

BOOK REVIEW

## Freedom to Care: Liberalism, Dependency Care, and Culture

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Liberal political theory has long been criticized for its omissions regarding the concerns of justice raised by the facts of human dependency. In *Freedom to Care: Liberalism, Dependency Care, and Culture*, Asha Bhandary aims to reconstruct a version of Rawlsian liberalism that responds to the basic human facts of dependency and the universal need for care (to varying degrees over the course of life), as well as the fact that those who provide care for others (women, generally) are often systematically disadvantaged relative to those without caregiving responsibilities. In other words, she aims to respond to “the dependency critique” of liberalism. As is well known, Eva Feder Kittay offers the most sustained account of that critique in *Love’s Labor* (Kittay 1999). Kittay argues that traditional forms of liberalism, and Rawls’s view specifically, fail to account for the fact that all humans need various forms of care over the course of a life and some humans need ongoing, sustained care for the whole of life, as well as for the injustices that arise for caregivers. The theoretical bases of liberalism—including strong forms of individualism, the characterization of the moral powers of persons as requiring attainment of forms of rationality, as well as the indices for evaluating just distributions (the account of primary goods in Rawls’s work)—exclude proper theorizing about persons as dependents as well as for dependency workers and fail to provide the conceptual tools for recognizing their needs as claims of justice. Kittay suggests one solution to these problems could include adding the capacity to care to the moral powers of persons as well as including “goods related to our interdependence in state of vulnerability in the index of primary goods” (Kittay 1999, 112). Bhandary takes up Kittay’s response and frames the first chapter in terms of the Rawls–Kittay debate. However, she departs from Kittay and offers her own account of the key issues and potential solutions aiming to recover Rawls.

In short, Bhandary argues that Kittay’s proposed solutions for a revised Rawlsian liberalism are inadequate because “they result in an incoherent theory when combined with other Rawlsian commitments” (25). Specifically, the suggestion of adding a third moral power fails to “include all utter dependents” (for example, those with extreme cognitive impairments [31]). Rather, Bhandary argues that by making the fact of human dependency known to deliberators in the original position, representatives in that position “will know to consider that they might be a dependent charge or a dependency worker” (32). Yet Bhandary does endorse the suggestion of adding

a sixth primary good, “receipt of care,” departing from her earlier view that the social bases of self-respect could cover this essential good (35). Moreover, against Kittay, Bhandary retains a commitment to “the separateness of persons” as necessary for theorizing about justice. Insofar as members of oppressed groups can have their needs “grafted” onto others or be ignored as not warranting response, maintaining the picture of persons as separate individuals and as self-authenticating sources of claims to justice is critical for redressing various forms of historical injustice. Thus Bhandary aims to stake out a unique view that takes on the substance of Kittay’s critique while saving Rawlsian liberalism and defending her modified view of “liberal dependency care” as capable of securing justice for dependents and their caregivers.

Before advancing her particular reconstruction of liberal justice, Bhandary offers an innovative conceptual tool for mapping the patterns of caregiving in a given society, so that we may better understand heretofore invisible contributions by women and women of color to this important area of social cooperation. She calls this tool “the arrow of care map” (chapter 3). By making transparent the actual patterns of caregiving, we are in a better position to acknowledge caregiving labor as a social good and track the ways in which some groups are subordinated vis-à-vis others in providing this good. Having such a map then enables us to evaluate caregiving arrangements from within the original position to determine whether they are fair or how we might reconstruct such arrangements to make them just.

Having offered a tool for conceptualizing caregiving arrangements within a particular society, Bhandary then turns to developing her account of liberal dependency care as employing the idea of hypothetical acceptability (from within a revised original position) to generate a set of constraining principles that offer practical guidance as to reform or restructuring caregiving relations in a given society (chapter 4). These principles include: a survival baseline principle (“that parties in the original position will share a desire to receive enough care to survive”), an antidisadvantage principle (that caregivers should not be disadvantaged in virtue of their being caregivers), “the no-correlation-to-disadvantaged-social-groups-principle” (self-explanatory), and “the limited-concentration principle” (rules out a small number of people as care providers). In the next chapter (chapter 5), she argues that “a necessary component of liberal dependency care’s contract theory device is to require people to develop a set of capacities that enable them to gain both increasing levels of ownership and critical understanding of their own values and cares” (95). In other words, existing societies need to advance the autonomy of their members in order to ensure both that they can represent their needs as matters of justice and that there is distributional equality with regard to care labor. These autonomy skills reflect a second layer to the contract device. As she puts it: “My defense of autonomy for real people” is part of a “two-level contract theory” so that “real-people” can “articulate their values and dissent in private and political contexts” (96–97). She defends a skills-based account of autonomy that she claims is compatible with the claim that “justice as fairness”/“liberal dependency care” is a political and not comprehensive liberalism. I won’t pursue this here, but I suspect many will find grounds to question whether the view Bhandary defends is, in fact, a political liberalism, for the account of autonomy may well venture into comprehensive territory.

Thus far I have outlined the key theoretical arguments that comprise part I of the book. Part II “concerns itself with the embeddedness of caregiving in actual personal, familial, and professional relationships” (115). Here Bhandary applies the insights from part I to our actual social arrangements of caregiving and offers several substantive

proposals for change. Her concerns range from defending the development of caregiving skills as a feature of human excellence (à la John Stuart Mill), the requirement to teach boys/men caregiving skills, and the practice of arranged marriage and cross-cultural patterns of care. There is much of interest here, and many liberal and care ethicists will find this portion of the book particularly compelling. For example, the discussion of Mill's ideals of human genius in the context of caregiving is especially original and interesting. Given the limited space of this review, I won't pursue further summary of the arguments of part II as I wish to now turn and critically engage with some arguments of part I.

I raise two concerns about Bhandary's account. I think the book would have been improved by a discussion of ideal theory, perhaps an opening chapter, offering arguments as to why she abandons ideal theory and how precisely to understand her view in light of its nonideal orientation. So, for example, she wants to retain the thought experiment of the original position, while altering the conditions behind the veil of ignorance by including facts about dependency and how dependency relations are structured in our current nonideal and oppressive circumstances. Thus, the representatives in the original position are choosing principles for us here and now, not citizens of a well-ordered society, and given the patterns of inequality in caregiving that structure our lives, not as they should be ideally structured within a well-ordered society. As Bhandary lays out this argument, she doesn't explicitly address these deviations from Rawls's methodology or project, except to say:

it is incumbent on me to clarify and defend the role of abstraction, and also show how my account is not subject to the pitfalls of ideal theory. . . . The arrow of care map is an abstraction that brackets numerous features of our lived experience of caregiving. It does not seek to characterize the complexity of lived experiences of care in relationships, nor does it represent the complexity of human agents. (57–58)

I am puzzled by this response. Particular abstractions, particular idealizations, and Rawls's formulation of "ideal theory" are all distinct matters. Abstracting away from particulars to develop a conceptual map of structural relations is one thing. Idealizing agents as rational or self- or other-regarding is quite another. And "ideal theory" comprises a very specific set of assumptions including notably that those in the original position are choosing principles for the basic structure of a well-ordered society characterized by strict compliance. Whether those assumptions are necessary to the project is a matter of debate, though in my view they illuminate what is distinct about Rawls's project, namely, investigating whether liberal justice is philosophically coherent, capable of ensuring stability, and able to sustain itself over time—that is, exploring the idea of democratic perfection. In any case, I think the book would have benefitted from a chapter on methodology, situating itself relative to the Rawlsian formulation of ideal theory and defending the specific departures as consistent with Rawls's view, or as reasons to more radically shift away from Rawls. In the end, I think that Bhandary's view so significantly departs from Rawls—in terms of the conceptualization of the original position, the work it is supposed to do concerning determining principles of justice, and the subjects for whom the representatives are choosing—that calling her view Rawlsian adds more confusion than clarity. It may well distract from evaluating the account of "liberal dependency care" on its own terms.

The second major concern is regarding her characterization of dependency care. Early in the book, she claims, “[w]hat differentiates dependency care from other forms of care is that the absence of dependency care rapidly results in the death of the dependent person” (1). And, as such, the information that is vital for representatives in the original position to know includes “the facts of dependency,” and that they “will want to secure the care needed to survive in normal conditions” (89). It is from these assumptions that the aforementioned principles of justice for caregiving are generated. The minimal assumption that representatives in the original position will merely want enough care to survive in normal conditions seems insufficient to generate the substance of the principles that follow. Of course, the representatives also know that they could be positioned as caregivers themselves and will seek principles that secure their freedom and equality as such. However, if the role of caregiver is indexed to the account of dependency care as enough for survival, we don’t capture the robust range of caregiving that exceeds this minimal standard. So it may be that the duties and tasks of caregivers are conceived of as rather minimal as well.

This book will be of interest to both liberals and care ethicists and will surely generate further considerations with respect to both the possibilities of liberalism for responding to concerns of dependency as well as care-ethics-oriented approaches to justice. Bhandary has staked out a unique position with respect to a myriad of issues within these debates and no doubt will provide a touchstone for others interested in reconciling the two positions.

## Reference

Kittay, Eva Feder. 1999. *Love’s labor: Essays on women, equality, and dependency*. New York: Routledge.

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