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Care, democracy and ‘being part of the story’

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ABSTRACT

Standard notions of democracy assume people’s equality. This poses a dilemma for conceptualising democracy in the context of caregiving and receiving among asymmetrically positioned people. One way to overcome this dilemma is to generalise dependency as a universal human condition. However, addressing how democracy is possible among unequally situated people is necessary for developing a distinctive theory of democracy that takes the fact of human dependency seriously. To this end, I develop an expanded conception of democracy that goes beyond the individual exercise of voice to that of interacting with others according to an ethic of care that supports the autonomy of others. Drawing on Hannah Arendt’s notion of a ‘common world’ as a web of narratives arising from the complex interaction of plural perspectives, I argue that democracy conceived as ‘being part of the story’ can foster such an ethic. This has practical relevance for societies where the sites of social cooperation are shifting from employment to care.

KEYWORDS Democracy; ethic of care; relational autonomy; Hannah Arendt

Introduction

The aim of this essay is to develop a conception of democracy in contexts of caregiving and receiving. Although the relationship between care and justice has been a central topic of concern among care theorists, the relationship between care and democracy has been undertheorised.¹ Nevertheless, the latter has practical and normative significance. First, in contrast to what some call the ‘demise of contemporary work’ (Breen & Deranty, 2021),² post-industrial pressures such as the end of the male breadwinner model and demographic ageing have led to rising demands for care (Fraser, 1997). This means that while work in the sphere of capitalist production may be demising as a locus of meaningful economic and social participation for a growing portion of the population, care is increasingly highlighted as an important

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site of people's social cooperation and contribution (Althorpe & Finneron-Burns, 2024; Breen & Deranty, 2021).³ Second, from a normative perspective, feminist and care theorists have long problematised how the exclusion of care from public justice has led to the disenfranchisement of carers and those with dependency needs (Kittay, 1999). Due to these practical and normative considerations, the social arrangement of care is being recentred as a matter of public and political concern.

One reason that relating democracy and care is difficult is because of the unequal power relationships inherent to care. While standard notions of democracy are based on the idea of people's equality, relations of care and dependency assume the opposite. This poses the dilemma of how to conceive of democracy among asymmetrically situated and differently empowered individuals. One way to overcome this dilemma is to generalise dependency as a universal human condition (Tronto, 2013). However, in this essay, I argue that addressing how democracy is both necessary and possible among unequally situated people is crucial for developing a distinctive theory of democracy that takes the fact of human dependency seriously. Thus, the conception of democracy I develop involves differently empowered people in associational contexts organised around the giving and receiving of care rather than in a generalised context of social cooperation on a society-wide level. Nevertheless, this kind of associational democracy can have society-wide implications.⁴

In addition, dependency can either be inevitable or structurally caused (Kittay, 1999, 2015). In the real world, correcting structural inequalities requires the collective agency of the dominated and oppressed. Yet, how can vulnerable and disempowered people in structurally disadvantaged positions participate in democratic processes to improve their situation? Drawing on the insights of 'relational autonomy' theorists who emphasise the relational basis of autonomy as self-determination, I develop an account of democracy that starts, not from already autonomous individuals who can make their claims in the public sphere, but from establishing the conditions for caring interactions which promote the voices of others – especially silenced minorities – to form and express their views on collective matters. By drawing on Arendt's (1958/1998) notion of a 'common world' as the web of human relationships and narratives that arises from the complex interaction of plural perspectives, I argue that 'being part of the story' enables people to care for others in ways that contribute to the democratic inclusion of differently situated people.

This essay is organised as follows. The next section considers the complex relationship between care, democracy and autonomy. After critically examining Asha Bhandary's (2019) 'strong procedural' argument which argues for educational interventions to develop the autonomy skills of the structurally oppressed, I advance a 'collective procedural argument', which emphasises

the importance of democracy as a collective practice for establishing the relational basis of people's autonomy and as a procedure for social change. Section III then develops an associative conception of democracy as people's participation in the creation of a web of human relationships and interwoven narratives by drawing on Arendt's (1958/1998) notion of a common world that arises from the complex interactions of differently positioned people. I argue that democracy as the collective power to create such a common world can foster an ethic of care among people implicated in that process. Section IV goes on to discuss this notion of democracy in relation to different ideas of 'being at home' in the world. I argue that 'being part of the story' is necessary for everyone – not just the privileged – to be 'at home' in the world. The final section concludes.

Care, democracy and autonomy

In its widest formulation, care involves the activity of meeting human needs.⁵ Beyond this, care is notoriously difficult to define. As Eva Feder Kittay (2015, p. 52) notes, on the one hand, care is discussed as something 'akin to a commodity, something people need and desire that can be of varying quality, distributed fairly or unfairly, and in adequate or inadequate doses.' As a distributable benefit, care could be conceptualised as some form of in-kind *service* such as childcare or healthcare. Care *work* for providing such services is also a benefit or burden of social cooperation subject to the principles of distributive justice (Kittay, 2015, p. 53). On the other hand, we also understand care quintessentially to be a moral value with normative content: 'In its purely normative sense, care means what we mean when we speak of "good care." It is the virtues, obligations and consequences of good care that are delineated by an ethic of care and which derive from practices in which care is done well' (Kittay, 2015, p. 52). For Joan Tronto (2013, pp. 34–35), the 'ethical qualities' of care include attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness in receiving care. In discussing how care interacts with democracy, I refer to care mainly as an ethic which governs how individuals are to interact with and relate to one another. Specifically, I discuss an ethic of care in terms of interacting with others in ways that support and promote their autonomy whenever possible.⁶ Nevertheless, it should be noted that the different dimensions of care – care as a distributable benefit or burden on the one hand, and as an ethic on the other – are not always easy to separate since we think that care *services* or care *work* ought to be provided according to an *ethic* of care, while an *ethic* of care moves us to undertake the actual hands-on tasks of meeting others' needs.

The relationship between care, autonomy and democracy is complex. The standard liberal notion of democracy assumes equally situated, autonomous individuals who make claims on one another on collective matters (Anderson,

1999; Christiano, 2008). By contrast, care assumes that people are asymmetrically situated in terms of their capacities for autonomous self-direction, whether because of 'inevitable' dependencies, or structurally produced opportunities (Kittay, 1999, 2015; Mackenzie et al., 2014a).⁷ While this does not deny people's equal moral status, real-life asymmetries in social relations are precisely why care is both necessary and possible. While some people need the care of others, others must be able to respond to them for care to take place.

Because of this inherent asymmetry, care theorists have argued for the necessity of measures to protect against both domination and oppression in caring relationships (Kittay, 1999, 2015; Tronto, 2013). Those with dependency needs are vulnerable in relation to the caregiver who has the power to provide or withdraw their care (Kittay, 1999). At the same time, those who provide care can also become vulnerable since their moral obligation to care for their charge often requires them to postpone or deny their own needs (Bhandary, 2019; Kittay, 1999). Because care is a necessity which cannot be left unfulfilled, care providers have no choice but to meet the dependency needs of their charge. To this end, a caregiver can become vulnerable to 'having her substance grafted onto another', as well as structurally placed in positions of disadvantage when social arrangements fail to account for the fact of human dependency (Kittay, 1999, p. 35). In the real world, these structural injustices are often played out in gendered and racialised ways (Bhandary, 2019).

Tronto's (2013) influential account of caring democracy presents democracy as the institutional arrangement for countering this problem. Her main thesis is that 'democratic politics should center upon assigning responsibilities for care, and for ensuring that democratic citizens are as capable as possible of participating in this assignment of responsibilities' (Tronto, 2013, p. 30). By centering care as a subject matter of democratic politics and bringing disenfranchised groups to the democratic table, the goal is to lift out the allocation of caring responsibilities from the private sphere of individual responsibility, foreground it as a matter of public justice, and ultimately to reform social institutions in ways consistent with it. The problem with Tronto's account, however, is that it sidesteps the initial dilemma of how to deal with power differentials inherent to care which Tronto herself acknowledges to be at odds with democratic equality (Tronto, 2013, p. 33). Tronto's strategy for making care and democracy compatible is to generalise human dependency based on the idea that we are all interdependent as caregivers and receivers over a complete life.⁸ While this is undeniably true from a macro perspective, it abstracts from the real power inequalities in actual contexts where caregiving and receiving take place. This occludes the ways in which democracy can function to protect against domination and oppression in these contexts. If democracy

in some form is necessary to track the needs of dependents or to prevent the oppression of carers, we need an argument for how democracy is possible, not *because* we are equal, but *in spite of* our inequalities in needs and social positions.

How is democracy possible among unequally situated people? Asha Bhandary's (2019) 'two-level contract theory' in her theory of liberal dependency care recognises the distance between ideal principles of just care and people's real-world inequalities. For Bhandary, education for developing autonomy and caregiving skills is the link between her ideal theory, which justifies the principles of just care based on a modified Rawlsian hypothetical agreement, and her non-ideal theory, which involves a second-level contract by people in the real world to eliminate epistemic biases in identifying the actual content of those principles. Bhandary (2019) argues that education in autonomy skills, which involve capacities for critical reflection and self-determination,⁹ is necessary for enabling carers and those in need of care critically to evaluate their social situation and make claims on one another. Thus, she promotes public education for autonomy skills so that silenced minorities can push back against oppression.¹⁰ In addition, she argues for early educational interventions for 'teaching the foundational skills of caregiving to those who have not previously possessed them' so that caregiving can become more socially dispersed (Bhandary, 2019, p. 139).¹¹ In this way, Bhandary's theory adopts 'strong proceduralism', which emphasises cultivating individual choice and agency for social transformation rather than prescribing any particular care arrangement.

While I agree that the capacity of the oppressed to form critical views on social arrangements and exercise their voice is important for realising just care arrangements, my contention is that formal education for autonomy is insufficient for this purpose. Bhandary (2019) rejects the relational conception of the person adopted by care ethicists as unable to protect the vulnerable against both external and internalised oppression at the level of theory formation. But while she criticises care theorists for conflating persons in the real world with model contractors in the original position, she missteps in the opposite direction by construing her action-guiding principles based on a model of the separateness of persons. Instead, a real-world strategy for developing people's autonomy must acknowledge the connection between human relationality and individual autonomy as self-determination.

To make this case, let me draw on the arguments of relational autonomy theorists who reject the dichotomy between people's autonomy and their embeddedness in social relations (Cf. Christman, 2004; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000; Mackenzie et al., 2014b). For Mackenzie (2014, p. 43), relational autonomy encapsulates the idea that the complex psychological, emotional and rational capacities that self-determination involve

emerges developmentally and are sustained and exercised in the context of significant relationships, and hence, that such relationships are necessary background enabling conditions of autonomy. This explains why, on a relational view, there need be no inconsistency between autonomy and interpersonal relationships of dependence and interdependence.

Furthermore, she argues that 'An adequate ethics of vulnerability must give central place to the obligation not just to respect but also to foster autonomy. Otherwise discourse of vulnerability and protection may open the door to objectionably paternalistic and coercive forms of intervention' (Mackenzie, 2014, p. 33). Many care theorists share the view that fostering people's autonomy is an important part of good care that is necessary for protecting against paternalism and domination. The insight of these relational autonomy and care theorists is not that autonomy is unimportant, but that people are not autonomous from the start; rather, their autonomy must be nurtured and supported through social relations.

While Bhandary conceptualises autonomy as a set of skills as opposed to a matter of structural conditions, personal and social relationships are fundamental to the development of people's capacities – their autonomy skills – to form and pursue their ends. Drawing on attachment theory, Daniel Engster (2021) has recently argued that the emotional security that comes from secure attachments in early life is integral to people's sense of self-respect and self-worth without which autonomous self-direction would be impossible. Thus, he argues that caring relationships are constitutive of people's freedom. In fact, the same may be said of people's capacity to care, for it is difficult to imagine how people can develop their other-regarding capacities and dispositions without the experience first of receiving care in and through caring relationships.¹²

Bhandary (2019, p. 112) argues that 'public education should design curricula to teach basic autonomy skills'. Although it is not clear what the exact content of this curricula would be, my point from the arguments of relational autonomy theorists above is that formal education appears insufficient for the development of people's capacity for autonomy as well as that for care.¹³ Although the design of school curricula is also important, both the capacities for autonomy and care are rooted in emotional and psychological foundations such as a secure sense of self, self-respect, confidence and independence, the development of which are dependent on the nature of people's human relationships. These are dispositions which cannot simply be imparted or taught through 'educational interventions'. Rather, they require more diffuse and accumulated experiences of caregiving and receiving in relations with others. If this is the case, a procedural argument for enabling people to make claims to transform social arrangements cannot be separated from an account of the relational conditions for the development of the emotional and psychological foundations of autonomy.¹⁴ This requires

a collective approach since it involves establishing the background conditions that enable people to relate to one another in ways that promote one another's autonomy. To distinguish from Bhandary's individualistic proceduralism, let me call this a *collective procedural* account for social change. It is procedural because it does not define a particular just outcome, but it is collective because the process for achieving those outcomes requires the cooperation and participation of many people to establish the conditions for the structurally disadvantaged to be able to express their views.

Democracy is at once a collective practice which requires the participation of plural individuals as well as a political procedure for producing collective outcomes. Thus, transforming social arrangements in ways that reflect the views of everyone requires a theory of democracy as a collective practice for enabling differently situated individuals – especially oppressed minorities – to develop and exercise their autonomy. This requires expanding the notion of democracy from a decision-making procedure that respects people independently as autonomous agents, to one which supports the relational basis of people's autonomy. While liberal theorists also recognise the importance of social conditions for the 'equal worth of political liberties' (Rawls, 2001, p. 149), a relational approach requires more than the material basis of equality and involves human relationships and social interactions which are conducive to the formation and expression of plural perspectives.¹⁵ In short, it requires a conception of democracy that enables people to interact with one another according to an ethic of care that promotes the autonomy of others. The next section sets out to develop such a conception of democracy.

Democracy as creating a common world with others

Although democracy comes in many forms, the conception of democracy I wish to advance can be called an 'associative' conception of democracy.¹⁶ There are two senses in which this account of democracy is associative. The first simply involves the context within which democracy takes place: within associations of people coming together for a common purpose.¹⁷ While there are various kinds of associations in civil society, the kinds of associations I specifically have in mind involve various citizen-led projects aimed at collective problem solving and need fulfilment (Cf. Hendriks & Dzur, 2022; Ostrom, 1990). Examples include associations formed for the purpose of community care by local citizens in areas such as elder care or childcare, self-organised projects and cooperative organisations among community members and service users to meet their common needs for housing, job-creation, social inclusion and empowerment, among others. Thinking of democracy in associations organised around need-fulfilment is important for my purpose because these are the situated contexts where actual, rather than general, caring needs and responsibilities arise. Yet, the responsibility for meeting

these needs extend beyond dyadic relations between a carer and dependent. In other words, they are also contexts that give rise to questions of collective organisation among people with both inevitable and socially produced asymmetries in needs and powers. Although equal voting rights may be a part of the final decision-making process, more emphasis is placed on the deliberative and communicative aspects of collective will formation. So long as this process is democratic, it should involve the participation of all members.

The second sense in which this conception of democracy is associative has to do with the way power is exercised; individually, or in concert. One way to conceptualise democracy is in terms of the equal distribution of 'power over', or the power to enforce one's will over others.¹⁸ By distributing 'power over' equally among individuals, democratic procedures recognise people's equal status as independent, self-governing agents capable of forming and expressing their views on common affairs. Although these procedures produce collective outcomes, each individual exercises decision-making power independently of the actions of others (Klein, 2022, p. 34).¹⁹ By contrast, 'power with' is the ability to achieve collective outcomes with the assistance of others.²⁰ The argument I want to advance is that associative democracy as the exercise of collective power through joint action among people with different perspectives can contribute to building the relational basis of care that supports and promotes the autonomy of others. This argument is inspired by Arendt's (1958/1998) theorisation of a 'common world' understood as the mediating web of narratives and relationships that arise from people's speech and actions.²¹

Arendt may not be a conventional theorist to turn to for understanding the conditions for an ethic of care.²² She famously despised the tasks associated with contemporary definitions of care that centre on maintaining and reproducing for fulfilling life's necessities as 'unproductive' and 'futile' labour (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 87). Such labour required the services of unfree slaves and women enforced through violence in order to enable citizens to be free in the public realm (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 84). While Arendt fully recognised the importance of need-fulfillment for human beings, she regarded it strictly as a prepolitical matter (Myers, 2013).

Nevertheless, there are growing attempts to find connections between Arendt's theory and care, especially centering on her conception of *amor mundi* or love of the world. Love of the world has been interpreted as care for the shared reality that arises between plural individuals in a space of common appearance.²³ Chaberty and Lemaitre (2022) argue that Tronto's focus on the political conditions of care provision – as opposed to care as a dyadic relation – can reconcile Arendt's care for the world with care as needs-fulfillment. By contrast, Sophie Cloutier (2023) argues that Tronto's care theory and Arendt's *amor mundi* differ on the objects of care. While the object of care

for the former, even in its political dimension, is human beings and their needs, that for the latter is the common world itself as a common space of appearance for individuals to reveal their unique perspectives which are irreducible to their needs.²⁴ Ella Myers (2013) also distinguishes Arendt's care for the world with care for a person or persons. Myers (2013) interprets Arendtian care for the world as being directed towards 'third terms', or worldly objects – including the complex web of human interactions – that shape the conditions of people's lives. At the same time, she argues against Arendt that the conditions for need-fulfillment can and ought to be a proper focus of democratic solidarities and contestation.

The debate concerning the relationship between Arendtian politics and care theory has thus centred on the question of the difference or convergence between the two in terms of the objects of care: persons or the 'world' understood as some form of objective condition of people's lives. I take a different approach in that my focus is not, in the first instance, on the object of democratic care, but on *how* democracy as a collaborative *process* can contribute to caring relations between persons. While Arendt saw need fulfillment in the private sphere as a condition for freedom in the public sphere, my argument is that freedom in the public sphere is a condition to care, not only for the world, but also for other people. Ultimately, I argue that caring for other people stands in a mutually reinforcing relationship with caring for democracy and the common world.

Arendt argues that the appearance of plural perspectives when people assemble to speak and act in one another's presence gives rise to an objective reality between them. This shared world constitutes the public realm. Without this shared world between us as a common reference point, we become isolated as private individuals with only our inner, subjective experiences. Moreover, the objective and shared quality of the common world relies on the fact that people see the same thing from different perspectives: 'Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position' (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 57).

At one level, the objective reality that is shared among people consists of the specific matters they are discussing about – their 'worldly interests' (Arendt, 1998 [1958], p. 182). Myers (2013) discussion of 'worldly things' as focal points of democratic politics centres on such objective worldly interests, whether they be material conditions or immaterial practices, institutions or culture. Such common interests serve as reference points around which people unite in associations to achieve common goals, or as sites of contestation against which they claim their different views and perspectives.

Yet, the product of democratic discussions is more than the actual matters being discussed. This consists of something less tangible, yet no less real, which Arendt (1998 [1958], p. 183) describes as a 'web of human

relationships' that mediates social relations. Here, what is emphasised is the 'agent-revealing capacity' of speech and action (Arendt, 1998 [1958], p. 182). Through revealing one's thoughts and experiences to others, people become recognised by others as individuals with these thoughts and these perspectives, and in doing so, step out of their private existence and become part of something shared. In addition, disclosing one's perspectives through speech and acts is to insert oneself into an ongoing process in which different people's words and deeds mutually affect each other to produce unexpected consequences. Speaking and acting in concert is thus to partake in the creation of an interwoven story which is constantly renewed through the interventions of new perspectives. Although the objective subject matter of discussion is one important dimension of the common world that situates people in relation to one another, the intangible human relationships and 'web of narratives'²⁵ that arise from people's interactions regarding those matters constitute a kind of 'meta-common world' beyond the actual topics discussed and decisions made.

My argument is that democracy understood as the process of creating a world according to this second dimension – as the web of narratives that mediates social relations – can contribute to establishing the relational basis of care in ways that prevent domination and support the autonomy of differently situated people. The first reason is that the mediating web of ongoing interactions can relate people to others without assuming prior commonality among them. Caring about other people requires a sense of being related and connected to them through sharing something in common. Yet, assuming some kind of prior commonality can conflict with plurality, which is the basis of both democracy and non-dominating care.²⁶ The idea of 'world as intermediary' suggests that what is commonly shared need not exist prior to people's interactions. Rather, the shared narratives and social relations mediated through them emerge as a *result* of people's interactions (Ferguson, 2012). At the same time, the mediating power of a common world requires the ongoing practice of democratic exchange, since it resides in the active practice of being among, and of acting and discussing together with, plural individuals rather than in the end-products of these practices.

Second, participating in the process of creating an interactive narrative with others is to exercise 'power with' understood as the collective potentiality to 'establish relations and create new realities' (Arendt, 1998 [1958], p. 200). Participating in this process is a source of empowerment for individuals since it enables them to achieve collective outcomes which one could not achieve in isolation. As Klein (2022, p. 34) argues, 'collective power cannot be distributed at the *individual level*, because it presupposes an ongoing *cooperative* activity, even as we may still say that an individual's power is enhanced by cooperation'. The power to create a shared story requires

people's continuing interactions and extinguishes when they cease to act together.²⁷ Hence, sustaining the potentiality of this power requires institutionalising the ongoing appearance of plural perspectives through furthering democracy in social institutions.

Here, we can make a connection between Arendt's conceptualisation of *amor mundi* and caring for other people. As already noted above, existing studies distinguish between the two objects of care. According to Cloutier (2023, p. 33), 'Arendt's *amor mundi* contrasts with Tronto's political concept of care as it is directed toward the common world and not toward the needs of individuals interacting in this world'. For Myers (2013, p. 87), 'Care for the world, as an ethical concept, draws on ordinary definitions of what it means to care, but it also marks a departure from conventional usage, where the implied object of care is another human being'. Yet, according to their readings of Arendt, *amor mundi* involves 'attention to plurality and the web of relationships that constitutes the common world' (Cloutier, 2023, p. 33). This involves deepening and expanding democracy to enable the appearance of as many viewpoints as possible. According to Myers (2013, p. 125), 'Caring for the world as a potential intermediary means fostering practices and building institutions that provide as many citizens as possible with meaningful opportunities to articulate their innumerable perspectives in the presence of one another and to influence the conditions under which they live'. This involves countering marginalisation by 'creating opportunities for citizens to interact with one another in ways that allow aspects of the world to come into focus as shared, disputed objects between them, sites of contentious commonality' (Myers, 2013, pp. 125–126). What kind of interaction between citizens would allow for the articulation of unheard voices and hidden perspectives? This, it seems to me, would be none other than ones based on an ethic of care which not only respects people's autonomy, but also supports and cultivates it. Instead of assuming equally autonomous individuals, an ethic of care involves actively engaging with others to nurture their capacities to form and claim their needs in the public sphere. By enabling previously hidden perspectives to come into view, interacting according to an ethic of care which enables the autonomy of others would strengthen inclusive citizen power. Thus, caring for other people in the sense of enabling their autonomy is also to care for the world of common appearance.

Let me now take stock. I have argued that democracy as an interactive process of creating a shared reality with others contributes to establishing the relational basis of caring for other people in ways that support their autonomy. The reasons given are that first, the web of complex interactions and their recursive consequences serve as an intermediary that relates and connects people without assuming prior commonality among them. Hence, it can establish relations in a way that is compatible with plurality. Second, democracy as people's participation in the

creation of their interwoven narratives leads to their collectively enabled empowerment. Because democracy as the collective power to achieve something in concert is sustained and strengthened by the inclusion of plural perspectives, enhancing democracy and caring in the sense of enabling the autonomy of others stand in a mutually reinforcing relationship. Caring for democracy is to care for other people in non-dominating ways.

This argument for why democracy is good for caring relations differs from existing arguments in the following ways. First, it differs from an equality-based argument which holds that democracy is the best decision-making procedure for arranging social institutions in ways that recognise people's equal status as care receivers (Tronto, 2013). As already argued, this argument generalises human dependency so that it obscures how democracy can counter domination and oppression in actual contexts of caregiving and receiving characterised by power asymmetries.

Second, it differs from an epistemic argument which holds that democracy is the best decision-making procedure for arriving at just decisions about care by pooling as many perspectives as possible. One example is Iris Marion Young's (2000) notion of communicative democracy, which holds that the inclusion and recognition of differentiated social perspectives ought to be considered as an important resource for social justice. Our perspectives are limited by our social positions in relation to different issues. Young (2000, p. 109) argues that drawing on the situated knowledge of people in different social positions enables a democratic public to maximise its 'social knowledge', which improves the quality of public discussions and leads to decisions which take the needs, interests and perspectives of everyone more thoroughly into account. Although the idea that plurality is a source of expanded social knowledge and better judgement is plausible and important, a problem is that knowledge itself may not be sufficient to motivate people to care about others.²⁸ Although Young argues that being exposed to different perspectives can help to revise parochial views, those in powerful positions can still *choose* not to see and hear or use their power and resources to justify and promote their own perspectives.²⁹

Instead, the account I have given can be characterised as an *empowerment-based argument* for democracy as a condition to care. A conception of democracy as joint action enables people to care for others because 'being part of the story' cannot be achieved in isolation and is only made possible through the interactions of multiple people. That is, an individual's collectively enabled power and influence depend on the inclusion and participation of other people. In this sense, caring to enable the autonomy of others also to participate in this process does not conflict with an individual's own power, and in fact, can enhance it by expanding the reach and potential of the reality that is shared among them.

Being at home as ‘being part of the story’

The previous section explored an expanded conception of democracy, which goes beyond democracy as self-government, to the notion of democracy as the power to co-create a common world through establishing relationships that nurture and enable the autonomy of others. In this section, I now want to place this argument in the context of different conceptions of ‘being at home’ in the world. My aim is to show that the idea of ‘being part of the story’ through one’s appearance and influence in a web of narratives with others enables everyone – not just the privileged – to be ‘be at home’ in the world.

Thomas Christiano (2008) argues from a liberal perspective that democracy upholds people’s fundamental interests in ‘being at home’ in the world. For Christiano (2008, p. 61), being at home in the world ‘is a condition in which one has a sense of fit, connection, and meaning in the world one lives in’; it means living in a world that confirms to one’s values. While part of these values consists of ‘modes of life’ to which people are accustomed to, they also extend to people’s judgements about justice:

Individuals have interests in the world they live in confirming to their judgements. Each citizen has a fundamental interest in having a sense of being properly at home in the society in which he lives. To the extent that a person sees himself as being treated as an equal, he has the sense of being properly at home in an egalitarian world. (Christiano, 2008, p. 62)

Living in a world that confirms to people’s sense of justice is an important part of being at home in the world. But given pervasive disagreements about justice, and since no one has the right to have their judgements prioritised over those of others, democracy is the best option for enabling people to perceive that their judgements were given equal consideration.³⁰ In other words, it prevents people’s alienation from the project of justice of their society. Christina Lafont (2019, pp. 19–21) builds on Christiano’s account of ‘being at home’ as non-alienation from justice to develop her argument on the ideal of democratic self-determination. According to Lafont (2019, p. 21), citizens ‘have a fundamental interest in not being forced to *blindly defer* to political decisions made by others that they cannot reflectively endorse as reasonable ...’. The democratic ideal of self-government requires that the substantive content of laws and policies align with people’s judgements about justice, as well as that they participate in the process of making them. Both Christiano’s (2008) account of ‘being at home’ as living according to rules that confirm to one’s sense of justice and Lafont’s (2019) ideal of democratic self-government centre on citizens’ ability to reflectively endorse self-legislated laws and policies.

Outside of the context of democratic theory, Bhandary (2019) also advances an account of ‘being at home’ in relation to a society’s care arrangements. Because caregiving arrangements are indispensable for any

society, it constitutes the 'spine of culture' around which social meanings and interpersonal relationships are structured (Bhandary, 2019, p. 180). 'being at home' in this context refers to a valued state where a person is able to 'retain a harmonious relationship between his social form and his position in it' (Bhandary, 2019, p. 185).³¹ There are two dimensions to this harmonious relationship with one's social form. The first is a context of intelligibility, or a 'shared matrix of understanding that makes actions intelligible to one another' (Bhandary, 2019, p. 186). The second involves the justness of the social arrangement which dictates one's access to primary goods such as wealth and income, opportunities and care. People's access to these material and social resources will vary according to their social locations within their social form. This means that although everyone is likely to be invested in their social forms as a context of intelligibility and intimate relationships structured through them, the state of 'being at home' is not distributed equally. More privileged members who benefit from the system will feel more comfortable in the world, while those who bear its burdens are more likely to welcome social change.

Let me now consider these two accounts of 'being at home' in turn. While I fully endorse the liberal argument that making and obeying just laws is important for the democratic ideal of self-government, the account of democratic participation for creating a common world delineated in the previous section places more emphasis on the interactive dynamics of the process of creating a shared story with others. Being at home in the world means not so much being able to endorse laws and policies, but 'being part of the story'. In other words, connection with the world is achieved through the active exercise of the power to shape the world in concert with others rather than through rational acceptance of the outcomes of those processes. 'Being at home in the world' according to the liberal conception can be interpreted as 'being at home with oneself' insofar as people can live in alignment with one's own judgements about justice. By contrast, 'Being at home in the world' according to the Arendtian view is distinctly relational since it involves one's presence and influence within a network of social relations through being seen and heard by others. My contention is that this sense of belonging in a web of human relationships is important for the development of our other-regarding capacities. While democracy as self-government is important for respecting people as ends in themselves, it may not necessarily contribute to establishing relations or building solidarity among participants. Conversely, democracy as joint action for creating a shared story contributes to a sense of connection with others who are also implicated in that process. Having opportunities to influence the narrative can foster people's moral capacity to care insofar as it empowers people to think beyond oneself to how other people are intertwined in the shared stories that they have the power to shape and change together.

Meanwhile, the dilemma in Bhandary's account is that the state of 'being at home' is unevenly distributed: social arrangements benefit some while burdening and disadvantaging others. This uneven distribution of benefits and burdens attached to different social positions will be a constant state in any non-ideal world. It would then seem that only the privileged can truly be at home in the world, while others will either be forced to accept injustices to maintain their place in society or to sacrifice their valued relationships.³² To overcome this dilemma, 'being part of the story' is a better way to conceptualise 'being at home' in the world. What is important for being at home in this sense is not being *comfortable* with social arrangements, but having the power to *influence* the common world that one shares with others, even if – or perhaps even *because*—current social arrangements are unjust. This involves one's presence and participation in a network of social relations and narratives that arise in relation to matters of common concern. Arendt's account of the powerlessness of 'private man' is telling in this regard. According to Arendt (1958/1998, p. 58), 'The privation of privacy lies in the absence of others; as far as they are concerned private man does not appear, and therefore it is as though he did not exist. Whatever he does remains without significance and consequence to others, and what matters to him is without interest to other people'. Without opportunities to be seen and heard by people outside of one's private life, people cannot be related to an objective reality and to others through it. The world beyond their intimate circle then comes to appear as other peoples' business which they are not a part of. This lack of public recognition and influence is internalised by the excluded, making them retreat further into their private lives and deepening their alienation from public affairs. By contrast, belonging in the world requires being able to shape the narrative together with others.

This is not to deny that just social arrangements are important for the state of being at home. Members of disadvantaged and marginalised groups are surely more likely to experience alienation from their society. However, first, as I have already noted, unequal social positions will always be a part of any non-ideal society so that some people will have better fit with their society than others: there will always be a need to improve and transform existing arrangements to become more just. Second, there is a case to be made that being part of the process of creating a just world is equally, if not more, important than simply living within a fair society made and controlled by others if one is to have a sense of belonging in it. Because social injustice and exclusions have roots in power structures and social relations, distributively just outcomes cannot compensate for inequalities in power and status.³³ Hence, the agency of those who are subject to injustice themselves is vital for transforming the very structures and relations that perpetuate their subordination and oppression (Deveaux, 2021). Playing a part in transforming those structures is just as

important as just outcomes for the self-respect and dignity of the structurally oppressed and is likely to be an indispensable source of their sense of belonging in their society.

Conclusion

How is democracy possible among asymmetrically situated people in relationships of care and dependency? In this essay, I have argued that including the voices of everyone requires a conception of democracy that enables people to interact with one another according to an ethic of care that promotes the autonomy of others. In short, I have advanced an expanded conception of democracy that goes beyond the individual exercise of voice to that of supporting and enabling others to express their views on collective matters. I have argued that an associative conception of democracy as people's participation in the creation of a web of human relationships and interwoven narratives can foster such an ethic of care. The reasons are that first, these stories mediate relations among differently situated people, and second, they rely on the dynamic interplay of diverse perspectives. In other words, enhancing the autonomy of others to articulate their views is it to enhance one's own collectively enabled power to shape the world together with others.

One objection to this argument could be that promoting an ethic of care to support the autonomy of other people does nothing directly to correct the unequal distribution of caring responsibilities and could even deepen expectations for other directedness by people already in caring roles by elevating care as a public virtue. In addition, as Bhandary (2019) argues, the marginalised themselves may internalise behaviours and attitudes that contribute to their disadvantage, either consciously or unconsciously, to maintain their cherished relationships. For caregivers, it may be especially difficult to detach themselves from their social roles which are tied to others' needs. Although we should acknowledge and guard against the danger of entrenching existing caregiving patterns,³⁴ the point of my argument has been to emphasise the interrelationship between autonomy and care. As theorists of relational autonomy have argued, caring relations are integral to the emotional and psychological foundations of autonomy such as self-respect, self-worth and independence. If people's embeddedness in existing structures prevents critical examination of their social situation, a conception of democracy as the individual exercise of voice will have limited value. In this situation, a collaborative and interactive approach is all the more important for raising the consciousness of the oppressed and for supporting them to form and express their perspectives in the public sphere. Expanding the notion of democracy in ways that enable everyone to become part of the story is necessary for everyone to be at home in the world.

Notes

1. An exception is Joan Tronto's (2013) influential work on *Caring Democracy*, which will be discussed in this essay.
2. The 'demise of work' involves precarious employment, long-term unemployment, platform labour, and the rise of new technologies that some say threaten the 'end of work' (Breen & Deranty, 2021). See also Dukes and Streeck (2023) on changing work in post-industrial societies and Althorpe and Finneron-Burns (2024) on the 'technological assumption' of work being replaced by new technologies.
3. In their discussion of a 'post-work future', Althorpe and Finneron-Burns (2024) identify affective care as a remaining area of work which is unlikely to be replaced by technological innovations.
4. As theorists of participatory democracy have argued, democratic participation in local contexts can have society-wide implications by transforming social relations and cultivating the skills and dispositions necessary for democratic citizenship (Mill, 1848/2008; Pateman, 1970). While traditional theorists of participatory democracy have focused on the modern workplace, this article focuses on caregiving as the site of participatory democracy.
5. See, e.g. Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto's (1990: 40) broad definition of care 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 possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web (See also Tronto 2013, p. 19).
6. Although care ethics and autonomy are sometimes understood in oppositional terms, many theorists argue that the promotion of autonomy is an important part of good care. Virginia Held (2006, p. 84) holds that 'An aim of the ethics of care is to promote the responsible autonomy of the cared-for where this is appropriate ... The ethics of care requires us to pay attention, rather than ignore, the material, psychological, and social prerequisites for autonomy.' See also Held (2006, pp. 48–49). The edited volume on the ethics of vulnerability by Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds (2014b, p. 16) advances the view that responding to vulnerability entails 'obligations to promote the autonomy and capabilities of vulnerable people wherever possible'. Dodds' (2014) contribution in the same volume specifically focuses on autonomy-promoting care as a response to vulnerability. According to Dodds (2014: 182), 'dependency is a specific form of vulnerability, and the care provided to meet the needs, and support the autonomy of dependents (dependency-care), is a response to this vulnerability'.
7. Mackenzie et al. (2014a, pp. 7–9) use the term 'situational vulnerability' to refer to structurally caused vulnerabilities. A situational vulnerability that is morally unacceptable is further categorised as a 'pathogenic vulnerability'. See also (Mackenzie, 2014, pp. 38–39).
8. For example Tronto (2013, p. 151) argues that 'Over the course of a lifetime ... those who are cared for and those who give care turn out to be the same people. In trying to care, and to assign care responsibilities throughout a society, inequality is a problem that must be kept in mind, but people's constant roles as caregiver and care receiver make the prospect of thinking about care and equality less of a problem than it might first seem to be'.

9. Critical thinking skills are necessary for guarding against manipulation and oppression, while skills for self-determination include observation and foresight to discern possible options and think through likely consequences (Bhandary, 2019, pp. 106–108).
10. According to Bhandary, ‘the action-guiding claim that results from this thesis’ – the thesis that autonomy skills are necessary for legitimating social arrangements—‘is that *public education should design curricula* to teach basic autonomy skills’ (Bhandary, 2019, p. 112, italics mine). In addition, she states that a ‘strong procedural principle’ for cultivating the skills for autonomy and for care ‘has policy content requiring perfectionist educational interventions to give individuals equal opportunities to obtain the requisite skills at an early age, just as the required classes in public education give us the opportunity to learn and to be literate and perform mathematical computations’ (Bhandary, 2019, p. 145). Westlund’s (2022) critical discussion of Bhandary’s education for autonomy skills also focuses on education in public schools.
11. In a more recent essay, Bhandary (2021) adds the norm of ‘interpersonal reciprocity’ as a virtue and practice required for the non-exploitation of carers. She maintains her individualistic procedural stance in arguing that these relational norms ought to be ‘taught’ to children rather than focusing on social arrangements as the conditions for these virtues.
12. As Engster (2021) demonstrates, empirical studies have found that childhood experiences of neglect and abuse contributes to multiple harms including interpersonal difficulties and antisocial and aggressive behaviours.
13. See note 10 above. A more expansive conception of education that focuses on the nature of interpersonal interactions for fostering students’ autonomy resonates with an ethic of care. However, it would be difficult to write such interactions into curricula.
14. In this sense, I agree with Kelly Gawel’s (2022) critique of Bhandary that an individual model of choice is insufficient and institutional conditions matter for social transformation. At the same time, my approach is also procedural in the sense that it does not prescribe a particular institutional outcome and instead emphasises democracy as a collective process for social change.
15. One example could be Young’s (2000) conception of ‘inclusive political communication’, which involves attentiveness to overlooked forms of political communication so that *others* can express their perspectives in the public sphere.
16. See e.g. Young’s (2000, pp. 188–195) discussion of associative democracy as civic organising that empowers various communities and invigorates public discussion, as well as her critical examination of existing accounts of associative democracy.
17. I use the term association in a loose sense. It may include both formal and informal associations as well as grassroots projects by citizens in local communities.
18. ‘Power over’ is associated with Robert Dahl’s (1957, pp. 202–203) formulation of power as ‘a relation among people’ such that ‘A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do’.
19. The notion of democracy as the distribution of equal decision-making power is associated with the ‘liberal procedural’ view of democracy (Cf. Klein, 2022).
20. ‘Power with’ is associated with Hannah Arendt’s (1969/2023, p. 37) understanding of power as ‘the human ability not just to act but to act in concert’.

21. I make no claim to originality for this Arendt inspired conception of democracy. See, e.g. Linda Zerilli's (2005) 'freedom-centered' conception of politics, Michael Ferguson's (2012) 'sharing democracy', Myers (2013) 'associative conception of democracy', which conceive of democratic politics in terms of an active process of shaping the world with others.
22. The sharp public-private distinction in Arendt's political theory has been a focus of criticism by feminist scholars. See e.g. Dietz (1995) and Chaberty and Lemaitre (2022) for critical overviews of feminist receptions of Arendt.
23. See e.g. Cloutier (2023), Myers (2013, p. 87) and Zerilli (2016, p. 110). These theorists interpret *amor mundi* as a political action-guiding principle to protect the world of common appearance.
24. As Cloutier (2023) notes, Arendt is known for arguing that making care a public matter is an encroachment of the social – or 'housekeeping' – in the sphere of politics (Cf. Arendt, 1998 [1958], p. 38).
25. Seyla Benhabib (2018, p. 20) uses this phrase to express the mutual interactions of differently situated people's interpretations of common issues. As she puts it, 'This seamless web of narratives, of interpretations and counter-interpretations, tellings and repudiations, is the stuff of which the world of human affairs is made'. While people are constrained by the existing web of narratives, they can also 'change the script' through inserting new perspectives into the world (Benhabib, 2018, p. 26).
26. Ferguson's (2012) Arendt inspired conception of 'sharing democracy' rejects prior commonality and conceives of democracy as people's active exercise of political freedom. She argues that assuming prior commonality is anti-democratic because it depoliticises what is deemed common.
27. See Arendt (1998 [1958], p. 201) for an account of how collective power requires ongoing interaction.
28. Young's account of plural perspectives as a source of expanded social knowledge aligns with Zerilli's (2016, p. 39) interpretation of Arendt's politics as a way to reach democratic judgement based on a more 'expansive perspective afforded by representative thinking'. I do not contest this reading of Arendt. Rather, my purpose is to consider how an Arendt-inspired democratic theory can contribute to caring relations.
29. Clarissa Hayward (2017) calls this the 'motivated ignorance' of the privileged. Young (2000, p. 116) herself points out that those in structurally superior positions are not only biased towards their own views 'but also have the power to represent these as general norms'.
30. Christiano (2008, p. 102) defends an 'egalitarian conception of democracy' that respects people's equal moral status as rational agents. By giving everyone an equal say in decisions about how their society should be organised, it upholds the 'principle of public equality' where people can perceive that their interests are equally considered. Christiano refers both to equal voting rights as well as public deliberation as parts of democratic procedures.
31. 'Social form' is the term employed by Bhandary (2019, p. 185) to denote 'the context in which people live, including both institutional arrangements and culture'.
32. Bhandary (2019, pp. 192–194) names this the 'Kartini position'.
33. Rawls's (2001, p. 138) critique of 'welfare state capitalism' captures this idea. Generous *ex post* redistribution towards the least well off fails to respect them

as equals if 'control of the economy and much of political life rests in a few hands'.

34. Bhandary's (2019 #66) 'arrow of care map' which makes the direction of care in society transparent is an innovative tool which can be helpful for this purpose.

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