Our discussion has outlined a number of ways in which self-sacrifice is considered valuable with respect to non-violent resistance. These include locutionary and perlocutionary communicative functions that can supplement rational argument against injustice. Second, self-sacrifice can be an essential feature of genuinely revolutionary transformation, as old privileges are given up and new ways of living are established. Relatedly, self-sacrifice contributes to transforming the individual, grounding dignity and self-respect, and cultivating dispositions for resistance. Finally, self-sacrifice can provide a material illustration of ideological conflict and make suffering and injustice visible.

6. Self-Sacrifice and Feminist Resistance

We will now explain the ways in which the value of self-sacrifice outlined above could prove attractive to feminists, and in particular, for a feminist ethics of care.

First, while not all women are committed to non-violence, women do have a long historical association with peace and with non-violent action. Furthermore, there are numerous feminist critiques of war and violence that lend support to the idea that feminists ought to be engaged in non-violent resistance to injustice, including in their fight against patriarchy. Many of the positions discussed above are explicitly theories of non-violent resistance and thus ought to be of interest to feminists keen to pursue non-violent resistance to various forms of oppression. Importantly, self-sacrifice played a key role in these theories of non-violent resistance. Therefore, to the extent that feminists want to non-violently oppose oppression, they should consider a role for self-sacrifice.

Second, feminists have become particularly interested in the phenomenon of implicit bias and other psychological or attitudinal factors
There is growing recognition that rational argument against injustice or oppression has limitations, namely, it frequently fails to convince. Moreover, the feminist focus on institutional reform has proved incomplete – resolving oppression requires changing attitudes. This issue mirrors King’s analysis of segregation, and the change of attitudes needed in order to achieve genuine integration rather than mere formal desegregation. Feminists then may find a valuable resource in King’s transformative (or redemptive) account of self-sacrifice. Relatedly, feminists may wish to promote self-sacrifice as a practice that men, for instance, could take up as a way to give up the privileges of patriarchy as well as cultivating dispositions to self-sacrifice. Finally, feminists can look to the perlocutionary power of self-sacrifice to give emotive force to their appeals.

Relatedly, a major obstacle to combating oppression is that oppressed groups frequently lack the means to participate in dominant discourses, or their contributions are devalued. They may, for example, find their concerns are not reported in mainstream media, or are not taken seriously. That is, such groups often find themselves silenced. The communicative and illustrative potential of self-sacrifice may offer another way to voice disagreement or dissent, and to give that voice force that oppressed groups lack in other media.

Finally, while theorists such as Fierke noted the general locutionary function of self-sacrifice, the above discussion also highlighted the particular messages associated with non-violent self-sacrifice. Here, we saw connections between self-sacrifice and sincerity, but also, importantly, connections with expressions of care and solidarity. Self-sacrifice can work to communicate support for those subjected to injustice, but also communicates inclusivity towards those upholding the unjust system. This ‘universal love’ (King) should appeal to care ethicists in particular, as it does not require an individual to ‘choose’ between parties; rather, care is expressed towards all. Moreover, the perlocutionary power of self-sacrifice can evoke feelings of sympathy and solidarity in others. As Deming (1971/2002, 149–150) writes, non-violent struggle aims to ‘shake him out of former attitudes and force him to appraise the situation now in a way that takes into consideration your needs as well as his’. In this way, self-sacrifice can enable others to care.

These are some ways in which feminists might find value in the practice of self-sacrifice. In light of these potential benefits, it is worth revisiting the initial responses care ethicists put forward in reply to feminist critiques of self-sacrifice. Do the various theories just explored give reason to evaluate one response as more promising than the others?

First, recall the self-care response, which attempts to avoid the problems noted by feminist critiques by setting limits on the extent to which someone ought to sacrifice. These limits are grounded in the imperative to care for
oneself as a necessary component of caring for others. There are two problems with pursuing this approach given the noted values of self-sacrifice. First, it seems possible to understand the demand to engage in self-care as being fulfilled precisely by engaging in self-sacrifice rather than avoiding it. As we saw above, King argued that self-sacrifice can restore self-respect and a sense of dignity to those damaged by violence and subjugation. Moreover, caring for others may require one to sacrifice benefits or privileges of oppression as part of revolutionary change. So, rather than protecting against oppression, the self-care restrictions work to hamper one’s ability to combat oppression.

The second problem stems from the relational account of human nature, where if one sacrifices too much, and hurts herself, she harms others. It is not obvious, though, that harming is always incompatible with care. Ruddick (1995, 164), for example, distinguishes between harm and damage, where harm can sometimes facilitate learning and growth, whereas damage confers no benefits. Ruddick argues that the ideal of preservative love that informs mothering is compatible with allowing harm (at times), but incompatible with allowing damage. If this is correct, then it is not clear that the self-care approach will be able to restrict self-sacrifice as intended.

This leads to a final, and related point. The self-care response suggests that it is the level of sacrifice that must be limited, understood in terms of sacrificed interests. However, many of the valuable roles discussed above were not tied to the level sacrificed, but rather to the form or substance of the sacrifice. In this sense, the self-care approach seems to impose misguided limits on self-sacrifice that may preclude its supporters from engaging in valuable forms of sacrifice.

The second response, as put forward by Pudner, distinguished four forms of self-sacrifice, rejecting three forms (immolation, deference and effacement) as incompatible with valuing autonomy. But the fourth form, self-donation, involves an agent autonomously contributing to the good of another and is therefore unproblematic on Pudner’s view. Pudner’s self-donation approach locates the (dis)value of sacrifice in its form rather than its level. However, as presented, there are two problems with this account. First, the account is too narrow, and excludes numerous forms of valuable self-sacrifice. For example, it is possible to autonomously engage in valuable communicative self-sacrifice without promoting another’s interests (i.e. does not qualify as self-donation), but also without destroying or disvaluing the self or deferring to another (i.e. does not qualify as immolation, deference or effacement). Similarly, King’s transformative account, and Day’s illustrative account of exemplification are not obviously describable in terms of self-donation. It may be possible to modify Pudner’s account to be more inclusive, though this likely requires significant revision of her response. In particular, it would require rethinking the central place she gives to autonomy. Autonomy may be one important
consideration, but it is not the only relevant factor. So, while a Pudner-type response may be the way forward, Pudner’s particular characterization is too coarse-grained for purpose.

Finally, the third response argued that care ethics is best understood as only one component of morality, and its requirements for self-sacrifice could be balanced through combining it with other components, such as justice. At first glance, this seems a promising approach given this section’s focus on resistance to injustice and oppression. However, considerations of justice may not restrict or limit self-sacrifice. Given the roles self-sacrifice can play in resisting injustice, it is likely that combining care ethics with a justice perspective will expand opportunities for legitimate self-sacrifice. Moreover, appealing to rights may not help: Gandhi (2009, 88), for example, describes his non-violent resistance as a ‘method of securing rights by personal suffering’. Furthermore, this justice response repeats the mistake of characterizing the problem of self-sacrifice as one about amounts, or excessive levels of sacrifice, rather than about its form. This perhaps reflects the contemporary focus on distributive justice, wherein a core feminist complaint about sacrifice could be read as a complaint about unequal distribution of sacrifice, i.e. that women sacrifice more than men do. If so, this represents only one model of justice, and pairing care ethics with alternative models of justice may result in a different approach to self-sacrifice.

This initial review suggests the existing responses on offer to reconcile care ethics and sacrifice are either misguided or underdeveloped. However, it has provided some insight into the value of self-sacrifice, particularly for pursuing non-violent resistance, and suggests promising directions for future development in this area. In particular, this review suggests care ethicists ought to focus their efforts on delimiting the forms of sacrifice that are valuable, rather than trying to specify permissible levels of sacrifice. Moreover, we ought to look beyond the value of autonomy, and distributive models of justice, when developing these future accounts.

7. Conclusion

In many ways, care ethics offers an attractive alternative to traditional moral theory. It gives weight to sentiments, concerns and practices unjustly ignored or disvalued by dominant ethical discourse. However, its celebration of care, and the related sacrifices it seems to demand, has been accused of reproducing the norms that contribute to women’s subjugation. In response, care ethicists proposed three ways to limit the role that self-sacrifice plays in their theories, thereby distancing themselves from what, for women, has been an historically oppressive virtue. We outlined three such strategies, namely the Self-care, Self-donation and Justice responses, and the ways in which they
attempt to limit the level, form and scope of permissible self-sacrifice in care ethics. However, the resulting restrictions give no consideration to the multiple ways in which self-sacrifice can contribute to fighting oppression. We have tried to fill this lacuna. By examining the work of exemplary non-violent resisters, including Gandhi, King, Pankhurst and Day, we distinguished three main functions that self-sacrifice can serve: communicative, transformative and illustrative. This analysis allowed us to offer a critical review of the existing attempts to restrict self-sacrifice in care ethics, concluding that all three risk rendering potentially invaluable methods of non-violent resistance, impermissible. It may be possible, however, to revise either the self-donation, or the justice strategies in light of this analysis, such that they better incorporate the positive value of self-sacrifice as political resistance. We have laid the foundations for this revision, and are optimistic that the supposed tensions between care ethics and self-sacrifice can be resolved to reveal a powerful and revolutionary moral theory that is well-equipped for the struggle against oppression.

Admittedly, revising care ethics to better incorporate the value of self-sacrifice must also acknowledge the particular obstacles that women face in employing self-sacrifice to combat oppression. As Fierke notes, the communicative and illustrative roles that self-sacrifice can play are dependent on the social meanings of particular acts. Thus, to the extent that women’s self-sacrifice occurs in a patriarchal context where it is expected, it may struggle to function as resistance. This is an important obstacle, but one we suspect is resolvable, and addressing it promises to generate innovative ways to think about self-sacrifice, care ethics and non-violent resistance.

Notes

1. Held (2006, ch.1) claims that this is one of five common features of different forms of care ethics. The others include valuing emotions as an important source of moral insight, skepticism towards abstract and universal moral principles, a reconceptualization of the public/private distinction and a rejection of liberal views of personhood.
2. Though note that Walker’s (1984) study shows no difference in moral development between the sexes when subjects are matched for education and profession.
3. Note that Pudner is responding to a worry about caring in general raised by Carse (2005) and Piper (1991), rather than the specific feminist objection that care ethics undermines feminism’s aims.
5. Fierke (2013, 34) distinguishes between suicide and self-sacrifice, arguing that while both acts involve the self-in infliction of harm, suicides are frequently individual, apolitical acts, whereas self-sacrifices are performed for the ‘interests of the group’.
6. J.L. Austin (1962) distinguishes between locutionary, perlocutionary and illocutionary speech acts. A locutionary act is the ‘performance of an act of saying something’, i.e. a meaningful utterance, whereas an illocutionary act is the ‘performance of an act in saying something’ i.e. utterances that themselves constitute a further action (99). A perlocutionary act is an attempt to produce certain effects via an utterance. Austin offers the following example: Consider the utterance 'Shoot her!' The locution consists in the content, or the meaning of the words expressed. The illocution is the act of urging, ordering, or advising one to shoot her. Finally, the perlocution is being persuaded to shoot her, i.e. the effect on one’s thoughts, feelings, or actions (101–102).


8. Other advocates of non-violence who extoll the virtues of self-sacrifice include Jane Addams, Cesar Chavez, Dorothy Day, Leo Tolstoy and Simone Weil.

9. Bondurant(1965, 28–29) clarifies that Gandhian self-suffering is undertaken as an act of courage and expression of dignity, not as a submission or humiliation.

10. Someone who practices satyagraha is called a satyagrahi.

11. For example, Gandhi did not intend for Indians to take up fine clothes once India had gained political independence – he wanted swadeshi to continue, gaining an established place in the Indian economy.

12. Atack (2012, 86–96) distinguishes between civil resistance, which aims to reinforce or restore the liberal democratic elements of the modern state, and transformative nonviolence which aims to replace state institutions.


14. Day (as a Catholic Worker) understands this oneness in terms of the Christian 'Mystical Body of Christ' (Ryan 1994, 34).

15. For feminist critiques of war and violence, see Ruddick 1995 and Cockburn 2010. There are also a number of feminist philosophers who do not endorse theories of non-violent resistance. Examples include Peach (1994) and Eide (2008).

16. See, for example Brownstein and Saul 2016 and Vierkant and Hardt 2015.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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