
Review

Care ethics and political theory

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Ethics and political theory have always been intertwined: whether we understand ethics as the proper basis for how we should organise our political institutions, or understand the creation and working of those institutions as being primarily in the service of ethics (living the good life, together). This volume comprises a varied and highly engaging set of essays looking at the ways in which an ethics of care can and should influence, or even completely reconfigure, our understandings of politics and political theory. Broadly speaking, care ethics takes human dependency and interdependency as its foundation and argues for an ethics which is based upon the ideals or practices of caring for one another. We are beings who are supported through our relationships with others, both in terms of our bodily needs and our sense of self; the forms of our sustaining relationships may change depending upon our context, but our relationships are nevertheless the basis of our survival and flourishing. Care ethics thus puts an emphasis on ethics as inherently relational, responsive and contextual, rather than a search for universal maxims.

Care Ethics and Political Theory is broken down into four sections which take in traditional political theory (Part I. Care and Justice), as well as looking at specific applications of care theory for political issues (Part II. Applications), before moving on to consider the political dimensions of considering care theory in relation to “other” cultures (Part III. Care Ethics, Non-Western and Subaltern Cultures), and finishing by considering how care theory might inform or criticise various political theories (Part IV. Challenging Dominant Paradigms). As many of the book’s contributors point out, a focus on care immediately brings care ethics into the realm of the political. Care “work” and responsibilities have traditionally fallen, and still to a large extent fall, to women and non-whites (at least in the US context of the majority of the contributors). Who provides care, and the extent to which it is valued and remunerated, is a theme which runs throughout the book, although the extent to which care can provide an all-encompassing approach to political theory, as well as the emphases of care theory in relation to politics are, as one would expect and hope, much disputed.



Much of the book involves direct or indirect debates about how care should be understood in relation to liberal conceptions of morality and politics. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Rawls's work features heavily in these debates: while Rawls is certainly criticised for not understanding or promoting the fact that we are subjects who are heavily dependent upon others, there is disagreement between contributors about the extent to which we should change his theory of justice in view of a focus on care ethics. To give just a couple of examples: Eva Feder Kittay argues for a concept of care as the basis for justice in her essay, "A theory of justice as fair terms of social life given our inevitable dependency and our inextricable interdependency", which is in the first section of the book. Kittay takes aim at Rawls's fair terms of cooperation, and begins to outline a political programme which takes care and dependency as its centre. If we undertake deliberation under a veil of ignorance which emphasises dependency, she suggests, the resulting principles would be aimed at sustaining and promoting healthy exchanges of care. Kittay situates this alongside her principle of *doulia*, which highlights the ever-widening intersection of care relations (as carers themselves need to be cared for, and those caring for the carers receive care, etc.). Kittay's concept of *doulia* takes the role of doula as its foundation: a doula is a woman who looks after and gives advice to women before and after they give birth. Kittay emphasises the caring role of the doula as enabling the caring role of the mother. From this, Kittay derives a principle of *doulia* which asks that 'when one is in a condition of dependency, whether as a dependent or a dependency worker, the dependency does not blight our prospects for a good life[.]' (pp. 65–66) Kittay argues therefore that care ethics asks us to acknowledge dependency as a means toward a theory of justice focused on relational rights and responsibilities in the service of freedom, rather than the distribution of goods.

By contrast, Maxine Eichner takes a less critical view of liberal theory in her essay "The supportive state: Government, dependency, and responsibility for caretaking", which appears in part two of the book. Eichner argues that the state is always and inevitably involved in shaping (particularly family) relationships, and illustrates how different laws, policies and other state initiatives impact upon family life and caring relationships. However, rather than revolutionise the role of the liberal state, Eichner argues that a focus on dependency means that a theory such as Rawls's needs to expand its list of goods to incorporate, and ultimately support, care. So, while Eichner argues that the family is central to society, her approach is to append this fact to liberal-state-functioning, rather than to upend the political to take dependency as its basis, as Kittay does.

Questioning the boundaries of public, political and private is also found in Julie Ann White's essay "Practicing care at the margins. Other-mothering as public care", which appears in section three. White argues that a practice of other-mothering, or shared parenthood, within African-American communities, can effectively push against the neoliberal tendency to reduce relationships to economies of exchange.



White's contention is that other-mothering is a public practice which places responsibilities for care within the community, rather than as a private enterprise, or something to be supported through the state through an expansion of market solutions. While Kittay's concept of *doulia* provides a way of understanding networks of care, White attests that an other-mothering conception of care incorporates a normative notion that we are all responsible for care. White argues that this conception not only supports care in the face of marketization, but also supports democratic citizenship, as that citizenship requires that we work together and that some will take on sacrifice and loss at different points of political life.

In the final section of the book, Fiona Robinson, in her essay "Care ethics, political theory, and the future of feminism", is similarly interested in care ethics in the context of neoliberalism. Robinson criticises the global trend to institute feminist policies of "gender mainstreaming" in the narrow service of development and market ideals. Under the neoliberal view, Robinson argues, women's emancipation and empowerment are aligned only with gaining a place within the labour market, which, even where it is successful, begs the question: who will do the care work? Robinson agrees with White that the underbelly of such market-driven policy is that care work is either reprivatized or made just another market sector, which re-entrenches already-existing hierarchies, with marginalised people taking on increasing amounts of care work for low, or no, pay. Robinson argues in the remainder of her essay that countering these neoliberal frameworks can be done when we foreground an ethics of care in feminism. An emphasis on care, Robinson suggests, works against the neoliberal thrust to re-privatise care, as well as shifting the focus of feminism away from its post-structuralist preoccupation with gender. A shift in emphasis to care can also, Robinson argues, serve as a ground for solidarity across cultural boundaries, because care is so fundamental to all.

This question of how far we can expand care ethics to encompass national and international issues is continually raised throughout the volume: can we really expect that we can care-about as well as care-for others who do not belong to our social sphere or immediate milieu? There is some disagreement across the essays over how far our capacity for care can extend, and how we might increase our capacity for care. In such a highly plural and global world, this debate seems incredibly salient, and also goes to the question of whether there is, even with care at the heart of political theory, a role for Kantian universalism. Overall, therefore, this volume takes in a great array of political perspectives, arguments and relationships, with care theory forwarded as a means of critique, revaluation and reconstruction for political theory. It also includes discussion of many of the debates within care ethics. Ultimately, care ethics, as I have indicated, is dissatisfied with the way in which traditional ethics has characterised the subject as an independent being, which in turn has resulted in much ethical and political theory having as its goal the preservation of that independence within a context of social cooperation. So, firmly grounded in a conception of the subject as relational,



care ethics is very well placed to present alternative political models. However, as this volume rightfully shows, how far we can take care as the basic political relationship is not without its own difficulties, as the debate about our capacities for empathy and care outside of our immediate social sphere demonstrates. Nevertheless, there is a strong case made throughout the volume that care, dependence and interdependence must be understood as paramount for political thinking and that placing care at the centre of political theory can be used to productively criticise existing political theory as well as favourably create new political paradigms.

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