Beyond Critique and Polemic:
Public Debate On and Offline as a Test for the Ethics of Care

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Abstract

This article investigates the state of public communication on and offline as a test case for the viability of care ethics to deal with the fundamental disagreements that characterize our communicative interactions. The argument proceeds in four steps. First, I adumbrate two styles of argumentation that I link with two influential modern ethical theories, the critical-deontological and the polemical-utilitarian. I claim that restricting ourselves to these four terms imprisons us to oscillations between two apparently incompatible frameworks that picture public communication either in normative terms or in terms of power politics. Second, I claim that care ethics offers promising conceptual and normative resources to overcome these oscillations between critique and polemic. Third, I show how this is the case because of the unique way in which care ethics seeks to overcome the opposition between dependence and independence by reconfiguring the standard picture of the separation between morality and politics. Finally, I claim that the real limitation of care ethics is not to be found in its lack of universalizable norms or precise standards, but rather in its insufficient questioning of the extent to which disagreement as dissensus might characterize contemporary politics.

Keywords: Care Ethics, Critique, Polemic, Public Communication, Dissensus.

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Eleştiri ve Polemiğin Ötesinde: Çevrimiçi ve Dışı Kamusal Tartışmalar Üzerinden Bakım Etiğinin Sınırlarının Sorgulanması

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Öz

Bu makale günümüzde çevrimiçi ve dışı kamusal iletişimin bakım etiğine dair sunduğu sınırları incelemektedir. Makalenin argümanı dört aşamadan oluşmaktadır. İlk olarak iki argümansal stil—kritik ve polemik— modernitede etkili olmuş iki etik teorisiyle ilişkilendirilmekte ve kendimizi bu terimlerin kurduğu kuramsal çerçeveye sıkıştırmanın oluşturduğu kavramsal salınımlar gösterilmektedir. İkinci olarak, bakım etiğinin bu salınımları aşmakta ümit verici kaynaklara sahip olduğu iddia edilmektedir. Üçüncü olarak, bu kaynakların merkezinde bakım etiğinin bağımlılık ve bağımsızlık arasındaki zıtlığı yeniden düşünmemizi sağlayan ve ahlak ile siyaset arasındaki sınırları sorgulayan argümanları konumlandırılmaktadır. Son olarak, bakım etiğinin karşılaştığı en önemli sınırın, genellikle iddia edildiğinin aksine evrensel normlar veya kesin standartlar sunamaması değil, günümüz siyasası yaşamını tanımlayan dissensus olarak anlaşmazlığı yeterince sorgulamaması olduğu iddia edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Bakım etiği, Kritik, Polemik, Kamusal İletişim, Dissensus.*

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Introduction

Much has been made of the erosion of norms in our politically charged times riven with polarized views on just about anything. Since many aspects of our everyday lives have been digitalized or at least coupled with their digital surrogates, this alleged erosion of norms is also appealed to as an explanatory factor for the state of public communication online. Hence, whether it is a question of vaccination, the evaluation of ChatGPT or the best way to bake a cake, we are shocked by the animosity characterizing the name-calling that passes for dialogue online and bemoan the erosion of norms. Even though this notion is inadequate as an explanation of much of what we dislike about contemporary communication, on and off-line, it signifies the need for a renewed attention to ethics beyond the platitudes and pious wishes in which we tend to conceive it.

In what follows, I will test out four interrelated claims centered around the limits of care ethics as a candidate ethical theory that could help us make sense of, evaluate and correct debate culture. First, I will adumbrate two styles of argumentation—what I will call here critique and polemic—to characterize not only two types of argumentations, but also two frameworks for the analysis of such argumentation. (Obviously, these are intended to be something like ideal types and not empirical descriptions). I will then align two standard modern ethical theories, namely deontology and utilitarianism, one with each type of argumentation. The result will be the claim that restricting ourselves to these four terms imprisons us to an oscillation between two apparently incompatible frameworks: normative views, which sometimes make it seem like a well-designed critical thinking and ethics course is all it would take to turn us into impeccable partners in dialogue toward mutual understanding; and power politics, which sometimes makes it seem like all we can ever do is describe the shifting forces in play in social life.

Second, I will claim that care ethics offers promising conceptual and normative resources to overcome the oscillation into which we are forced when we are restricted to a choice between critique and polemic. It does so—and this is the third claim—by moving beyond the dialectic of dependence and independence characterizing these perspectives in favor of collective care and care networks (i.e., interdependence) and by emphasizing the irreducible *cognitive* import of *emotive* attitudes such as empathy, compassion and imagination. The fourth and last claim is that the real test for care ethics as an ethical and political framework for debate culture on and offline is not its subjectivism, lack of precise standards or universalizable norms, but whether it can take *dissensus* into account. Attention to this issue allows us to identify an important feature of genuine communication, especially missing in most online debate culture, namely, its ability to transform the identity of an individual and enable the creation of new subjectivities. This, in turn, allows us to foreground sources of social division and conflict that are deeper than the 'erosion of norms.' Hence, the very strength of the perspective of care ethics in comparison with two alternative perspectives, namely its acknowledgement of the political dimension of ethics, becomes a limitation due to its insufficient conceptualization of this political dimension.[1]

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[1] Hence, the types of public debate that are of particular relevance to this study and serve as the background in terms of which care ethic's fundamental orientation is examined are those that are involved in, for ex-

Critical-deontological and Polemical-utilitarian Orientations

What I will call here the framework of critique is historically associated with Kant, but one may invoke many sophisticated contemporary versions.[2] In the critical tradition, free public communication is not only one possible way of expressing rationality but is necessary for the very possibility of rational thought. This is partly because the latter comes to be conceived as a social institution with economic and political conditions.[3] For my purposes here, I want to isolate what I take to be the four dimensions of the perspective of critique: 1) Self-examination, 2) interrogation of limits, 3) concern with legitimacy (rights), 4) the requirement of communicability. This perspective is characterized by self-examination because it is inherently reflexive: The problem of knowledge of self and world, here, is recast as that of the self-knowledge of the rights whereby a subject justifies its claims to knowledge. In any claim I make, I must minimally take myself as making a claim, that is, as engaged in a particular kind of practice defined by a set of beliefs and commitments (e.g., equality of the participants, unacceptability of violence, responsiveness to reasons.) Because it is concerned with the question of whether, in any claim-making, I have a right to that kind of claim, it privileges the problem of legitimacy. No putative fact or some given in experience will count as a legitimate move in argumentation unless it is counted as such by a subject who can justify it by appealing to rules that are universalizable in principle.

In other words, in any claim-making, what is at stake is not only *the particular claim itself* but also the normative constraints that are presupposed by the very possibility of making such a claim. The perspective of critique has a picture of human rationality that sets it up as a tribunal, which alone can set the limits and boundaries of legitimate thought and action.[4] Hence, in this perspective there are two possibilities for viewing public communication: Either it will be a rational resolution of disputes according to at least implicitly acknowledged—and therefore common—rules, or it will be a state of war unchecked by any rules that are held

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ample, the status of climate change, same-sex marriage, public vaccination, and public regulations in the context of a pandemic.

[2] My interest here is not primarily to provide an exhaustive discussion of the theme of critique but to delineate those aspects that I consider to be relevant to its formulation as a theoretical orientation and its ethical import, which I explicate below. Three works that offer a conception of critique (while developing it in different directions) are: Dieter Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German idealism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Jürgen Habermas, *Moral consciousness and communicative action,* C. Lenhardt, trans. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990) (Original work published 1983); Onora O'Neill, *Bounds of justice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[3] See Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's idealism: The satisfactions of self-consciousness* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 1989). For the articulation of the four elements in relation to a critique of polemics in the Turkish Press, see A. Özgür Gürsoy and Gökçen Karanfil, "The Afterlife of Critique: The Communicability of Criticism and the Publicity of Polemic Concerning Public Debate in the Turkish Press," *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 1261–1275.

[4] See A 395 and A 751/B 779 in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* P. Guyer & A. W. Wood, trans. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999) (Original work published 1781).

to be normatively binding. The former is the path of genuine criticism, whereas the latter is that of self-proclaimed but objectively vacuous victories and defeats. These dimensions of self-examination and the concern with the limits of legitimate thought and action lead directly to universalism. In a text in which the link between the capacity for thinking and the possibility of free speech is discussed, Kant says that "[t]o employ one's own reason means simply to ask oneself, whenever one is urged to accept something, whether one finds it possible to transform the reason for accepting it, or the rule which follows from what is accepted, into a universal principle governing the use of one's reason."[5] The demand for universalizability is presented as the antidote for superstition and zealotry.[6] In short, the perspective of critique is that of a mode of self-relation in relation to another, which commits itself in principle to accept only that rule or claim which could be accepted by all.

It is possible to establish a link between the perspective of critique and one of the main theories of morality in contemporary ethics, namely deontology.[7] Deontology focuses on the inherent rightness or wrongness of actions themselves and not their consequences as the source of the moral worth of actions: Some actions are just the right kinds of actions regardless of their consequences. Hence, deontology privileges duty, obligation, and rule as the morally relevant concepts. There are some moral principles or duties that are universally binding and apply to all individuals in all situations. These principles are seen as objectively binding because they are derived from rationality and not due to their expression of our preferences, personal interests or feelings.

Hence the central principle of deontology is what Kant calls the categorical imperative, which imposes an unconditional moral obligation. A morally worthy action is one I perform because it is the right kind of action, and that is one which could be performed by any rational being without generating a contradiction. The motive of my action must be that it is my duty (as opposed to being my inclination or desires—even my altruistic desires). Because in a moral action, I am supposed to abstract from all of my personal and hence particular features, the categorical imperative emphasizes treating others as ends in themselves rather than as means to an end. Because moral worth is supposed to arise from my nature as a rational being, the key value of deontology is respect for individual autonomy and human dignity. It acknowledges the inherent worth of each person and asserts that individuals should be treated as autonomous agents capable of making their own rational choices. The political extension of this theory is

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[5] Immanuel Kant, *Kant: Political writings,* ed. Reiss, H. S. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 249.

[6] This foundational concern of critique with the demarcation of legitimate criticism from superstition and zealotry links it with such contemporary problems as misinformation, disinformation, and types of bullying that occur in online communication.

[7] My initial exposition of deontology follows some uncontroversial general characterizations this label has acquired by now. There are historical and conceptual reasons why the critique-deontology connection occurs more or less unproblematically. What concerns me here, however, is the contrast this establishes with the perspective of care ethics and so the way it helps foreground the limitations (as both advantage and disadvantage) of the latter in the context of public political communication.

typically associated with political liberalism and its emphasis on universal human rights such as respect for self-determination, enfranchisement, equal opportunity, and individual dignity.[8]

Hence the first set in the typology I want to set up is the perspective of critique and its ethical counterpart deontology. Here we have, on the level of public communication and its analysis, the privileging of concepts such "as rational self-examination, legitimacy, universalizability and in principle communicability; and, on the level of ethical evaluation, we have the privileging of concepts such as unconditional duties and rights, universalizability, morally worthy intention and obligation. Apart from the overlap of characteristics, what gives them coherence as a pair is a conception of rationality that sets itself normative ends, i.e., a non-instrumental conception of rationality, and a sanguine view of rational debate as inherently oriented towards *agreement*.

The second perspective is that of what I will call polemics. Polemics is a type of discourse or mode of communication that involves self-consciously controversial, adversarial and sometimes explicitly aggressive argumentation. As the word's etymology suggests, it sets up the field of argumentation as a battlefield or a war zone. The primary or sole goal is attacking or refuting opposing viewpoints rather than reaching a mutual understanding or consensus. Or, even when the latter are stated as goals, they are characterized in instrumental terms, as a means to the satisfaction of some groups' particular goals. Its logic is typically that of zero-sum games, where a win for one party is a loss for the other. Since the primary goal of polemics is to subdue others to acquiescence or to convince them of a particular position or to defend one's own position, it often involves the use of rhetorical figures such as ad hominem arguments. Exaggeration, sarcasm, ridicule, and mockery are accepted as techniques to dismiss or silence one's opponents. At this level, there is no normative distinction to be made between polemics used to challenge oppression and domination, on the one hand, and polemics used to facilitate oppression and domination. This is because any communicative situation emergent on a fundamental disagreement has the status of a fight to the death. Hence their confrontational character, provocative tone, and emotional charge.

The theory of morality I want to pair with the perspective of polemic is utilitarianism, the other influential modern moral theory.[9] For utilitarianism, the right action is what benefits the

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[8] An influential version of the kind of view that is encompassed by this orientation is John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. E. Kelly (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). For what I want to claim in the third section of this article, it is significant that Rawls' defense of political liberalism may be developed into capitalist or socialist versions as what economic system can best implement these principles is regarded as an empirical problem. One advantage of the care perspective is its recognition that the transcendental and the empirical may not be so neatly separated; its disadvantage is its inability to recognize that the question of economic system may not be settled by the perspective of care either.

[9] Strictly speaking, and unlike the previous pairing of deontology with critique, this connection is problematic, since utilitarianism too is a normative theory that seeks to make principled distinction between right and wrong and does so in a deliberately universalist framework. The principal motivation behind my linking of the two stems from utilitarianism's empiricist assumptions. As the famous attempt of Mill's to ground the distinction between 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures attests, utilitarianism, even when it admits of qualitative (and not merely quantitative) distinctions, has no inherently *normative* basis for doing so. It is motivated by a desire to justify distinctions between what is better and worse (as in, for example, better

greatest number of people or harms the least number of people. Hence, it is a consequentialist theory which states that the locus of moral evaluation is the outcome resulting from the action. The principle it invokes as a standard for the discrimination between right and wrong is that of utility. Utility in turn, is spelled out in more or less sophisticated concepts of happiness and/ or pleasure. It has universalist concerns because, first, it requires equal treatment of people to the extent that the utility calculus is to count the happiness of each individual affected by that calculus; and second, because each person's happiness is to count equally. In other words, those preferences which prevail in the calculus do so not because they are expressed by powerful individuals or groups (understood as those with cultural influence or wealth) but because *that outcome* is said to maximize utility for *all parties concerned*. Political liberalism also has a utilitarian current to the extent that the common or public welfare is acknowledged as the only legitimate principle of social difference.[10]

Hence, the second pair in the typology I want to set up is the perspective of polemic and its ethical counterpart utilitarianism. Here we have an instrumental conception of rationality that privileges the concepts of strategy and tactic as well as the logic of maximization or minimization of utility/disutility.

I want to argue that we are trapped in a number of oscillations when our ethical orientation toward communication is exhausted by critical-deontological and polemical-utilitarian perspectives. Moreover, these oscillations appear to have a certain pattern or logic, hence, are not accidental. Either we get ideal duties abstracted from material contexts of embodied human existence or we get the vague and ambiguous domain of feelings without normative purchase. Either we get absolute principles grounded on reason but problematically applicable to actual conditions or we get the relativism of inclination and emotion. Moreover, formal ideal consideration of duties is not only inaccurate, but it also has ethical implications because it leads to a blindness regarding certain kinds of harm. To show this, I will adapt an example of Card's to illustrate my argument concerning oscillations and blindness:[11] When women were barred from the Harvard Library, some male classmates provided photocopies of texts for them. Hence, we could say that the unjust exclusion of women from a particular service

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kinds of pleasure and worse kinds of pleasure), but it can only have recourse to the judgment of someone who has had *experience* of both kinds and who *regularly* declares a *preference* for the former. In which case, in a debate with someone who might say, "Well, I have had both kinds of experiences and I prefer the latter," our imagined judge can only respond "Then you didn't *really* experience the former" or "Then your experience of the former was not *genuine*." This recourse to implicitly evaluative terms ('really', 'genuine') in the response will rightly be called question-begging by the interlocutor. The following discussion of 'oscillations' will unpack further my reasons for the connection I establish between the perspective of polemic and that of utilitarianism. (For the relevant section in Mill, see John S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Oxford University Press, 1998), Chapter. 2.)

[10] This commingling of deontology and utilitarianism in the framework of political liberalism suggests the limitations of the latter to deal with the political aspects of public debate. I only hint at this toward the end of the present article as it is beyond its scope.

[11] Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm. A Theory of Evil* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 104-5. Her point is restricted to utilitarianism.

did not produce more harm than would be the case, had there been no exclusion, since a de facto remedy was readily available. Yet clearly there is a harm here to women's dignity and self-conception arising from the very existence of an exclusion. This fact seems to swing us back in the direction of a critical-deontological orientation by the invocation of an ultimate value, viz., dignity. However, a formal conception of dignity can be justified only on the condition that we abstract from many different human capabilities for the sake of one or a few common ones (for example, rationality). This will in turn generate, if not in principle than in fact and in concrete social situations, other harms—as when some individuals or groups of individuals are judged insufficiently rational (as historically was the case with women, members of non-white ethnicities and working-class individuals).

Oscillations such as these, where the inadequacy of principles justified a priori (like the categorical imperative) leads to empirical standards (like happiness), the inadequacy of which in turn motivates a movement back to a priori principles, indicate the mutual conditioning of the critical-deontological and the polemical-utilitarian perspectives. Despite their differences, and perhaps as a precondition of those differences, these two share a common conception of human nature to the extent that they conceive of happiness as an ephemeral and merely empirical feeling (and hence as contingent and particular). The latter insists that genuine knowledge is derived from sensory givens, and so can locate the principle of an objective morality only in the quantitative increase in this feeling; whereas the former, which insists that the empirically given must always be conditioned and hence subjective, can locate the principle of moral judgments that will be binding for everyone only in the denial of the moral status of any empirical feeling. This background of shared assumptions implies that the moral outlook of these perspectives locks us in a choice between agreement vs. disagreement, dependence vs. autonomy, reason vs. emotion …. The upshot of this outlook for the appraisal of public communication on and offline is that either we assume the critical standpoint, from which others are excluded in advance as insufficiently rational (because our standpoint cannot perceive what may be the rationality specific to their system of beliefs); or, we assume a polemical standpoint, in which case we remain within the terms of the status quo despite ourselves, since we cannot ever change the mind of someone who does not already agree with us.

The Acknowledgement of the Political by the Ethics of Care

Care ethics has resources to overcome these oscillations. I think this is because its perspective is one that allows us to consider the political dimension of ethics as well as the ethical import of politics. What care ethics foregrounds is the importance of caring relationships and interdependence in ethical decision-making. From its early formulations in Gilligan's work onwards, care ethics offers itself not as a supplement to deontology or utilitarianism, but as an alternative to them that displaces the center of attention to a cluster of 'concepts' including care, empathy, and responsiveness to the needs of others.[12] This is motivated by a redescription of

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[12] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), see Chapter 3. I put 'concepts' in quotation marks to indicate the self-con-

human existence that emphasizes its relational nature and the centrality of attentiveness to others' perspectives and experiences. It values the particularity of individual situations and the unique needs and vulnerabilities of individuals. In this re-orientation of what ethics does and why it exists, it is not an accidental feature of our experience that we are embedded in interconnected webs of relationships and that responsibilities and obligations arise *from* these relationships. Gilligan emphasizes that care is not just a response to a particular situation or relationship, but a comprehensive moral framework that can guide ethical decision-making in various contexts.[13] Noddings' development of this orientation highlights human interdependence as an ongoing and reciprocal process that requires attentiveness, responsiveness, and empathy.[14] She also argues for the importance of seeing care as a fundamental human instinct and a natural response to vulnerability and dependency. Even though the perspective of care has been characteristic of experience "more typical of women than men," she thinks that it is a universal human capacity that should be nurtured and developed.[15]

Because the perspective of care places so much emphasis on the contextual and relational nature of human experience, its focus seems out of focus when viewed from the two perspectives I outlined above. I will mention just two such features: 1) *Autonomy*, which is one of the main values, if not the linchpin, for deontological theories, is criticized as an illusory and dangerous quest;[16] 2) *impartiality*, which gives its normative purchase to utilitarian theories, is here regarded not only as impossible but also as undesirable. If we express these disagreements in the terms of these two other perspectives, what we get with care ethics is diminished agency, inability to challenge oppressive structures of tradition and economy, the exploitation of the caregiver, unjust partiality, and no principled action-guiding rules.[17] The dramatic illustration of these criticisms is vividly enacted in the Tim Burton film *Edward Scissorhands* (1990): it

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sciously problematic status of these terms. Their very indeterminacy and vagueness, hence their necessarily contextual and situational dimension, are appealed to as a virtue in care ethics.

[13] Gilligan, *In A Different Voice*, 35. Moreover, Gilligan explicitly relates the motivation to place 'relationality' at the centre of ethics to the difference expressed and made by care ethics: "The most basic questions about human living—how to live, what to do—are fundamentally questions about human relations, because people's lives are deeply connected, psychologically, economically, and politically" (xiv). It is through the foregrounding of these connections and their import for ethics that care ethics hopes to overcome the emphasis on separation, individuality and conflict that characterizes alternative moral outlooks.

[14] Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) Noddings continues Gilligan's emphasis on relationality—here called 'relatedness'—and the following gloss she offers is illuminating: "reciprocal receptivity" (xvii).

[15] Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993), xxiv. The differences between Gilligan's and Noddings' conceptions of care are not my concern here.

[16] Gilligan, 48. I will discuss below how Tronto's development of care as a moral value and a political ideal seeks to recover a place for autonomy, in the perspective of care; this place, however, requires a modified sense of autonomy and would be in line with Gilligan's denial of its excessively formalistic and abstract version in the perspective I called above 'critical-deontological'.

[17] For two examples of these criticisms, see Sarah L. Hoagland, "Review: Some Concerns about Nel Noddings' 'Caring'," in Hypatia, 5 (1) (1990): 109–114 and Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

does not take much for the caring community to aggressively drive out the stranger. Kind and gentle can co-exist with a structure of quiet violence that can suddenly become explicit in the absence of formal rights or objective rules.

However, it is important to notice that care ethics has resources to deal with these kinds of objections and therefore become a viable ethical theory for both the evaluation of and participation in public communication. I want to claim that this is so *not* because care ethics would be universalist (against charges of particularism and relativism) or because it would be rational (against charges of emotivism), but rather because it acknowledges the political dimension of ethics. A good indication of what this claim amounts to is found in Tronto's development of care ethics.[18] Arguing against a particular picture of care ethics as women's morality, she seeks to formulate a conception that can account for the values of autonomy and justice without abandoning what made care ethics valuable in the first place. Three features in this reformulation stand out for my purposes: First, care is here conceived not as an attitude or a disposition but as a *practice*; second, it is to be used *strategically* and not in a purely non-instrumental manner; and third, it involves an ideal for a more democratic and more pluralistic *politics*. The upshot of these features is to help us to the realization that 'care' goes beyond its everyday associations with private attitudes because it is always already implicated in current structures of power and inequality. It is with this in mind that we should understand the following definition she offers: "… caring [is to be] viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web."[19] Hence care work is marked by the gamut of social categories that structure our social reality including race, gender and class. Therein lies the promising complexity of care ethics, when it acknowledges the "messiness of care".[20] It is not accidental that the content of care cannot be made rigorously explicit, because it forces us to stop thinking about morality as only morality and motivates us to question the boundaries of morality and politics. Values such as attentiveness, responsibility and compassion require us not only to transform our relationship with others by giving priority to the meeting of their needs, but also to recognize that moral arguments have a political context and so demand accounting for the effects of power and privilege for their very intelligibility.

This is a controversial claim and so must be further explicated. Even though the definitions of morality and politics—and their relationship (or lack thereof)—are all contested, it is possible to articulate the salient features of what might be called the standard conception. According to this view, morality consists of the principles of right or wrong behaviour and encompasses our considerations of what is important and unimportant to do, how to conduct

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[18] Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: a Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (Routledge, 1993).

[19] Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 103. She is reiterating a definition they had formulated in a former study with Berenice Fisher in "Toward a Feminist Theory of Care," in *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives,* eds. Emily Abel and Margaret Nelson (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 40.

[20] I owe this expression to a conference presentation delivered at the NECS conference in June, 2023: Ingvil Hellestrand, "On the Messiness of Care: Vulnerability, Responsibility and Community."

our relationship with others in a way that will be guided by a set of values and the appraisal of these values. Politics, on the other hand, is understood in a standard way to be concerned with the distribution of resources and roles, the establishment of a public order, and the procedures whereby disputes that arise about such distributions and establishments are to be resolved. There are important advantages that accrue from formulating their distinction in this way. For example, the separation of public and private spheres has not only been a significant political achievement in modernity, but it has also emancipated individuals from the kinds of oppression that result when traditional morality (however conceived) is imposed by force. Yet it is also the case that the line separating the private and the public spheres cannot be fixed analytically, is historically determined and challenged, and shifts as a result of technological development and social conflicts. The very indeterminacy of care as both a moral value and the basis for what Tronto calls "the political achievement of a good society"[21] offers a significant corrective to the standard picture according to which the boundaries of morality and politics are fixed once and for all. Care, then, could be used strategically to expand the boundaries of the political world in order to include those who are excluded from it.

Dissensus as a Limitation of the Political as Conceived by the Perspective of Care

What the perspective of care would seem to imply for public communication on and offline would be the following: We should prioritize empathy and seek to understand the perspectives and experiences of others; take the time to listen actively and consider the emotions and needs underlying their arguments.; avoid dismissive language, and strive to engage in dialogue with genuine curiosity and respect; be responsive to the needs and concerns of others; acknowledge and address their questions, comments, or criticisms in a thoughtful and considerate manner; engage in a dialogue that promotes understanding and collaboration; adopt an attitude conducive to kindness and inclusion; provide constructive criticism rather than resorting to hostile or demeaning remarks; talk about the arguments being presented rather than attacking the person making them; and, perhaps most importantly for my purposes, recognize power imbalances and take them into account. Hence, we should recognize that privilege, silencing and subtle effects of domination can co-exist with the best of our intentions and genuine reciprocity may require the amplification of marginalized voices. The perspective of care, in other words, starts from an awareness of the common ground uniting the care-giver and the care-receiver and the recognition that the common ground is never in fact so and hence is continually in need of attentive nurturing. In this way, it seeks to foster a sense of community, even in the midst of disagreement.[22] The key claim motivating these reasonable guidelines is the

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[21] Tronto, Moral Boundaries, 9.

[22] These guidelines could be seen to operative in the guidelines for community standards at Twitter and Facebook. See https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-rules and https://transparency.fb.com/en-gb/policies/community-standards/ The problems both companies experience in the actual carrying out of their content moderation policies, which have become exacerbated after Elon Musk's acquisition of the former and Facebook's conflict with the EU and the Canadian government over regulation, would be indicative of the kind of limitation I claim later in this section.

value according to which we should prioritize others' needs in our reflection on how we should act and assume others' positions to recognize that these are in fact needs. Since our identity is in part defined by what and who we care about, our ability and willingness to do *that* implies that there is a shared ground of assumptions, beliefs and feelings—a fundamental agreement— before or beyond particular and temporary disagreements.

I want to situate one important limitation of care ethics precisely at this point where it both acknowledges its dependence on politics and stops short of thinking through the implications of this dependence.[23] In explicating how this limitation may be understood, I will draw first on Zamalin's criticism of what he calls 'civility' and second on what Rancière has conceptualized as 'dissensus'.

In *Against Civility,* Zamalin takes issue with the consensus view that emerged in the aftermath of the 2016 election of Donald Trump that we need to be more civil with one another. He quotes the CNN commentator Van Jones' remark as typical of this call: "Hopefully [Trump's election] will open up our eyes to how fragile democracy is and how key civility is to civilization. Civility isn't just some optional value in a multicultural, multistate democratic republic. Civility is the key to civilization".[24] The normative purchase of the invocation of civility seems to be that we should be politer, less rancorous, less embittered, more compassionate, rule-abiding, responsible, and empathetic in our dialogue with one another. Genuine communication occurs when one hears both sides, reaches a compromise and seeks consensus. As such it contrasts with disruption on the street, or unruly interruptions of communication. Civility aims at a kind of universality because it is symmetrically directed at both sides: for example, white supremacist and Black Lives Matter protester, the one who calls for and who rejects reproductive rights alike.

A quotation from historian Michael S. Roth is particularly illuminating in crystallizing the tensions at the intersection of ethics and politics: "Name-calling or assuming the status of the victimized is among the least productive forms of disagreement. Outrage may lead to feelings of solidarity, but it insulates us from the possibility of changing our minds, from opening our thinking".[25] Civility implies a common ground, a non-political domain, where commitment to certain core values and the shared background of affects such as sympathy, empathy and care make consensus possible in principle, if only we could calm down and acknowledge the bonds imposed by rational norms and human feelings alike.[26] This non-political common ground is

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[23] Here I use the term 'limitation' in both a positive and negative sense of the term: it marks a condition of possibility for the intelligibility and well as the effectiveness of ethical considerations (as care); and it marks a domain in which the political has characteristics that make the ethical (as care) problematic.

[24] Alex Zamalin, *Against Civility. The Hidden Racism in our Obsession with Civility* (Beacon Press, 2021), 6.

[25] Zamalin, *Against Civility*, 7.

[26] A basic issue such as how best to understand sympathy and empathy—notions that are sometimes used as if equivalently and sometimes distinguished in varying ways—evinces the difficulty at work here. When, for example, Noddings starts her reflection on empathy with a dictionary definition ("The power of projecting one's personality into, and so fully understanding, the object of contemplation" *Caring*, 30), she immediately continues by noting that this is a "peculiarly rational, western, masculine way of looking at 'feeling with'." In

that of neighbourliness, caring interpersonal relationships, affection, and humility.

This vision of a common background of commitments and feelings on the basis of which all of our sayings and doings become possible and assessable contrasts sharply with the vision of politics as the domain of competing interests, the distribution of resources, determinations about who counts in public life and how much. It is this vision that seems to leave us with the stark bedrock of power and struggle, a place where inequality is or has become the norm. Against this political background, civility is said to produce two effects. It provides one with a language that clearly demarcates good and bad, right and wrong, friend and foe, legal and illegal; thereby reducing complexity by identifying the enemy and characterizing oneself as virtuous. And it distracts one from the ways in which one's own choices contribute to injustice. It neutralizes opposition and functions as a silencing device. As such the call to civility itself can serve (and Zamalin claims that it has so served historically) to maintain racial and other forms of injustice. (As examples he offers the moral appeals to conscience in nineteenth century slavery, but also the Jim Crow era.)

The lesson we are asked to draw from this is that what is needed in a genuinely emancipatory struggle and politics with a normative concern is precisely that political change happens, if not exclusively, then mostly, through direct confrontation "without obligation to decorum or propriety."[27] From this perspective, the right kind of strategy will be to shock and provoke regardless of politesse, in words and actions. (As, again, the complex history of struggle for racial justice in the United States evinces for Zamalin). This is the case because here we have a vision of politics that takes disagreement rather than agreement as its starting point. At this level, the difficulty with appeals to care is not that it is vague or too particularistic but that the maintenance and repair work it involves, to which I referred above, can serve as a silencing device in the interest of maintaining a status quo that is characterized by a fundamental inequality.

To better understand what taking disagreement in politics as fundamental and what its ethical implications for care ethics are, I want to invoke Rancière's distinction between 'politics' and the 'police (order)' and how the former involves a staging of 'dissensus'. For Rancière politics is "an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration—that of the part of those who have no

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its stead, she suggests 'engrossment', which involves not projection but reception. Hence the good kind of empathy is not a question of putting oneself in the other's shoes, with its suggestion of analysis and objective data. It is, rather, a matter of setting aside analysis, planning and solving in favour of seeing and receiving the other in their unreflected feeling. Sometimes, 'sympathy' is the name given to this projective and overly rational type of 'feeling with.' What this complication of definition and terminology suggests for my purposes is that even at such a fundamental level as our ability to understand another's feelings and experiences, the thorny issues of political differentials are at work, requiring us to distinguish between an instrumentalizing and controlling mode of understanding and its more receptive and non-judgmental counterpart.

[27] Zamalin, *Against Civility*, 13.

part".[28] In other words, politics is not to be confused with the mere exercise of power, nor with the standard conception of politics as the distribution of resources and roles and the orderly resolution of conflicts over this distribution. There is a basic opposition between the social order comprising the institutions and processes governing a particular community and politics. The latter is a process whereby equality of all speaking beings is presupposed, declared and verified in specific situations by groups of people who are denied political existence and participation in a given order of social categories, institutions and practices. Hence, the claim of equality is necessarily disruptive and seeks to reconfigure a given social order. Since any hierarchical social order is based on a principle of division and exclusion, politics happens in rare moments when a group of people who do not count in this order demand to be so counted in the name of an equality that cannot even be heard as intelligible by those who have a determinate place in this order.

There is this opposition between the presupposition of the equality of speaking beings and the social order that delimits our standard understanding of political life, because, for Rancière, every such social order involves a constitutive wrong.[29] And this is a wrong because every such ordering restricts political rule to some part of the social whole and excludes some other part as those who have no part or share in the social order.[30] The upshot of this characterization is that democracy, far from being a particular kind of political regime, names the process of politics in this reconceived sense where and when those who are said to be nothing identify with the whole of the community in the name of the wrong that excludes them. Thus their claim is necessarily unintelligible in the terms of the dominant social order against which they emerge as political subjects. Slaves, women, immigrants, workers… These figures who historically come to stand for the *demos* do so only to the extent that they protest against the established concepts and practices in terms of which a given social order names and manages them *as* slave, woman, immigrant, or worker. In other words, their very existence *as people* is denied in the terms of the dominant social order. Hence their claim of equality *against* the miscount that founds the social order (by excluding them) is the very process through which they come to exist (as people) in the first place.

The wrong that is laid bare by this radicalized sense of the political implies that politics involves an ineliminable disagreement, which Rancière calls *dissensus*. It marks a dispute that is fundamental to the extent that it concerns the question of who will count as capable of language in the first place. What is at stake here is the process through which 'speech' that has not been counted in the social order comes to count *as* speech worthy of equal attention and with equal weight. This dispute cannot be understood as a discussion between equal parties about the validity of their respective claims and which can therefore be adjudicated by appeal

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[28] Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose, (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 29.

[29] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 9.

[30] His generic name for this part that has no part is the demos and it has different historical incarnations: "the poor of ancient times, the third estate, the modern proletariat." Rancière, *Disagreement*, 9.

to norms common to all of them. Disagreement as dissensus is fundamental and prior to any particular disagreements because it is the enactment of the very political existence of one of the 'parties' to it *as a subject*, which status is denied or not recognized by the other parties. That is why the political dimension implies something like a *manifestation* or an *intervention* that cannot be understood in terms of given institutions or procedures, legal or otherwise: it is the appearance of that which has been excluded and which was, before this manifestation, invisible in the social order into which it irrupts.

These points are conceptualized by Rancière in terms of the 'distribution of the sensible', which is the fundamental level of dividing up and sharing out of the social space. As such it is "the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it…."[31] The fact that this concept foregrounds its experiential, spatial and sensory aspects is important because it shows that social division is not only an economic or discursive matter; it also concerns the affective. In other words, what gets divided/shared and unequally marked also includes the aesthetic and affective dimensions of human life. What is of particular significance regarding care ethics as I have formulated it above is that what counts as harm, or need, or the meeting of such a need, and which harms and needs are counted as relevant for moral or political consideration are also at stake in the divisions of a social order. Since dispute over these questions involve a dissensus, which indicates the distance of a social order from itself—the fact that it is constituted by a wrong—one's perspective on them should allow for the possibility that they may not be resolved peaceably, and that conflict may be ineliminable. In other words, the perspective of care ethics corrects the excessively formalist conception of consensus as the normative ground for legitimate political activity (by showing how that conception would be too distant from our practices to be of much help in the face of actual conflict and so must be seen to presuppose the practice it calls care); but it in turn risks an insufficiently critical appreciation of the presuppositions of care.

The perspective of care ethics, as an alternative to the oscillations of what I have called the critical-deontological and polemical-utilitarian perspectives, promises to integrate the moral and political aspects of human practice. Its attention to context—both as the political context of moral argumentation and as the ethical orientation informing political considerations—helps us realize that subtle kinds of oppression may be involved in the dismissal or ignorance of those who are marginalized by our current practices. To that extent it is capable of taking into account how care itself can facilitate structures of power.[32] But the difficulty it overlooks stems

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[31] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (Continuum, 2004), 13.

[32] And so, it has resources to expand the concern of care to include the nonhuman domain of animals and things as well. See, for example, the introduction to M. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

precisely from what it proposes as a corrective to the inadequacy of being trapped in a binary opposition between the critical and the polemical orientations. By foregrounding care as that practice which is informed by the recognition of our inescapable interdependence—that is, of the import of sympathy, attentiveness, empathy, responsiveness, need, and vulnerability—it fails to question the very ground of *that recognition* itself. *If* it is the case that (1) the categorial and institutional distributions of our social life go deeper than those that care ethics rightly acknowledges (such as gender, race, and class) and that (2) disagreement also concerns what we (should) care about; *then* the kind of caring politics care ethics envisions may not be available when the *recognition* of such interdependence has been lost (to one or all of the parties involved) and can only be recovered or created *at the end* of a political struggle. Whose demands are to count as needs or whose lack of strength is to count as a vulnerability-to-be-responded-to (as opposed to a weakness-to-be-exploited) are matters that cannot be assumed to have been settled already.[33] Even though care ethics is an important theoretical perspective thanks to its recognition of care as both a moral and a political concept, its proposal to rethink the boundaries of these two domains kept apart in standard accounts needs further reflection on two unsettling and unsettled questions: 1) Is it possible to 'make' someone care, when s/he does not already so care and do so in a non-conflictual way? 2) May it be necessary that, precisely because I care about something or someone, I have to stop caring about some other (thing)?

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[33] An ostensibly trivial example of the kind of dispute that cannot be settled by shared norms precisely because their very existence indicates the disappearance or unavailability of such a shared ground is the wave of substance attacks on famous paintings exhibited in European museums in 2022. In two of these, a climate emergency activism group, *Letzte Generation*, splattered, splashed, or smeared mashed potatoes and an oily black substance on works by Monet and Klimt, respectively. It is easy to criticize this type of protest on tactical or even strategic grounds; alternatively, one can criticize it by seeing it as a symptom of the absence of civility in contemporary political life. However, it is important to realize that the people who enact it claim that if climate change is as important a crisis as many in the scientific community claim it is, then caring about it should be made a priority and that the recognition of the need for a reordering of our priorities does not arise through reasoned debate or appeals to care.

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