The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency

Eva Feder Kittay and Ellen K. Feder (eds.)

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, 2002, 336pp.

ISBN: 0742513637.

Contemporary Political Theory (2004) **3**, 358–360. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300147

Before freedom, there is dependency. With dependency comes the need for care. But who exactly does the bulk of life's caretaking? Why has caretaking work frequently gone unacknowledged as real 'labor' (and how have gender, race and class affected its treatment)? Can contemporary political theory effectively displace the ideologically-driven fiction of the citizen as a self-sufficient, independent individual and develop more secure principles and rights to protect dependents and their caretakers?

The 16 contributors to this volume raise such questions and insist upon collective attentiveness to the impoverishment and exploitation that often marks the lives of caretakers and their 'charges'. While tackling many issues from a distinctly feminist perspective, these contributors also provide reflections and proposals that are essential reading for any political theorist, philosopher or activist currently committed to a substantive vision of freedom and a progressive approach to social justice.

Part I provides conceptual analysis and historical insights into the meaning of dependency. Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon's notable genealogy explores 'registers' of dependency (related to economic, sociological, political and moral-psychological conditions (p. 16)) and how normative claims about those who appear dependent have shifted over time, especially in relation to the dominant discourse of liberal capitalism. The moral anxiety and economic marginalization of those labeled dependent (and now morally and psychologically deficient) in the current liberal welfare state are far from neutral or benign (see especially pp. 19–23). Essays by Iris Marion Young and Rickie Solinger reinforce this point, with Young exploring further the unfair disciplinary consequences for today's welfare recipients.

Robin West and Martha McCluskey frame Part II with their hopes for reshaping US law and classical economic theory. West, by reinterpreting the 14th Amendment as well as parental rights cases, argues forcefully for a (positive) constitutional right to care with increased material support for caretaking. McCluskey defends resource redistribution to caretakers as well, but believes this can come only after exposing the hypocritical and harmful underbelly of efficiency claims associated with neoclassical economics. McCluskey's work looks timely given US domestic politics and current global

trade agreements (many of which pressure developing countries to privatize services and increase burdens on families and women, as Ofelia Schutte's essay notes).

Can more comprehensive theories of justice envision broad principles that fairly distribute the all-too-human need to give and receive good care? Martha Nussbaum and Martha Fineman cover this terrain and are particularly interested in how principles of fairness should redress many unseen and inequitable distributions of care work within (private) family structures. Both demand that liberalism revisit justice within the family because family associations (contra John Rawls's claims of late — see pp. 198–200) differ from other voluntary associations: families do not allow members (certainly children) to exit with ease; they remain a key site for the development of citizen virtues; and they often fail to provide for what Nussbaum identifies as the good functioning capabilities (pp. 200–201) necessary for achieving free and equal personhood. Diemut Bubeck sympathizes with these efforts, but her essay from this section seems to tackle justice for caretakers by obligating all citizens to do a 'share' of community 'care service' over a lifetime. How to implement this is unclear, but the proposal opens a provocative conversation alongside other well-known contemporary readings on the subject of justice.

In Parts IV and V, we find discussions of caretaking in the face of vulnerabilities based on mental retardation, age, race, and sexuality. Contributors here include Robert Goodin and Diane Gibson, Dorothy Roberts, Kelly Oliver, Elizabeth Spelman, and Bonnie Mann, as well as the book's editors. Eva Kittay looks to rethink rationality, personhood and fairness in light of her labor of love for a child facing mental impairments. Her notion of 'doulia' (pp. 270–271) hopes to foster an ethical imperative that demands greater support for inevitable dependents as well as their derivatively dependent caregivers who often stand as advocates for the vulnerable and who themselves should not be subject to the vicissitudes of charity. Kittay's work is important to highlight given that so many writers in this volume have reacted with and against her larger work on the subject (especially Kittay, 1999). Ellen Feder, for example, brings Kittay's discussions about trust between a dependency worker and her 'charge' into discussions about relationships surrounding intersexed children and their expert-dependent parents. Through interviews with families and a critique of the mistrust generated by medical approaches to intersexed children, Feder not only applies Kittay's work in an interesting way but tackles unfair dependencies facing a population that deserves on-going attention.

If anything stands out after reading these essays, it is that so many have provided new, engaging conceptual and political insights into care (as an attitude, a practice, an obligation and a burden critical to the human condition) and that so many have moved the conversation beyond Carol

Gilligan's earlier, pivotal work (Gilligan, 1982). These reflections prompt many additional questions. How might we, more concretely, prepare for the problems and paradoxes emerging when the state gets involved with care (a question that might follow from Dorothy Robert's essay on the damage inflicted on many black families with children in state custody)? What would it mean to calculate and provide compensation and pensions for those who care for home and children? How much money exactly should we shift from, say, military budgets to support for the frail elderly (as Robert Goodin and Diane Gibson's essay might lead us to ask)? These questions give us only a sample of the important areas of inquiry that could flow from the work Kittay and Feder have collected in this wonderful volume.

Ellen Freeberg

New School for Social Research, New York, USA.

References

- Gilligan, C. (1982) *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kittay, E.F. (1999) *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency*, New York: Routledge.