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Ancient Virtues, Contemporary Practices: An Aristotelian Approach to Embodied Care

Hollie Sue Mann¹

Abstract
Earlier discussions of care have both insisted on its importance to political life and decried the unequal burden borne by women in care work. Yet they have failed to demonstrate why for reasons above and beyond the instrumental ends it serves. We ought to make the cultivation of an ongoing practice of caregiving a political priority. This article redefines and reframes care as a thoroughly critical and deeply embodied practice that is central to the flourishing of human beings. By way of Aristotle, I situate philia and embodied practices of care at the center of the shaping of the citizen and demonstrate a deeper significance of relations of care to our political life. When this is done alongside attention to habituation to right action and thinking, we can see more clearly how a particular kind of embodied politics can activate and sustain an ethic that cultivates citizens’ capacities and desires to care.

Keywords
care, Aristotle, virtue, embodied, caregiving

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Long before the *New York Times* began blogging about the challenges facing caregivers, feminists and theorists of care located care at the center of political and ethical life. On the one hand, some feminists saw care work as a serious impediment to women’s emancipation. Care work, which was done almost exclusively by women, stood in the way of social justice. On the other hand, some took care to be necessary and valuable work. Theorists like Sara Ruddick, Nel Noddings, and Joan Tronto insisted not only that care need not be opposed to social justice but can actively support its pursuit. This article takes its bearing from this second group, and, by recovering a tradition of thinking about care in Aristotle, seeks to revise and extend their claim that care is a practice that must be cultivated in and by democratic citizens.

Before turning to Aristotle, however, I begin by locating this project within the landscape of already extremely compelling political theoretical work on care. Three contributions stand in particular need of identification, for they have uniquely, if differently, shaped what I take to be the most theoretically rich account of care’s place in democratic life.

Joan Tronto did perhaps more than any other theorist to demonstrate the political dangers of denigrating care. She made a compelling case against conceiving of care as a merely “feminine” practice, insisting instead that the ability to actively care for others is a skill that enhances democratic citizenship and can only at our peril be thought of as “feminine” work. She offers an illuminating and expansive definition of care: “Care is a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.” I will refine this admittedly broad definition momentarily, but for now I would like to highlight the fact that Tronto sees democratic life as requiring caring subjects for its own just reproduction. This is a thought given very fine articulation by Virginia Held, for whom care “forms the basic moral framework into which justice should be fitted.” Not only, then, does care not stand opposed to just political life. A just political life might not be possible without an ethic of care. This essay is indebted to both their projects, even though neither takes Aristotle to be a central resource for her thinking. Though Tronto does acknowledge an affinity for Aristotle’s project, her central ancient interlocutors are the Scottish Enlightenment figures. And Held believes that virtue ethical traditions that emerge from the ancients stand opposed to the ethic of care she endorses.
This is not to say that this essay is wholly uncritical of either Tronto or Held. Indeed, their failure to fully appreciate the deeply embodied nature of care has already been identified. Maurice Hamington has delivered a particularly elegant version of this critique and one with which I am in some sympathy. Hamington, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, insists that no account of care can be complete without a robust account of our bodily ways of knowing. There is, for Hamington, a kind of moral knowledge located in our bodies, and care theorists have done a disservice by not tending to this fact. I think that Hamington is quite right to insist upon the centrality of an embodied ethic of care, though it will become clear that I do not think he ultimately gives the correct account of it. I agree with Hamington that care is, in one sense, an ontological fact of our existence, “always already” embodied in moral and political communities. Yet, this fact does not help us to see precisely how we are shaped as moral subjects in and through relationships of care, how we are habituated to become better or worse practitioners of care, and whether this fashioning is a necessary component of political life. So although it’s clearly the case that care is always unfolding—indeed we could not survive or flourish otherwise, I also see the potential for a much more critical and reflective mode and ethic of care, as something that awaits a kind of disclosure and actualization through praxis and habituation. The materialization of this praxis can be greatly enhanced by a hermeneutic endeavor that can begin to reveal, through Aristotelian ethics and ontology, precisely how care is embodied in our world and why this is so central to political life.8 In other words, though I think that Hamington is correct to call care theorists back to certain embodied facts of our existence and, moreover, the embodied structures of our relations with others, I think that Aristotle offers a much richer account of that embodiment and, therefore, is a much richer resource for theorists of care.

Not only am I correcting Hamington’s articulation of embodied care with Aristotle, I am also drawing on a rich tradition of feminist theorists who have sought to recover and emphasize the body’s centrality to political thought and life.9 There is much disagreement among political theorists on the question of the body, in particular how much weight should be given to the bodily character of our lives, or even whether it is wise to talk about things like affect, disposition, and disciplinary practices lest we risk constructing something like pre-social conceptions of the self.10 Perhaps because of this worry, much of the literature in gender and cultural studies focuses on representations of the body but has the odd effect of obscuring actual bodies in favor of discussions of language, symbols, and belief.11 In this exploration of the relationship
between care and embodiment, I aim to focus on both; that is, how bodies and bodily habits are fashioned by social and political forces and the ways in which individuals can and do cultivate expressive ethical practices, like care, in the broader context of internal and external constraints. So embodiment and corporeality, for me, designate both how bodies are taken up and signified in and through different modes of discourse but also the ways in which embodied subjects can and do work on the self to cultivate particular habits, desires, and techniques, though always within larger political and social contexts.

In my formulation, then, embodied care is an ethic that understands individual and social morality as deeply bound up with the caring relationships and communities in which human beings are embedded, and which cannot be adequately understood without attending to the corporeal practices that constitute such relationships. Yet it is also a set of practices whereby individuals take up the work of caring for the bodies of others predominantly with and through their own bodies, but in a deeply mindful way. This latter claim acknowledges the absolutely central work of Tronto, Held, and Hamington, but also signals important departures from them. Against Tronto and Held, I affirm the deeply embodied nature of any defensible ethics of care, but against Hamington I insist that this embodiment must be understood in a way that Merleau-Ponty simply does not allow.

In the following section, I begin my examination of the place of care in Aristotle’s thought. I focus particular attention on the role of philia (friendship) and oikia (family) in political life. This section develops the grounds for my claim that we begin to think about the practices of care in a way not unlike Aristotle thought about the virtues—as activities that are natural and proper to human beings, without which the best kind of political and ethical life is impossible. I should say at the outset that I have no illusions about Aristotle, and by no means see him as a wholly unproblematic ally for care ethics or feminist theory more generally. I acknowledge these hurdles, though I will not recount them here, but I do not find them insurmountable. Indeed, my own reading of Aristotle casts doubt on earlier feminist interpretations that see him as always and necessarily hostile to the body, displaying a deep antipathy for the corporeal. I am not the first theorist of care or feminist theorist to see Aristotle as a kind of friend, though surely one with whom it is safe to say I often disagree. And though I am in good company on this score, my own appropriation of Aristotle and, indeed, his virtue ethics, is unique in that I am interested in both what Aristotle teaches us about how we become moral agents and perform good actions, that individual and social “goodness” is contingent on political life, as well as the openings he creates for thinking
My claim is merely that Aristotle opens up resources for care theorists in a way that has yet to be acknowledged, and that he does so in a way that both preserves the best insights of Tronto, Held, and Hamington, while recasting their picture in an even more attractive frame.

**Philia**

*Philia* is the mutually acknowledged and reciprocal exchange of goodwill and affection that exists between people who share an interest in each other on the basis of pleasure, usefulness, or virtue (*NE* 1156a). The best sort of friendships are, of course, voluntary, but Aristotle also includes in his account of friendship nonvoluntary relations of affection and care, such as those that exist among family members and fellow citizens (*NE* 1159b25-30, 1161b15). What exactly is it about friendships that make them necessary for our lives and for living virtuously? Some have suggested that friends are needed in order to properly practice the main Aristotelian virtues. Even a cursory reading of Aristotle on friendship suggests that at least one reason why friends are valuable is because they care for us in times of need. On this view, affiliation is important because we need it for our own survival and flourishing, as Tronto, Groenhout, and other care theorists have demonstrated, specifically in the context of contemporary democratic politics. More than this, though, Nancy Sherman points out that friendships are sometimes a kind of external good, like money or power, but they are also the “form virtuous activity takes when it is especially fine and praiseworthy.” On her reading, friendships of different types are important for virtue precisely because they provide us with the opportunity for excellent action and desirable sentiments that would otherwise be unavailable to us (*NE* 1171b33-35). And, yet, it is not only in times of need or “opportunity” that friends are desirable. Friendships provide us with the necessary context to learn how to do well by others: “For how would one benefit from such prosperity if one had no opportunity for beneficence, which is most often displayed, and most highly praised, in relation to friends” (1155a8-10). I am suggesting that friends are most valuable because they form an important structure in which we learn other-regarding thought and action, and they also become the enabling conditions for our own acting and doing well, for living virtuously (*NE* 1169b9-16). In other words, friendships are important for Aristotle not simply because they make us feel good or provide us with a sense of solace and security, though they surely do that, but because they call on us to do well by others, to act benevolently toward those with whom we share an
ethical and political life, and they are the contexts within which we learn how to do this successfully.

But in what does this benevolent behavior consist? Of course, Aristotle explicitly says that monetary generosity is a virtue, but this is not all he has in mind for friends. Aristotle frequently focuses on relationships of care that involve not just moral support but also bodily care; the physical growth and development of children is central to the kind of philia parents have for children and Aristotle says explicitly that the elderly are cared for when weakness and failing make activity impossible without the support of others (NE 1155a12-15). He even goes so far as to say that “the excellent person labors for his friends and for his native country, and will die for them if he must; he will sacrifice money, honors, and contested goods in general, in achieving the fine for himself,” where achieving the fine for himself means doing well by a friend through these actions, actions which often entail more than being generous with one’s wealth and extend to a care that is deeply embodied (NE 1169a19-22).

Of course, I do not wish to deny the importance of contemplation for the good life, nor the fact that Aristotle emphasizes conversation between friends (NE1170b12).19 Yet I think that we can certainly say that something like care as we understand it today, or at the very least, dispositions and habits associated with care, are at the center of Aristotle’s philosophy.20

To highlight the value of caring about and for others in friendships, Aristotle asks that we consider a friendship defined primarily by radical inequality and, at least for some time, ongoing bodily care. Given Aristotle’s examples intended to show the importance of love in friendships—friends who care for the elderly and mothers who care for their children—it seems reasonable to say that he admits, in perhaps an imprecise way, forms of bodily care into his conception of friendships. Aristotle’s word for “love” in describing character friendship is stergein, which is a word that is most often used to apply to a mother’s love for her children and other family attachments.21 This is significant both because this word emphasizes a deep emotional bond and a particular way of relating to another that goes beyond the kind of attention we might give to someone with whom we are not in a relationship of bodily intimacy or dependency. Although Aristotle says that friendship is more than goodwill, both because it is more intense and because it entails mutuality, the features of this mutuality are fuzzy. Aristotle says that what is required for friendship is the mutual wishing for good things and awareness of this reciprocal wishing; he does not say that reciprocity in action is required for friendship. This point is made clear in the context of friendship
between non-equals, where love has a kind of equalizing effect (NE 1159a15-35).

The example of the relationship of parent to child is especially important because it brings into focus the idea that complete reciprocity need not be present in friendships in order for us to find pleasure in them and to practice the virtues. This is in stark contrast to the view that character friendships are most valuable because they alone enable living an excellent life. To the extent that we have the opportunity to do well by another, even when we get very little in return, we have the opportunity to achieve excellence.

The value of care entailed in friendships is made even more vivid in Aristotle’s chapter on the importance of active benevolence to friendship (NE IX 7).22 Here Aristotle compares the case of the benefactor to that of the craftsman. The craftsman, unlike the creditor who loans money to another who then becomes a debtor, loves what he produces because he has labored to produce it and he loves the finished product even though it does not have a soul and cannot pay him back. He says this is most true of the poets, “since they dearly like their own poems, and are fond of them as though they were their children” (NE 1168a1-2). The benefactor resembles this case but he loves his beneficiary even more because “the product is, in a way, the producer in his actualization; hence the producer is fond of the product, because he loves his own being” (NE 1168a5-10). One important component of friendships, in which we work to bring another person along in some way, is other-regarding action and this passage suggests that benevolence is a kind of work that entails the moral, psychological, and physical growth of another human being.

In the case of the benefactor, one is not merely loaning money to another, for that would be an instance of the creditor/debtor relationship. Nor is the work of benevolence similar to the activities that Aristotle says constitute friendship, things like drinking, hunting, and doing philosophy (NE 1172a1-5). Quite the contrary, the work of benevolence seems to entail a certain kind of effort that runs deeper than mere concern for another or monetary generosity. This work is bodily in nature, in addition to cognitive and moral. Yet, as we will see, despite what some have interpreted as a strong disregard for bodily labor in Aristotle’s work, the analogy of mother and child that Aristotle draws on to make his case suggests that bodily labor has its place in political life to the extent that friendships do, at least in the context of the benevolence that characterizes the best sort of friendships. The work of producing or sustaining an other is worth the costs and is even enjoyable to the benevolent one, even though the fruits of that labor may never produce anything externally valuable. Aristotle says that this work of “producing” a moral, rational,
and physical being is one of the finest activities because it is integral to our own self-actualization (NE 1168a5). Further, he believes that working to ensure that others flourish (at any age) actually works over time to produce more love and fondness:

What is pleasant is actualization in the present, expectation for the future, and memory of the past; but what is most pleasant is the [action we do] insofar as we are actualized, and this is also most lovable . . . loving is like production . . . and [the benefactor’s] love and friendliness are the result of this greater activity. Further, everyone is fond of whatever has taken effort to produce. . . . And while receiving a benefit seems to take no effort, giving one is hard work. This is also why mothers love their children more [than fathers do], since giving birth is more effort for them, and they know better that the children are theirs. And this also would seem to be proper to benefactors (NE 168a15-1168b28).

Doing well by others can lead to an increase in friendly feeling, which suggests that practices of care might hold some space for the growth of deeper feelings of care and love.

Nevertheless, there is an important moment in the above passage for our thinking about embodied care and it comes in Aristotle’s association of the love mothers feel for their children not with some essential female quality but rather with the work of laboring to produce another human being. His point is not the essentialist one that women are more loving toward their children simply because they are women, though this passage is sometimes interpreted this way. Rather, Aristotle is saying that mothers come to love children more than their fathers only as a result of the activity they have done for them, in particular, pregnancy, labor, and, perhaps we can infer, the work of child rearing more generally. Such a reading perhaps requires that we take seriously the claims of Jill Frank. She has persuasively argued that we look beyond Aristotle’s direct claims about the inferiority of slaves and women and consider more closely his fluid, constructivist conception of nature, which Aristotle clearly believes is contingent on one’s function, and one’s function is contingent on the activity that one takes up, or is allowed to take up. Presumably, fathers who do the work of care would be, on this account, better benefactors, caregivers, and friends to their children than women who give birth but do little else for their children. Good friends are benefactors of a sort, and this work of active benevolence suggests a project of actively caring for others. Friends are valuable both because they are copartners in our agency
and they are the conditions in and through which we learn to care for others, learn to be excellent creatures.

Family

We can also think about the importance of caregiving for Aristotle in terms of the way he conceives of the work that goes on in the family (οικία) and its relationship to political life. As has already been noted, feminist theorists often criticize Aristotle for excluding women from the political realm and from participation in virtue and practical wisdom. These criticisms are warranted but they do not stand an indictment against Aristotle as a fertile resource for care. In this section I want to build on the previous by demonstrating how structures of care permeate a second focus of Aristotle’s thought, the family.

Stephen Salkever argues that familial life is important to Aristotle not only because it prepares us for political life by instilling in us a notion of shame and a desire to do noble things but because “it provides a separate focus of attention and care—a real job to do—which can check the danger of excessive civic mindedness that seems always to threaten to turn the most tightly knit cities into armed camps.” Similarly, Arlene Saxonhouse has argued that Aristotle insists on the importance of the family “for concern for affectionate ties of care and love between human beings. He insists that the sense of oneself as an individual, as different in form, must be prior to a sense of oneself as a political equal.” This is consistent with Salkever’s reading of Aristotle as striving to undermine rather than support the evaluative hierarchy of civic life over and above family life, which draws heavily on Aristotle’s criticisms of an intensely political life in Book 2 of Politics. In contrast to the virility and masculinist nature of the political realm, the family, for Aristotle, is one important arena in which we develop a capacity for care, attachment, ethical perception, and deliberative choice. Salkever highlights the humanizing work that the family does for Aristotle insofar as it is within families that we find relationships and activities through which we realize the needs that uniquely define us as human beings. On Salkever’s reading, families are certainly a separate focus from politics. Yet, it is also clear that Aristotle believes that living well in a city-state depends on the health of families and friendships in a way that necessitates taking caring relationships seriously for political purposes. For him, more is required for a city-state to exist than a common location and mutual exchange (Pol 1280b30-40).

Friendships and families provide the context for living happily and nobly, both to act benevolently as benefactors, that is, to do the labor of producing
and sustaining another human being, and to participate in the relationships that help us correctly discern the kind of creatures we are and how we ought to live our lives. In and through these relationships of care and dependency, we find many opportunities for excellence and we discover and rediscover our humanity. The nurturing and caring work that goes on in the home, work that women have historically performed and are largely responsible for today, furthers *philia* in Aristotle’s view, which is not only intrinsically valuable to the good life but is also important political work, since friendship is what, according to Aristotle, “holds states together” (*NE* 1115a22).

Care is quite obviously not a virtue for Aristotle, not in a strict sense anyway. Although there are clear contradictions in his thought concerning the body, I do think we can say that care, even its most bodily forms, is central to his ethical and political project. I suggest that we press Aristotle on this, going further than he did and begin to think about the practice of embodied care as something like a virtue, that is, an activity that is most proper to human beings, given their natural sociability and interdependency, and yet also requires the larger political community to do the work of habituating citizens to it. In other words, though it is most befitting for humans to practice things like courage, generosity, magnanimity, and I would add to this list (even though Aristotle does not) embodied care, nothing in the natural world or in the structure of the human being as such guarantees that he will do so.

Of course, to count as full virtue, we must come to enjoy an activity for its own sake such that it constitutes its own end, regardless of whether or not it achieves its planned goals (*NE* 1105a30-34). This is consistent with Aristotle’s understanding of *eudaimonia* and the virtues. We do not, for example, only act courageously when we know that we will defeat whatever threatens us or when we think we won’t experience fear, for that would not count as courage. Although it is clearly the case that we are happiest when we live a good and virtuous life, happiness in Aristotle’s view does not amount to a mere psychological state or something like “feeling good.”28 We can and should expect in practicing most forms of care, even under the most just and equitable conditions, to encounter exhaustion, resentment, disempowerment (on both ends of the caring relationship), frustration, and so on. But this does not disqualify care from counting as an excellent pursuit.29 In Books II-IV of the *Ethics*, we see that virtue requires not just intellectual understanding but the proper direction of emotions and desires. It is true that only the virtuous person performs the virtues without overmuch strain and even finds them pleasurable. But virtue also requires a sustained commitment to living one’s life in a particular sort of way *despite the challenges that such a life entails*. Caregiving, just like the virtues Aristotle explicitly names, requires resolve. For virtue of character is
about pleasures and pains,” (NE 1104b5-9). This passage suggests that whether or not a person feels pleasure while being virtuous depends both on the person and on the activity itself. Aristotle tells us that “not all the excellences give rise to pleasant activity, except to the extent that pleasant activity touches on the end itself” (1117b15), and he gives the examples of courage and temperance (NE, 1117b10). We do find pleasure in practicing human excellence but there is also challenge and even hardship in this pursuit. Caregiving, like courage, brings moments of intense displeasure, but we continue to do care because we keep a higher pleasure in view—the pursuit of an excellent life. Further, habituation to the virtues involves properly training desires such that one comes to find pleasure over time in certain practices we take to be good. One might still find weariness, frustration, and even anger in the activity of giving care over time, just as one might still feel fear in battle after many years of being a soldier. Yet these feelings do not necessarily constitute pain or the absence of a deeper pleasure, nor do they necessarily threaten to compromise the virtuous person’s deeper commitment to doing just actions.

Aristotle takes seriously the desire human beings have to form strong attachments and to give care to others, and I suggest this is very instructive for own thinking about why care matters. What is appealing about Aristotle’s engagement with care is that there we do not find unthinking devotion to others of the sort that leads to self-abnegation; indeed, this care work requires a concern for the self and for the other, as well as sharp cognitive and perceptual judgment. I am not claiming that Aristotle is defining morality in terms of what we owe to other people, for such an ethic would exacerbate women’s tendency to disregard their own needs while tending to others’. Rather, I am arguing that Aristotle thinks that all of us are more complete when we actively do well by others with whom we share a moral life and political constitution. It should be all the more appealing, then, to theorists of care who rightly worry about too much self-sacrifice, self-abnegation, and a lack of critical distance between the caregiver and the cared-for. In doing well by others, says Aristotle, “the excellent person awards more of the fine to himself,” such that even if we decide to give our lives for the sake of another, we are, at the same time, “choosing something great and fine” for ourselves (NE 1169a35-7, 25-30).

Embodied Care and Human Flourishing

Thus far I have been making a case for why Aristotle’s ethical and political treatises are fruitful resources for an ethic of care that takes the activity of caregiving to be constitutive of a life well lived. It seems a fair question to
ask at this point, how much can Aristotle really contribute to a care ethic that values all aspects of caregiving, specifically the most bodily forms? Recall that the definition of embodied care I offer has several components. First, it is an ethic that understands individual and social morality as deeply bound up with caring relationships, and which cannot be adequately understood without attending to the corporeal practices that constitute such relationships. It is also a set of practices whereby individuals take up the work of caring for the bodies of others predominantly with their own bodies. I have also said that the practice must be critical and reflective.

The definition I offer above differs significantly from that offered by Maurice Hamington, who draws not on Aristotle but on Merleau-Ponty, a thinker much more explicitly concerned with the body. Here is Hamington’s definition of embodied care:

An approach to personal and social morality that shifts ethical considerations to context, relationships, and affective knowledge in a manner that can be fully understood only if care’s embodied dimension is recognized. Care is committed to the flourishing and growth of individuals yet acknowledges our interconnectedness and interdependence.31

Although he acknowledges the fact that caring is something we learn to do in different ways, in and through specific kinds of corporeal interaction with others, Hamington also argues that there is a certain kind of tacit knowledge rooted in the human body, a moral knowledge even, which we tend to overlook in our thinking about care. He closely links Merleau-Ponty’s rough theory of intersubjectivity and relational knowledge to the potential for caring knowledge and habits, arguing that it is the continuity of the flesh that allows us to have a shared, and in this case, precognitive meaning. In other words, the meaning that is attached to my own movements and of which I have a precognitive understanding creates the potential for understanding the meaning of others’ movements.32

Briefly considering a few problems with this view will further point us in the right direction for an alternative framework for embodied care, one that draws on important Aristotelian insights regarding habituation and the shaping of moral character and human action. Hamington’s first mistake is this: he assumes a shared corporeal experience of care (i.e., by everyone) and a shared bodily knowledge of caregiving. For example, he argues that “the body captures” a certain kind of meaning related to care in the form of habit, where caring habits comprise all those “bodily movements that contain the body’s understanding of how to care in and adapt to new situations.”33 His talk of the
body and its capacity for giving care universalizes experience and, more importantly, presents an inaccurate picture of who is likely to exhibit caring habits and take up the work of care.

More troubling, though, is that this concept of care seems wholly embodied, by which I mean that there is no discussion of the cultivation of conceptual and emotional capacities necessary for developing habits of care. Indeed, the notion of care as a practice to be cultivated and sustained seems largely incompatible with Hamington’s view of care as a kind of nonconceptual, corporeal coping that we “learn” by virtue of having been cared for ourselves and by being born with a body that can feel pain just as everyone else can feel pain. For Hamington, it seems enough to say that caring habits are deeply rooted in “the body’s affective knowledge,” which is “less explicitly discrete than propositional knowledge and therefore often not entirely possessed,” by which he means to suggest that we do not always have complete mastery over our habits.34

This rendering of Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of perception and habit leaves very fuzzy the role of cognition and practical judgment, which is precisely the point at which Aristotle can be very useful. On this view, it is our bodies that possess knowledge of how to care, even if we are not cognitively aware of our body’s potential for care and the myriad ways in which we already do.35 Of course, we often do things “without thinking,” but that doesn’t mean that we should or that care is not a practice that requires both perceptual and critical capacities, and moreover, that those perceptual capacities cannot themselves rely on critical thinking and cognitive discernment. Further, Hamington makes no attempt to explain how the caring habits that he suggests are largely nonconceptual might be transformed into a skill or practice with conceptual content.36 We are given no account of how habits become routinized and what exactly the role of conceptual capacities and choice is in caregiving. Instead, it is the essence of the body that explains humans’ capacity and impetus to care. This is insufficient. We need a richer account of how one gets habituated to a caring disposition, one that constructs care as a kind of practice and includes the cultivation of choice and mindfulness in caregiving.

Cultivating an enriching care ethic, one that is consistent with other democratic values, is a political enterprise that must be achieved and practiced; it is not simply a matter of rediscovering the “always already” presence of shared corporeality. In addition to the transformation of our political institutions, structures, and discourses to better promote practices of care, habituating individuals to care must also entail the development of rational and critical thinking capacities wherein part of learning to practice care means learning to make
choices and to continuously exercise mindfulness and judgment. For more on this, we need to turn once again to Aristotle.

To return to the question I posed above: could Aristotle’s ethics accommodate the view that caring for vulnerable, diseased, and failing bodies is constitutive of virtue and flourishing? Does Aristotle help us to imagine that the most excellent person is someone who performs the “dirty work” of caring for those who are unable to care for themselves? Aristotle does not, as is well known, value the activities that we today conceive of as the messy work of caregiving (changing diapers, bathing the infirm and elderly, dressing wounds, and so on). Indeed, at times he explicitly devalues such work. Surely no serious scholar of Aristotle imagines that the magnanimous person is going about changing bedpans, wiping up vomit and human waste, serving as midwife to women in labor, or helping the elderly to die with dignity. This was work that women and slaves performed, of course, not citizens.

Despite his insistence that the good life is deeply bound up with the flourishing and happiness of others, we would be hard pressed to make the case that for Aristotle a genuine wish to contribute to others’ flourishing and happiness in any way corresponds to a practice of embodied care. Indeed, Aristotle has been appropriated by a range of political theorists to argue against the centrality of the body to political life.37 The question of whether or not Aristotle should defend embodied care is a much more interesting and complex one, however, especially in light of his views on human flourishing, activity, and doing well by others. Aristotle is not a thinker who entirely eschews the body, as his close attention to practice, habit, and activity—and, importantly, their relationship to human knowledge—all show.38 As Martha Nussbaum has demonstrated, Aristotle took seriously the idea that moral subjects can never escape bodily and emotional fragility and that our own well-being is in no small measure dependent on the care others take with us, as well as features of the natural world that lie beyond our control; further, these facts about human existence are not something to be overcome but rather something to be valued.39

Central to Aristotle’s virtue ethics is also the idea that certain actions and activities, often those done in concert with others, are excellent and just, not simply the product of biological necessity. If we take an Aristotelian view, we can also see that the normative component of caregiving, which drops out in the phenomenological framework, is what necessitates our orientation to it in the first place. Although there is no explicit, well worked out model of a child’s moral and intellectual development in Aristotle’s thought, some scholars have urged that we look beyond Aristotle’s grouping of the child with the animal, whom he says at various times are both lacking the deliberative and
decision-making capacities (*prohairesis*) and action (*praxis*) that we find in
mature, ethical adults (*NE* 1111a25-7, 1111b8-9, 1144b8, 1147b5, *EE*
1224a25-30 1240b31-4). Indeed, in Book I of the *Politics*, Aristotle says
that the child has “a deliberative part” (*to bouleutikon*) and that his virtue is
not relative to him, the child, but relative to the one who has authority over
him (1260a13-14, 32-33).

Early in Book II of *Ethics*, Aristotle states clearly that virtue requires that
individuals (1) act knowingly, (2) choose virtuous actions and choose them
for their own sake, and (3) act virtuously from “firm and unchanging states”
(*NE* 1105a32-35). Then later, Aristotle says that children may be born with a
kind of “natural virtue,” or they may not, but in any case if they seem to pos-
sess a virtuous character, this is a deception. An individual cannot be said to
act from the kind of full virtue outlined earlier until she is brought to an
understanding of *why* a particular act or activity is virtuous, which requires
(1) an habituation to that activity relatively early in one’s life and continuing
as one ages (1103a19-26, 1180a1-5); (2) the guidance of an adult who will
also serve as a model for the child (1103a1-4); and (3) the cultivation of the
child’s own deliberative and choice-making capacities—that is, practical
wisdom—such that she or he is able to judge for herself which action is right
and thus desires to choose that action in accordance with reason (1113a10-
14). Aristotle is clear about the distinction between what appears as natural
virtue and what actually counts as fully virtuous action (*NE* Book VI, 13
1144b4-17, 1144b32-3). It is not enough to perform a good action either
because one experiences pleasure in it or even because one “knows” that it is
good (insofar as one acquires a sense that this activity is either pleasurable or
good). Rather, one must come to know, in the stronger sense, that something
is good through one’s own experiences of performing the activity and inter-
nalizing the knowledge of *why* it is good by weighing reasons and judging for
oneself. Only then can we be said to truly love a particular activity or a noble
action.

As Aristotle makes clear at the start of the *Ethics*, what we first want in
constructing (or revising) a vision of the good life is a clear picture of the kind
of creature for whom such a life is possible (1097a15). Constructing such a
picture will most certainly entail empirical observation, but it will also entail
acquiring knowledge about the world and how humans encounter it through
activity (*NE* 1097b23). Despite the special place Aristotle holds out for *theo-
ria*, he also shows us that we come to understand our actions more deeply by
cultivating a practice around whatever it is we seek to know or do well. Through
cultivating a practice, we come to better grasp relevant particulars and are able to exercise our capacities for finely tuned discernment and
judgment based on what we have learned through practice. What we want, then, is to engage in a range of activities that reveal to us the unique kinds of creatures we are, possessing a plurality of possibilities and limitations. This kind of work will also help us immensely in determining what sorts of things we need our political institutions to aim at accomplishing.

Caregiving very often forces us to confront and negotiate the radically vulnerable and contingent aspect of our lives. In caring for the bodies of others, we come to better understand what we are, human beings inhabiting distinctly animal bodies. Our bodies in their most unsettling state—weak, leaky, deficient, decaying—confront us. And when caregivers enter into relationships of care, they stand before some potential version of themselves; that picture, while often destabilizing, is important to developing a self-understanding that admits of limitations and weaknesses.

Embodied care also prompts us to identify certain desirable ends given our fragile and often tenuous state, and then to begin the difficult work of formulating political and ethical responses to facts of dependency and need. In this way, embodied care resembles other excellences, such as political commitment, courage, and love of friends, which often carry moral agents into situations where the requirements of good character might press very hard against the continuation of life itself and living excellently. As Nussbaum shows in *Fragility of Goodness*, virtue often cannot be achieved without external goods and we will very often need to rely on good fortune in order to act well. Yet it is also the case, argues Nussbaum, that some excellences by their very nature can put us in precarious or dangerous states, or simply expose our vulnerability.

Embodied care, I want to suggest, is similar to the excellences in this regard. It helps us to confront human fragility in at least two ways. First, in a very general way, as a practice that always entails the facts of necessity and imperfection, embodied care, which is itself a response to bodily dependence and fragility, can reorient our thoughts and feelings about what a human life should be and what sorts of achievements are even possible or desirable, living as we do, in an animal body. We come to see that some of us have severe limitations that frustrate things like progress, physical achievements, autonomy, inviolability, and sufficiency. And these are quite permanent states for many of us. In other words, some human beings will not experience a great deal of “improvement” in their physical or mental states, they will never “get better,” a fact that does not fit comfortably within the many post-enlightenment narratives of progress that permeate political discourses and worldviews in late-modernity. We are often unwilling to accept that some of us are simply where we are and where that is might be less than ideal, or perhaps pretty
awful. Cultivating a practice of embodied care should involve an acceptance of human limitations, coming to understand human frailty and need, and the development of the emotional, physical, and cognitive skills required for care.

Even more concretely than a new awareness around human finitude, the activity of practicing care is crucial for acquiring the precise techniques and habits of caregiving. We cannot develop the proper affective, physical, and cognitive skills appropriate to giving care if we are not first habituated to that activity. Mastering knowledge of the right tones of voice, forms of touch, methods and techniques for bathing, feeding, nursing, changing bedpans, cleaning and dressing wounds, and simply comforting the sick requires participation in caring relationships. Further, these are skills that must not only be developed and sharpened through habituation, they must be preserved in and through ongoing practice. The more we care for others, the more we discover about the caring needs of human beings, and the more we discover about our own potential needs. Embodied care is fundamental to human flourishing because without it we would have a very incomplete picture of ourselves, of what it means to be fully human. It is also necessary for gaining knowledge of the forms that good care can take, care that we have come to see—through tending to the bodies of others—is a central feature of human existence. More than this, though, it is in and through caring relationships that we are socialized and habituated to act as moral agents.

Finally, caregiving can orient our attention to body–mind connections and encourage forms of corporeal mindfulness that can otherwise be difficult to achieve in a culture that emphasizes efficiency and virtuality at the expense of mindfulness and presence. As creatures with both affective and deliberative capacities, humans have the potential to train or shape their emotional responses to the external world. What does this work look like? I am certainly not suggesting that one can or even should try to tell oneself not to feel sadness when tragedy has struck, or anger in the face of an injustice simply because such feelings are not pleasurable to us; this would be neither effective nor wise. Indeed these emotions can be productive and quite correct. But it does mean that our emotions are not always appropriate or effective and that sometimes they need to be adjusted to better fit a situation in which we are called on to act morally.

Taking up the challenging activity of embodied care opens up several quite unique opportunities to alter our current emotional states when it comes to bodies that violate norms of health and beauty. Caregivers use their senses to do the work of care and they frequently interact with bodily fluids, waste, and material that many of us typically recoil from. Ongoing interaction with
bodies that appear frightening or even contaminating to us can actually go a long way toward recalibrating our responses to such bodies and to our own bodies when we find they fail us. A dirty diaper may never come to smell pleasant to the parent or caregiver who must tend to them day in and day out, but it is surely the case that the more one changes dirty diapers, the more indifferent one becomes to the smell and sight of human waste. Cultivating a critical practice of embodied care has the potential to alter reactions of disgust and fear of bodies in need of care. Another way of saying this is that a practice of embodied care can function as an antidote to antidemocratic forms of normalization, encountering bodies that resist dominant ideals of personhood.

Where is the bodily potential in all of this? Further, what does the fact that bodily existence is partly constituted by political discourses and processes of normalization have to do with care? First, a concept of embodied care that acknowledges the power of norms to shape self-understandings points to the possibility of transforming those social imaginaries and problematic modes of inhabiting bodies. I do not mean to suggest that we can think ourselves out of illness or disease by practicing embodied care, but rather than we can begin to take seriously the idea that bodily habits and corporeal styles are deeply connected to the sociopolitical realm we construct for ourselves. Taking this seriously would mean urging democratic transformations that work to secure healthier bodies and corporeal styles that reflect rather than contradict democratic values. In short, it would mean acknowledging the political dimensions of bodily subjectivity, accepting that there is a range of constraints—natural, material, and discursive—that constitute and fashion bodies. There is a certain kind of freedom that comes about with this knowledge, a freedom that stands in stark contrast to the Cartesian conception of freedom as free will or Berlin’s notion of negative liberty as the freedom to simply be left alone. Indeed, bodily necessity complicates both notions of freedom. Rather than desperately trying to tear necessity away from freedom, we might rethink the relationship between the two.

Fostering a steadier and more appropriate view of what it means to be a finite creature through embodied care will also entail learning how to be gentle, a quality that might be captured by Aristotle’s conception of mildness, but also qualities like generosity and kindness. The gentleness required for care is related to the kind of freedom mentioned above; it requires accepting the limitations of those with whom we share a moral and political life. To be gentle in our interactions with others requires relaxing our expectations and desires for things to always go well and for others to succeed as embodied subjects. This is indeed difficult to do because so much of our own well-being and ends (political and otherwise) are bound up with the happiness and
flourishing of others. Yet gentleness does not require passivity, but in fact may work to heighten our awareness rather than relax it. We must develop new forms of attention that encourage us to focus on the particulars of the sick person’s state. We must learn to listen and to see differently, and these forms of attention require a turning away from distractions in our lives. The point I wish to make is not that care requires that we all be gentle all of the time, certainly not. For any parent who has ever watched their child begin to wander mindlessly into a busy street knows this cannot be so. Rather I am simply suggesting that the gentleness and patience care often demands are also features of a society that accepts that we don’t always get to determine the course of our lives, to construct our own stories.

Practical Implications

If we follow Aristotle’s understanding of political inquiry as largely directed toward determining how to best promote the good life, then to say that caregiving is constitutive of that life is to also commit oneself to the idea that our polity is responsible for creating the conditions that make caregiving possible. Living excellently requires community, and politics is the activity through which we collectively structure our shared life. Now I want to very briefly consider some of the practical considerations of what I have said.

First, a conception of caregiving as necessary for living an excellent life means that it must be widely shared and can no longer be the work of the marginalized and oppressed. When care becomes the work of the least valued members of society, as it has been, it not only works to further exploit them, thus hindering the development of care as a widely held virtue, but it also means that the privileged miss out on something that can contribute to their own actualization as human beings. The exploitation of caregivers, professional and nonprofessional, and the continued devaluation of this work by dominant groups only engenders feelings of resentment on the part of those performing care, which threatens caring relationships. I am not suggesting that caregivers are presently morally superior to noncaregivers; indeed, the unjust arrangements of care that constitute the “care crisis” we face today appear to exclude the possibility of precisely the sort of excellence that a more ideal ethic of embodied care reflects. Further, when care is the work of devalued persons, it reflects and reifies the myth that some people are just naturally nurturing and really enjoy doing care work, despite its devalued status in the labor market and in society, thus making it “easier,” in a sense, to keep them in a marginalized and relegated position. This is another way of romanticizing care and, in turn, contributes to the codification of certain
kinds of people as natural caregivers. And all of this only makes a widespread achievement of embodied care more challenging, as well as the taking up of care work by people in positions of privilege or power.

So we will need to think seriously about how we might habituate all citizens to care, which may be accomplished in and through educational programs and a range of social services that teach people how to care and help to provide support systems so that caregivers are less isolated. Indeed, this is not an altogether unfamiliar concept in the West, as many Western European countries have free programs for new parents to help them learn how to care for their infant children; in the States, too, these sorts of programs are in place, but usually only for low-income mothers, the assumption being that they are the only people who need an education in how to care for their dependents.

It is also useful to consider how we can work to support—materially and civically—communities of care. We might imagine public care in a variety of ways, depending on context. We know of successful “communities of care” in which able-bodied and disabled persons, dependents and caregivers, live and work together. Let me give just one example: In Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Power of Weakness, authors Stanly Hauerwas and Jean Vanier write about L’Arche, a nonprofit organization that establishes and operates caring communities where individuals who are in some way dependent on a great deal of care and able-bodied people come to live together.  

Although I recognize the potential dangers of a prophetic message of care, I have something very much like these communities in mind when thinking about how we might structure and support public communities of care. Founder of L’Arche, Jean Vanier, talks explicitly about the power that caring for and living with severely mentally and physically disabled individuals has to transform the nondisabled person’s self-understandings and even their bodily habits. (Vanier is also a scholar of Aristotle and seems to have a deep affinity for him, as do many Catholic thinkers.) Vanier places his own experiences, acquisition of new knowledge, and transformation through providing care for others at the center of the story. The authors then go on to discuss the limits of political theory for revealing to us the value of living with those who are unable to care for themselves. “Significance,” they write, “found in sharing one’s life with another person—a significance that will usually come as a surprise—cannot be found outside the activity itself.” Interestingly, they quickly move to criticize and set themselves apart from Aristotle, claiming that this sort of friendship, on which L’Arche is founded, is far superior to Aristotle’s understanding of friendship, which, according to them, does not allow for friendships between radically disabled and able-bodied persons. As should be clear, I think there is textual evidence to suggest that this is more of
an open question for Aristotle and, in fact, it strikes me that there is a deep
tension in Aristotle’s work around just this point: If friends really do love
nothing more than to live together always and if friendships are most neces-
sary for the good life because friends care for us in times of need and afford
us opportunities to become excellent through good deeds, then it makes very
little sense to cut out from friendships the important work of embodied care,
which is so fundamental to human fragility and excellence.

That aside, I do think the authors miss another deeply Aristotelian moment
in their own thinking and it has much to do with the relationship between
practice and knowledge. Caregiving communities based on the necessity of
caregiving for “becoming human” and not solely on the instrumental goals of
care are evidence of how we might still benefit from Aristotle’s understand-
ing of political and ethical inquiry, which begins, not with exercises in
abstract moral reasoning, but rather with what we observe when we take a
look around. Participating in communities of care is both a way of living
excellently and an important method for determining how to best achieve the
excellence that is caregiving. Many liberal theorists have advanced political
principles defending why we ought to care about those in need of care; in
other words, they have shown why children, the disabled, and the terminally
ill have a share in justice despite their inability to meet the criteria of a liberal
account of personhood. But if care truly is a virtue, then we need to better
understand why we ought to live with such people rather than merely secure
the material conditions that make their care (by someone else) possible. We
need to come to see how living with those who need our care in order to live
well can enrich our own lives. This kind of knowledge can only come about
when we have sufficient opportunities to live just this way, in communities of
care. It may be the case that we cannot even know what constitutes justice
with regard to the radically dependent until we live with such people, but it is
most certainly the case that we cannot know how caring for them will change
who we are and widen our own possibilities for excellence and freedom until
we do so.

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Notes

5. Tronto, Moral Boundaries.
6. Ibid., 103.
8. Thank-you to Mary Dietz for helping me to clarify the distinction between something like mere normative prescriptive theorizing and my own theoretical
commitments in this piece, which are both hermeneutic and, to a lesser extent, prescriptive.


10. This worry can be partly attributed to the linguistic turn, which precedes the recent corporeal turn and perhaps is one reason why we need to turn our attention back to the materiality of bodies; an emphasis on language, symbols, and discursive power, though illuminating in many ways, has tended to elide talk of actual bodies.


13. I do understand care to be one type of bodywork. Judith Twigg, “Carework as a Form of Bodywork,” *Ageing and Society* 20 (2000). However, I view care as unique and distinct from other forms of bodywork, such as massage, beauty practices, physical therapy, and so on, because it is in and through relationships of care that we come to better understand and to enact the widest range of our uniquely human capacities as moral agents. Indeed, it may be that other virtues or activities, like the practice of educating others or of acting courageously in war, are equally fundamental to flourishing, but that would need to be textually demonstrated and/or philosophically argued, which is beyond the scope of this essay.
14. I want to echo Martha Nussbaum on this point, who writes that “while we should not forget what Aristotle said here, we may proceed to appropriate other elements of his thought without fear that they are logically interdependent with his political and biological misogyny” (Martha C. Nussbaum, “Aristotle, Feminism, and Needs for Functioning,” in Feminist Interpretations of Aristotle, ed. Cynthia Freedland, 250 [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998]).


16. Two important points: First, Aristotle’s understanding of “friendship” is much broader than our contemporary understanding and includes many relationships that we don’t tend to identify, in the first instance anyway, as friendships. So, e.g., fellow citizens count as friends on Aristotle’s picture, as do children and parents. Yet, at the same time, the sort of friendship he values most—character friendship—is characterized by a sort of thickness that is perhaps also unfamiliar to us today; character friendship is constituted by a shared commitment to practicing the virtues and living a good life. In other words, the best sort of friends are those who are equally committed to living an excellent life and to helping one another pursue the respective projects that enable and reflect such a life. Because I want to consider the ways in which friendship is a mechanism for activating virtuous thoughts and actions, character friendship is certainly relevant here. Yet friendships defined primarily by inequality and caretaking, like parent-child relationships, also have the ability to cultivate the capacities for character friendship and can grow to become a character friendship (NE 1166a25). For this reason, these are relevant as well.


18. Ibid., 127.

19. Nor is my suggestion here that Aristotle is laying out an argument for something like what Rosayln Diprose has articulated as corporeal generosity, that is, a
prereflective openness to others. See Rosalyn Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity: On Giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas* (New York: SUNY, 2002), 4. As she puts it, “it is an openness to others that not only precedes and establishes communal relations but constitutes the self as open to otherness. Primordially, generosity is not the expenditure of one’s possession but the dispossession of oneself, the being-given to others that undercuts any self-contained ego.” It is far from clear that Aristotle would endorse any practice that is prereflective or “primordial,” for the fact that we can choose is what sets us apart from nonhuman animals.


21. *Stergein* appears seventeen times in twelve different contexts and there seems no reason to give it any weaker sense than “love.” In fifth-century tragic poetry, it frequently describes the affection parents have toward their children (see Liddel, Scott, and Jones, s.v. stergô, with citations from the *Oedipus Tyrannos*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and Euripides’ *Electra*, among others), and it is this sense that predominates in Aristotle, too. Aristotle also speaks of the affection—*stergein*—friends have for one another. Here the word does seem to demand a slightly weaker sense. For more on this, see David Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 78. Aristotle also uses the word to describe the feeling that poets have toward their own poems. But even here (1168a) he says that the poets love their creations as if they were their own children! Irwin (329) lists the other appearances of the use of *stergein*.

22. Ibid., 145.

23. Unfortunately, Aristotle glosses over the complicated nature of relationships of care, at least in the case of friendships and the mother–child dyad. The inequality that is such a central feature of caring relationships creates important challenges that he avoids and though he writes so beautifully about the intrinsic worth of doing well by others, he does not help us to see the complicated feelings and thoughts involved in the work of friendship and care.


27. Salkever, *Finding the Mean*, 201.


29. I’d like to again thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to more clearly articulate this point.


32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 46.

34. Ibid., 56.

35. Ibid., 56.


37. Perhaps the most well known is Arendt, whose reading of Aristotle on the relationship between *zoe*, mere biological life, and *bios*, distinctively human (and so political) life, significantly shapes what can only be characterized as her own deep fear and resentment of all bodily activity or care for the body. Contra Arendt, I understand Aristotle to hold out the possibility of achieving virtue through the cultivation of a practice around particular activities that may, on first consideration, appear to be “merely” necessary and bodily. In other words, a practice of embodied care can constitute a distinctly human form of life, which entails *prohairesis* for Aristotle and the “space of appearances” for Arendt. This space is “world-building” and “depends for its reality and its continued existence, first, upon the presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember, and, second, on the transformation of the intangible in to the tangibility of things” (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998], 95). Her view of all activity having to do with the body as necessarily “necessary,” that is, without the sort of cognitive capacities, moral judgment, and collective achievement entailed in politics is, to my mind, overly narrow and obscures the presence of caring relationships in Aristotle’s virtue ethics.

38. Aristotle’s father was a physician and, perhaps partly because of this, Aristotle himself displays a fascination with biology. This, of course, does not lead Aristotle
to reflect on the deep contradictions in his own thought, particularly the limitations he attaches to certain types of bodies.


41. This passage seems to Sherman to invite a developmental model “in which the child is viewed not statically, but as in progress toward full humanity, on his way towards some end” (Sherman, \textit{The Fabric of Character}, 234).

42. Of course, when Aristotle speaks about virtue and the rational capacities of young children, he is speaking of young male rationality only.

43. Burnyeat’s reading of Aristotle on habituation, which explores how one moves through habituation from a knowledge of the “that” (qualified knowledge of what it noble) to the “because” (unqualified knowledge of what is noble), nicely explains why this must be so and has been instrumental to my own thinking: Burnyeat, “Aristotle on Learning to Be Good.”

44. I have in mind here Book II of the \textit{Ethics}, in which Aristotle discusses the importance of habituation, not only for grasping how to act in a particular way but why one ought to do so.

45. To be clear, then, I am certainly not claiming that caregiving is the only activity we need engage in, or even that it is necessarily the one to which we should attach the most value.


47. Ibid., 336.


49. The extent to which something like just friendships actually flourish in L’Arche communities would need to be evaluated from the perspective of both caregivers and dependents. For more on this, see Julie Anne White, \textit{Democracy, Justice, and the Welfare State: Reconstructing Public Care} (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000). Though it’s not clear that the authors have adequately addressed this, for the purposes of this article, I’m assuming that in these communities, where indeed social justice and equity are taken quite seriously, just friendships have at least as strong a chance of flourishing as anywhere and thereby altering the self-understandings of all parties in the caring relationship.


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