

# Alternative Moral Theories in Organizational Ethics: The Application of Care Theory and Virtue Ethics

Wenli Cheng

College of Arts, The University Of Melbourne, Melbourne Australia, 3010;

**Abstract:** This paper points out that the traditional justice-oriented frameworks centered on deontology and consequentialism in organizational ethics, while underpinning management practices such as corporate compliance mechanisms and KPI assessment, have limitations including being abstract, lacking humanistic care, being difficult to adapt to complex situations, and failing to address power inequality. It focuses on analyzing the organizational applications of care ethics and virtue ethics: the former, with focusing on others' needs and maintaining relationships as its core, is embodied in personalized employee support and the creation of a psychologically safe atmosphere, among other aspects, and faces challenges such as issues related to fairness; the latter, which focuses on character cultivation, is applied in virtue-oriented leadership and the construction of ethical culture, among other areas, and has problems such as subjectivity. The paper affirms the value of both, holding that they promote organizational ethics to become more humanistic.

**Keywords:** Organizational ethics; justice perspective theory; deontology; consequentialism; ethics of care; virtue ethics; ethical leadership; organizational culture

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## Introduction

In contemporary organizational ethics, the dominant paradigm of moral reasoning has long been influenced by justice-based frameworks, namely deontology and consequentialism. These theories, which emphasize justice, fairness and considerations of universal obligations or results-based considerations, form the basis of most corporate ethical standards, compliance systems and regulatory models. However, these methods are often criticized as being too abstract, lacking human touch, and insufficient to deal with the complex relationship dynamics and moral ambiguity in the organizational life of the real world.

This essay will first briefly describe the traditional justice perspective theory and its application and limitations in organizations. Then, it will conduct an in-depth analysis of the specific application possibilities of care ethics and virtue ethics in the organizational environment. Next, it will respond to the main criticisms of these alternative theories. Finally, it will propose suggestions for the mixed use of multiple ethical frameworks and look forward to their significance for future organizational governance.

## 2 Theoretical Foundations of Organizational Ethics: Justice, Care, and Virtue

### 2.1 Justice Perspectives: The Traditional Framework

The perspective of justice in normative ethics aims to establish universal principles applicable to all contexts and individuals. The theory of obligation, most notably represented by Kant, focuses on the inherent correctness or incorrectness of behavior itself, emphasizing responsibility, universal moral laws, and absolute commands. On the other hand, the typical representative of consequentialism is utilitarianism, which holds that the morality of behavior depends entirely on its outcome. In organizational contexts, this typically means maximizing efficiency, shareholder returns, or overall welfare - even if it involves some morally ambiguous behavior. These two theories have been widely applied in organizational management. The impact of the obligation theory is mainly reflected in the establishment of compliance mechanisms. The embodiment of obligation theory is particularly evident in the establishment of a series of rules and regulations that must be

strictly followed by enterprises, such as anti fraud processes in the finance department, fair employment policies in human resources, and sustainable development standards in environmental protection. These are not optional, but mandatory requirements, reflecting the management philosophy of "rule first". Consequentialism permeates the incentive mechanism of enterprises. The most typical one is the KPI assessment system: performance commissions for sales positions, innovation rewards for R&D departments, year-end management dividends linked to profits, and so on. When making major decisions, managers usually conduct a cost-benefit analysis and choose the plan with the highest return on investment. This "results-oriented hero" orientation is particularly prominent in key decisions such as business expansion and resource allocation.

These two seemingly perfect theories are full of loopholes in practical operation. Firstly, in terms of interpersonal relationships, both theories exhibit a clear tendency towards dehumanization. The management logic that emphasizes the supremacy of rules in the theory of obligation often leads to the dilemma of mechanical execution for organizational members, resulting in the absence of emotional connections and collaboration that should exist in the workplace; The results oriented quantitative evaluation system, on the other hand, simplifies individual value into performance indicators, essentially obscuring the diverse needs of organizational members as "complete individuals". Secondly, in terms of situational adaptability, both theories are difficult to cope with the complexity of real-world management. Modern organizational decision-making often requires comprehensive consideration of situational factors such as specific cultural backgrounds, historical evolution, and individual differences. However, deontological and consequentialist approaches have lost their adaptability to specific situations due to excessive abstraction. Finally, at the level of power structure, both theories have failed to effectively address the issue of inequality within organizations. They tend to assume that all stakeholders have equal voice and decision-making power, but in reality, organizational power structures are often unequal, and the voices of certain groups may be marginalized or ignored (Martínez et al., 2020).

## 2.2 Care Theory and Virtue Ethics

In terms of Care Theory, this theory stems from a reflection on the abstraction, rule-based approach, and neglect of specific interpersonal relationships commonly found in traditional moral theories. Gilligan specifically pointed out that traditional ethics often overly emphasize justice and rights, while neglecting individual responsibility and emotional connections. Care Theory emphasizes that moral judgment should be rooted in the observation and response to specific needs of others, rather than the application of universal principles. The core of this theory focuses on sensitivity to others' situations, responsibility, the ability to provide practical assistance, and the trust and dependence relationships established through continuous interaction. Compared to abstract justice, it places more emphasis on maintaining interpersonal relationships (Gilligan, 1995). As Nel Noddings puts it, "At its best, care is not merely a warm, fuzzy feeling; it is an active engagement with the needs of the other person" (Noddings, n.d.). This quote captures the essence of care ethics as a practice-based, responsive moral framework grounded in relationships rather than detached reasoning.

Compared to Aristotle's classical philosophical tradition, Virtue Ethics focuses not on whether a single action is "right" or "wrong", but on the overall character state of the individual. It proposes that moral behavior originates from the cultivation of good habits and the development of individual virtues, such as courage, honesty, temperance, compassion, and justice. More importantly, these virtues are not innate, but gradually developed through continuous practice and social interaction, a view consistent with Aristotle's original articulation and modern virtue ethics scholarship (Hursthouse, 2001). The concept of eudaimonia—a flourishing life—and phronesis, or practical wisdom, are central to this framework.

## 3 Organizational Application of Care Ethics

Care Ethics, as a unique moral theoretical framework, originated from Carol Gilligan's criticism of traditional moral development theories in the 1980s. In her book "Different Voices" (Gilligan, 1995). Gilligan pointed out that traditional moral theories overly emphasize abstract principles of justice and concepts of rights, while neglecting moral reasoning methods based on relationships and responsibilities. She found that many people (especially women) are more inclined to consider how to maintain relationships, reduce harm and assume care responsibilities when facing moral dilemmas, rather than simply applying universal principles. Nel Noddings further developed the theory of care ethics, defining it as a moral

framework that focuses on the specific needs of others and emphasizes situational responses and relationship maintenance. Noddings proposed the four basic elements of care: attentiveness - being sensitive to the needs of others; responsibility - Being willing to take responsibility for the well-being of others; competence - Possessing the skills and resources to provide effective care; And responsiveness - ensuring that caring actions truly meet the needs of the person being cared for (Muñoz & Schweizer, 2021).

Within the context of organizational ethics, care ethics offers significant potential for practical and meaningful application. To begin with, in employee support, care ethics suggests a more nuanced alternative to standardized welfare systems. Traditional benefits often follow a one-size-fits-all model, whereas a care-based approach encourages organizations to understand individual needs more deeply. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, many organizations discovered that conventional remote work policies failed to account for the varied challenges employees faced—some lacked a suitable workspace at home, others had caregiving responsibilities, and many struggled with mental health. Companies like Google, for example, responded by offering flexible hours, mental health resources, and parenting subsidies tailored to individual situations (Rhodes, 2022).

Growing attention to psychological safety likewise reflects care ethics in action. Amy Edmondson of Harvard Business School defines psychological safety as a climate in which team members feel safe to speak up, admit mistakes, and seek help without fear of negative consequences. Creating such an environment calls for leaders and colleagues to practice care through active listening, empathy, and inclusive communication. In conflict resolution, care ethics offers a perspective that differs from traditional mediation, which tends to focus on assigning blame and resolving issues through rules. A care-based approach prioritizes restoring damaged relationships, uncovering the deeper needs of those involved, and preventing future conflicts. Though this approach may require more time and resources, it often leads to healthier and more cooperative work environments in the long run. (Khoury & Marchand, 2021)

In addition, fostering team culture is another area where care ethics makes a difference. Care-oriented team management focuses not only on task completion and performance metrics but also on individual development, mutual support, and collective well-being. This may involve mentoring systems, knowledge sharing, and team-wide support during personal challenges.

However, the application of care ethics in organizations also faces criticism. The most prominent concerns relate to fairness and practicality. Critics argue that care ethics, by emphasizing particularity and context, may lead to inconsistent decision-making. In large organizations, how can care be distributed fairly? How do we ensure that some employees don't receive undue advantage simply because they are more vocal in expressing their needs? And how do we balance care demands when resources are limited? Another critique is that care ethics may reinforce existing gender roles and power structures. If care is culturally associated with women, women may end up doing more emotional labor while being excluded from leadership and decision-making. Moreover, care-based practices require significant time and emotional investment, which can be difficult to sustain in high-pressure, fast-paced environments (Ripamonti et al., 2021).

#### **4 The organizational application of virtue ethics**

Aristotle defined virtue as a stable disposition of character, a form of excellence expressed in specific domains of action. He distinguished between intellectual virtues (such as theoretical and practical wisdom) and moral virtues (such as courage, honesty, justice, and temperance). Especially important is the concept of phronesis, or practical wisdom, which refers to the ability to discern and choose the right course of action in concrete situations. In organizational settings, virtue ethics holds profound significance and offers wide-ranging applications. One key area is leadership development, where it provides a contrast to skills-based or performance-driven training models. While conventional leadership programs focus on competencies such as communication, strategy, or task management, a virtue-ethical approach emphasizes the cultivation of character traits such as integrity, courage, compassion, justice, and practical wisdom (Letendre, 2015).

The concept of ethical leadership directly reflects the application of virtue ethics in organizations. Studies show that leaders who possess strong moral character tend to perform better in ethical decision-making and have a greater influence on the organization's moral climate. This influence does not operate through coercion or incentives, but through moral

charisma—employees are drawn to the leader’s character and naturally seek to emulate their example. Importantly, ethical leadership is not merely about avoiding wrongdoing; it is about actively embodying and promoting virtues. A courageous leader, for example, will uphold principles in the face of difficult decisions, even at the cost of short-term losses. A compassionate leader will be attuned to employees’ challenges and create a supportive environment. A just leader will ensure fairness in resource allocation and evaluation processes, thereby building trust within the organization (Brown et al., 2005).

In terms of organizational culture, virtue ethics offers a deeper foundation for values than surface-level mission statements or codes of conduct. Rather than simply declaring values, a virtue-ethical approach demands that organizations systematically cultivate character traits that embody those values. This includes integrating moral considerations into hiring, performance evaluation, promotions, and training processes. For example, in hiring and selection, a virtue-informed organization might incorporate character-based assessments. Rather than relying solely on background checks or honesty tests, the process might include behavioral interviews, situational judgment exercises, and reference feedback to assess traits like integrity and practical wisdom (Chun, 2005). Candidates may be asked how they handled ethical dilemmas, balanced competing stakeholder interests, or maintained principles under pressure. For example, companies like Patagonia or The Body Shop not only promote sustainable development, but also actively recruit employees who demonstrate personal integrity, social responsibility, and environmental awareness. The recruitment process not only assesses abilities but also evaluates the alignment of values and ethical qualities. In professional training, virtue ethics opens new possibilities. Traditional compliance programs focus on teaching rules and analyzing case studies. In contrast, a virtue-based approach emphasizes character formation and the development of practical wisdom. This could involve mentorship programs that expose employees to moral role models, challenging assignments that test their moral fiber, and reflection sessions that help them develop their own moral reasoning. In industries such as education and healthcare, professionals who demonstrate patience, kindness, and integrity are often more efficient and valuable than those who only pursue efficiency. Integrating these virtues into performance evaluation and career development paths can enhance the ethical structure of an organization (Riggio et al., 2010).

Virtue ethics also informs organizational decision-making. While standard models focus on gathering information, analyzing options, and forecasting outcomes, virtue ethics adds another layer of inquiry: What kind of character does this decision reflect? How does it influence the moral development of the decision-maker and the organization? Does it align with the kind of organization we aspire to be? In this way, decision-making becomes not just a technical exercise, but an opportunity to cultivate values and shape character. That said, the application of virtue ethics in organizations is not without criticism. One of the main concerns is its subjectivity. Critics argue that understandings of virtue can vary across cultures and backgrounds, potentially leading to conflict in diverse workplaces. Some cultures, for instance, may emphasize group harmony, while others prioritize individual autonomy; some may value hierarchy, while others stress egalitarianism (Martínez et al., 2020).

Another challenge lies in the difficulty of assessing virtue. Unlike measurable performance metrics, character traits are inherently harder to quantify. How does one determine whether someone truly possesses “courage” or “honesty”? How do we distinguish authentic virtue from performative behavior? And how do we evaluate character with limited observation? These issues make virtue-based assessments complex and prone to bias. A further critique is the risk of moral elitism—the belief that only those with exceptional character can make sound moral judgments. This perspective may inadvertently undermine the moral agency of regular employees by encouraging dependence on “moral authorities” instead of empowering individuals to develop their own ethical judgment (Elango et al., 2010).

Despite these challenges, virtue ethics continues to offer important insights for organizational life. The key lies in finding shared moral foundations across cultures, developing practical tools for assessing character, and empowering all members—not just leaders—to cultivate moral growth. Contemporary organizational research and practice are exploring ways to address these challenges, including cross-cultural virtue studies, the development of virtue assessment tools, and participatory ethics education methods.

## 5 Conclusion

Through the analysis of caring ethics and virtue ethics in organizational environments, this essay affirms their important value as traditional theories. Nursing ethics provides key insights into relationship dynamics, vulnerability, and situational responsiveness. Meanwhile, virtue ethics emphasizes moral qualities and exemplary leadership, providing a more solid foundation for ethical culture and long-term development. These frameworks collectively enrich organizational ethics by promoting a more humane, sustainable, and ethically based workplace.

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