

Reconsidering the Political Individual

Responding to Carole Pateman's Critique of Social Contract Theory with Help from Developmental Psychology and Care Ethics

In The Sexual Contract, Carole Pateman (1988) claims that, according to social contract origin myths, the individual is a fully autonomous adult male who has propriety over a woman. Taking a cue from Pateman, I argue that political theory should not be grounded in myth. Rather I suggest that a more realistic conception of the individual can be found in developmental psychology. Developmental psychology teaches us that individuals are never fully fledged. It also affirms that, ironically, the more autonomous individual is the individual who has more reliable care from others. Since needs for care have been largely ignored in social contract theory, there has been no recognition of the need to negotiate who will do the work of care. Social contract theorists have remained ignorant of the fact that if some individuals are forced to do all of the care-work, they will not be able to participate as fully in civil society. Once we recognize that providing care is a vital aspect of promoting the values of freedom and participation in civil society, then care itself becomes a vital political issue. Identifying care as an integral human need brings Pateman and developmental psychology in dialogue with care ethics. In turn, care ethics affirms that care is an important feminist political concern and thereby helps to address Pateman's concerns about women's marginalization. I conclude that if women's freedom is to be affirmed, then it can no longer be assumed that it is women's work to provide care for the family.

By now it is a familiar refrain that the notion of the individual as autonomous is worthy of critique. Carole Pateman (1988) makes an especially evocative criticism of this concept in *The Sexual Contract*. Her analysis is unique in that she outlines how social contract theory's notion of the individual presupposes the subjugation of women. Pateman believes that to assert the value of individual freedom as found in social contract theory is to affirm it

for men only, since it is only through subjugating a woman that a man can gain status as an individual, assert his “autonomy,” and fully participate in civil society. Pateman uncovers this latent theme in a close reading of social contract origin myths. These myths naturalize and de-politicize women’s marginalized social status and construct the individual as a radically free adult male. In this paper, I engage this element of Pateman’s critique and consider how the notion of the individual might be reformed. Taking a cue from Pateman, I argue that political theory should not be grounded in myth. Rather I think that a more reasonable and realistic conception of the individual should come from developmental psychology. Developmental psychologists believe that the degree to which a person’s needs for care are addressed can be correlated with her ability to establish herself as an individual. Therefore, this approach requires that we recognize both every individual’s dependence on others *and* her possibilities for freedom. Identifying care as an integral human need brings Pateman and developmental psychology in dialogue with care ethics. In turn, care ethics demonstrates that care is an important feminist political concern and thereby helps to address Pateman’s concerns about women’s marginalization.

The connection between Pateman’s (1988) agenda and that of care ethics seems especially clear. Like Pateman, care ethicists have argued that women are simultaneously subjugated to men and enable men’s free participation in civil society. Women have made men’s individualism possible by ensuring that their needs for care are met. I argue that in making both needs for freedom and care an explicit part of our political conception of the individual, we also make the need for negotiations about how care will be provided a political concern. That is, if women’s freedom is to be affirmed, then it can no longer be assumed that it is women’s work to provide care for men. A more difficult alliance to demonstrate may be that between care ethics and developmental psychology. Carol Gilligan (1982), one of the founding theorists of care ethics, is also the most famous feminist critic of developmental psychology. Nevertheless, I propose that developmental psychology can help provide a more realistic and inclusive ground for our political notion of the individual. Provided this notion of the individual takes hold, I suggest that the dialectical moments that constitute the political individual will no longer be men’s freedom and women’s subjugation as Pateman has found, but rather the freedom and dependency which constitute each individual.

Pateman’s critique of social contract’s notion of the individual

In *The Sexual Contract*, Carole Pateman (1988) argues that social contract theorists believe their theory is an affirmation of freedom when, in fact, it is grounded in the subjugation of women. Pateman thinks that social contract theory sets up opposing masculine and feminine realms; women inhabit nature and the private realm, while men inhabit the civil/public sphere. Their theories both patently and latently claim that this ordering is *natural*. She further

argues that the sexual contract—which gives men ownership over women—is presupposed by social contract theory, particularly their notion of the individual. That is, for social contract theorists, the individual is a man who holds sexual dominion over at least one woman.

Pateman (1988) claims that “the story of sexual contract thus begins with the construction of the individual” (38). She believes that the individual of social contract is constructed within the mythical origin stories that are its basis. Although there are a variety of origin stories, they can be placed within two basic categories. In the first type, inhabitants of a state of nature voluntarily give up its insecurities for civil freedom protected by the state. In the second story, sons cast off paternal rule in favor of civil government. According to Pateman, each of these origin stories has obfuscated the sexual contract and has deemed patriarchy an apolitical problem. According to the first story, women are positioned as *naturally* apolitical. They are not born free into the “state of nature,” but are already subjugated to men; and, marriage, the marriage contract, and patriarchy are thought to be a part of the natural condition (prior to civil society). According to the second story, patriarchy is seen as a private or family problem, not a political problem and is narrowly interpreted as the power of the father over his children.

These stories expose the beliefs upon which social contract is based. If Pateman’s (1988) reading of social contract theory is correct, then feminists should agree that there is a highly problematic conception of the individual at its heart. However, some feminists find Pateman’s formulation inadequate. Since the publication of her book in 1988, many have argued that autonomy cannot simply be framed around the male-oppressor/female-oppressed dichotomy (Bordo, 1993; Fraser, 1997; McNay, 2000; Mohanty, 1991). These accounts wish to offer a more nuanced understanding of the power relations. “Feminist theory today aims to complicate the notion of power in a way that ‘goes beyond oppressor/oppressed’ (Mohanty, 1991: 13; Bordo 1993: 23) to account for ‘the intersections of the various systematic networks of class, race, (hetero)sexuality, and nation ... that positions us as ‘women’ (Mohanty 13)” (Miriam, 2005: 274).

In “Getting Pateman ‘Right,’” Kathy Miriam (2005) defends Pateman (1988) against these critics. She says that they undermine the fundamental feminist tenet that men’s privilege is perpetrated by a complex of power relations. In defense of Pateman, I would also argue that her account does not simply *rest* on the dichotomy male-oppressor/female-oppressed. Rather, she shows that the politically subjugated female gives birth to the political male. Thus, Pateman shows us that freedom and subjugation are both moments of liberal individualism. For this reason, I agree with Miriam that Pateman’s critics have overlooked the true vitality of her theory; she provides a convincing framework for understanding women’s subjugation without sacrificing any of the true complexity of the issue. I also agree with Miriam that Pateman’s theory invites us to rethink the notion of the individual:

At bottom, her critique is an attempt to portray the unsatisfactory nature of the underlying conception of what human existence is/should be that motivates contract theory (and contract ideology)... The key to the genius of contract derives from the ontology of a disembodied, un-situated, dissociated individual, that is to say, an individual who is thought to stand in external relation to his/her person, capacities, and body, the way she/he can stand in relation to external material objects. (276-7)

Is there a better way to conceive of the individual upon which we found our political theory? According to Miriam (2005), if we are to reconsider the meaning of the individual along the lines that Pateman (1988) suggests, then the individual must be *embodied, situated* and *associated*. I maintain this means that the individual must be any person, born into the world as a human infant—utterly dependent on care from other people for survival and, ultimately, for whatever measure of freedom and participation in civil society that she attains. Real living individual humans have always emerged out of a nexus of care relations. A body of work already exists which has made the attempt to understand the basis of human existence along these lines for nearly 100 years—developmental psychology.

The developmental story of the individual

Three main strains of thought can be discerned within developmental psychology which can help us to reconceive the individual—Objects Relations Theory, Attachment Theory, and Erik Erikson's (1959) stage theory. Due to space considerations, I will omit a discussion of Object Relations and provide only brief discussions of the other two. However, each of these theories shares the belief that the degree to which an infant or young child's needs for care are addressed can be correlated with her ability to establish a sense of self-reliance. Also, thanks to Erikson in particular, developmental psychology emphasizes that the task of individuation is lifelong. That is, infants and young children are utterly dependent on others, but so are the rest of us to greater and lesser degrees throughout our lifetimes. For developmental psychologists there is never a point at which the individual becomes fully independent. This is unlike social contract theory which sets up individuation and dependence as antithetical.

Attachment Theory was conceived of by John Bowlby when he noted that children raised in institutions develop severe emotional issues, particularly the inability to form close relationships. Mary Ainsworth, who was Bowlby's research assistant early in her career, found that infants who had demonstrated a secure attachment in early life, later did much better in other areas such as cognitive tasks, persistence, self-reliance, friendliness and leadership (see Weinfeld, Sroufe, Egeland and Carlson, 1999). Over the years, attachment research has been broadly tested, in Israel, Africa, Japan, China, Western Europe, and the United States in both rural and urban areas. Interestingly, as William Crain

(2000) says in *Theories of Development*, “The U.S. and Western European samples contain the highest percentage of [insecure] avoidant children. Perhaps the West’s cultural emphasis on independence leads parents to rebuff babies’ needs, and the babies defend themselves with avoidant behavior” (57). Attachment theory seems to teach us that it is ineffective to force independence on a child. However, if a child is able to create a close bond with a reliable caregiver, this will actually make her more self-reliant. Furthermore, researchers find that the ability to form intimate bonds with others is correlated with the qualities of both leadership and independence.

Erik Erikson, one of the most influential developmental psychologists, was the first to conceive of human development as a lifelong process. Erikson (1959) believed that the most fundamental accomplishment of human existence is to establish a sense of basic trust. Caregivers cultivate their child’s trust when they provide consistent, responsive care. Trust in one’s parents then leads to a general orientation of hope, and thereby, a greater ability to take on new challenges. Particularly, this child will be better prepared for the next developmental stage—the task of establishing autonomy. In young adulthood, Erikson believes that our primary task is to negotiate the tension between intimacy and isolation. However, he also believes intimacy is only possible if a sense of identity is established during puberty. Thus we can see that not only are independence and interpersonal intimacy mutually constituting for Erikson, but also that the foundation of moral and emotional development is a sense of trust that others will provide care in times of need.

As a means of understanding how the political individual comes into existence, developmental psychology has several strengths. First, the developmental story situates our “origins” in theories born out of decades of interdisciplinary research. Unlike an origin myth that establishes a single truth regardless of any supporting evidence, developmental psychology is subject to ongoing revision. Second, developmental psychology denies the idea that humans ever inhabited a radically free state of nature. Instead, it is grounded in the fact that every person is born into a community. Third, developmental psychology acknowledges that individuals do not attain their place in civil society by throwing off the shackles of the family. Rather, the family (in whatever form it takes) provides nurturance to the individual (of any age) making participation in society possible. Thus, the family has an ongoing, essential and active role *within* civil society, and this fact belies any public/private dichotomy. Finally, developmental psychology recognizes that the individual is both historically and culturally situated. In summary, the individual of developmental psychology is *embodied, situated* and *associated*. It successfully contradicts the problematic formulation of the individual that concerns Pateman and provides a helpful alternative.

In addition to yielding a more realistic notion of the individual, the developmental account sheds new light on the feminist concerns raised by Pateman (1988). Developmental psychology has taught us that autonomous individuals are never fully fledged. Ironically, the more *autonomous* individual

is the individual who has more reliable care from others. Disproportionately throughout history, women have been charged with caring for men, while men have considered themselves self-reliant. Men typically have not been burdened with awareness of this dependency. So, it is not surprising that traditional social contract theorists overlooked it as well, and were not concerned with the that if some individuals must do all of the carework, then they will not be able to participate as fully in civil society. Once we recognize that providing care is a vital aspect of promoting the values of freedom and participation in civil society, then care itself becomes a vital political issue.

Care ethics

At least since the publication of Carol Gilligan's *In A Different Voice* in 1982, care ethicists have been working to demonstrate that care is political. They have been skeptical of individualistic notions of the human. In *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, Joan Tronto (1993) says "Perhaps the most fundamental level of change in our political ideals that results from the adoption of a care perspective is in our assumptions of human nature. From this standpoint, not only will we be able to see changes in conceptions of self, but also in relations to others" (162). Tronto says that positing care as a fundamental of human life means that individuals are best understood in relations of interdependence. Tronto criticizes liberal individualism on the grounds that it opposes autonomy to dependence: "Rather than viewing dependency as a natural part of the human experience, political theorists emphasize dependence as the character-destroying condition" (163). Some care ethicists have even gone so far as to declare an utter incompatibility between care ethics and liberal individualism (Fox-Genovese, 1991; Glendon, 1991).

It might seem that care ethics and developmental psychology will be in accord. But would care ethicists really be satisfied with the reformulation of the individual enabled by developmental psychology? In fact, there are several reasons why they might reject it. First, it could be argued that developmental psychology actually originates from social contract theory. Locke might be considered one of the first developmental theorists in that he argued that people are largely formed by environment and education, rather than via innate qualities. In *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke (1961) says: "Whence has [the mind] all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from *experience*; in that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself" (Vol. 1, book 2, section 2). In *Theories of Development*, William Crain (2000) also argues that Rousseau holds the first "true developmentalist position" (11). We see this in *Emile* when Rousseau (1948) says: "The wisest writers devote themselves to what a man ought to know, without asking themselves what a child is capable of learning. They are always looking for the man in the child, without considering what he is before he becomes a man" (1). Given that developmental psychology could be said to have its roots in social contract theory, it makes sense that feminists could

be skeptical. Still, even though Locke and Rousseau have developmentalist leanings, these discoveries do not ground their notion of the individual as present in their political theory.

Nevertheless, in *In A Different Voice*, Gilligan (1982) provides additional reasons that care ethicists might reject my solution. In this book—one of the founding texts of care ethics—she staunchly critiques developmental psychology. If care ethics stems from this critique, then would care ethicists really see it as holding an important solution for feminists? In particular, Gilligan argues that Erikson (1959) relies upon the male as the prototypical human; his theory of feminine psychology is merely an addendum. Indeed, Erikson does suggest that women do not achieve as great a degree of autonomy as men. While the male forms his identity in adolescence, the female, “holds her identity in abeyance as she prepares to attract the man by whose name she will be known, by whose status she will be defined, the man who will rescue her from emptiness and loneliness by filling ‘the inner space’” (12). Gilligan does not object to this picture of femininity, but rather the fact that Erikson does not make his theory of feminine psychology more central to his stage theory. If he did, she believes that the stage theory would more accurately represent the fact that care and intimacy are central lifelong concerns.¹ Still, even though Gilligan is critical of Erikson and other founders of developmental psychology, her own theory is developmental. She simply thinks some reforms are needed. This possibility for ongoing improvement is precisely one of developmental psychology’s strengths.

But perhaps there is a deeper difference between care ethics and developmental psychology—a divergence of values. While I affirm the value of independence, seeking only to more clearly trace its relationship to dependence, perhaps Gilligan and other care ethicists would say that independence should not be considered a good end in its own right. In “The Future of Feminist Liberalism” Martha Nussbaum (2002) seems skeptical of the ramifications of seeing care as merely a means of making one a full member of society. She explains that the severely disabled are also entitled to care although autonomy may not be achievable for them. Eva Feder Kittay (1999) expresses a similar view in *Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency*. Kittay says that everyone is entitled to care on the basis that everyone is “some mother’s child.” She explains that entitlement to care cannot be justified only on the grounds that it is conducive to greater autonomy or the ability to participate in civil society.

While Kittay’s (1999) emphasis that everyone is entitled to care is very important, her theory still has several problems. First, even though she attempts to broaden the meaning of care beyond the maternal, she relies heavily on the metaphorical force of an idealized vision of the mother-child relationship. In doing so, she seems insensitive to the fact that all mothers do not love and care for their children. Many women, even mothers, are not nurturing. Thus, mother love is not a universal quality that can serve as the archetype for care. Finally,

this formulation of care emphasizes a dyadic and unidirectional relationship of care. Instead it seems more advantageous to emphasize the wide variety of forms which care can take without relying on patriarchal myths of femininity. I strongly agree with Tronto (1993) when she says that care does not have to be conceived of as dyadic or described in mother-child terms: “In assuming that care is dyadic, most contemporary authors dismiss from the outset the ways in which care can function socially and politically in a culture” (103).

Nussbaum (2002) also does not completely agree with Kittay’s (1999) “some mother’s child” basis. Nussbaum finds that predicating care in this way is inadequate, regardless of the abilities of the individual:

I think we need a lot more: liberty and opportunity, the chance to form a plan of life, the chance to learn and imagine on one’s own. These goals are as important for the mentally handicapped as they are for others, though much more difficult to achieve...One of the most important kinds of support mentally disabled children need is the support required to be free-choosing adults, each in his or her own way... Even for Sessa [Kittay’s disabled daughter] who will never vote or write, doesn’t a full human life involve a kind of freedom and individuality, namely a space in which to exchange love and enjoy light and sound, free from confinement and mockery? (196)

Based on this statement, I think Nussbaum (2002) would agree that care can be grounded on the fact that every person needs it in order to be more fully self-actualized, even the severely disabled. They too are developing, potentially becoming more self-determining, and expressing their own values, creativity and hopes. This is akin to what Nussbaum calls a respect for their dignity and Kittay (1999) calls “respecting each person as an end” (204). If individualism is conceived in *this* way, then I think that Pateman, developmental psychologists, and care ethicists could agree that it is appropriate to think of care as a means to this end.

The origin myths of social contract theory are seductive. They emphasize our freedom and our ability to supersede an oppressive situation, to remake society in the manner of our choosing. Meanwhile, care ethics focuses on some of the least glamorous tasks assigned to humans, and on the self-sacrifice that is sometimes required to assure another’s wellbeing. Still, if we want to affirm individual freedom, we should not be deluded about what makes it possible. Developmental psychology makes us aware that dependency is fundamental. Unlike the origin myths of social contract, developmental psychology is contextualized within a time and place, and can change with human nature. Furthermore, it can be tested empirically and contributed to from a wide variety of fields and methods of research—psychology, sociology, anthropology, phenomenology, and so on.

Care empowers the individual. This is one of the reasons why men have

been most powerful historically. Most have had the benefit of at least one woman being responsible for them. Meanwhile, women have given more care away. Paradoxically, the person who is cared for is able to more fully individuate. If we value the ability of individuals to engage in civil society we must also affirm the care relations that make that possible. If women's political engagement is to be prized, then we must openly negotiate how care is provided. We must recognize that when one takes care of another, they lend some of their own autonomy to the other person.

¹While I do not fully agree with this critique of Erikson (1959), I will need to leave this issue aside here for the sake of space.

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