

PREFACE

In my previous book, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, I made the claim that the world would look very different if we put care at the center of our political lives. In the intervening years, no mass movement to improve care has arisen, despite repeated attempts on the part of scholars and activists to make such a thing happen (Engster 2010; Stone 2000). Yet, despite the changes in the feminist frameworks within which the original argument was couched, despite the deepening insecurities wrought by terrorist attacks and continued globalization under the conditions of neoliberalism, I remain hopeful about the political possibilities raised by the visions of more caring and more just societies. In this book, I ask how we might differently understand democracy and caring in order to create such societies. I argue that, despite the voluminous discussions about the nature of democratic theory, politics, and life, nothing will get better until societies figure out how to put responsibilities for caring at the center of their democratic political agendas.

This argument will not seem at home in the context of much recent democratic political theory. Many political theorists have dedicated their recent work to demonstrating how *undemocratic* and brutal modern liberal democracies have become, and how often liberal democratic regimes end up reducing some people to “mere life.” Other political theorists have become more concerned with ways to describe conflict in political life: Is democracy agonistic? Is deliberative disagreement a more promising way to think about politics? Others search for a form of democratic judgment that will set our thinking about politics aright again. While these issues are important and worthy of pursuit, they miss the fact that democratic political life has to be about *something*. In this book, I propose that thinking about caring in its broadest and most public form, as a way in which a society allocates responsibilities, offers a substantive opportunity to reopen the closed, game-like political system to the genuine concerns of citizens.

This is a book about an idea. The idea grows out of a word that does a lot of work in the English language: *care*. Care has many meanings: when

we say “cares and woes,” “care” denotes a burden; when we say “I care for you,” we express love. Care always expresses an action or a disposition, a reaching out to something. When we use it to refer to ourselves, as in “I take good care of myself,” we are in that instant thinking of ourselves as both the doer and that toward which we are reaching out. Care expresses relationships. It is used to express our deepest convictions, as when we say, “I care about dolphins”; it is used by advertisers in banal ways to make us like a company and perhaps continue to buy its products, as when we hear advertisers say, “McDonald’s cares.”

To put the idea of this book as simply as possible: what it means to be a citizen in a democracy is to care for citizens and to care for democracy itself. I call this practice “caring with.” Citizenship, like caring, is both an expression of support (as when the government provides support for those who need care) and a burden—the burden of helping to maintain and preserve the political institutions and the community. Actually to engage in such democratic caring requires citizens to think closely about their responsibilities to themselves and to others. And it requires that people think about politics not simply as an election contest, but as a collective activity in which they guide the nation forward in time. While John Maynard Keynes was right to say “in the long run, we are all dead” (1971 [1923], 65), people are also always shaping the future by how they act. Caring about democracy’s future is no simple task. Furthermore, it is already obvious that the conception of democracy I am using is not one that views democracy simply as a system for aggregating interests and choosing political leaders. For reasons I will spell out later, though, I am not going to focus here on offering a full-blown alternative account of democratic life and practice. That, it seems to me, is the task of citizens in a democratic society.

For nearly thirty years I taught at Hunter College, whose Latin motto is “mihi cura futuri.” At Hunter we would loosely translate this as “The future is in my hands,” or, still less literally, “caring for the future.” Until 2003 most people thought this phrase was an example of the kind of made-up Latin that was popular in the nineteenth century, “a concoction of some doddy 19th century pedant,” as the view was expressed around the college. A student of classics, Jillian Murray, found out that the phrase was, actually, quite legitimately Latin: it appears in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in Book XIII. As Ulysses and Ajax argue about who should get the slain Achilles’ armor, Ulysses draws this unkind contrast with his opponent: “Your right hand is useful in war, it’s a talent . . . ; you lead men without thought, the

care of the future is mine [*mihi cura futuri*]” (Murray 2003). To “lead men without thought” may make one more successful in the short run, but if one needs to care for the future, then one must act differently. So argues Ulysses, asserting that he is the true successor to Achilles.

We are living in a time in which too many leaders “lead men without thought.” But I want to focus on an often overlooked but critical aspect of this current thoughtlessness: What has happened to our concerns about *care*? Why has so much in human life and in politics turned into discussions about selfishness, greed, and profit? Why has the language of economics seemingly come to replace all other forms of political language?

Here is the place where the little word “care” takes up another burden. What has gone wrong, I shall argue in this book, is that we have lost sight of the other side of human existence besides the world of the “economy.” In addition to our economic roles as workers and consumers, citizens live in two other realms as well: in the world of intimate caring in our households, families, and circles of friends, and in the political world. In this book, I argue that we have misunderstood politics as if it were part of the world of economics. Instead, I shall argue, politics has historically been, and rightfully should be, closer to something we think of as part of our households: a realm of caring. Despite the feminist critiques of “maternal thinking” (e.g., Dietz 1985)—and neither I nor advocates for “maternal thinking” argue that there is an exact match between political and household concerns—there is a good reason that political thinkers have often compared households to polities. Both are kinds of institutions that rely upon bonds other than those that arise when people pursue their self-interest. In a democracy, politics requires our care, and we should expect from the state a certain kind of support for all of our caring practices. Government is something we care about, and something that reciprocates by providing “care” for us as well.

The great challenge of democratic life is to provide for economic production—which produces inequality—and at the same time to recognize everyone as equal participants in their society. Since democratic arguments began to resurface at the end of the eighteenth century, this danger—that democratic citizens will not want to work hard enough to produce enough for everyone to exist well—has lurked in the back of our political minds. Coercion of workers, “wage slavery” to early anti-capitalists, produced the remarkable growth of capitalism. Capitalism is a system for producing extraordinary wealth, and, as Karl Marx argued, one of the key roles of the state has been to support the growth and expansion

of capital. But as so much of public life has focused on economic production and growth, an equally important set of human concerns took the backseat, namely, that humans need not only to produce but also to live lives filled with meaning. The intriguing aspect of this development is that, as economic life left the household and subsistence behind, the tasks of caring and producing meaning were left behind in the household as well. In the middle of the eighteenth century, arguments proliferated about men's roles as productive citizens. Thinkers such as Adam Ferguson (1995 [1767]) protested the new focus on economic well-being: to be interested only in one's own economic well-being was, he said, "effeminate." As economic production left the household, these "separate spheres" of a caring household and a remote worksite were also gendered. And the end result is that "care" became secondary to a state focused on tending to the economy.

In this book I will not offer a history of how this imbalance came about. But I will describe how, in a democratic country, to put it aright. To put the point succinctly, it requires that citizens take seriously the responsibilities for "caring with" each other. "Caring with" is not the same as judging one's self-interest, though it is about our collective and self interests in the long run. To do so requires a change in the values of citizens. It requires that citizens care enough about caring—both in their own lives and in the lives of their fellow citizens—to accept that they bear the political burden of caring for the future. That future is not only about economic production but also about caring for the values of freedom, equality, and justice. That future is not only about oneself and one's family and friends, but also about those with whom one disagrees, as well as the natural world and one's place in it. That future requires that we think honestly about the past and accept some burdens and responsibilities that have been deflected or ignored, realizing that if all such responsibilities are reconsidered, democracy will function more justly.

To care about and for democracy is a task for all citizens, and it is not easy. But when all citizens engage in such "caring with" practices, even though they will disagree about and dispute the best ways to proceed, one outcome of their engagement will be greater trust for one another, and thus a greater capacity to care for this collective purpose, this "res publica," this public thing. This book is an argument for why we have to make this change in our values. Whether or not we succeed depends upon the thought and action that will follow it.

When Bill Clinton ran for president, he famously hung a sign in his

campaign headquarters that read “It’s the economy, stupid.” But beyond the emaciated account of democracy as periodic elections in which parties compete primarily to attract the attention of potential voters, people’s daily lives are not made up of problems like “the economy,” but rather the absence of jobs, inadequate health insurance, time-binds, how to take care of children and aging parents, trying to balance care and work duties, and so forth. As elected officials increasingly press to achieve agendas that have no resonance with voters, voters become more and more disinterested in their games. These cynical games become a vicious circle that leads to an even less accountable form of gamesmanship as a substitute for genuine politics. Voters lose trust in the system, but since their role is marginal anyway, gaming their absence from politics becomes a way to achieve victory. If more potential voters can be kept out of the system, it remains more predictable and controllable by the techniques of electioneering that serve the interests of those who have been elected, who in turn serve those who are part of the existing high-cost campaigning system.

In writing this book, I carry the brief for changing the subject of political life from an abstract set of concerns about “the economy” to a way of coping with real people’s lives that is much closer to the way that people actually live. But what I do not do is to spell out in much detail a series of prescriptions about how responsibilities for care should be allocated. Democratic theorists have often observed the irony of theorists trying to prescribe outcomes for the *demos*, the people, at the same time they argue for giving power to the people. It will become clear in what follows what kinds of policies I think are best. But one need not agree with the details of my descriptions or my prescriptions in order to accept the overall point that I am making: that political life is ultimately about the allocation of caring responsibilities, and that all of those relationships and the people engaged in them need to be part of the ongoing political discourse. To be a small “d” democrat requires that one put ultimate trust in the people, who, well-informed and committed to democratic values, will make decisions consistent with those values.

This is a tall order. Most of what political scientists know suggests that citizens are largely disinterested and not very knowledgeable about politics. Many democratic theorists recognize that, at present, there is much obfuscation about democratic values, which are too often reduced to soundbites or to single words, such as “choice,” “rights,” or “freedom.” Right now, it would be difficult to trust democratic majorities with making sound judgments about democratic values. Yet if, as democratic

theorists, we are able to describe and analyze politics at a level that can be made meaningful in people's lives, and if some of the corrupting influences that now afflict "politics" were removed, then it might become possible to develop some trust for citizens' collective judgments. Care helps in bringing such discussions to a level that engages with people's real lived experiences and differences.

In arguing that democratic politics are themselves increasingly about institutions and practices that entail caring, I make half the case for connecting care with democracy. But the other half of this argument is equally important: democracy itself, as a form of governing in which citizens participate, requires care. A democratic state in which citizens do not care about justice, about their role in controlling rulers, in the rule of law itself, will not long remain a democracy.

I hope that my argument is not misread. We are living in an age in which "politics" has come to have such a strained and empty meaning that it is possible to think that I am suggesting that "politics" would be better if it were more like a caring household, that a nation should be like one big happy family, that thinking about care eliminates or mitigates conflict. I am not making such claims at all. To think honestly about the nature of care for only a few minutes reveals its complexity. Care relations are often relationships of inequality, posing an immediate challenge to any commitment to democratic equality. People think in many different ways about what constitutes good care; any account of care that is not pluralistic will end up imposing bad care upon some, and thus impinging upon people's liberties. Although some have tried to paint attempts to raise collective concerns for care as a creeping "nanny state," beyond that derogatory label it is clear that, given the complexities of modern society, most needs for care exceed the capacity of individuals and their intimate family members to meet them. The question is not *whether* caring responsibilities will be more broadly allocated, but *how*. The question is not whether democratic societies have to think about meeting their caring responsibilities without relying solely upon the family, but rather how they currently do so and whether these are the best ways to foster democratic citizens. Rethinking care on such a broad scale requires not only that we reassess human interactions, but also that citizens think, as democrats, about their location in a global society and on an increasingly fragile planet.

This book thus describes a way to rethink the subject matter of democratic politics. Because I am an American and most familiar with the dilemmas of caring as they play out in my own society, I draw most of

my examples from this case. But I mean for the general argument to be used in many different political contexts. Indeed, if I am correct about the depth of the problems for care created by the contemporary economy, only solutions that transcend individual nations will ultimately succeed.

I hope that this book will be interesting to scholars of democratic politics, to scholars who think about care, and to ordinary citizens who are baffled by how wrongly our current ways of thinking reflect what matters the most to us. Humans begin and end their lives depending upon others for care; in between those times we never cease being engaged in relationships of care with others, and we never cease needing and providing care for ourselves. As our interdependence in caring grows greater, we need to rethink how we parse out our time, energy, work, and resources to make certain that we, as well as those around us, are well cared for. We cannot rethink these questions in isolation, we can only do so collectively. And in so doing, we will change how we see ourselves in the world and what should guide our most fundamental political choices.

Perhaps it is not too late.

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