



Care ethics in theory and practice: Joan C. Tronto in conversation with Iris Parra Jounou

Iris Parra Jounou¹ · Joan C. Tronto^{2,3}

Accepted: 15 January 2021
© The Author(s) 2024

Joan C. Tronto is one of the most distinguished voices in care ethics and American political theory. Her work is the theoretical foundation for research on topics ranging from designing public policy, creating more democratic institutions, improving health care, and adapting urban planning, architecture, and the arts for greater well-being. The concepts she formulated have travelled and been discussed across the globe.

Professor Tronto's 1987 article, "Beyond gender difference to a theory of care," announces two major themes to be developed in subsequent work: the need to change the moral point of view, and the search for social and political institutions best suited for an ethics of care. Professor Tronto explores these two themes in depth in *Moral Boundaries* (1993): Why do we talk about *moral* theories if the objective is to develop a *political* proposal? How are morality and politics related in and through care?

For Professor Tronto, care can serve both as a moral value and a foundation for the political success of a good society. It offers a way to change paradigms, move beyond moral boundaries, and advance towards more just and caring societies. Realizing this, however, requires that we analyze how today's society views care and what power dynamics are involved.

She further elaborated her feminist ethical–political proposal in *Caring Democracy* (2013) and *Who cares?* (2015). Her starting point, here, is that the care deficit and the democratic deficit are two sides of the same coin. As a consequence, it is not possible to try to solve one without facing the other. While most political theorists focus on the crisis of liberal democracy, citizens' political disaffection, and low electoral participation, Professor Tronto instead insists that genuine democracy requires

✉ Iris Parra Jounou
iris.parra@uab.cat

Joan C. Tronto
jctronto@umn.edu

¹ Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Bellaterra, 08193 Barcelona, Spain

² Hunter College/CUNY, New York, NY 10065, USA

³ University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA



a new model of care. For her, care does not belong in the private sphere, is not natural, and cannot become a commodity. Rather, care is something for which we are collectively responsible. As a consequence, a revolution in institutions and practices of care will require a parallel revolution in political and social institutions and practices. This entails the elimination of privileges based on gender, ethnicity, religion, and class and involves a rethinking of democratic politics. If care responsibilities are to be at the center of democratic political agendas—that is, if we understand the function of democracy as not only sustaining the economy but also allocating care responsibilities equitably—we need a new understanding of both care and democracy. Professor Tronto’s work is a central pillar for anyone thinking about the relationship between contemporary ethics and political theory.

The following interview was occasioned by the award of the Benjamin E. Lipincott Prize to Professor Tronto by the American Political Science Association in recognition of work of exceptional quality and lasting influence by a living political theorist.

Interview

Iris Parra Jounou (IPJ): Theory and practice are intertwined in your way of thinking. To what extent has your involvement in feminist movements and militancy, which is something you mentioned in *Moral Boundaries*, shaped your ideas?

Joan C. Tronto (JCT): It is completely related. The National Organization for Women was founded in 1966 in the United States, and its founding documents said: “The purpose of NOW is to take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men.” I became very involved in Maine NOW. We were very committed to all kinds of changes including lesbian-gay change, peace activism, feminist movement activism. So our chapter in Maine was much more broadly interested in all kinds of questions: questions of race and class, questions of gender, queer topics (although we didn’t use the word “queer” back in the 1970s), and we operated on consensus rather than majority rule. It was a very interesting mix of people in the chapter, and, somehow, we all managed to talk about these issues. Looking at it now, I would be critical in many ways: it is a very liberal organization, with very American liberal ideas. Especially this idea that women should become like men made me wonder what would happen if women took up this claim, and what would be left out. And I worried. Later, when I started as a teacher at Hunter College, in New York City, the first course I taught was called “Women and Gender and Politics.”

IPJ: When was that?

JCT: That was in 1982. And I would tell my students that I had a feminist nightmare. And my feminist nightmare was that feminists would succeed in abolishing the caste barriers to women in the workforce, so that women could move to the places at the top of economic pyramids. They could become lawyers, and doctors, and professors instead of elementary school teachers, and just do everything



they wanted to do. And what it would do is not eliminate the need for care work, but rather transform care work into a system of class and race rather than gender.

People often meet the people they marry at work, and it used to be that men would meet secretaries and women who worked in subservient roles, and the women would retire and leave the workforce when they married and had children. That was not a good system, but now we have a system where men and women meet at the same professional level. So now we have two professionals marrying, and the gap between professionals as married couples and everybody else in the economic structure has grown precipitously. Growing inequality is in part a function of this development.

That was my nightmare, and it came true, in some ways. It is also extremely positive for me that I could become a college professor, but still there are some costs to this openness and freedom.

IPJ: Apart from this first interesting political experience that you mentioned, are you or were you involved in any other social movements?

JCT: I am not very involved in social movements. I have been doing a lot of work as an academic. When I was working, I would easily work 60 to 70 h a week, and I didn't have much time to do anything else. And being at the City University of New York (CUNY), where I spent most of my career, I often thought of that as a form of political work, because the students who were there were almost all first-generation college students. They were experiencing this world for the first time. I took the responsibility to teach these students very seriously. So, in a way, getting students to think critically about issues of gender, about issues of politics, was a kind of political work.

IPJ: Related to this idea, you make clear that your books are aimed at conversing with academics and non-academics. Your goal is to reflect on urgent topics, and you use a lot of well-known examples and cultural references to make your claims understandable to a wide audience. What kind of writing do you practice so that ideas are not overly simplified or overly technical?

JCT: You have to remember that I am a first-generation college student. My parents were not university educated, so it was always my goal to write about the world in a way that people like my parents could understand. So, I guess I just always thought of myself writing primarily from my experience of teaching first-generation college students. It is respectful to make what you are saying understandable to students, and that became the standard by which I write, speak, and teach.

IPJ: When you think about all the knowledge you have created or shared with the world it seems that there is a blurred line between expertise and non-expertise. You also talk a lot about how expertise is created. Would you consider your work to be expert work?

JCT: I hope not! And I often meet people who read my work and find it refreshing and that it still speaks to them. It is approachable and applicable and that is always what I have tried to do. I have never ventured into arenas of social media or the mainstream press. I suppose I could have, but again it depends on what your priorities are and what talents you have.



IPJ: Some people might think of you more as a thinker than a teacher, but this part of your work seems to be central to you. What is the importance of teaching new generations of students and scholars?

JCT: Oh, it is so important. For me it has been very helpful. I actually learn more from students than I think anyone learns from me. But there are series of practices that you engage in, in the academy, that students are losing their ability to do. Reading is one: to be able to read something, to understand it, and then to be able to play with it and think with it. That capacity of playing with ideas is really disappearing in our world.

First, you need to be able to grasp ideas, by playing with them, and the only way to do that is to practice, practice, practice. And the only way to practice is if someone is willing to guide you through thinking through a text. Teaching is not an easy thing to do, and if you can do it, then you should. That has always been my thought. Then, of course, when I was at CUNY, I taught not only political science but also womens studies. There the students would speak about their work and care work. I hardly ever taught courses on care or care ethics. Most of the teaching I did over the course of my academic career was in history of political thought—you know, the classic writings. It is important because they are always actually with me, and though those guys mainly weren't feminists, they had some important things to say to the world.

IPJ: I also want to congratulate you on receiving the Benjamin E. Lippincott Award, which is given by the American Political Science Association in recognition of a work of exceptional quality and enduring influence by a living political theorist. You received this award in 2023. What does it mean to you?

JCT: It means a lot. First of all, have you looked at the list of other honorees? Oh my God, it is like I don't belong in such company. I really don't! There are just extraordinary people on this list: John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, Simone de Beauvoir, Carol Pateman. Sadly, several feminist theorists who I think should be there, aren't, because they were no longer alive by the time their work was known well enough. But had they still been alive, they should have won the award: Susan Moller Okin, Iris Marion Young. I did not attend the awards ceremony because the APSA meeting was held in Los Angeles this year, and they informed us very late that there was likely to be a strike in the hotel where the conference was going to happen. So I didn't attend the conference or the ceremony.

IPJ: Nevertheless, it is a recognition of your more than thirty years of thinking, developing ideas, and exchanging perspectives with other people around the globe. How does this interaction with others improve your work, not just theoretically but also emotionally?

JCT: It is interesting that almost everybody I know who writes about care has had some deep experience of it. Of course any human being has, as Virginia Held points out: we are all cared for as infants. We all grew up being cared for. We know what care is if we pay attention to that knowledge. So, it is a deep knowledge that it's already in people. I guess I put it this way: I didn't expect to spend my whole career thinking about care, I just knew I had to write that book when I wrote it. But the idea has just continued to grow and deepen and be really important to people so that I have continued to think about it and to write about it.



What it is fascinating is that in every part of the world it is different what care means, how it affects us, how we care well or how we do not care well. The more I think about it, the more radical and fundamental I think that idea is—the more revolutionary, really, it is. If we were to put care at the center of our lives, rather than wealth, the ego, or autonomy, we would live in a much better world. Not that those things are bad in themselves, but they need to be tempered by what is really important, which is that we all have to be cared for and we all have to give care.

IPJ: It is also true that in some of your works you also acknowledge that there are other places in the world in which care has a more central role as a social value. Care is universal, but there are contextual differences. While travelling around the world you have been able to notice all that.

JCT: Yes. But you don't have to go all over the world. You can just talk to your next-door neighbor, because they care differently than you do. Care is so interesting because on the one hand, it is universal, but on the other hand it is deeply personal: each of us wants to be cared for, each of us wants to give care in a different way. There is endless variety, and on the level of describing it there is no limit, just as there is no limit for the needs for care. Yet, there are some things that are more or less universal.

The other thing that's become clearer to me in the last few years is that not only do we have to travel through place but also through time. People in the past, of course, always cared differently. Talia Schaffer published a book on *Communities of Care* (2021) about nineteenth-century Victorian novels. Often, all that could be done to care for someone in the nineteenth century was to offer them tea and make sure they were warm and hold their hands. Both rich and poor people, men and women, the ones who were family and the ones who weren't but who were close, could form a community around the need for this person to be cared for, while they were sick and, often, dying. It is a fascinating point that communities arise out of need rather than having a community first that then meets its needs. And what we will do as carers is not necessarily a thing very exotic or very special, but we will take care.

IPJ: You have also travelled through languages. Your work is soon to be published in Spanish and Catalan. How do you feel about that? Can you foresee possible readings and receptions that differ from the ones in the francophone world or northern European countries?

JCT: I am very excited that the book will be published in Spanish and Catalan— not because I care that they are my ideas but because I think that care is a very powerful idea that attracts the attention of many people. So I am always glad when care reaches different audiences. Frankly, I learn a lot from how care gets received in different places. In Latin America, I think they have already made the most progress towards thinking more systematically about what a care policy would look like on the ground for actual humans. Part of it comes from the influence of UN Women in Latin America, and then through a huge network of feminist scholars and activists who have been incorporated into the government itself and have been able to influence it and think about its work. It has already happened, and so with the texts available widely I think it will happen more, probably.

I was recently in Mexico City, and I spoke in public on two occasions. On the second occasion, there was a very large number of very young people, and they



really were very enthusiastic because for them the language of care leads to two sets of concerns they are really involved with: one, reducing violence, and two, caring for the environment. Those are subjects I have not written much about. But if we approach them from the standpoint of care, they look and get solved very differently, and those kids were very excited about those things. Every time a book appears in another language it opens up other possibilities. So I am very excited.

IPJ: In your books you say that care is a tiny word that does lots of work. Care and care ethics have exploded as hot topics in the last years and your work has influenced very different disciplines such as philosophy, politics, economics, geography, aesthetics and the arts, architecture, business management, and healthcare professions. Now, it is almost impossible to follow all the new ideas and proposals emerging in each of these fields. How can we deal with the limitations of time and at the same time create dialogue and mixed spaces with all these different approaches to care?

JCT: It would be much better if we were able to integrate care more systematically across different fields and ideas. In Latin America—and this is a step forward—several countries have adopted care systems. But they approached care once again as a government service to individuals rather than a relational practice. And while some parts of care might be related to the healthcare system, others are related to the social care that people receive from this care policy. What happens when those are in conflict, when one person requires more care from one of these systems than from the other, or when the systems are not working together? That is the danger.

There is never going to be a perfect form of care because that is the nature of humans: we don't have perfect forms of care. But I worry a little that we won't be integrating care ideas sufficiently across disciplines, across frameworks. People would ask me, and they still ask, "when you talk about care, do you mean healthcare? Do you mean social security?" And yes, I mean that; that's part of it. But also no, that is not what I mean. "Do you mean care for disabled people?" No, that is not what I mean. It is part of it, but I mean all care. It is hard. There is not a good way to do this yet.

I thought of a couple of things that we might think about. The first is an idea that is foreshadowed in a manifesto written by a group of scholars in Germany and Austria, which they modified in light of COVID-19 and called "Clean Up Time" (Brückner et al., 2022). They say we need to mainstream care like we have mainstreamed gender. And it is a nice metaphor for what we need to do. My version of this is to say that we need to address care impact whenever we change a policy. Whenever we decide that we are going to change a policy, we ask how this would affect care. This is the way: to think about consequences is one way to think about more than just one little piece of care.

You began by noticing that care is now everywhere, and I worry that it will simply become a fad that will have disappeared again in 10 years. It is being used meaninglessly in lots of contexts. But you have to keep struggling to make the meaning real. The language of "carewashing" that the *Care Manifesto* (The Care Collective, 2020) uses is very nice. People often forget that every care-practice is nested in another care-practice that is nested in another care-practice which on the most general level means everything we do. The hardest thing to do is to develop our sense



of judgement about whether a so-called care-practice is really a care-practice at all; and when it isn't, to call it out and say that this is not care. I've come to realize—and I think that it is the most important thing that I've realized in the last 10 years—that everybody cares. You can't say of someone that they are uncaring; they might just care for the wrong things. They care for money or for ego, but they care. Once you recognize that this is also a kind of care, you can begin to figure out which pieces are legitimate ways of caring and which are not actually care.

IPJ: So it is also about reflection and self-knowledge.

JCT: Self-knowledge, reflection, and judgement, the capacity to judge, to make judgements: this is what you need as a democratic citizen and what we don't have as much anymore. It is part of the requirements of journalists, public figures—especially public figures—and leaders to demonstrate how to make judgements, although these days it seems as if the opposite were the case.

IPJ: So who should do that if they don't?

JCT: Well, if they don't do it, we are really in trouble. But then we have to call them to account and say: "it is time for you guys to stop being children and start making judgements."

IPJ: Even though you have retired from your faculty position, you are still very active in public events and conferences all over the world. What moves you to keep doing that?

JCT: I am really committed to these ideas. Very early in my career I read Mona Harrington and Nadya Aisenberg's book, *Women of Academe: Outsiders in the Sacred Grove* (1988), and they argued that men think of academic work as playing games and women fall in love with their research. I have never thought of this as a game. It has never been, for me, a puzzle to solve. I have colleagues in political science who tell the graduate students to think of an interesting puzzle to solve. That is just not what I ever wanted to do. I have always wanted to think about something that really matters. And this really matters, so I keep going. At some point I am going to stop because I am getting tired. But it is fascinating for me to keep talking to people and learning new things, being in new places, doing new things. John Dewey said—and I quoted it in *Moral Boundaries* and *Who Cares?*—that, "Learning from all the contacts of life is the essential moral interest." (Dewey, 1929, p. 418) I want to keep learning.

IPJ: This makes perfect sense. Not only are you one of the most well-known theorists of care ethics, but you are also a lovely person, open to receive and to care for others. Do you think that there must be a consistency between thinking and acting? Do care theorists have a particular responsibility to embody or enact the moral standards they propose in their work? Is there something to being the change you want to see in the world?

JCT: I don't believe care theorists have a particular responsibility. It just so happens that everyone I know who works on care ethics is a really nice person committed to working collectively, sharing with other people, being decent to others. It would be interesting to see if in 20 years this is still true. That will be the real measure of whether ideas have taken root. I don't want to say that thinkers about care should have more responsibility than others for living out their theory. Many great artists were really awful humans, and many great thinkers can be really awful



people. Those things are not related. But it just so happens that this group of ideas attracts people who have a kind of decency in themselves that makes them find this approach attractive, I think.

IPJ: We talk about the importance of the standpoint because we admit that personal experiences nourish our theoretical questions. Would you like to share with us a few important events, or special moments, that have shaped your trajectory or had a deep impact on your career?

JCT: My mother was a nurse and before I started writing about care, we were out once to buy gasoline and we had to go into the gas station to pay. It was one of these places where they also sell groceries, and there was someone else in line. As we walked out after paying my mum said: “Did you see that woman? She is an abused woman. Didn’t you notice, she had a bruise on her face.” And I hadn’t noticed, but my mother, who was trained as a nurse, worked as a school nurse, and often saw sad situations, was very much attentive to that issue. When I write about attentiveness, one of the examples that is always in my head is my mother. As a nurse, she saw things that being just a person walking down the street I did not. But now I notice them.

IPJ: I am glad that you mention this example, because it illustrates the role of training in balancing self-interest and other-regarding activities. Can we learn to care better? To be attentive, responsible, competent, responsive, and solidary?

JCT: It is very much true of care in general that if we are caring well, we are training ourselves to be attentive to more different things. When I first started talking about care, my colleagues in social work would stress the need for them to keep professional distance. Social workers—and all care professionals—have to learn to keep some distance from their clients, and it is very important and difficult to learn what that distance is. So there is a kind of training to learn to care, and there is also a training in proper balance. That is a very difficult thing to learn over the course of our lives.

The thing about care is that it is a practice, and as with any practice, the more you do it the better you get at it. I used to give my students the example of watching somebody dunk a basketball and seeing how they do it—they bounce it and then they throw it. But I can’t do it, and probably will never do it, but if you practice you can do it. Studying political theory, you have to practice, you have to hear these words that come out of your mouth and think about them, think along with them, before you will be able to do it. There is no shortcut. It is the same with care. Although we think of care as natural, it isn’t. We have to learn how to do it, and how to do it better. And part of doing it better is being trained to see things differently.

IPJ: Sometimes care is understood as a scarce resource and there is a fear that we might run out of it. But it has been proved that the more people practice care, the more they will care.

JCT: Yes, and that is part of the switch in the mind that we just can’t make yet. We are living in an age in which the economic principle of scarcity seems to be absolutely true of everything. But the truth is that there is enough food, there is enough wealth, there is enough stuff in the world. If we thought about it, we could make it possible for everyone to be well cared for. We just don’t think about it. What we are facing is a complete change of paradigm.



IPJ: In *Moral Boundaries* you said that one of the objectives of the book was visionary: how to think and to propose an alternative vision for a different world. In *Caring Democracy* you mentioned utopian thinking and drew on authors such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Marge Piercy, Edward Bellamy, and Charles Fourier. Would you say that your project can be seen as a political utopia, in the sense that it suggests a prescriptive ideal for politics and social organization?

JCT: It is not a utopia. It is not utopian because utopias generally involve a complete overhaul. I have taught several courses on utopia over the course of my career and I love to do it because it is such an interesting frame. But utopias almost always require that we go somewhere else to realize them. We have to start anew to make a utopia. We are never going to be able to start anew, and care ethics doesn't require us to think that way. I like the metaphor people sometimes use of a ship we have to fix with the resources we have on board. If we want to fix it, we have to do it with what we have. There is no principle floating along in the sky, there is no travelling to another place. We just do it.

Nevertheless, my work is prescriptive or normative in the sense that we could live in a better world if we cared more. That's a normative claim, and I believe that. It is a pretty complete vision of what a caring democracy looks like. Some of the early feminist scholars were also activists in a really deep way and published in journals like *Off our backs* and *Quest*—these little feminist journals that sprung up spontaneously. The same happened in Europe. One of the people who wrote this was Charlotte Bunch, who later went on to be an academic. But she started out as an activist, running one of these small journals called *Quest*. She published an essay about the nature of political theory in which she wrote that political theorists do four things: they describe the world to us, they offer analysis of why it is that way, they offer us a vision of what it could be and they provide us with a strategy to get there.

Now that is so simple and yet, if you think about Plato or Hobbes or Machiavelli or Rawls or any great political theorists, that's what they are doing. Bunch was quite right. In a way I have used that frame in my own writing to think about whether I had done everything I wanted to do in writing a piece of work. In that regard, it looks like a political theory, it sounds like a political theory, because it's made to be a political theory, which, to some people, looks utopian. On the other hand, what is really utopian is the neoliberal vision of a market-driven world. *That's* the utopia. That's the made-up world. And even as early as the 1940s, Polanyi (2001 [1944]) said this in *The Great Transformation*. This is a utopia: the so-called free market only came into existence because the state created the conditions for its coming into existence. That was true then, and it is true now. It is a lie, one of those myths that just lives on.

IPJ: In *Caring Democracy* you have a small section in which you call for utopian thinking as a kind of inspiration.

JCT: Yes, and I think it is an inspiration. Edward Bellamy has an image that I quoted in *Caring Democracy* that captures the psychology of someone who is afraid of falling off a carriage. It said:

The other fact is yet more curious, consisting in a singular hallucination which those on the top of the coach generally shared, that they were not exactly like



their brothers and sisters who pulled at the rope, but of finer clay, in some way belonging to a higher order of beings who might justly expect to be drawn. . . The strangest thing about the hallucination was that those who had but just climbed up from the ground, before they had outgrown the marks of the rope upon their hands, began to fall under its influence. As for those whose parents and grand-parents before them had been so fortunate as to keep their seats on the top, the conviction they cherished of the essential difference between their sort of humanity and the common article was absolute. The effect of such a delusion in moderating fellow feeling for the sufferings of the mass of men into a distant and philosophical compassion is obvious. To it I refer as the only extenuation I can offer for the indifference which, at the period I write of, marked my own attitude toward the misery of my brothers. (Bellamy, 1888, pp. 16–17, quoted in Tronto, 2013, p. 44)

Once you climb into it, you pretend that you don't know all those people pushing the carriage. It is a beautiful metaphor he used.

IPJ: One of the difficult aspects of your work for academics coming from European social democracies is your attachment to the liberal state. Why do you want to hold on to the idea of a liberal state as the basis of your alternative approach to care?

JCT: By liberal I mean in the very simple idea that freedom, autonomy and rights matter. Individual rights should be protected. There should be due process of law. I don't mean liberal in the sense of neoliberal, and I certainly don't mean liberal in the sense that capitalism gets to just run away.

I don't think that social democracies fully embody care for a couple of reasons. First, social democracies are still thinking in the old framework about delivering services rather than caring. Care and service are not the same, because delivering services is not relational but substantive. And even the Latin American experiences that go beyond social democracy in terms of the goods they deliver, are still just delivering goods to people. There is a wonderful essay by Amy Bridges, published a long time ago, called "The other side of the paycheck," (1976) in which she points out that the paycheck has to be transformed into our daily lives, and that the other side of the paycheck work still has to be done. Giving people money gives them a resource that will make their life easier, but it is not the same as care.

To think relationally is the hardest piece for me. But it is true of every political theorist I have ever read that their theories are better than they are. That is, their writings often contain contradictions and problems that they couldn't see because they were too caught up in their own world to see how their good ideas might look and work out somewhere else. The piece that I know that I can't quite understand is relationality, that when you start to think about everything being relational, the world is going to look different. Science will be different, knowledge will be different, everything will be structured differently when we finally arrive at the point where we understand what it means to be in relation all the time. So, I am not sure what it will look like, but I know that we are not there yet.

Second, one of the things that social democracies have continued to emphasize is the workforce. The way to solve the problem of discrimination against women or women's inequality is to increase women's participation in the labor force. I don't



think that is right. Some women in 1966 said that if women act like men, then everything will be fine. But this leaves out the fact that there is still this whole other set of things that go beyond work, that go beyond the sphere of production. Social democracy is still caught in the Marxist paradigm of thinking of work and production as the most important forms of activity. They are extremely important forms of activity, to be sure, but they are not the only important human activities. Social democracy is better than the neoliberal state, but it still has a limited understanding of care because it is attached to the workforce.

IPJ: In *Moral Boundaries* you talked about the changes in eighteenth-century society and how for some authors like Ferguson or Hume those changes meant a corruption of virtue, while for others, like Adam Smith, what was happening was a reformulation of the nature of the content of virtue. Do you think that we are experiencing something similar today? After cosmopolitanism lead us to social distance, is care ethics trying to create social proximity?

JCT: Social distance has changed its meaning again in the contemporary world on some levels—on other levels it hasn't. And part of the right-wing backlash that it is going on now is exactly against this: that you can be close to people on the other side of the world. If that's happening, then how do you keep your frame that the only people that matter are the people who are right around me? This is always the biggest challenge for care, for me: that we care most for the people who are closest to us. This was the question that Adam Smith couldn't answer, and his ideas changed over the course of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (2010 [1759]). It is like the theory of gravity. There is something about this that shouldn't disturb us if—and only if—we admit that we are willing to support everybody in their own. This is an idea that it is closer to something Nel Noddings said: that care relations are dyadic and that there are many dyads in the world. I don't think that it is only dyadic—I think that's wrong—but I think that if we can support the idea of the small relation being multiplied in many places in the world, then we can support a more cosmopolitan way of thinking about care.

IPJ: *Moral Boundaries* was, in fact, devoted to the concept of “otherness” and how to face responsibility for others. What are the differences between your ethics of otherness and other approaches to the ethics of responsibility, such as Levinasian ethics?

JCT: The danger of privileged irresponsibility is to cut off one's reaction to others. Levinas is also interested in these questions, but it is on a philosophical and abstract level that doesn't come down to the concrete daily work of making life happen.

IPJ: There also seems to be a core in care ethics related to meaning in life, but you never explicitly address this topic in your writings. How is care related to meaning in life?

JCT: When I was in college I took a course in public speaking, and in the textbook there was this sentence: “The world of daily life carries within it the secret of our being.” I thought that was really profound, and I copied it and put it on my board. It stayed there for 4 years—it actually stayed there for my whole life. We aren't anything other than how we live our daily lives. We can try to pretend that there is something else, but sorry—you are stuck with what you do every day. I



think that care has to do with the meaning of our lives, but philosophers write about this differently. Harry Frankfurt, for example, talks about the importance of what we care about. But the fact that I found inspiration in a textbook in public speaking tells you a lot about me. It doesn't have to be Levinas or Frankfurt telling you. Care is what gives our lives meaning and shape. It is not something that is chosen. You are thrown into it. You don't choose your family, you don't choose lots of things, including who we end up caring about. That is part of the "communities of care" argument too. And that's what makes us who we are as individuals, as humans. That's it, that's the meaning.

IPJ: Why did you introduce the concept of "caring with" in *Caring Democracy*? Why not use concepts that already existed in political theory, such as the anarchist claim for "mutual aid"? What is the role of solidarity?

JCT: I presented this book to the feminist reading group at the Western Political Science Association Annual Meeting in 2012, and they said that I needed to say something about how this is a political idea, because it is not really different from just talking about the practice of nursing, for example. It was at that meeting that someone suggested the language of "caring with," and it made perfect sense to me because it is an integrative phase, and it is about the fact that care becomes reliable, predictable, normal, shared, if we talk about care over time. My colleague Robert Nichols, who has written a wonderful book on Native Americans called *Theft Is Property!* (2019), explains that before settler-colonists could steal the land from Native peoples, they had to transform the land into property. That was part of their way of thinking. Nichols realized that the notion of the recursive—something that occurs over and over again—is a really important pattern that we don't use systematically as a way of thinking. In a way, "caring with" is recursive: it changes when it is repeated. It is different from spontaneous care because spontaneous care becomes recursive in a good society. Everybody expects that if you have a breakdown on the highway, someone will come and help you. That's recursive, and that is "caring with."

IPJ: You usually apply this concept to the idea of citizenship and stress the importance of active citizenship. But what about all these individuals who are excluded from citizenship?

JCT: I should have thought this through a little better. I don't mean it to be just about citizenship but about everyone who is part of an ongoing community of care. I didn't take it as far as thinking about legal ramifications. I wrote about migrant care labor (Tronto, 2005), and this is one of my ideas that nobody likes very much. There I say that everybody who is in a care relation with a citizen becomes a citizen. Citizenship is a relational idea. That means that if you hire a Filipino woman to take care of your grandmother, she becomes a citizen. But she is also in a caring relationship with her children in the Philippines, so by extension they *also* become citizens. And it also works the other way around: you also become a Filipino citizen. And so, as a result, the notion of citizenship loses its national meaning and becomes an idea about relations and about who is in relation with whom. Imagine how differently we would treat migrants if we allowed them to vote, and if everyone in their family was allowed to vote on our issues if they wanted to. We wouldn't treat them badly. It sounds scary at first, and it would be a very different world.



IPJ: For readers who are not familiar with the history of political thought in the United States, I was wondering whether the particular political and social contexts in which you wrote *Moral Boundaries* in 1993 and *Caring Democracy* in 2013 constrained your imaginary as you reflected on alternative frameworks for care. Could you tell us a bit about the contexts in which you wrote your books?

JCT: I am a slow thinker, so the context doesn't match the years. I've never been attached to the context. In fact, I never expected anyone to read my work, so I don't think in those strategic terms. There was already a huge backlash against feminism by the early 1990s: Ronald Reagan's presidency and the election of George H.W. Bush meant that these right-wing, neoliberal developments were just going to continue. Everyone took the collapse of the Berlin Wall as vindication of Reagan and Reaganism. I was despairing then about that, and this is part of the book's context. In 1992, after I finished writing *Moral Boundaries*, it was too late for me to incorporate it into the text. But Susan Faludi published *Backlash* (1992), which is really a powerful book to reread now because it was about the backlash and about how men wanted to claim back their privileges.

Caring Democracy was published in 2013. I actually finished writing and submitted it in 2010, but it sat on the publisher's desk for a long time. I rewrote it a little bit in 2012. Most of it was written in 2010: the oil and fiscal crises had just happened, but I hadn't yet really been able to think it through. Obama had been elected president, but there was this backlash again, this time in racial terms, to the election of a Black person as president. And the Tea Party movement, which became the Republican, Trump-supporting right-wing, had just taken power in the House of Representatives. Both these books were written when the right-wing was at the center. And they are again.

IPJ: True. Although there have been some gains in terms of gender, racial, and other forms of social equality, there is also a revival of traditional conservative discourses that refuse to recognize traditional privileges and is trying to dismantle these gains. Do you think that we are getting closer to, or moving further away, from a caring democratic society?

JCT: There is always an ongoing struggle between these two positions, and one is not more prominent than the other. But in fact, I would say we won. We won because now people believe in gender, racial and other forms of social equality, and it is the people who are afraid of change who wish to claw back what they believe they lost and return to things as they were. This back and forth will continue, but I am in this regard a very old-fashioned thinker: I believe in progress. I think that human beings want to be treated with dignity, that they want to live lives of dignity, and that they want to live meaningful lives. Even for the people who have privileges, these privileges don't get you a meaningful, dignified life. There is always a threat to freedom, which isn't just another word for nothing left to lose. Freedom doesn't mean choice. It means being capable of making judgments about what's best for you and others around you, and that requires that you understand those things on a deep level.

IPJ: This brings us back to the ideas of education and the role of teaching people how to ask questions and reflect on the world. As a final question, then, I want to ask what you are you currently working on.



JCT: What I am working on right now is *A Field Guide to Bad Care*. It's perhaps a silly title, but it will help us understand how the care we currently give in our culture is bad. The things I have talked about most as forms of bad care are wealth care and protective care. If you think of bad care, you have to think about the fact that we have to move from a system where much of the care we give is bad (among other reasons because it is unjust) to something that is more just. How do we get people to begin to make judgements about what is good or bad care, and why, with each other? That's the hardest thing to get started. If we can do that, then we can begin to think about how a more caring and, thus, a better world could happen. As I say this, I realize that I have been writing about bad care for all my career, because privileged irresponsibility is a kind of bad care. In this sense, I have always been focused on how to make things better when in trouble rather than saying, "Here is the ideal, let's go for it."

Acknowledgments Iris Parra Jounou thanks the funding of the Spanish Research Agency (code PID2019-105422GB-I00).

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Bellamy, E. (1888). *Looking backward, 2000–1887*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Brückner, M., Fleischer, E., Gather, C., Luck, F., Jurczyk, K., Rerrich, M.S., et al. (2022) Clean up time! Redesigning care after COVID-19: A position paper on the care crisis from Austria, Germany and Switzerland. *International Journal of Care and Caring* 6(1–2): 247–251. <https://doi.org/10.1332/239788221x16153878820658>.
- Dewey, J. (1929) *Democracy and education*. MacMillan.
- Faludi, S. (1992). *Backlash: The undeclared war against women*. Crown Publishing Group.
- Harrington, M., & Aisenberg, N. (1988). *Women of Academe: Outsiders in a sacred groves*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Nichols, R. (2019) *Theft is property!*. Duke University Press.
- Polanyi, K. (2001 [1944]). *The great transformation*. Beacon Press.
- Schaffer, T. (2021). *Communities of care: The social ethics of Victorian fiction*. Princeton University Press.
- Smith, A. (2010 [1759]). *The theory of moral sentiments*. Penguin Classics.
- The Care Collective. (2020). *Care manifesto*. Verso Books.
- Tronto, J.C. (1993) *Moral boundaries*. Routledge.
- Tronto, J.C. (2005) Care as the work of citizens: A modest proposal. In M. Friedman (ed.) *Women and citizenship*. Oxford University Press, pp. 130–145.
- Tronto, J. C. (2013). *Caring democracy. Markets, equality, and justice*. New York University Press.
- Tronto, J.C. (2015) *Who cares?*. Cornell University Press.
- Weinbaum, B. and Bridges, A. (1976) The other side of the paycheck: Monopoly capital and the structure of consumption. *The Monthly Review* 28(3): 88–103.



Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

