View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
brought to you by CORE
provided by Columbia University Academic Commons

Women and the Quest for Equal Citizenship

(The Eleanor Rathbone Social Justice lecture, February 2016)

Susan Pedersen

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today. It is a privilege to reflect on the work and thought of Eleanor Rathbone, especially in Liverpool. One might think that the city of Liverpool owes Rathbone a good deal – after all her family helped to found the Anti-Slavery Society and the Central Relief Society, district nursing and the School of Social Work, Liverpool University, and the Walker Art Gallery. But that isn't how Eleanor Rathbone saw it. As she wrote to a friend in 1919, she thought her relationship to Liverpool "one sided": the city had given her wealth and position; she needed to do more, much more, to give back. I think right there we see something critically important about Rathbone, which is that she didn't equate wealth with moral virtue. Hang on to that thought, if you would, because I'm going to come back to it.

Now Rathbone did of course "give back" – not just to her city, but to all of us. She did this through some fifty years of ceaseless feminist, humanitarian and political work. She had a share in, or was the architect of, a host of important feminist reforms, from women's suffrage to widows pensions to family allowances, but her extra-parliamentary campaigns also touched countless individuals lives, from Liverpool children given a better start to refugees from fascism who found her always willing to battle the Home Office for one more visa, one more exception. We should remember that tireless work, but today I'm going to talk about Rathbone's thought. Between the 1890s and 1918, or in other words between her twenties and her late forties, Rathbone crafted what I still think is the most brilliant analysis written of the causes of women's disadvantage in advanced industrial societies. That is my subject today.

You may ask: why bother? How can an analysis developed to speak to conditions in Liverpool in 1896 be relevant in 2016? I would contend those ideas are, if anything, more relevant. To remind you, Rathbone argued that women's inequality had, at base, one cause: and this cause was that the work of care, work that women mostly do, is undervalued politically and economically and under-supported socially. Plenty of

people, men and women, left wing and right wing, feminist and anti-feminist, disagreed with her. They argued that gender inequality was fundamentally about discrimination: equal access and equal pay would cure it. Rathbone didn't believe that – and I have to say, she was more right than wrong. Of course there are many causes of women's disadvantage, but that "cause of causes" that Rathbone identified has proven almost uniquely intractable. Nor do our current policies, aimed mostly on making sure women enter the labour market, adequately address it.

So what might we do? I am a historian, not a politician; I can't offer a roadmap to gender equality. Instead, what I want to do is to use Rathbone's thought to suggest some ways we might think afresh about that conundrum of the undervaluing of care. In this talk, then, I'm going to do four things. First, I'll remind you of Rathbone's analysis of the causes of women's inequality and of her proposals for combatting that. Second, I'll look at the course of family policy after her interventions, noting the extent to which the drive to incentivize waged work has left the problem she identified untouched. Third, I'll examine some proposals for how we might value care, pointing to the difficulties we still have generating support for measures whose worth doesn't reside primarily in their market value. How do we argue for "goods" except on grounds of utility and economic improvement? Rathbone's ideas suggest some healthier approaches. Fourthly, then, I am going to recover Rathbone's moral philosophy. This will take us into the wilds of Kantian thought, but bear with me. Unlikely as this sounds, I want to persuade you that Kant helped Rathbone, and can help us, value the work of care.

Let me begin, then, by going back 120 years, to the spring of 1896, when Rathbone returned from Somerville College to Liverpool, back to Greenbank, the family home just down the road. She came back disappointed: she had, very unusually for a woman, read "Greats" at Oxford – that is, classics and philosophy – in the hopes of getting a first and embarking on an academic career. But although her tutors thought very well of her "capacity for abstract thought," as one of them put it, her Greek and Latin translations just weren't good enough, and she got a second. She was crushed: that was the end of her hopes of a college job. Oxford's loss was our gain, though, for she

threw herself instead into social and political work. And out of this came her analysis and politics.

So what was Liverpool like at the turn of the century, when Rathbone returned to it? It was larger – about 700,000 people lived in the city, compared to well under half a million today, and as a result it was much, much more crowded. A tenth of the population lived in housing the City Council found unfit for human habitation. Liverpool was a trading city, so much of the work was casual. Men would go down to the docks in the morning, and push up to the "stands" where, if they were lucky, a foreman would take them on. They were paid by the shift and worked irregularly, which meant their wives couldn't count on regular housekeeping money either. Worse, there wasn't a lot of other work, especially for women. Liverpool wasn't a textile town, and it wasn't a factory town, so women could only turn to casual work – charring, taking in washing and lodgers, selling sweets, going to the pawnshop. It was a hard life: at fifty, they were old.

We know these things about turn of the century Liverpool from city council reports, the newspapers, and the records of philanthropic organizations. But we also know them from Rathbone: <u>she</u> wrote the most important studies of turn of the century Liverpool life. She wrote from hard experience. On her return from Somerville, Rathbone worked for the Liverpool Central Relief Society – taking a "district" as an unpaid "friendly visitor." What this meant was that when someone appealed to the Society for help, she was sent to meet the family, investigated the case, decided whether to give aid, how much, and for how long – and, ideally, tried to devise a long-term plan for getting the family back on its feet. The experience left her with a strong sense of how hard it was for a working-class family to deal with any interruption to the man's earnings – sickness, accident, a drunken spree – and also overpowered by guilt at her own wealth and good fortune. Surely more could be done than this patchwork almsgiving, she thought – for women and children in particular.

Twenty years of social work and social investigation followed. Those years saw the founding of the Victoria Women's Settlement, a house where young women social workers could live. It saw the establishment of the Liverpool Council for Voluntary Aid, of the Liverpool Women's Industrial Council, and of a School of Social Work, allied to the University of Liverpool – and the hiring of Elizabeth Macadam, who became

Eleanor's great friend, to run it. It also saw women's first forays into electoral politics, as school boards and then local council's opened to women. Rathbone was at the forefront of every single one of these developments.

And across these twenty years of work Rathbone worked out her analysis and her politics. From the very beginning, she asked how full citizenship could be extended to women – how women could, like men, aspire to economic independence and full political self-representation? Good child of liberalism that she was, she didn't start out advocating for state aid to mothers. She started instead with the market, with wage earning, trying to help women into well-paid jobs. No-one could have worked harder, for years, at this task: she set up apprenticeships for girls; she tried unionizing charwomen; she organized courses to train women in skilled work. But, as she admitted honestly in the Women's Industrial News, the results were "as disappointing as may be expected", not just because almost all trades were closed to women and the few that weren't were horribly paid, but also because most girls were too focused on their future as wives and mothers, and most wives and mothers too bowed down with domestic work, to think wage-earning anything but a temporary expedient anyway.

But if wage-earning couldn't wrest women out of poverty, as Rathbone discovered, marriage couldn't either. Rathbone had at her father's urging led the first serious investigation into dock labor – a study that pushed the city to move finally towards de-casualization. But she looked beyond wages to examine what casual work meant for dockers' families as well, sending her apprentice social workers into working women's homes to gather budgets and finding, unsurprisingly, terrible want. However dockers suffered from their irregular earnings and low pay, their families suffered still more.

So, the labor market in Liverpool couldn't deliver economic independence to women, and marriage couldn't either. Wage-earning couldn't lift women out of poverty, but marriage couldn't either. So was the situation hopeless? Rathbone refused to accept that. In 1911 and 1912, she published two brilliant essays, one in the Economic Journal and one as a pamphlet. It was clear, she explained, that marriage and motherhood lay at the root of women's subjection. It was the expectation of marriage that kept girls in poor jobs and their wages low, and it was marriage and motherhood that kept women from

earning thereafter – both because they were already fully occupied with their children, and because they were barred from almost all decently-paid work. "All the problem of women's wages," Rathbone concluded:

> have their root in the one set of facts common to women as apart from men; viz., their functions as childbearers and housewives, and the economic dependence of themselves and their children on the male parent which, under present social arrangements, the proper performance of those functions entails. In simpler words, the difference between the wages of men and women is due to the different consequences which marriage has for the two sexes.

But if inequality was founded on the institution of marriage itself, what on earth could be done? Surely, having children was the most natural thing in the world. Rathbone did not dispute that. But she did insist that "present social arrangements" were not natural but social: the fact that children would be born and needed care didn't dictate that the cost of that care had to be channeled through the "clumsy device" of the male wage. In 1912, Rathbone began saying publicly that the best hope of winning economic equality for women and solving the desperate problem of child poverty, lay in separating wages and the cost of children through the "payment of motherhood."

This was such a radical idea that I still find it amazing that Rathbone – a wealthy young woman from one of Liverpool's preeminent families – was willing to risk her political career on it. But that's what she did. And, true to her political instincts – her pragmatism, her sagacity – she experimented by starting at home. First, in 1912, she and a friend persuaded Liverpool's seamen's unions and shipping lines to pay a portion of seamen's wages directly to their wives, an experiment that won universal acclaim. Then, in 1914, she started a pilot program at the Victoria Settlement paying pensions to widows with young children directly.

But it was the experience of the First World War that convinced her that actual state endowment of motherhood was possible. During the war, the government accepted the need to pay "separation allowances" proportional to family size to the wives of all soldiers and sailors. Rathbone organized those payments in Liverpool; she soon had a thousand women workers in a dozen districts visiting and making payments to tens of thousands of soldiers' wives. The separation allowances of the First World War, almost

forgotten today, were the largest direct transfer of income to women in British history, their cost by the end of the war roughly equal to total prewar government spending. And Rathbone, true to her social science training, thought this worth investigating. In 1915 and 1916, the Liverpool Women's Industrial Council collected health statistics and education records, and discovered that, despite men's absence, working class children were healthier, and their mothers more confident and capable, than ever before. For Rathbone, separation allowances had proven her case: endowment of motherhood was better for women and children than the vagaries of the male wage. In 1918 she formed a Family Endowment Committee, launching the campaign that would culminate in the passage of the Family Allowances Act some 25 years later.

By the end of the war, then, Rathbone had her analysis and her campaign. Women would never be equal, she had concluded, unless the work of care were recognized: economically, politically, and socially. She was of course committed to women's political equality too: indeed, she led Liverpool's constitutionalist suffrage movement, and as Millicent Fawcett's successor as president of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, organized lobbying for the final wartime passage of the suffrage bill. But she didn't just want inclusion for women: she also wanted the whole economic and political system to be, as she put it, "reconditioned" to better reflect and value the circumstances of women's actual lives. This was a time, remember, when only 10% of married women were in the formal labour market and almost all professions, including teaching and the civil service, required a woman resign on marriage: this was the reason, not some preference for traditional gender roles, that led Rathbone to focus her attention on wives. Rathbone, in fact, was aware of the way that housebound life could limit women's civic involvement and sought to build up social services for them. She was behind the creation of Liverpool's Personal Service Society, which coordinated voluntary work among what we would now call at-risk families, behind the creation of the city's Citizens' Advice Bureaux, and, in the late thirties, behind the formation of welfare committees that sought to combat the isolation and loneliness of the old. She faced much criticism in her work, not only from those who resented anything that might cost ratepayers money, but equally, I'm afraid, from Labour men who saw any interference into the working-class household as patronizing do-gooding. Today, I think,

we can recognize the sophisticated and multivalent character of her politics. Hers was the most creative strategy for securing women's equality in a profoundly gendered world.

From 1919 until her death in 1946, Rathbone pursued her efforts to expand women's equal rights while also claiming new social entitlements. And what became of all that work? Results were mixed. Persistent lobbying yielded some victories: equal franchise, finally, in 1928; equal guardianship of children; equal divorce. But the numbers of women in political office remained minuscule, and the economic problems of a gendered labour market and an "unendowed" family remained. The Restoration of Prewar Practices Act tossed women unceremoniously out of wartime jobs; throughout the interwar period, women who lost their jobs were routinely denied unemployment benefit on the grounds that they weren't normally workers anyway. Many feminists concluded that defending women's work rights must take precedence over pressure for family endowment – and as the country slid into depression, Rathbone, always pragmatic, took heed. In the 1930s she built a campaign to provide better social services to children, and when the family allowances campaign revived during the Second World War it was supported as a modest anti-poverty measure, not to lessen the dependence of wives. Indeed, it is a sign of how very far the policy had moved that when the coalition government introduced the Bill in the Commons, the allowance was to be paid to the father. Only Rathbone's last-minute threat to vote against the bill herself secured payment to the mother. Family allowance, then, was a small and underfunded program from the start: for most families, the advent of the National Health Service and the raising of the school leaving age probably mattered more. Certainly Rathbone's core hope, of securing a means for valuing the work of care, was very imperfectly realized.

II.

Which brings me to my second question: what has happened since then? Certainly much has changed. Advanced industrial economies across the board have become much richer. But they have also changed character, for the massive shift from industrial to service work has changed labour markets beyond recognition. An economy structured to deliver 'breadwinner' wages to working men has vanished forever. At the turn of the century roughly one in ten married women were in the formal labour market;

now their labour force participation rates in both the US and the UK rival those of men. If the pay gap remains, women's remuneration has inched upwards. Glass ceilings continue, but anti-discrimination legislation made simple hiring by sex impossible. We all got used to women doctors and male nurses – although national political bodies changed slowly and boards of major corporations more slowly yet. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the first part of Rathbone's agenda – to win equality for women in all realms from which they were barred, bore fruit in ways she could have scarcely anticipated.

But what of the second part of the agenda – of "reconditioning" the social order in align with women's values, and especially to value the work of care? Here, the record seems much more mixed – and, I suggest, the achievements of "equality" in some ways rendered the problem still more difficult. For what this universal worker-bee model ignores is that workers still have children, and as a generation of exhausted fifty-something mothers discovered, seeing their last teenager out of the house, they now have ever longer-living aged parents to be cared for as well. The economy relies on caring – still largely uncompensated and now undertaken in addition to waged work. As a host of studies showed, women bear the brunt of what has become known as the "work-life" or "second shift" problem. But once labour market participation became normative, there was no going back. Policies to compensate caring as caring won less support, not more.

The fate of Rathbone's campaign to "endow mothers" tells us much. A universal system of family allowance was finally introduced, as we know, but more to distribute the cost of large families across the life course rather than to emancipate wives, and the allowance's value was allowed to degenerate. Only with the rediscovery of child poverty was family allowance reborn as child benefit and increased, first by Barbara Castle, then by the Blair government, in a serious attempt to combat that poverty that results from child dependence. The US, of course, never introduced universal child allowances (this is one of the reasons for its shocking child poverty rates); what it does have, however, are child tax credits, and in both countries these became a central tool of redistributive family policy. Now, there are good political reasons to make redistribution palatable by hiding it within the tax system, for people perplexingly don't feel that married couples claiming child tax credits are welfare cheats the way they appear to feel lone mothers receiving child benefits are, even though in both cases you have a state subsidy for dependent

children.   But a tax-based system redistributes only among families with someone in the labour market – thus incentivizing work and reinforcing the message that labour market participation is the condition for full citizenship.

That message comes out still more strongly when we track the fate of those policies that actually paid unwaged mothers for the work of care. Such policies were never universal, but they did exist. At the beginning of the last century, "mothers pensions" for lone mothers were introduced in many US states, while civilian widows and orphans pensions were introduced in the 1920s in the UK as well. These were won on the argument that widows and other lone mothers raising their children alone were honorable claimants and not work-shy shirkers. Yet, those programs – what became Aid to Families with Dependent Children in the US and supplementary benefit in the UK – were always selective and means-tested, and when norms changed in the sixties and seventies their rationale and political support evaporated. With married women returning to the workforce, that language of dignity and entitlement for the work of care came under pressure: now, poor mothers were "welfare queens" and "dole queue mums". The drive for Welfare Reform of the Thatcher/Reagan years was possible because of this sharp shift not in what women were doing – caring for kids – but in the social value accorded that role in a world that now accepted that wage-earning was a universal obligation.

In the years since Rathbone wrote, then, we have subsidized care but in a way that turned her assumptions on their head. Rathbone wanted to provide entitlements to women who couldn't be wage-earners because they were mothers; now, we make assistance conditional upon just that wage-earning that she thought mothers too occupied to do. There are reasons for this shift, of course – but I don't think I was the only feminist to find the punitive and often racialized language of the drive to end "welfare as we know it" cruel and anti-feminist. The New Democrats and New Labour were nonetheless at one on their pro-work agenda and their faith in the market to lift all boats – and not only women but children sometimes got lost in the shuffle. Frank Field, looking back at those years in the UK, concludes that policy makers spent too little time trying to keep young men in work, and to support young families more generally, and too much time over-zealously (his word) harrying single mothers into the workforce.

Now, despite my bitter language, I do recognize that there are good reasons to incentivize wage-earning, even and perhaps especially for mothers. For, as decades of research have shown beyond much doubt, if women suffer most from the "double shift" of mandatory wage-earning and minimally-supported childrearing, once work is normative and marriage fragile, they suffer still more, and more lastingly, if they crumble under the weight and leave the workforce to "stay home." It isn't just that they become more vulnerable to unequal or abusive relationships. They also just become poorer, especially if their partners leave and especially in old age. Here in the UK, women make up a disproportionate percentage of the aged poor because, as John Macnicol has shown, they are less like to have accumulated much private pension, while also being less likely to have a full state pension because they interrupted earning for purpose of care. Especially in countries that try to encourage all adults to earn, the cost of opting out is very high indeed.

And yet, so is the cost of care: this is the conundrum. Indeed, the Luxembourg Income Study of most advanced European economies concluded that by the 1990s gender per se had ceased to be a determinate of disadvantage, since childless women could no longer be distinguished from men in their education and ability to earn. All, repeat all, the disparity in earnings and life chances between women and men was explained by the differential impact of childbirth on men and women: having a child cost mothers (but not fathers) hundreds of thousands of dollars in lost wages and often permanently derailed their careers. In 1912, recall, Rathbone had argued that all the difference in women's wages was due to the different consequences that marriage had for the sexes: shockingly, a century later, that remained true. Women could have the same rights and standing as men, in other words, only if they abstained from child-bearing – a brutal choice men did not have to face, since children did not derail their careers in the same way. For surely equality isn't a privilege available only to those women who abjure motherhood. Rathbone's project – to find some way to revalue the work of care, as a crucial basis for women's emancipation – remains as urgent as ever.

III

So how might we value the work of care? This is my third question. Proposals tend to fall into three main camps. I mean, of course, proposals to actually value care: there are those who object to the very idea. Some consider children a private pleasure, sort of a lifestyle choice – a position brought home to me with some force when a committee I chaired at Harvard proposed to subsidize day-care for non-tenured faculty. Why was this university business, one faculty member objected. If some faculty members wanted to spend their spare time and money on children, others might want to spend it surfing, and there was no need to subsidize one lifestyle choice over the other. There is of course an answer to this – my child will be cleaning your aged backside but your surfboard won't clean mine – but it is worth noting the intense visceral response to any argument for public support for care. In an unequal society, too, people fall into the assumption that family life can be restricted those with the resources to pay for it. No-one – such thinking goes – should have children who can't afford them.

I am not going to take on these arguments, for no welfare state (not even the US) functions on this basis. Let us accept that the desire to have families is normal, widespread, and independent of economic condition, and that some socialization of the burden of dependence across society and across the life course is inevitable and right. We know too that Rathbone was right to say that the wage system is not structured to meet the shifting burdens of family dependence alone. So how might we do better?

A first proposal is radically simple: pay mothers. Rathbone's 1918 committee urged this, recommending a state allowance for each dependent child, and an allowance for the mother as well so long as there was a child under age five. This is state payment for care in its purest and most explicit form: universal but limited to the period when children were under school age and hence really in need of adult full-time care.

Where is this agenda today? Redistribution on this scale, and still more across gender lines, was always unthinkable and has become still more unthinkable now that gender equality is a universal norm. This has mostly been fine with feminists, who have always been highly critical of any policies that might tie women more closely to the home. Indeed, when the international "Wages for Housework" campaign arose as part of second-wave feminism in the seventies, the campaigners admitted straightforwardly that their real goal wasn't to get welfare states to pay poor women to cook and clean. Their

purpose, rather, was to expose the unpaid caring work of women upon which capitalist production relied and to organize women to resist that work. They were after freedom, not benefit.

However we decide to value care, then, its fair to say that policies that would entrench women in the home have become unacceptable. The closest thing we have to "endowment of motherhood" are programs that provide a relatively meager allowance to those caring for the disabled or old, and paid parental leaves after the birth of a child for those in work. "Endowments" of this sort accept that wage-earning is normal, and they are neutral about the gender of the caregiver. They accept that the market not the state is the provider of first resort, and that the gendered relations of care are a private, family matter.

But making policies gender neutral doesn't make gender go away. It will surprise no one to hear that carers' allowances and parental leaves are taken up mostly by women. Once again, while we might be gender-neutral about the work of care, it is still women who disproportionately do that work – and who still pay a disproportionate cost in terms of foresworn career advancements, lost pension contributions, and poverty. It might be for this reason that feminists have been among those rallying most vocally towards a second proposal that has moved onto the radar screen – I speak of Universal Basic Income. So what is Universal Basic Income or UBI?

UBI resembles endowment of motherhood in its radical simplicity. It is simply the proposal to pay every adult a basic income, above the poverty line, with no strings attached. UBI has a history: it is essentially what Sidney and Beatrice Webb advocated more than a century ago when they argued that wealthy Britain could afford to provide a "national minimum" to everyone. UBI is explicitly not an anti-poverty program, for it would go to the rich as well as the poor, but it is attractive to anti-poverty campaigners because it could easily be made socially redistributive by clawing back much of the payment to wealthier recipients through income tax. Likewise, while it is not a program to endow mothers – it would go to the childless and those with children, women and men – it has won some support from feminists who wish to lessen women's economic dependence on men but to leave how they order their domestic lives entirely to them.

Now, I have to admit that when I first heard about UBI it struck me as utterly utopian, and I think its fair to say that, so far as the US and UK are concerned, it is little more than a thought experiment. Yet, it isn't as utopian as all that: some of the economic mandarins at the Davos summit lined up to endorse it; one or two Swiss cities are giving it a try; and Finland – wouldn't you know it – may have a limited trial, probably at rates in excess of the level of the UK state pension. For some countries, this may be moving into the realm of practical politics.

Is that a good thing? I am not certain. Obviously, any policy that might abate the US's terrible child poverty begs attention. Yet, UBI seems to me to mesh rather too nicely with precisely those aspects of Anglo-American culture that cause the most trouble: I mean here our propensity to identify money as not just one of the foundations but as the major foundation for the good life, and to identify choice as an absolute individual right, one that is – provided one isn't breaking the law – value-neutral. Supporters of UBI argue that, it will lead to all sorts of good things: with a basic income, people could combine work with caring or community service; we might even see the revival of the kind of civic engagement Rathbone fostered more than a hundred years ago. I am not sure. Having a basic income won't incline you to a life of social service unless social service is socially valued; having a basic income will help you feed your kids, yes, but as Frank Field recently argued, poor kids will still become poor adults unless they and their parents have community centers and nursery schools, public libraries and play groups.

Will UBI foster these things? It is, remember, entirely neutral about people's spending choices – for UBI, as for my faculty colleague, surfing and childrearing really are equally valid choices. I am not sure we want to embrace value-neutrality to that extent, or to think of individuals apart from the social world. We need to think of the good life, I think, in terms that are not so, for lack of a better word, neo-liberal: that recognize that the good life rests on community norms, social mutuality, shared values. It is revealing, I think, that those countries that have not just choice-rich academics proselytizing for UBI but might actually be willing to experiment with it are those that have gone farthest already in quite another direction: that is, in the direction of building social supports for the work of care through universal services.

So this is the third model, what one might call a social services model, in which a good part of the work of care is taken over by the collectivity as a whole. In its pure form this conjures up the world of the utopian commune or the collective farm, but the Scandinavian welfare states are more moderate approximations. Labour force participation is normative for both sexes but is eased by generous parental leave policies and extensive day-care provision – a structure that does genuinely limit gender disparities in economic and social power and, equally importantly, socializes all citizens into shared norms. Of course, as a number of scholars have pointed out, this model requires not just a high level of social consensus over welfare but also a willingness to pay its costs; it is also true that socializing care doesn't necessarily change the gender dynamics involved: put bluntly, women might run collective nurseries while men make Volvos. Yet, by almost any measure, states committed to this model have done more to promote women's equality and to reduce child poverty, than any others.

Let me give a few numbers. In 2015, Iceland, Norway, Finland and Sweden, in that order, topped the "gender equality" rankings of 145 countries produced by the World Economic Forum; the UK was 18th; the US 28th. The Columbia Earth Institute's "happiness index" delivers similar findings: of 158 countries, Switzerland, Iceland, Denmark, and Norway were "happiest": here, the US ranked 15th; the UK ranked 21st. When we look at child poverty too, we get some similar outcomes: in 2013, and among 35 advanced economies, Finland (with 5% of children in poverty) had the lowest rates, with the Netherlands, Denmark, Iceland and Norway nipping at its heels. The UK, with about 10% of children in poverty, ranked 14th , but the truly shocking result is the United States which, horribly, consigns almost a quarter of its children to poverty, ranking 34th of 35. Of course, you might protest, those Northern European leaders are rich – and indeed they are, but they are not, actually, as rich as all that. Yes, Norway's oil money has put it at the top in terms of per capita income, but our other high performers – Iceland, Finland, the Netherlands – all rank lower than the US in GDP per capita, and only marginally above the UK. These countries can afford their expensive welfare states, yes, but only because they choose to do so.

Now, I don't expect the UK or US to turn into Finland anytime soon – although it is heartening to see our countries paying more attention to early childhood education and

the kinds of family, gender and education policies these states have pioneered. But, we have, I think, particular disadvantages to overcome – which are not only lack of resources and political will, but also the lack of moral imagination. When not only government ministers but also journalists or activists in the US and UK talk about the aims of social policy, they are far more likely to fall into the language of the market, defending social programs because they will prepare children for high-earning jobs or keep women in the labor market, not because they prepare children to be full members of society (of which earning is a part but only a part) or support women properly in lives that are likely not oriented towards earning alone. Let me be clear. I am not questioning the need to focus on skills and earnings; what I am saying, however, is that if we want to promote women's equality, we can't let market language displace moral argument or accept that things not valued by the market are not valuable at all. This is particularly urgent if we wish to make arguments for the importance of care. After all, the reason to care for the very old – and to support those who care for the very old – is not because elder care is an expanding market in which we intend to outperform the Germans, but rather because this is a requirement of a decent society. We have some trouble generating these arguments, however, because we default almost immediately to the language of political economy and market liberalism: these are our Anglo-American traditions; they are what Alexis de Tocqueville would have called our "habits of the heart." But we do have other traditions as well, and it is not only worthwhile but urgent that we recall them. In my last part of this talk, I want to return to Eleanor Rathbone, precisely because she thought within a moral tradition that had human dignity and not individual liberty at its heart.

IV.

Eleanor Rathbone was a social reformer and not a moral philosopher, of course. But that was sort of an accident. She went to Oxford to read "Greats," and had she not gotten a second she would have stayed there; it's easy to imagine her as a great Principal of Somerville. And while she did leave, philosophy stayed with her. In Rathbone's pamphlets and speeches, if you know what to look for, you'll see she employs arguments drawn from thinkers she read years earlier. What were those texts?

We know Rathbone read Plato and Aristotle; she read Hume and Mill; she read Kant. But which of those thinkers grabbed her? Plato did, and its easy to see why, for his Republic is a community bound by the most stringent ideas of public service and care, one that (remarkably) envisaged women as full members. Women might have a lesser average measure of various virtues, Plato reasoned, but nonetheless their virtues were the same in kind; thus, every service for which they were fit – from philosophizing to fighting – should be open to them. Rathbone read out those passages to the "Associated Prigs," a discussion group she had founded together with a few other women students. One can see why.

Yet, it isn't to Plato that Rathbone refers in later life. It is to Kant. We might find this surprising. For, when we think of Oxford philosophy in those years, we usually think of T.H. Green's appropriation of German idealist thought, on which basis liberals built a conception of the state as a school for collective virtue. Rathbone certainly imbibed this new optimism about the state – but the main legacy she took from those years was in the realm of moral philosophy. She was tutored by Edward Caird, a Scottish philosopher who succeeded Jowett as Master of Balliol and who was a strong supporter of women's education. Caird was also a Kantian – and Rathbone became a Kantian too. What on earth does this mean? And why does it matter?

Put simply, it means that she held to an absolutist ethic, one that judged morality entirely according to its conformity to moral law, independent of all considerations of expedience, market rationality, or natural law. I can explain this a bit better if we compare Kant's moral thought with that of the Scottish enlightenment philosopher, David Hume. Hume thought himself as an empiricist and almost as a natural scientist, and his moral philosophy reflected that orientation. In An Enquiry into the Principles of Morals, published in 1751, Hume examined the kinds of values and behaviors he saw naturally recurring in society and concluded with delight that we needed not worry about morals so very much. It was clear, Hume said, that we love the social virtues: we value sympathy, friendliness, civility, liberality – and thus, while we might not live by the most strenuous ideals, those preferences will keep us moderately considerate. As Hume put it, we won't tread on our neighbor's gouty toes. Indeed, even our little weaknesses – our vanity, our desire to look well with others – had their utility, since they made us behave better simply

to protect our reputations. Now, it isn't right to say that Hume was just a believer in laisser-faire: he was optimistic not because he thought society didn't matter but rather because he thought we were naturally social. But it is easy to see why Hume and Adam Smith were great friends, and why liberal optimism began from this taproot.

Kant, though, began from an entirely different foundation. Kant would not trust to scientific method or empirical observation; for him, we could never answer the question of how we should live by looking at how we live now. Indeed, the fact that some people are naturally nice and sociable is if anything a snare for the moral philosopher, leading him to the kind of soft-headed thinking Kant thought Hume embodied. Hume has a walk-on role in Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, published in 1785: he's the "warm-hearted friend of mankind" about whom Kant is especially scathing. For the only true morality, Kant insists, is unconditional and absolute: it is a categorical imperative, derived from reason alone. One must act, Kant tells us, so that the maxim – let's say, principle – of your action could be a universal law, could hold for everyone, regardless of condition or place or time. Only then do we treat man not as a part of nature but as something above nature, as an end in himself. Only then do we not derive laws from empirical observation but rather give ourselves the law, based on reason and justice alone.

At Columbia, where I teach, we still teach all sophomores a curriculum much like that Rathbone read in the 1890s. Yes, we've now added Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf, W.E.B. Du Bois and Michel Foucault. But we still begin the fall with Plato's Republic; we still start the spring with Hume and Kant. It's a tough curriculum, if a great one, and we teach it – as Rathbone learned it – through discussion, asking our students to put these ideas to the test of their own lives. Imagine you're sick in hospital, I ask, would you rather have a visit from Hume or Kant? Hume always wins hands down: better the cheerful, convivial Scot than the humorless moralist from Konisberg! But if I ask them to imagine that they're lying, half dead, in no-mans-land, and they need to have someone crawl out under fire to rescue them, they trust to the absolutist German in the end. Just as there are no atheists on hijacked planes, we are all Kantians in situations of real moral duress, for the imperative to treat each human as an end in themselves is

absolute. We must choose to do this, of course, but in a sense this choice is no choice at all, for it is only through such choice that we rise to being fully human.

I don't know why Rathbone became a Kantian – or even if she would have acknowledged that she was a Kantian – but she was. Loss of religious faith may have had something to do with it, for Kant offers a secular grounding for morals that is as absolute as the Sermon on the Mount. Kantianism influenced her thinking on tough political questions: in an article arguing that suffragists could not legitimately break the law, for example, she insists – astonishingly – on the need to hold to the Kantian ideal of statecraft: "Act so the maxim of thy action could be law universal." This is not the usual kind of argument we find in suffrage journals, but it shows up in other Rathbone speeches and articles as well.

But Kant didn't just provide Rathbone with arguments about political means; his thought echoes through her thinking about the ends of human action as well. And her 'end,' her goal, was always to defend the right of each individual human person to a full moral and social life. Of course, Rathbone was pragmatic in her politics and would in fact use almost any argument to support her cause – and yet, she always drew back from justifications based on expediency alone. That is, while she certainly did say that benefits for children would make them productive workers, and that German refugees could help the war effort, she never argued that those were the only, or even the main, reasons to care about the vulnerable or oppressed. Children needed protection because they were individual human beings with an absolute claim; refugees too had an absolute claim – simply on the basis of their humanity and ours. Kant, as we know, is a foundational thinker for theorists of human rights, and Rathbone too belongs in this tradition.

It's easy to see why people sometimes found Rathbone frustrating. Moral absolutists are hard to live with. A political culture accustomed to think in terms of property rights, market forces and individualism found it hard to accommodate someone who felt not just Liverpool's children, nor just Indian women living under British rule, but also Jews living under Nazi rule and starving German children at the end of the war, were her personal responsibility. But there is something uniquely valuable, I would argue, about the Kantian perspective, as we think about the duties we have to one another and especially to the most vulnerable.

We now live at a moment of extraordinary deference to the market. We expect markets to sort out most distributional questions; we confuse economic success with moral worth. But as Rathbone argued 120 years ago, and as social investigators continue to show, market thinking cannot, and will never, properly value the work of care. And yet, we know that work is, in the true Kantian sense, valuable: it has moral worth; it treats each human being as an end. Indeed, in continuing to do that work, against the logic of our time and to their own economic cost, many people – and especially many women – demonstrate through their own lives the limits of our politics and thought. We will never live up to Rathbone's (or Kant's) strenuous standards, but we still need to think more richly about the ends of our lives. Eleanor Rathbone can help us do that.

A Brief Note on Sources:

This account of the thought and work of Eleanor Rathbone draws on my full biography, Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2004). For Frank Field's thoughtful account of the complex interplay between gender, generation and poverty, see Field, The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults (London: HM Government, 2010). For poverty and gender in old age, see especially John Macnicol's searing Neo-liberalising Old Age (Cambridge University Press, 2015). There is an extensive debate about UBI readily available on the web.