

Janet L. Borgerson

*Caring and Power in Female Leadership: A Philosophical Approach*

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*Reviewed by Maurice Hamington, 2018*

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**Quote:** "Borgerson offers readers the most extended juxtaposition of care ethics with Nietzschean thought available to date."

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The corpus of scholarship in care ethics continues to grow in both volume and disciplinary variety. What's more, fitting of the relational and postmodern character of care ethics, novel analysis is increasingly being brought to bear on care in an intradisciplinary manner (Richards 2015; Defalco 2016; Johnston 2016). Janet L. Borgerson's *Caring and Power in Female Leadership: A Philosophical Approach* is an example of such a unique and seemingly disparate intermingling of intellectual fields. Perhaps this approach is to be expected of Borgerson, who has published in philosophy, business, and contemporary culture. As the name implies, *Caring and Power in Female Leadership* is one of the first book-length works to address the tensions between power and care ethics: "A philosophical investigation of care and power in the context of female leadership opens up spaces of understanding, learning, and potential action" (6). Borgerson accomplishes this by engaging contemporary (mis)perceptions of women in leadership positions and extending her analysis to both historical (Angelina de Montegiove), and fictional ("Bone" from Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*) women leaders. The result is a wide-ranging treatment of care ethics and issues of power that is sure to inspire further development in future works of care theory.

One interesting and perhaps ironic aspect of Borgerson's analysis is how she challenges care theorists to address social and political realities rather than define intangible moral ideals. This seems ironic because as a product of feminist interpersonal, social, and political analysis, care ethics has never been a purely abstract normative theory (recall that Carol Gilligan is a developmental psychologist). An ethic of care was born of women's experience of performing caring labor that was crucial to human survival and yet terrifically undervalued and undertheorized. Still, in the feminist struggle to name the previously unnamed, which in this case was a complex moral approach, scholars utilized the available philosophical language and concepts. For example, Nel Noddings names care ethics as an *ethical ideal* (Noddings 2013, xvi). That is to say, care names an aspirational moral way of being. Morality is often framed in idealized terms. Noddings's observation is correct: care ethics describes an ambitious ethic, and

Borgerson does not dispute this point. However, Borgerson points out that the present reality is that most people will confuse the "is" and the "ought," thus identifying women with a burden of care even if they are corporate leaders and even if gender identification is not what care theorists intend at all. Because we live in an imperfect world, Borgerson establishes a fundamental tension between female empowerment and adopting the posture of care: "ethics of care and power often seem mutually exclusive" (25).

Borgerson intentionally complicates the notions of identity and leadership to demonstrate the complex role that perception plays in the efficacy of those who lead. Focusing on the concept of the "glass cliff," or the modern tendency of women to be placed in leadership positions for organizations on the brink of failure, Borgerson turns to the scholarship of aesthetic leadership. Accordingly, the perceptions and expectations of a certain aesthetic can influence how effective a leader can be. For women, the burden of a care ethos can be detrimental: "accomplishments, ambitions, and achievements of female being, female knowing, and female practices are often overlooked, underestimated, or pushed to the sidelines" (20). Despite the efforts of contemporary care ethicists to avoid essentialism, Borgerson finds care ethics too often closely associated with femininity in the workplace, and such an association works against women being perceived as leaders. She advocates intentionally viewing an ethic of care as an intersubjective model. Borgerson describes, "[c]omprehending an ethic of care as an intersubjective model of engagement and interaction allows analysis of modes of interaction in diverse contexts, recognizes that varied intersubjective models illustrate diverse theoretical, practical, and embodied modes of being and knowing, and offers welcome contributions to female leadership" (37). In this manner, Borgerson appears to recognize the value and contribution of feminist care ethics but is concerned with how perceptions of it hinders women's will to power. Appropriately, she turns to Nietzsche's analysis of femininity as an example of socializing for weakness--a concern that Borgerson has for the other-directedness of care. She describes "practicing caring" as what women do to fulfill feminine gender roles while failing to "develop the power to listen and obey themselves" (55).

Borgerson offers readers the most extended juxtaposition of care ethics with Nietzschean thought available to date. In particular, she explores Nietzsche's rich notion of *ressentiment* in the face of being powerless. Not simply the emotion of resentment, *ressentiment* engages in a "transmutation" (77) of the individual that provides misguided agency, often exacerbating the powerlessness. Borgerson appears conflicted in valuing care but also seeing how the mantle of care may result in women experiencing *ressentiment*. Clearly, women should seek power: "The desire for power is precisely what a feminist ethos ought to promote, the alternative being to continue instantiation of de-moralizing normative practices and ways of being" (82). Drawing on the work of Kelly Oliver, Borgerson claims that in seeking and garnering power, women can benefit those around them but that if they are damaged by a caring ethos they will ironically be less able to care for others (101; Oliver 1995, 194).

Perhaps like provocative philosophical analysis should, *Caring and Power in Female Leadership* leaves the readers with more questions than it answers. For example, if indeed the current context makes care and leadership a dicey circumstance for women, do we blame the victim when we suggest that women should eschew care or at least the care ethos? Borgerson effectively focuses on women's agency and how perceptions hinder the exercise of that agency,

but what about the role of men in shifting the paradigm of organizational leadership? At times, Borgerson suggests that the sexism inherent in social systems must change (126), but she focuses primarily on the disposition of women and not that of men. Other feminist scholars have taken up the concern about how masculine-dominated institutions need to reinvigorate care. For example, Joan Tronto describes "privileged irresponsibility" as the inability of the powerful in society to acknowledge their dependency on the caring labor of others (Tronto 1993, 112). For organizations, and particularly the men who lead business organizations, to take on a care disposition does not have to come at the expense of the effectiveness of those businesses. As Jeanne M. Liedtka describes, care offers "new possibilities for simultaneously enhancing both the effectiveness and the moral quality of organizations" (Liedtka 1996, 40).

*Caring and Power in Female Leadership* also does not take up the issue of the kind of power created within a caring relationship. A critique of care ethics by some has been the invocation of care by those who might seek to abuse their position of power, for example, caregivers over the ones receiving care. This is different from the institutional, position-based power Borgerson addresses, but it might be interesting to consider the conflict of approaches to power engendered by different methodologies.

Finally, Borgerson considers gender exclusively in regard to the relationship of care and power, but a further delineation might be made to consider intersectional challenges of race, sexual orientation, class, and other identity-based characteristics that interact with gender and what the implications are for the nexus of care and power. For example, Parvati Raghuram extends the argument that gender matters to care theory by arguing that race matters to care theory: "Race not only shapes care practices but must also be seen to reflect back on care ethics because racialised differences in care practices have implications for care ethics" (Raghuram forthcoming). It is becoming more and more difficult to consider a significant issue from a purely gendered identity without also engaging in intersectional complexity.

Early in the book, Borgerson admits that "some proponents of continuing work on care may well say that the version of care ethics engaged in this book fails to capture the rich detail of care ethic's evolution and potential" (5). I am in the camp Borgerson describes, as I am unconvinced that care and power are dichotomous and incompatible, regardless of social perceptions. Nevertheless, there is much to appreciate about Borgerson's wide-ranging and thoughtful analysis. *Caring and Power in Female Leadership* may not be the definitive work on care ethics and power, or care ethics and leadership, but it can provoke theorists of care to consider the full real-world implications of their ideas.

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