

SYMPOSIUM ON CARE AND JUSTICE

Shifting Paradigms: Theorizing Care and Justice in Political Theory

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The following is an introduction to a roundtable panel of the American Political Science Association meeting (Normative Political Theory Division) held September 2, 1994, in New York City. I set out some main themes in the "care/justice debate," and suggest that the impasse between care proponents and liberal, neo-Kantian thinkers is perpetuated by caricatured construals of these theories; salient differences come into relief by addressing the ethical and political applications of these moral perspectives.

It's rare that an idea provokes debate simultaneously in several different academic disciplines. In the past decade, the suggestion that an ethic of care is central to morality has generated controversy in sociology, ethics, moral and political philosophy, and political science, as well as in such professional fields as nursing, medicine, and education. The underlying message of the care perspective is as powerful as it is succinct: put briefly, it states that human relatedness and the practices that support it shape us in profound ways. It also states that taking this fact seriously in political terms would precipitate fundamental changes in our social arrangements. Philosophically, the care perspective rejects rule-based morality, and eschews the Kantian and utilitarian moves that ground morality in reason and/or utility. Care writers reject the assumption—dominant in moral philosophy since the eighteenth century—that we act according to moral axioms and point to a range of everyday ethical experiences that defy such characterization. These feminist thinkers try to show why no account of morality that foregrounds universality, rationality, and

autonomy can capture the essence of our ethical reasoning—in particular, that of women.

For good reasons, the impact of the care perspective on feminist theory has been especially significant. Since Carol Gilligan first drew attention to a different, more relational voice in moral psychology in the early 1980s, the category of care has come to occupy a central place in much Western feminist thought and practice. However, reactions to suggestions that morality bears the markings of gender and that a care perspective might better reflect the moral reasoning of girls and women have been strikingly divided. While many feminists have welcomed what they perceive as the dispelling of masculinist myths of standard moral and psychological development, there have been numerous charges of essentialism, ethnocentrism, and reification of femininity. Most recently, these critics have been joined by the dissenting voices of postmodern feminists, who argue that the care perspective ignores the complexity of power relations and the social construction of gender, and embraces a modern epistemology inconsistent with feminist critiques of knowledge and truth.¹

Feminist moral and political philosophers who adopt a care perspective are engaged in what has proved an ongoing, and sometimes quite tedious, exchange with liberal and neo-Kantian philosophy. For some care writers, this means demonstrating the limitations of the justice ethic and deontological philosophy generally, as well as questioning the valuative priority accorded such norms as impartiality and universality. Challenges from feminist moral philosophers, communitarians, and virtue ethicists have prompted many mainstream moral and political philosophers to defend neo-Kantianism and liberal politics from what they view as mischaracterizations of such central concepts as autonomy, justice, obligation, impartiality, universality, and moral judgment. Eloquent clarifications of these and other concepts by neo-Kantian philosophers (mainly women, incidentally) have certainly been useful and have led some feminist theorists to rethink and integrate categories from mainstream philosophy.² Several feminist thinkers have gone to some length to show the inextricable links between care and justice, and the extent to which the concerns of each overlap and presuppose one another: the work of Virginia Held (1993), Marilyn Friedman (1993), Susan Okin (1989), and Margaret Urban Walker (1989, 1992) have been particularly instructive in this regard.

More disappointingly, however, defenses of universalist ethics have been accompanied by a general tone of dismissiveness vis-à-vis feminist moral theory. Caricatures of care theory by established moral philosophers are now common currency: for instance, Jonathan Dancy's charge that a care perspective leads to endless self-sacrifice, that it is "its own worst enemy" (Dancy 1992), and Jürgen Habermas's insistence, in response to Carol Gilligan's work, that discourse ethics has nothing to learn from care ethics because it is founded

on a number of misperceptions of moral theory.³ Care proponents have argued that these marginalizations reflect a failure to recognize the nature and scope of care as both an ethic and a set of practices, and in so doing serve to perpetuate social and political inequalities.

Critics frequently dismiss aspects of the care perspective on the grounds that it doesn't offer satisfactory corollary philosophical categories to the theories that it seeks to displace. Underlying this criticism is the assumption that care writers conceive of care as an all-encompassing ethic that obviates the need for accompanying values or practices. This view is problematic on two counts. In the first place, it precludes the possibility that care is compatible with—and on many writers' views, essential to—principled commitments and justice. More fundamentally, it demonstrates that critics have failed to recognize that the care perspective defies reformulation in "grand moral theory" terms. Although care proponents often focus on theoretical themes and debates, the importance of actual experience and dialogue is paramount. This emphasis on context, experience, and particularity is part of a broader shift within academic feminism toward displacing discrete, nondialogical and totalizing moral and political theories.

What is often perceived as care theory's biggest liability is, from a feminist vantage point, actually its greatest strength: it is an implicitly, even explicitly, *normative* perspective. A care perspective relies centrally on a conception of human good and entails a deep commitment to a transformative politics. The social and political ramifications of care have been a continual focus of care proponents, from Sara Ruddick's work (1989) on the potential significance of maternal thinking in a feminist peace politics to Seyla Benhabib's thesis (1992) that attention to concrete, particular others would transform contemporary political discourse. Not only have these thinkers asked what difference contextual moral reasoning might make to politics, but more radically, they've asked what it would mean to fundamentally reorder our social and political priorities to reflect the central role of care in all of our lives.

Due partly to the difficulty of speaking across academic disciplines and idioms and partly to the radical nature of the care critique, we seem to have reached an impasse. Liberals continue to treat the care perspective as a grand moral theory and raise criticisms accordingly. In response, care proponents say their approach is antithetical to grand moral theorizing, that it's about seeing the world in terms of context, attachment, and actual, not hypothetical, experience. They reject the suggestion that they need to match liberalism concept for concept, and suggest that this very expectation obfuscates the broader critique of moral philosophy and ethical practice made by feminist care writers.

Because of this impasse, and the confusion and misperceptions surrounding the care perspective, it seemed a good idea when devising this panel to seek reprieve from familiar, oppositional formulations of what is often called the

"care/justice debate." This is of course easier said than done: not only have discussions of care (by both proponents and critics) largely been cast in dichotomous terms, but this dualistic framework is reinforced by analogous oppositions in ethical thought, such as those between cultural or radical feminism and poststructuralist feminism, and between virtue ethics and an ethic of justice and rights. There *are* significant theoretical and political differences at stake in these debates, and we shouldn't underestimate these. But it won't help to insist that care and justice are two incompatible paradigms between which we must choose. This isn't only for conceptual reasons; in approving the proposal for this conference panel, Jennifer Hochschild commented, quite appropriately, that the world doesn't need another debate on care versus justice.

In the spirit of that comment, the present panel is intended as a continuation of care proponents' engagement with *social* and *political* thought and practice—their visions of how we can and should live together—rather than an exercise in deflecting attacks by powerful philosophical interlocutors. The broader understanding of politics for which feminist theorists have long argued is of course operative here: that is, politics understood as including all those practices, institutions, and discourses that constitute our social and public arrangements. The multi-faced nature of the care perspective is reflected in the composition of this roundtable: the panelists come from the disciplines of psychology, philosophy, and politics, and their perspectives are equally reflective of their different social and cultural contexts.

The main question that informs this discussion is, What role should an ethic of care play in changing existing moral and political discourses and practices, and what are the caveats to this project? This question is interpreted differently by each panelist. The roundtable is organized so as to begin with a broader elaboration of the care perspective and its relationship to a justice ethic and to move toward a more politically focused discussion of care and what it might mean to bring a care perspective into politics. Carol Gilligan views care primarily as a psychological and social condition denoting relationship; she'll suggest how a care orientation changes the way we approach moral and political issues. Virginia Held views care as central to a feminist morality and politics, and will discuss ways to integrate care and justice perspectives. Uma Narayan will consider care as a moral discourse which, like all discourses, is susceptible to ideological misuses in contexts of unequal social power; she'll show how the ideology of care has been deployed historically in colonial contexts to justify colonial power and oppression. Annette Baier considers how a care perspective might address the issue of immigration policy, and suggests that we need to begin—but not finish—with a recognition of "natural ties and sympathies." Finally, Joan Tronto argues for a conception of care as a set of social practices and as a political concept; her presentation will focus on the intersection of care and political judgment.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Susan Hekman (1993).

2. Some recent examples of writing from neo-Kantian perspectives by philosophers who respond to some of the challenges raised by feminist moral theorists include Marcia Baron (1991), Barbara Herman (1993), Thomas Hill (1991), and Onora O'Neill (1989a, 1989b).

3. See Jürgen Habermas's response to Carol Gilligan's work in Habermas (1990, 175-81; 1993, 153-54).

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