

**Joan C. Tronto.** *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice.* New York: New York University Press, 2013. 256 pp. (\$75.00 cloth, \$24.00 paper).

I received my copy of *Caring Democracy* shortly before the birth of my son, which is how I happened to read it during a stay in the hospital. There could hardly be better circumstances for appreciating the argument of Joan Tronto's latest book. The contemporary American hospital is one of those sites we identify as a place for personal care that yet manages to feel, at least much of the time, impersonal and uncaring. Hierarchy is everywhere evident, decisions are made routinely without consultation or explanation, and as an institutional matter the bottom line is the bottom line: the first call I received after my child's arrival in the world was not from a well-wishing family member or friend, but from the hospital cashier, wanting to make sure I knew where to pay my \$250 deductible and reminding me to do so before I went home. So sign me up as a believer in what Tronto says here: we have deficit of care in this country, and we have a deficit of democracy in this country, and those two facts are interlinked.

In her earlier work, particularly *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, Tronto established herself as a preeminent voice among "theorists of care," and much of what she says about care and caring here will be familiar to readers who have already encountered her thinking. Where *Caring Democracy* gets really interesting, then, is in its contribution to contemporary democratic theory.

Essentially, Tronto asks us to reject the common contemporary conception of democracy. That conception, rooted in the liberal notion of human beings as autonomous and coherent selves, actually fosters discriminatory attitudes and policies. For in its privileging – its romanticizing – of independence, the liberal account of democracy demeans dependence; the more we take independence to be a starting point or standard, the more we become inclined to discount or disparage those individuals, groups, and communities that seem to us in any way needy.

That kind of uncaring – manifested not just in neglect but often in cruelty – at the level of perception and policy points to a more fundamental failing with the standard liberal account of the self: it fails to capture who we are and what our lives are like. "While individuals, and their liberty, can still matter greatly, it makes little sense to think of individuals as if they were Robinson Crusoe, all alone, making decisions," she writes. "Instead, all individuals constantly work in, through, or away from, relationships with others, who, in turn, are in differing states of providing or needing care from them." All human beings are "vulnerable and fragile" creatures who are both "givers and receivers of care," shifting in our "needs and capacities for care" over the course of our lives (pp. 30-31).

To be fair, this emphasis on human relationality is not a new one. As Tronto herself notes, it is a standard starting point for feminist theorists in general and the feminist ethic of care in particular. And I hear even more distant echoes in Tronto's account of our selves; her argument calls to mind John Winthrop's claim, in *A Model of Christian Charity*, that God made us all have need of each other, and that in seeing our shared condition of dependence, we are meant to see that we are equal.

But Tronto does something other than just suggest that, theoretically speaking, democracy is most properly grounded in this relational sense of ourselves. She shows that,

absent such a grounding, democratic life is in practice enervated if not eviscerated. As long as we fail to recognize our own mutual dependence, we fail to care adequately about ourselves, about each other, and about democracy itself. “Care needs a home in democratic political theory,” she tells us, “and democratic political theory remains incomplete without a way to explain where and how care gets done in a democratic society.” But more tangibly, care needs to find its footing in the “contemporary political world, where a clear and anti-democratic account of how to solve the care problem has become a cornerstone of neoliberal political ideology” (p. 37). This is no small task, as Tronto recognizes, because “we have got things backwards now.” We habitually fail to recognize that “the purpose of economic life is to support care, not the other way around” (p. 170). Our thinking, our acting, our institutions, and the way we spend our time need to change if we are to have the caring democracy that is a more truly just democracy.

Tronto tries to avoid making too many specific proposals about how we might start making those changes; she says she does not want to fall into the trap, all too common among democratic theorists, of claiming to value democratic decision-making while simultaneously asserting what it is that the people should decide. That is an admirable stance, and yet it leaves open some serious questions about whether achieving a caring democracy is possible in anything like current global conditions, just given the sheer scale of the modern state.

For example, Tronto recognizes that good care is particularistic and pluralistic; we want to be cared for by people who truly want to be caring for us, and we do not want to be cared for according to a rote, standardized model. But of course, a state as big as our own inclines toward large-scale, standardizing “solutions” to problems, and perhaps appropriately so; there are serious logistical difficulties that inhere in trying to respect particularity *and* guarantee some kind of equity when you are trying to make policy for a mass society. (The impersonality of neoliberalism allows it to thrive in conditions of vast and global scale; the interpersonality of good caring does not.) Absent a return to family-centered care, which Tronto deems a nostalgic and incomplete vision of things, one is left wondering what kinds of institutions – indeed, what kind of state and world – Tronto imagines.

At times she seems to indicate that we could do much within the contours of our current politics. The few policy ideas Tronto does put forth – like making prisons into sites of care rather than condemnation, and aligning the length of school days with the length of work days, and implementing some form of national service – are good ones, and they far from require a fundamental reconfiguration of the state. But elsewhere, as I have indicated, she seems to stipulate that creating a caring democracy would require a far more radical overhaul.

In any case, *Caring Democracy*, in its return to foundational questions about the nature and purpose of democracy, in its own thoughtful analysis about what justice and human life require, is a book that itself merits serious – and caring – attention.

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