

## Care ethics. The introduction of care as a political category. By Fabienne Brugère.

### BOOK DISCUSSION

Precisely because I am fairly new to political theories of ethics of care, I feel myself urged to underscore the introductory quality of Fabienne Brugère's book on political care ethics. More than merely offering a critique of patriarchy and (neo)liberalism, Brugère familiarizes the reader with care ethical core notions by arguing for their unmistakably political emanation. According to her, the grand statue of liberalism – autonomy – should be reassessed in light of our vulnerability while human equality becomes a task, not a given.

She begins her argument with discussing the feminist notion of 'voice' of Carol Gilligan's groundbreaking book *In a different voice* as a relevant foundation for today's strands of care ethics. In subsequent chapters she derives insights from a considerable amount of other major authors in and outside of care ethics traditions rooted in the United States: Joan Tronto, Judith Butler, Eva Feder Kittay and Nancy Fraser among others. This collection of perspectives involving many cross-links makes Brugère's book a delightful read.

While presenting a short outline for this already short, albeit densely written book, I will also allow myself to elaborate two themes that Brugère leaves open for discussion: one ontological and one social. I believe that these matters necessarily need to be clarified further in order for care to become a convincing ground for political ethics in late modern society.

#### **Gilligan's 'voice of women'**

Brugère traces the North-American origins of care ethics back to feminist theory and the 'particularistic turn' in moral philosophy. According to her, it was never Gilligan's goal to defend feminine morality as different from men's, or to confine it to the realm of affects instead of male rationality. Rather, the aim of feminism which is initiated by Gilligan is "to tie together the traditional voice of women and the more emphasized voice of men to argue for a pluralism of moral values, a bipolarity which finds its origin in the two constants of the cycle of human life: attachment and separation" (Brugère, 2019, p.21). Brugère explains that, back in the Reagan 80's, it was critical to give voice to women who expressed a different form of attention to others. Instead of a moral psychology structured by emotional separation, independency and rationality – whose declared superiority was advocated by the US psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg – Gilligan found that women construct moral problems differently.

Gilligan claimed that the women she investigated, placed shared responsibilities and emotional connection to others at the heart of moral development, thereby expressing a fundamental concern for the others' well-being: "In contrast, Kohlberg's conception of morality is only a reflection of the organization of power and knowledge in a well-established masculine thought which considers itself to be universal, rational, and applicable to all human beings" (Brugère, 2019, 18). This allegedly superior, masculine thought stresses ethics of justice and human beings as subjects of law. In contrast, Brugère highlights that Gilligan showed how such ethics should be enriched by an ethics of care that is sensitive to the contexts of human beings as vulnerable subjects of need within the particular moral situations she presented.

As Kohlberg sticks to a viewpoint of separative masculinity from where moral problems ideally are solved, he continues to have trouble in conceiving realities of dependencies. The importance of such realities is however supported by Gilligan's feminism through the voice of women, or "other narratives than those which usually normalize behaviors" (Brugère, 2019, p. 34). This voice should, according to Brugère, pave the way for developing a pluralism of values. Yet, illustrations of the actual *role* of value pluralism within a political ethics of care are only scarcely provided for by Brugère. Consequently, it adds somewhat to confusion when she states that "When we focus on care, the question is not so much to consider the place of values, rules or laws in a given action through moral reasoning, but to consider the best way of behaving in a particular context toward other subjects who have specific social or cultural beliefs, personal emotional backgrounds, etc." (Brugère, 2019, p. 31). Thus, what should be the effect of considering values and value pluralism on a political care ethics according to Brugère ?

### **Rawlsian liberalism**

The questions of patriarchy and Kohlberg's stance on the superiority of rationality in moral development are elaborated by Brugère in her critique of liberalism. She aims her attention at John Rawls as a key proponent of contemporary liberal thought. A strategically convincing move, since Rawls was directly inspired by Kohlberg's theory of moral development (see for instance Rawls (1971, p. 460n-461n)). Brugère adequately argues that, although Rawls is genuinely determined to theorize an egalitarian and just society, his theory ultimately accords to the myth "that we are immediately equal, rational, and autonomous citizens" (Brugère, 2019, 65). Because Rawls adopts the 'veil of ignorance' of the original, indeed universal position for conceptualizing a just society, he asks of people to ignore their particular subjectivity, needs and interests. In social reality, however, it is precisely those particularities that constitute relationships of dependency, for example in asymmetrical relationships between care-receiver and care-giver. Brugère refers to such relationships as 'infra-political'. That is to say, according to Rawls' theory of justice, we can view relationships of dependency to fall outside the scope of the political, because they are not determined by autonomous, equal and rational people. Yet, care-practices and the social asymmetry frequently involved with relations of care "truly reveal human vulnerability and constitute situations of injustice" (Brugère, 2019, 47). The Rawlsian theory of justice, then, does not allow for a critical reflection on good care by real people involved in real practices of care.

In order to provide for historical context for the liberal peculiarity of neglecting dependency and vulnerability, Brugère appeals to insights worked out by Tronto. Specifically, these observations touch on the historical development of practical philosophy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In order to understand Brugère's critique of liberalism from her rather minimal resume of this historical perspective, the reader probably does well to switch to Tronto's text awhile.

In *Moral Boundaries*, Tronto argued that a transformation occurred with the transition from Scottish Enlightenment philosophy such as Hutcheson, Hume and Smith to Kantian philosophy. This transformation pertains to a boundary that came to separate moral theory from political theory. As a result of social changes, such as the increasing social distance between people, rapid expansion of the market, the attenuation of social bonds and breaking up of communities, moral judgments became increasingly formulated from a distanced and disinterested point of view, that is, "beyond the world of emotions and feelings", a perspective which is further perfected by Rawls (Tronto, 1993, 9). With Tronto, Brugère writes that morality had to incorporate universal rules for justifying

the moral conduct of separated individuals, such as was done by Kant. Politics became opposed to moral thinking, because the former had to incorporate a public sphere regulated by laws in order to protect liberty and control private interests. Moral feelings that underlie dependency and vulnerability, then, became a private issue and could “easily be ascribed to the private and quiet world of women assigned to the private sphere” (Brugère, 2019, 49). While, at the same time, the notions of dependency and vulnerability are de-politicized and relegated to some sort of essentialist ‘women’s morality’, women turn out to be the ones whose peripheral and tongue-tied existence is further reinforced. Similarly, other minority groups questioning the apparent rational and neutral mechanisms of justice from their situations of dependency and subordination cannot be understood through the Rawlsian promise of justice.

### **Ontology of vulnerability**

The cracking of liberalism with the notion of vulnerability leads Brugère to discuss the possibility of including vulnerability in both a framework of moral and political philosophy and an ontological framework. This challenge was, according to Brugère, already anticipated by Tronto in her (to speak with the former) ‘global’ definition of care that now enables Brugère to adopt an ontological stance (Brugère, 2019, 51). By adopting this perspective, Brugère concludes that humans are fundamentally vulnerable. At the same time, however, Brugère seems to render herself vulnerable to a similar objection of abstract and universal theorizing with which she attacks her liberal counterpart. Consider the following snippet:

“The ethics of care actively mobilizes an ontology of vulnerability on the one hand, destabilizing a spiritualist or intellectualist tradition on the other. The reference to vulnerability is essential from an ontological perspective in order to include the protection of nature or the environment within the scope of protection issues. However, it is also crucial to obtain better understanding of vulnerable lives, that of subjects of need who need to be ‘cared for’. In both cases, vulnerability takes on a pragmatic meaning aimed at highlighting the various experiences of dependencies. Dependency can in fact be seen as indicative of an ontological and anthropological vulnerability.” (Brugère, 2019, 53).

In the above, one reads a pursuit to substantialize, or ‘establish’ (funderen) as Frans Vosman would say, fundamental human characteristics (Vosman, 2018, 30). It is however an attempt to abstract from “the political, that is the factual gathering, disordering, caring and conflicting of people” (Vosman, 2018, 29). A difference appears, then, between studying care as a material practice which is fundamentally political and founding a political theory on the basis of an ontology. More than the former, the latter risks objections of abstraction from tensions inherent to particular care relationships. Ontological abstractions of vulnerability lead Brugère (2019, 51) to claim that care “entails an attention to all the lives and all the beings which inhabit the world” and that care is “a central and essential activity of human life”. Such statements may lead to promoting care activities that are *desired* according to the theory founded upon its alleged universality. To care, however, may not always be *de facto* ethical: “It can do good; it can oppress” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, 1). For example, Brugère follows Tronto by saying that from the perspective of care ethics being “inattentive to the needs of others constitutes a moral failure” (Brugère, 2019, 63). However, this rule seems to conflict with her preference for ethics resulting from an immersion in a specific, materialized context and that “favors empirical investigations which propose to establish norms on the basis of lived situations”, thereby appreciating “the singularity of a specific case” (Brugère,

2019, 30). Throughout the book, the unmistakable difficulty of constructing an inevitably abstract (ontologically rooted) political theory of care whilst staying sensitive to the particularities of social reality offers chances for alerting ourselves to the danger of idealizing and ‘de-realizing’ real life (Vosman, 2018, 54).

Yet, if, and only if, Bruguère would opt for continuing to carefully untie the ontological from an *anthropocentric* view, her account of vulnerability as mentioned above indeed carries the potential for considering care as an “attention to all the lives and all the beings which inhabit the world” (Bruguère, 2019, 51). She refers to Tronto’s broad definition of care as a universal activity that “characterizes the type of relationship that should be had with an individual being, a natural element, or an object, provided that its inclusion in a vulnerable world has been recognized” (Bruguère, 2019, 51). With Tronto, Bruguère seems to argue that the care-relational capacity of humans are not restricted to the human race *per se*, but involves other kinds of beings as well, perhaps even those without a voice. Does Bruguère intend to seriously consider care from an ontological and political perspective in a radical way, namely one that requires us to *decenter* human agency and reach ‘beyond’? If so, then Bruguère affirms a present need for exploring the significance of care for a posthumanist theory of care such as is delivered by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017). Such affirmation would indeed seem to fit with Bruguère’s fascination for Spinozian ethics – a founding father of posthumanist ethics – as displayed on page 33 of her book.

### **Care as practice**

Having argued for the meaning of feminism (chapter 1) and for a critique of the liberal man as grounds for constructing a political care ethics (chapter 2), in her last chapter Bruguère zooms in on care as a practice. Viewing care in the reality of embodied individuals beyond the idealized enterprising self is necessary because, following Tronto, Bruguère clarifies the political dimension of care in its concrete and affective manifestations as ‘care-giving’. Care is realized and materialized in daily occupations and work within the broader social framework of policies, institutions, professions and family bonds. In a refreshing way, Bruguère argues that, in order to reflect upon the delegation of care tasks in society, a political care ethics should not be restricted to the level of doctrine, but should also amount to arranging and governing care in practical ways. In this chapter, she concentrates on this second point.

Bruguère starts with a somewhat fleeting description of neoliberal ideology in the context of North America. At its base lies the familiar definition of man as *homo economicus* and the projection of individuals as primarily rational, egocentric and productive agents. Also: the pervasion of norms such as individual responsibility and independence into (self-)care policies and practices. And, neoliberal as well is the reduction of care to either informal settings of private care-giving – mostly to the disadvantage of women – or to an economic sphere of dubious pay-gaps.

Luckily, more and more women participate in the workforce these days, as Bruguère rightly remarks. Yet, since our time also marks an increasingly aging population in countries across the globe, such developments call for reorganizing care in a way that begs for overcoming the liberal private-public boundary. It is, after all, according to this boundary that care is still often associated with the domestic order which is imposed on women as primary care-givers. A political care ethics enables us to view how the private is permeated by the political in a way that – here Bruguère quotes Susan Moller Okin – “the equal sharing by men of (...) productive and reproductive labor” can become

implemented (Brugère, 2019, 80). One of the ongoing tasks of a political ethics of care is to denote the superficiality of the private-public separation (the boundary may itself be regarded as political). That may offer practical consequences for the ways in which care as, for instance, “parental concern” (Donald Winnicott’s term) is practiced in the micro society of the family (Brugère, 2019, 76). Child-rearing activities, but the intimate and professional caring for other dependent others as well, thus become central to the question of gender equality: they should not be practiced by primarily women, but must be equally a men’s issue.

### Care and cultural class

At the end of her book, Brugère asks for the reader’s attention to the increasingly authoritarian politics of France, her home-country. Her sketch is that of a “standardized society stifled by norms and rules of social reproduction” operating top-down through vertical relations of power (Brugère, 2019, 96). It is a politics that fosters the marketization and bureaucratization of care which is contrary to the interests of many people. A political ethics of care, according to Brugère, should contribute to the returning of “creative power” to civil society in order to construct a “common world”. Brugère emphasizes the necessity of starting from society’s sociocultural diversity among all individuals, because individuals can only act and speak freely when their own capacities to do so are fostered in their unicity, or singularity.

Brugère’s priority of the singular individual raises questions for the social and political dimension of care ethics. Having reached this point in her argument, it appears that Brugère’s projection of ‘singular individuals’ is rather abstract. Yes, it is allegedly embodied; yes, it is unjustly gendered; yes, it lives in social reality. However, what Brugère has not yet begun to address is the manifold, complex ways in which singularization processes already transform our social reality day by day. According to the German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, virtually all aspects of our social life become increasingly dominated by a logic of uniqueness, particularity, singularity. His perspective helps us to view the hegemony of ‘standing out’ and being authentic. Our economy is increasingly fixated on offering unique goods and services including all kinds of attractive personalized care products. Our digital culture is both cause and effect of personalization and customization tools, and liberal political agenda’s of the past few decades have fostered and valued a heterogeneous aggregate of (sub)cultures within societies and promoted individual rights related to the ideal of self-realization.

Reckwitz shows that singularization processes illustrated above ultimately lead to the positive valuation of the *singular* individual above all other types of people. Yet, as such they *bring about* new cultural classes. On the one hand, a new, highly educated middle class consists of people who are indeed appraised and positively valued as singular. On the other hand, living a singular life – being singular – is a predicate that seems denied to whole groups of people in the lower strata of society. They do not have the means, power or conviction with which they would realize their own lives in terms of singularity or with which they would other people’s lives in terms of being particular and unique in a positive sense. As such, they are often seen as ‘losers’, as of lesser worth, vulgar. Or they are rather finding benefits in all kinds of new social movements and collectives which ask for them to ‘sacrifice’ their individuality for the sake of the group. One may not only think of the groups that Brugère herself addresses, such as feminists, but they also include radicalized (hate) groups from the far- and alt-right political spectrum, as is perfectly obvious in the context of the USA. And what about religious fundamentalist, or even communitarian religious

groups that prioritize community over individual values and desires? When it comes to care, in what ways can and should people that turn away from the hegemony of the singular individual be viewed and treated as such an individual?

Thus, in contemporary society singularization processes are ambivalent and bring about unforeseen and contradictory effects. This observation, then, points to an overall loss in Brugère's emphasis on care as political category. Namely, understanding the uses and relations of care can only occur in a philosophy that is mindful of the social world, as Brugère (2019, p. 73) rightfully remarks. Precisely in our present-day reality the line between 'singularity' as a descriptive and a prescriptive predicate fades. Therefore, we need thick descriptions of how cultural class relations emerge from the singularization of day-to-day life before we begin to study what care-giving and care-receiving must entail. My question to Brugère, then, is: who exactly do you attempt to address as singular care-givers and care-receivers in a political ethics of care?

### **Conclusion**

One of the fruits of American ethics of care is to have initiated a politicizing of people as embodied care-givers and care-receivers. With a revived emphasis on the political dimension of care and vulnerability, Brugère continues this important endeavor. Firstly, we have seen that in her book, she attempts to root a political ethics of care in the feminist psychology of Carol Gilligan. Secondly, it is Gilligan's feminism and Tronto's political theory that, according to Brugère, should provide sufficient ground for a profound critique of liberalism. Contemporary (neo)liberal politics rather obscures the interdependent condition of vulnerable beings. Lastly, it has yet become clear that, when thinking of care, Brugère's understanding of subjects risks to remain an idealized abstraction from reality. On the one hand, her ontological approach of vulnerability further opens the door to an ecological, or even posthumanist theory of care that would be of immense importance with regard to colossal societal challenges. On the other hand, although Brugère stresses the need of viewing care as a social practice, she tends to normalize her subjects of care as singular individuals without describing actual ambivalences of what such a conception of subjects actually brings about in care practices that involve, for example, patient-centered care. A further revival of the notion of cultural class should therefore prove worthwhile for a political ethics of care that does not want to give in to the prescriptive and authoritative morality which Brugère has effectively criticized.

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