

“The Political Role of Caring About”

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Two of the biggest topics of conversation in the United States over summer 2015 were the Black Lives Matter movement and the killing of Cecil the lion by a Minnesota dentist during a hunting trip in Zimbabwe. As the controversy about Cecil gained more and more attention on traditional and social media, many African-American commentators, in particular, pointed out a pattern: many people who had been vocal about Cecil were noticeably silent about Sandra Bland and Freddie Gray, and in general, more attention was being paid to Cecil than the Black Lives Matter movement. It seemed that a large swathe of white America cared more about Cecil than about Black lives—a symptom of precisely the disregard that Black Lives Matter is protesting. The writer Roxane Gay tweeted: *I’m personally going to start wearing a lion costume when I leave my house so if I get shot, people will care.* (Gay 2015)

Some critics, for example Lori Gruen, suggested that this sort of commentary was playing into a zero-sum game, an “Oppression Olympics” that denied the obvious truth that one can (and should) care about more than one thing. (Gruen 2015) This rather misses the point of Gay and others, which I take to be that there is evidence that many people cared more about Cecil than about Black lives, and that *that* gap in caring-about is revealing.

One thing that it reveals, or reminds us of, is that our carings-about are very often political, and in this sort of case arguably infected quite thoroughly with injustice. What are the implications of this for our theorizing of care, especially caring-about? What if our carings-about reflect and reinforce injustice?

Here, like many now, I follow Tronto’s multi-phase analysis of care, which distinguishes caring-about, taking care of, caring for, care receiving, and in her latest work, caring-with. (Tronto, *Moral Boundaries* 1993) (Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice* 2013) In focusing on caring-about in this talk, I do not wish to suggest that caring-about is any more central than the other phases of care. Indeed, caring-about that is never expressed, so to speak, in concrete practices of care may be rather hollow, all else being equal. Having said that, I will focus my remarks today on a particular issue arising from the relationship between caring-about and justice.

Caring-about itself, I suggest, can be understood in terms of four closely related aspects. First, caring-about has an epistemic aspect; one is aware of and typically curious about the cared-about; lack of desire to know about it may be evidence of

lack of care. Second, caring-about necessarily involves an emotional response to the cared-about; typically, one of happiness when the cared-about is doing well, and so on. I do not include 'negative' caring-about, for instance when the carer is emotionally invested in the cared-about's doing badly, since I think it does not comport with how the language of care works in the world; "I care about you" is just not plausibly understood to mean "I will be satisfied to the extent that you do badly"; "I care about arts education for children" is likewise not plausibly understood to mean "I will be satisfied if arts education for children is eliminated." Third, caring-about is often, but not always, connected with judgments of value and importance; "I care about you" usually connotes "I think you are important, I think you are valuable" and likewise "I care about arts education for children" usually connotes "I think arts education for children is important and valuable." However, as Blustein and others have pointed out, it is perfectly possible to care about things in spite of one's considered judgments of their value and importance; for example, I find myself caring about the characters in a TV show I find to be silly, badly-written, etc. (Blustein 1991) Note that in such cases, there is usually a sense of dissonance because our carings-about conflict with our considered judgments; a desire for our judgments and carings-about to align is typical, and with good reason. Fourth, caring-about involves a disposition to act on behalf of the cared-about. This does not, of course, always translate into action, since I may not be able to do anything on the cared-about's behalf, or I may have reason to think that my action would not be helpful, appropriate, and so on. Still, we can say that a pattern of failure to act on the cared-about's behalf when such action is possible is evidence against any claim to care about that person or thing. These aspects are closely interrelated and affect each other; for example, emotional investment and awareness or curiosity will tend to be mutually reinforcing with respect to caring-about.

Some care theorists have argued that justice is founded on care. This can include practices and relations of care, as Held suggests. (Held 2006) I'm interested, more specifically, in the idea that caring-about, or something like it, is the basis for justice. We can see these suggestions in two recent articles, by Nel Noddings and Michael Slote.

Noddings (Noddings 2015) explicitly says that caring-about "may be thought of as the foundation of justice in care theory" (75). In her view, caring-about leads to the consideration of ways to facilitate caring-for. To care about, in her view, is "to be concerned for" (74); caring-about is a "basic attitude" (75). In political contexts, where one may care about people or issues beyond one's capacity to engage in face

to face caring-for, Noddings envisages caring-about prompting the development of policies to facilitate caring-for; from this process arises justice.

Slote (Slote 2015) argues that political concepts such as justice and rights can and should be conceived of in terms of care, specifically, in terms of “empathy and empathic concern” (39). In Slote’s view, caring-about depends on empathy (39). Taking the other’s perspective and trying to see things from their point of view is a surer foundation for claims of justice and rights than a liberal approach.

Noddings avoids the term ‘empathy’ in relation to care because it often connotes a projective rather than receptive mode, the latter being more truly characteristic of care in her view. It should be noted that empathy is a contested concept, as Noddings points out, with affective and cognitive aspects more prominent in various accounts (78). Note that these aspects align with two aspects of my account of caring-about above.

There is much to be said for the claim that caring-about, or something like it, supports justice or lies at its root in some way. Indeed, one might plausibly claim that something like caring-about lies at the root of moral obligation more generally; for example, one could read Kant’s account of moral predispositions in the *Doctrine of Virtue* similarly, especially the predisposition to love of humanity. It is plausible that our seeing duties of justice as morally compelling requires that we care about justice, or about those who are entitled to it. Moral and political values cannot leave us cold. That, however, is not quite the same as saying that justice or morality generally are based on caring-about or empathy or the like in the sense that they are what makes things just.

Now, people tend to care about those close and familiar to them more than about those distant and unfamiliar; this one might call “garden-variety” parochialism. Problematic as this is, there is hope that it can be corrected for by expanding the scope of our caring-about. Slote, for example, acknowledges this problem but argues that scholarship on moral development should occasion optimism that people’s empathic concern or caring-about can be widened in scope through moral education. Indeed, it is plausible to claim that we can become more caring moral agents by cultivating sensitivity, attentiveness, openness, and the like via exposure to different places and people, via literature, and so on. The more difficult problem is the one we saw in the case of Cecil the lion, when widespread, systemic injustice causes people to fail to care about all that they ought to care about, including the suffering of people right in their midst—suffering in which they are implicated, not incidentally. The point is that it is not a matter of the scope of caring-about being

simply too small, but that it is distorted so that the needs of those in close proximity, who should be familiar to us and in some ways may be, simply do not receive our attention.

Injustice can—and does—infect our carings-about in various ways and with respect to each of the four aspects of caring-about mentioned before. One possibility is someone being aware of a need and superficially having an emotional response, but ultimately that feeling not being strong enough to create a disposition to action (one forgets, one has other priorities, one is busy, etc.). This would arise from injustice in cases where the weakness of emotional response can be traced to a pattern of disregard for an oppressed social group, for example. Most brazenly, think of the person who consciously judges the needs of certain groups to be of little importance or value (e.g. reactions to IV drug users and gay men suffering from AIDS), or the person who lacks an emotional response to certain groups' needs or struggles because of prejudice against them. The lack of caring-about may be attributable to ignorance or insensitivity; this may result from a deliberate refusal to pay attention, or from unequal access to the means of knowledge production and dissemination, but the more pernicious factor may be less flagrant, more systemic forms of ignorance (think of Charles Mills's epistemology of ignorance (Mills 1997)) or forms of what Miranda Fricker calls epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007). In many such cases, unlike in "garden-variety" parochialism, the failure of caring-about may be difficult to detect, at least for the agent who is failing to care—after all, as Mills argues in the case of white ignorance about racism, often one's whole society is built upon keeping such failures hidden in plain sight, so to speak.

Epistemic injustices wrong their targets specifically as participants in knowledge practices. Fricker identifies two major forms; the first is hermeneutic injustice, where marginalization results in a certain group lacking the conceptual tools to make sense of their experiences (for instance, women trying to make sense of, and communicate, their work experiences before sexual harassment entered our lexicon). The second form discussed by Fricker is testimonial injustice, where stereotypes serve to undermine a person's assumed credibility (for example, racist stereotypes resulting in an African-American's account of a police encounter not being believed). If, for example, oppressed or marginalized people are suffering testimonial injustice—that is, they are less likely to be treated as credible sources by their interlocutors—this will mean that others will not care about their experiences and needs because they will lack awareness about them. (And in turn, not caring about them will further impede awareness, since one will typically be incurious

about what one does not care about.) Other philosophers, such as Kristie Dotson (Dotson 2012) and Gaile Polhaus Jr (Polhaus 2012), have discussed more expansive forms of epistemic injustice. My task is not to explain them all here: the point is that epistemic injustices contribute to troubling failures of caring-about. The supposed foundation of justice is in fact riddled with injustice. Two questions arise for us here: one, what is the upshot of this for theoretical positions like Slote's or Noddings's? Second, what can be done about this deep problem?

To take the second question first, Fricker, while acknowledging the need for wider change to underlying injustices, focuses on individuals' cultivation of hybrid intellectual-ethical virtues such as testimonial justice, where the virtuous hearer develops the reliable capacity to correct for unfair credibility ascriptions. The remaining worry is that this sort of thing, by itself, is a "patch-up job" leaving the deeper root cause—injustice (ethical-political as well as epistemic) largely intact.

None of this is to downplay the importance of individuals' working on their carings-about (and their capacities for such). Individuals can educate themselves to mitigate the impact of unequal distribution of the means of knowledge production and dissemination; we can make choices about what we expose ourselves to in our lives; we can explore the latest research on implicit bias and other relevant psychological concepts; we can work on cultivating our emotions; and so on. We cannot, and should not, choose between individual action and solving the wider systemic problems; moreover, tackling those wider systemic problems may require people to be better as individuals at caring-about appropriately. However, we would do well to be modest in our expectations for such individual measures while structural injustices remain so widespread and deeply ingrained in our societies.

Now, let us return to the theoretical upshot of these observations, especially for claims like Slote's and Noddings's to the effect that caring-about is the foundation of justice. If caring-about grounds justice, but is itself corrupted by injustice, this is at least peculiar. More than peculiar, it poses a problem for the claim of priority for care here. If the foundation (caring-about) needs buttressing with justice, it cannot straightforwardly be its basis. This does not establish the priority of justice either, I hasten to add: as I have remarked earlier, there are good reasons to find caring-about necessary for justice. The most plausible conclusion, it seems to me, is that neither care nor justice is the foundation for the other. The next theoretical task is to elucidate a more complex relation between them.

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