

THE INDIVIDUAL REIMAGINED: INVESTIGATING  
RESPONSIBILITY THROUGH DEWEY AND A FEMINIST ETHICS  
OF CARE

by

AARON GEORIS

A THESIS

Presented to the Departments of Philosophy and Political Science  
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts

April 2023

## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

Aaron Georis for the degree of Bachelor of Arts  
in the Departments of Philosophy and Political Science to be taken June 2023

Title: The Individual Reimagined: Investigating Responsibility through Dewey and a Feminist Ethics of Care

Approved: Erin McKenna, Ph.D.  
Primary Thesis Advisor

Contemporary social and political spaces often engage questions of freedom, ranging from abstract musing on free will and causality to significant political debates about the relationship between individuals and the state. However, seldom do these debates go to the fundamental problem at hand, namely, what defines the relationship between the individual and liberty? This thesis will explore how this fundamental relationship has been engaged in order to come to a morally robust understanding of our position as individuals in the world. This paper argues—in contrast to many current understandings—that the individual is not a primary ontological status, but rather develops out of natural interdependences that shape our organic relationship with various environments; by demonstrating this point, it will become clear that questions of liberty must be oriented towards addressing our engagement and responsibilities in an interdependent world. This paper develops this problem by engaging the work of John Dewey—specifically his grasping of ontology and resulting moral framework—as well as the field of feminist care ethics. By offering a synthesis of these two fields, what is developed is a self-reflecting ethical framework that is principled on the natural interdependencies of human ontology and is therefore prepared to wholly engage how responsibility relates to us as engaged individuals.

## Acknowledgments

I want to begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to every professor, faculty member, advisor, and mentor at the University of Oregon who has helped guide my undergraduate journey. My deepest thanks go out to Erin McKenna, Alison Gash, and Kenny Knowlton, all of whom I've had the distinct pleasure of working with as members of my thesis committee. Additionally, I'd like to thank Angela Rovak, who has been a consistent mentor and guide throughout my undergraduate time. All of your comments, insights, and support have been monumental in making this project everything I hoped it would be. *Thank you.*

I want to thank my family. My mother, for teaching me kindness, tolerance, and sincerity. My father, for teaching me strength, perseverance, and responsibility. My older brother, for paving my way and being my lifelong friend.

Thank you to my best friends Jake and Jared for teaching me how to be a responsible and caring man. Your constant support and friendship have meant the world to me, and I'm incredibly excited to see where life takes us all.

Thank you to my lovely partner Quaye, who inspires me to be a better version of myself every day and who reminds me of the importance of caring for myself and the world. I look forward to growing together.

To those listed and to countless more, this project would not have been possible without all of your constant support, care, and love—I'm in debt to you all.

## Table of Contents

Preface.....	5
October 18, 2019 .....	5
Introduction.....	7
What is Freedom? .....	7
Dewey and Moral Deliberation .....	7
Feminist Care Ethics.....	8
The Relationship between the Individual and Responsibility.....	9
Section I: Historical Understandings of Freedom and the Individual.....	10
Man, Enlightened.....	10
The Frontier Individual.....	14
Man, Forgotten .....	15
Engaging the Question of Liberty in the Contemporary Context.....	16
Challenging Liberalism and the <i>Negative</i> Individual.....	22
Section II: The Ontological Reorientation .....	26
The Circumscribed Individual.....	26
The Actual Ontological Development of the Individual.....	28
Section III: The Individual Re-Imagined: Concerning Our Responsibility.....	33
So what? The Significance of the Ontological Reorientation.....	33
Dewey and Moral Deliberation .....	33
The Feminist Care Orientation.....	41
Cultivating Care: Responsibility through Dewey and a Feminist Ethics of Care .....	46
Conclusion: Towards a Shared Moral Future .....	51
Bibliography .....	55

## Preface

**October 18, 2019**

Dear Aaron,

Hello to my duck(ling!). Right about now in your new Oregonian academic life, you may be feeling a little bit topsy turvy and unsure of yourself. Change can do that to you. It's a constant force in our lives, so this won't be the first time you feel this way but as life goes on, you will become more of a pro at navigating it. Change can make us feel unsteady or uncertain of ourselves. But don't be deceived! Instead, be excited...because change allows you to reinvent yourself, to open up your mind to entirely new ways of being.

Sometimes, feeling uncertainty and change can make us actually close our minds because the 'known' is more comfortable than the unknown. The fact is, you don't know. Ask questions. Cultivate an open mind. This way, learning never ends.

Sometimes, change can make us judgmental. Judgment is simply a false certainty. Be tolerant.

Sometimes, change can make us too serious. Laugh at yourself!

Sometimes, change can make us look inward. Look out to other people...connect with them. Help them if they're down, and it will put your own worries and troubles into perspective. Look up to nature to calm your own soul. Oregon will be good for that.

Sometimes, amidst all the academic and book learning, we can forget that a lot of life is just common sense. But, like integrity and conscience, it speaks to you from inside, and sometimes so softly that it can be hard to hear. Listen.

I know, maybe even better than you, how well prepared you are for this new part of your life's journey. Challenge yourself to make the most of it! Have fun in moderation! Trust yourself, work hard and the rest will come. I believe in you. I am excited to see where your journey takes you!

Lots of love,

Mom

## **Introduction**

### **What is Freedom?**

The following thesis does not purport to answer this question. Rather, the opening section addresses the way this question has been answered in the American political tradition since the Enlightenment, and what sort of conception of the individual has resulted therefrom. By understanding how discussions of freedom have informed our conception of the individual, we will then be prepared to provide an ontological shift—which challenges the traditional conception of freedom and instead posits a socially grounded ontology—that orients our ensuing discussion of the individual re-imagined. For our purposes, therefore, examining discussions of freedom serves as a lens through which we will finally view how responsibility relates to the individual.

### **Dewey and Moral Deliberation**

John Dewey (1859-1952) was a formative figure in many intellectual spheres. For our purposes, we will focus specifically on his moral philosophy, and even more specifically on his process of moral deliberation. How does this process fit within our larger project? Moral deliberation for Dewey is a process by which the individual—as an ethical agent—actively reflects upon their circumstances in order to imagine and eventually pursue a chosen course of action. In this sense, we will be using Dewey’s moral philosophy to inform our re-imagined understanding of the individual as an agent engaged in constant deliberation aimed towards a state of *conscientiousness*, in which careful attention is paid both to the self and to the

environment<sup>1</sup>. In other words, Dewey's philosophy will reflect and exemplify the ontological shift that is made concerning the individual in relation to freedom. The complexities and shortcomings of Dewey's project—namely the risk of relativism in his philosophy—will be outlined clearly in the third section of this paper.

### **Feminist Care Ethics**

It is precisely out of the shortcomings of Dewey's project that we find the need to introduce a feminist ethics of care. The feminist tradition of care is relatively new, developing out of recent feminist movements that focus on raising awareness of emotional labor and its historical and social effects. Similar to Dewey's work, feminist care ethics also challenges the traditional conception of ontology as individualistic and instead sees ontology as socially grounded. Again, the intricacies of the field will be discussed in significant detail in the third section. What I hope to highlight presently is the discussion surrounding the 'feminist' description of the field. It is feminist in two senses: (1) insofar as the field of care ethics was developed and promoted by predominately female thinkers within the feminist tradition and (2) insofar as it focuses on labor activities that have historically been relegated to women. By 'feminist' I *do not* mean to say that the contents of the field matter only to women. Quite the contrary. I argue that the ideas and implications of a feminist ethics of care are of importance to every single individual as an engaged ethical agent. The field compliments Dewey's work, and in their synthesis provides us with a robust understanding of the individual and their relationship to responsibility.

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Environment' is used by Dewey—and similarly in this paper—to describe both the natural world *as well as* our countless social and interpersonal connections to the world. In this sense, the term 'environment' describes something both external to and always already connected to the individual as ethical subject.

## **The Relationship between the Individual and Responsibility**

This relationship is at the heart of this thesis. By its end, my project will reveal not only a re-imagined conception of the individual but also a novel understanding of how we relate to responsibility as ethical subjects. These thoughts can be found in the conclusion of the thesis.

## Section I: Historical Understandings of Freedom and the Individual

### Man, Enlightened

Defining the period of The Enlightenment is a difficult task that is largely beyond the scope of this paper. Our focus will begin with the work of Thomas Hobbes, whose most influential work arrived in his 1651 book *Leviathan*. It is in this book that we find one of the most foundational conceptions of the individual as political animal. Hobbes writes: “it is manifest that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man.”<sup>2</sup> Apparent in this statement are two significant points: first, Hobbes refers exclusively to ‘man,’ thereby defining the masculine as primary and more original. Hobbes shares this shortcoming with most other traditional thinkers in the fields of politics and philosophy. While seemingly trivial, the use of exclusively male pronouns establishes an understanding of the individual as particularly male and had further political significance insofar as only men were legally recognized as political actors. In this sense, the use of male pronouns de-limits the concept of the individual. The second significant point is that Hobbes claims that prior to political association under a common power, men exist in a state of radical individualism in which disharmony defines any form of association and interaction. As a result of these two points, it comes as no surprise when Hobbes claims that this pre-political life is defined by “continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”<sup>3</sup> Hobbes provides us with a particular conception of the pre-political individual as a man who exists in radical solitude, removed from interpersonal relations, and disposed to death.

---

<sup>2</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 77.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

Quite like Hobbes' philosophical work, John Locke (1689) provides us with an isolated and masculine understanding of the individual. When theorizing as to how political power develops, Locke writes that "we must consider, what state all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man."<sup>4</sup> The 'natural state' of the individual, according to Locke, is explicitly masculine, isolated, and therefore leaves man perfectly free to live and act according to their own volition. This describes the relationship between the individual and freedom in clear antinomy to any sort of dependence or interdependence; instead, the natural individual is only truly free as long as they exist by and for themselves.

Another foundational thinker, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762) had much to say regarding the individual and their relation to freedom. Sharing a similar 'state of nature' theory to many early political thinkers, Rousseau boldly proclaims in the opening of *The Social Contract* that "man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains."<sup>5</sup> Again we see the immediate use of male pronouns, reflecting the strict idea that only men could possess political freedom and moral agency. While Rousseau shares a similar pre-political theory to Hobbes, the starkest difference is that Rousseau believes the 'state of nature' to be quite peaceful and harmonious; for Rousseau, it is in this pre-political state that perfect freedom is achieved and enjoyed. Historian Robert Wokler confirms that in this original state Rousseau believes that humans would have "no moral relations with or determinate obligations to one another."<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, Rousseau admits that "men must have developed all their social obligations so as to protect their lives and their

---

<sup>4</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Wokler, *Rousseau: A Very Short Introduction*, 47.

possessions.”<sup>7</sup> That is, the need to protect one’s freedom requires coming into social relation, which is precisely the moment that original freedom morphs into social liberty. Rousseau makes it clear that avoiding this transition out of pre-political life is impossible, writing that “to renounce your liberty is to renounce your status as a man, your rights as a human being, and even your duties as a human being...Such a renunciation is incompatible with man’s nature.”<sup>8</sup> Again, this strictly masculine being has no choice but to abandon perfect pre-political freedom, thereby coming into association with others to protect their liberty. Similar to other foundational thinkers, it is clear that Rousseau shares an understanding of the individual as a solitary male being who comes into political association for the sake of protecting their personal liberty.

Not surprisingly, Immanuel Kant (1784) echoes the tradition when he defines the process and period of Enlightenment as “*man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lacking of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another.*”<sup>9</sup> How exactly does this follow from the work of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau? Firstly, it must be noted that Kant also provides a blatantly masculine understanding of Enlightenment, making it explicitly clear that women are incapable of reason and can only have a beautiful understanding of the world. Secondly, Kant describes the movement away from ‘self-incurred immaturity’ as a process of applying one’s reason independently from the influence of others; again, the Enlightened individual for Kant is the man who can actualize this state of complete rational independence. How does Kant relate this understanding to freedom? He writes that “for enlightenment of this kind, all that is needed is

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>8</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Kant, “What is Enlightenment,” 54

*freedom*. And the freedom in question is the most innocuous form of all—freedom to make *public use* of one’s reason in all matters.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore Kant argues that the relationship between the individual and freedom is defined by man’s ability to actualize his wholly independent faculty of reason. Important to our discussion is that Kant believes this ‘faculty of reason’ is not a universal human capacity but is rather possessed exclusively by men. Women, animals, and all non-male beings are incapable of pure reason and can therefore never fully be enlightened as philosophical agents.<sup>11</sup> Freedom, for Kant, is therefore arrived at when *man* is able to publicly employ his starkly independent rationality and thereby emerge enlightened.

Having touched on these historically consequential figures (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant) what conclusions can we draw regarding the early foundations of the relationship between the individual and freedom? Our first conclusion is that the individual in question was exclusively male, a development that has both moral and political significance. Our second conclusion is that freedom has been traditionally defined as antithetical to social dependencies and interdependences, which this thesis argues is seriously inaccurate. David Hildebrand helps us grasp the similarities of these foundational thinkers in the following passage:

“While early versions of liberalism (e.g., Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, J.S. Mill) vary in many ways, they all start from a definite, theoretical, conception of human nature as individual and rational. Within this ‘atomic’ individualism, agents were *natural* egoists, bent upon maximizing individual standing. Accordingly, liberal theory’s values, problems, and methods were designed to address problems as encountered by this model of political agency.”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>11</sup> While not contained within our scope, it is crucial to note that Kant’s teleological understanding of reason, enlightenment, and freedom was not only gendered but also racially biased, with white man being the pinnacle of reason. His racist system has had its own complicated and problematic history of influence, a topic which an entire separate thesis could—and should—be dedicated.

<sup>12</sup> Hildebrand, *A Brief Account*, 13.

While the focus of this thesis will stay largely within the American political context, it is important to address these early Enlightenment thinkers considering the historical influence their thoughts had on the establishment and development of American ideology.

### **The Frontier Individual**

So, how do these early conceptions of the relationship between the individual and freedom translate to the early American context? Perhaps the most helpful angle to begin answering this question is by focusing on the concept of the ‘American frontier.’ The concept is explored in depth in Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 “Frontier Thesis,” in which he explores how settler colonial exceptionalism and American democracy were shaped by the frontier. According to Turner, “the frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social...The frontier individualism has from the beginning promoted democracy.”<sup>13</sup> Turner uses democracy here to describe a system of organization in which individuality is emphasized, encouraged, and protected. As he mentions, the frontier—as a wilderness that threatens organized society—is conducive to democracy insofar as the individual is left to conquer the land, plant their claim, and act according to their individualistic volition. In this sense, Turner’s understanding of the frontier and its influence reflect the conception of the isolated and masculine individual present in Enlightenment thought.

However, well ahead of his time, Turner later warns us that “democracy born of free land, strong in selfishness and individualism, intolerant of administrative experience and education, and pressing individual liberty beyond its proper bounds, has its dangers as well as its

---

<sup>13</sup> Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier of American History (1893), 45.

benefits.”<sup>14</sup> It is in the same spirit as this warning that we will come to challenge the historically dominant relationship between the individual and freedom. Turner accurately states that the dominant American ideology, as shaped by the frontier, contains a selfishness and independent nature that poses a significant risk to the construction of a supportive social community. As we will continue to show throughout this thesis, this dominant American ideology is not only deeply problematic but also inaccurate in assessing our actual ontological condition.

### **Man, Forgotten**

Before we move on to a more detailed analysis of liberty in the modern American context, it bears value to confirm the influence of Enlightenment thought within the early American tradition. Specifically, we must ask: where do we see the ideas of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant influencing the early American tradition? Firstly, the influence of Locke specifically is readily apparent in the Declaration of Independence, the founding document of the United States of America. Dewey points this out when he writes that “the outstanding points of Locke’s version of liberalism are that governments are instituted to protect the rights that belong to individuals prior to political organization of social relations. These rights are those summed up a century later in the American Declaration of Independence: the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>15</sup> This is to say, the philosophical foundation of the United States adopts the Enlightenment values of individualism, and conjointly its notion of freedom as determined through man’s capacity for willed social association.

These Enlightenment values resurface a century later in William Graham Sumner’s influential essay “The Forgotten Man” (1883) in which he details the social invisibility of the

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>15</sup> Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, 15.

“simple, honest laborer, ready to earn his living by productive work. We pass him by because he is independent, self-supporting, and asks no favors.”<sup>16</sup> Already his rhetoric and use of male pronouns echo the sentiment of individualism and independence present in the early-Enlightenment thinkers. This point becomes explicitly clear when Sumner defines civil liberty as follows: “Civil liberty is the status of the man who is guaranteed by law and civil institutions the exclusive employment of all his own powers for his own welfare.”<sup>17</sup> Liberty, used here in a similar sense to the term freedom, therefore only appears for Sumner through the independent pursuance of man’s desires and passions. The masculine angle is again referred to explicitly through Sumner’s male pronouns and is further evident insofar as the extension of civil liberty was based on the ownership of property, which was a right guaranteed exclusively to white men in early America.

At this point, we have revealed how several key Enlightenment thinkers developed a particular understanding of the relationship between the individual and freedom. Further, we showed how these foundational thoughts were transposed to the United States, and lastly confirmed their continued influence on early American political thought through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, what is left to accomplish is revealing how this conceived relationship endured and developed through late and contemporary American ideology.

### **Engaging the Question of Liberty in the Contemporary Context**

Our discussion here is shaped by the following questions: how has the concept of the individual—having been grounded in the Enlightenment tradition—developed in contemporary

---

<sup>16</sup> Sumner, *The Forgotten Man and Other Essays*, 315.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

political contexts, and how does this shape our understanding of liberty?<sup>18</sup> Firstly, John Dewey (1935) helps us confirm the ongoing influence of Enlightenment notions of the individual in his critique of liberalism. This is made apparent when he writes:

The whole temper of this philosophy is individualistic in the sense in which individualism is opposed to organized social action. It held to the primacy of the individual over the state not only in time but in moral authority. It defined the individual in terms of liberties of thought and action already possessed by him in some mysterious ready-made fashion, and which it was the sole business of the state to safeguard. Reason was also made an inherent endowment of the individual, expressed in men's moral relations to one another.<sup>19</sup>

As he reveals, placing primacy on the individual as a rational actor is not a tradition that has been forgotten since the Enlightenment; quite the contrary, Dewey believes this ideological tradition is stronger than ever in the American context. In part, Dewey argues that this ideological tradition has grown as a result of capitalist economic ideology, specifically founded in the philosophy of Adam Smith, who “held that the activity of individuals, freed as far as possible from political restriction, is the chief source of social welfare and the ultimate spring of social progress.”<sup>20</sup> This “laissez faire liberalism,” as Dewey calls it, has grown to be the defining ideology of the American context. In Dewey’s historical reading, “as [the United States] became industrialized, the philosophy of liberty of individuals, expressed especially in freedom of contract, proficed the doctrine needed by those who controlled the economic system.”<sup>21</sup> Reflecting on our earlier discussion of the role of the *frontier* in the development of the United States, we can see now how the rugged individualism potent in the early development of the country morphed into a political, social, and economic ideology of individualism. In this ideology, the individual is seen

---

<sup>18</sup> ‘Liberty’ and ‘freedom’ are used in this paper interchangeably. While discussing liberty often connotes political associations, I contend that the same is true for all discussions of freedom.

<sup>19</sup> Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, 16-17.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

as a ready-made and exclusively male agent possessing the capacity of reason; it is an ideology that draws on the state-of-nature theory as well as Kant's emphasis on reason, and as a result, it is an ideology that defines the individual—again as an explicitly male figure—not in association with others, but contrarily in isolation from others. It is important to mention, however, that Dewey failed to challenge the dominance of male pronouns in his work. While we will discuss the gendered universalism of his work in detail, we ought to keep in mind that even his work in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century continued to use exclusively male-oriented rhetoric.<sup>22</sup>

Several decades later, esteemed political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1961) confirms Dewey's analysis when she writes the following:

The Philosophic ancestry of our current political notion of freedom is still quite manifest in eighteenth-century political writers, when, for instance, Tomas Paine insisted that 'to be free it is sufficient [for man] that he wills it,'...Obviously such words echo the political philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who has remained the most consistent representative of the theory of sovereignty, which he derived directly from the will, so that he conceive of political power in the strict image of individual will-power.<sup>23</sup>

In this passage, Arendt describes how our current understanding of freedom is still firmly rooted in the political tradition of the Enlightenment, a claim which is exemplified in the work of political theorist Isaiah Berlin (1958), who attempts to define liberty in both its negative and positive dimensions. Berlin defines 'negative liberty' as follows: "I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity. Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by other... This is what the classical English political philosophers mean when they used ['freedom']."<sup>24</sup> This can be

---

<sup>22</sup> As Dr. McKenna shared with me, Dewey wasn't alone in this rhetorical and ethical shortcoming. Most writers of the time used 'man' as a stand-in for 'human'—it wasn't until the late 1980s that the APA released a statement regarding the use of pronouns.

<sup>23</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 163.

<sup>24</sup> Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty", 3.

understood as a ‘freedom from’; it describes the capacity of man to live and act outside of social and political relations. It is a pure and categorically essential freedom. Conversely, “the ‘positive’ sense of the word ‘liberty’ derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master. I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men’s acts of will.”<sup>25</sup> This can be understood as a ‘freedom for’; it describes the capacity of humans, within social relations, to determine their own actions apart from the direct influence of others. Through these competing definitions, Berlin is attempting to put forth a more nuanced notion of liberty. However, both the positive and negative dimensions of his conception of liberty fall into the exact trap described by Arendt: that is, they still find footing in a traditional understanding of the individual as an isolated masculine figure who only through their own enlightened will chooses to come into association with others. The individual in Berlin’s notion is certainly the same individual as described by Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Paine, and various other foundational thinkers. Having in common this particular understanding of the individual, it comes as no surprise that Berlin’s notion of liberty also overemphasizes solitude, independence, and non-interference.<sup>26</sup>

Around the same time that Arendt and Berlin were writing on individuality and its relationship to freedom, famed American philosopher Robert Nozick (1974) was developing the influential political field known now as libertarianism. Nozick asks the following: “if the state did not exist would it be necessary to invent it? Would one be *needed*, and would it have to be *invented*? These questions arise for political philosophy and for a theory explaining political

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>26</sup> While neither Arendt nor Berlin were American by birth, their ideas were spread across the increasingly globalized world, allowing their ideas to have a significant degree of influence within the American context. Arendt, for instance, lived in America for over thirty years, gaining significant traction and influence within the American tradition. While Berlin didn’t live in America, as will become apparent shortly, his political ideas are reflected clearly in the thinking of various American political scholars.

phenomena and are answered by investigating the ‘state of nature,’ to use the terminology of traditional political theory.”<sup>27</sup> Immediately Nozick references traditional political thought and encourages us to return to it for answering contemporary questions about the individual and freedom within the state. Our goal here is in not to challenge the entirety of Nozick’s work, but instead to reveal and consider its grounding in traditional political thought. Nozick comes to argue for a minimal state in which individuals are left to pursue their actualization, free from the influence of others to the greatest degree possible.<sup>28</sup> As he describes, “the minimal state treats us as inviolate individuals, who may not be used in certain ways by others as means or tools or instruments or resources; it treats us as persons having individual rights with the dignity this constitutes.”<sup>29</sup>

It’s not difficult to identify similarities between Nozick's and Berlin’s notions of the individual and freedom. Both share a common understanding of liberty as a state of existence in which the individual is left alone, and in which interactions with others only threaten to mitigate one’s freedom. As Nozick concludes, by “treating us with respect by respecting our rights, [the minimal state] allows us, individuals, or with whom we choose, to choose our life and to realize our ends and our conception of ourselves, insofar as we can, aided by the voluntary cooperation of other individuals possessing the same dignity.”<sup>30</sup> Nozick’s notion of liberty appears as a state that limits interaction to particular voluntary cooperation, and in general leaves the individual inviolate. We can see, therefore, how Nozick exemplifies Arendt’s claims insofar as his political thought preserves its appeal to the conception of the individual and freedom found in early

---

<sup>27</sup> Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Investigating the nuances of Nozick argument, although important for a detailed study of his philosophy, is beyond the scope of this paper. Our interest remains focused on how he conceives of the individual, and how this develops out of a history of political philosophy.

<sup>29</sup> Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 333.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 334.

Enlightenment thought. Similarly, Nozick's development of the individual as an atomistic being associated only through voluntary cooperation shares the same ontological underpinning as Berlin's conception of positive liberty. Of course, this isn't to say that *all* American political philosophy reflects this understanding of the individual and freedom; rather, our intent here is to show how these Enlightenment ideas continue to hold a significant influence on contemporary thought.

We can now return to our initial question, namely, what is the relationship between the individual and liberty in the American context? Firstly, we can now understand how early the founding of the United States was imbued with Enlightenment values, both implicitly and explicitly. Implicitly, this occurred through the physical context of the frontier, a *supposed* wilderness<sup>31</sup> that favored individualism as colonizers pushed West in hopes of securing new livelihood opportunities. Explicitly, this occurred through references to key Enlightenment thinkers, for example, Locke's principles being included in the Declaration of Independence, or Paine's vision of freedom—echoing Kant—as resulting from man's rational ability to will it into existence. Despite a shift away from agrarian and frontier values as a result of industrialization, American ideology continued to preserve these values of classical liberalism. The growth of capitalist economic ideas continued to place favor on the individual as a singular actor; freedom, therefore, resulted not directly from communal association, but instead from the ability to use society as a means by which one could achieve economic success. The values of liberalism continue to underpin many contemporary political discussions, as shown through the work of figures such as Dewey, Arendt, Berlin, and Nozick. We can conclude that the relationship

---

<sup>31</sup> Of course, the American frontier *was not* a wilderness, but was instead filled with a diverse array of Indigenous cultures that were violently eradicated through Westward expansion. By 'supposed wilderness' I mean simply to imply that this is how the frontier was *seen* by the colonizers.

between the individual and freedom has been defined negatively. The concept of the individual has tended to begin with man in isolation, and whose pure freedom is threatened by all social interactions. As we will discuss shortly, this raises an immediate question: what would a re-imagined individual look like, and how would it alter our relationship to freedom and responsibility? Before turning to the heart of our investigation, it is important to address several nuances relating to the argument so far.

### **Challenging Liberalism and the *Negative Individual***

We have so far demonstrated how the dominance of Enlightenment thought, values of liberalism, and an overall notion of the individual as isolated and morally distinct have defined much of the development of our relation to freedom in the American context. While this is true, it would be both naïve and unscholarly to assume that this has been the only way in which the individual and freedom have been theorized in Western culture since the Enlightenment.

One such challenge comes from Arendt when she discusses how we gain awareness of freedom. In the traditional argument, our freedom is contained within the self and is therefore obtained through a process of self-liberation directed by rational will—this sort of argument should seem familiar if not redundant at this point. Contrarily, Arendt claims that “we first become aware of freedom or its opposite in our intercourse with others, not in the intercourse with ourselves.”<sup>32</sup> Arendt is challenging the idea that freedom is contained wholly within the individual; for her, the relationship between the individual and freedom can only be realized through an outward engagement with others in the world. This challenge doesn’t immediately contradict the traditional values of the Enlightenment and liberalism. For instance, Sumner writes that “whenever you talk of liberty, you must have two men in mind. The sphere of rights of one

---

<sup>32</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 148.

of these men trenches upon that of the other, and whenever you establish liberty for the one, you must repress the other.”<sup>33</sup> However, Sumner goes on to argue that civil liberty is achieved when individuals are protected in the employment of their own powers toward their own ends. What, then, makes Arendt’s claim different? Sumner and other traditional thinkers *do* recognize others in their conception of liberty, but only insofar as the other infringes upon the singular individual—that is, freedom is still something contained within the individual and only threatened by others. Conversely, Arendt means to say that freedom is not contained within the individual and can only be conceived of through the individual’s association with others. While this nuance might seem inconsequential, we will reveal shortly the radical extent of its implications in understanding the individual and their relation to responsibility.

Another poignant critique comes from Allen E. Buchanan, a contemporary political philosopher who critically investigates liberalism. As he sees it, the ‘communitarian’ analysis of liberalism—which shares a similar outwardly engaged attitude as Arendt—outlines four clear critiques of the ideology. The most interesting for our scope is the fourth critique, which states that “liberalism presupposes a defective conception of the self, failing to recognize that the self is ‘embedded’ in and partly constituted by communal commitments and values which are not objects of choice.”<sup>34</sup> For Buchanan, the result of this critique is that liberalism fails to encourage a robust-enough social community, and therefore fails to work towards what he deems the ‘good life.’ He continues by sharing what he sees as the overarching thesis of Liberalism in the American context: “if the state enforces the basic civil and political rights it will leave individuals free, within broad limits, to pursue their own conceptions of the good and will preclude itself from imposing upon them any one particular conception of the good or of

---

<sup>33</sup> Sumner, *The Forgotten Man and Other Essays*, 311.

<sup>34</sup> Buchanan, *Assessing the Communitarian Critique of Liberalism*, 853.

virtue.”<sup>35</sup> Buchanan reads this thesis both generally within American culture, as well as specifically within the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights. Not only is Buchanan echoing our claim that the values of the Enlightenment and liberalism are still preserved in the modern American context, but he is also providing us with a significant challenge to these ideologies. That is, Buchanan is prompting us to ask if the traditional relationship of the individual to liberty is accurate and adequate in producing an effective society. It is precisely this question that has prompted my entire investigation, and it is the question that will guide the rest of this thesis.

The third challenge to liberalism comes from John Dewey, who traces the influence of John Locke, Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill as significant contributors to the classical conception of liberalism—Bentham and Mill influenced the tradition through the founding of utilitarian ethics, which shares a traditional understanding of the discrete individual. Early in the history of liberalism, Dewey notes that primacy was placed on the individual, and what followed legally were policies of non-interference. As already discussed, the individual—always a masculine individual—was seen as possessing freedom inherently, and any sort of social or state interference threatened that freedom. However, Dewey notices that the new liberal school, which developed around the mid to late 1800s, slightly challenged this pure classical notion. The new liberal school believed it to be “the business of the state to protect all forms and to promote all modes of human association in which the moral claims of the member of society are embodied and which serve as the means of voluntary self-realization.”<sup>36</sup> Further, the new liberal school functioned to “instill the idea that [freedom] is something to be achieved.”<sup>37</sup> This

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 854.

<sup>36</sup> Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, 34.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 34.

nuance provides clarity as to the development of contemporary neo-liberal and libertarian philosophies insofar as it recognizes the need for the state to protect the freedom of individual associations. In other words, the state protects, confirms, and upholds contracts between individual political actors. While this shift in the new liberal school is significant insofar as it recognizes freedom not as an original state but instead as something constructed, it still doesn't move beyond the traditional notion of the individual as solitary and devoid of original social engagement. Additionally, the new liberal school provides important clarity to understanding the nuance of contemporary liberal, neo-liberal, and libertarian thought.

At this point, our argument has been situated on two fronts: first, we have shown how the values of the Enlightenment and liberalism more generally shaped the founding of the United States, and how their influence continues to hold an important role in underpinning contemporary American culture. Specifically, we have shown that the relationship between the individual and liberty has been conceived in a largely negative sense while treating the individual as an insular and rational male actor. Secondly, we have provided nuance by revealing that there have in fact been challenges to the dominance of this ideology. It is in these challenges, in this periphery, that we will begin our challenge of this traditional conception of the individual. Outlining the historical development of the traditional ideology has set the scene for the heart of our thesis: how can we re-imagine the individual in order to come to a more morally engaged notion of responsibility?

## Section II: The Ontological Reorientation

### The Circumscribed Individual

Liberty is, therefore, the right to do everything which does not harm others. The limits within which each individual can act without harming others are determined by law, just as the boundary between two fields is marked by a stake. It is a question of the liberty of man regarded as an isolated monad, withdrawn into himself... Liberty as a right of man is not founded upon the relations between man and man, but rather upon the separation of man from man. [Liberty] is the right of such separation. The right of the *circumscribed* individual, withdrawn into himself.<sup>38</sup>

What has been shown up until this point is succinctly summarized in the above passage from Marx. The dominant ideology has defined the individual as an isolated masculine figure, a rational actor whose freedom is constantly threatened through associations with others. Marx is of course skeptical of this tradition—a skepticism that I share. This section will focus on unpacking this skepticism, demonstrating its erroneous ontological foundation, and in its place establishing a reoriented ontological foundation of the individual.

It is clear at this point how the question of the individual and freedom has been formulated and answered in dominant philosophical and political discussions; now, it serves our interest to address the ontological significance of the tradition. As Marx alludes to above, the individual has been defined as a withdrawn being, isolated from others; the individual is *circumscribed*, as he puts it. Gregory Pappas helps us grasp the significance of the circumscribed individual, writing that “the traditional ethicists begin with a passive and isolated self. For this kind of self ‘interest’ originates in the private subject and the objects of her interest are always external and a mere means for the self.”<sup>39</sup> This description of the individual should sound

---

<sup>38</sup> Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, 42.

<sup>39</sup> Pappas, *Dewey and Feminism*, 86.

familiar; it is precisely this sort of isolated individual that is conceived of in Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, Paine, Kant, Nozick, and various other significant foundational thinkers. Pappas is certainly critical of this notion. He notes that “there are occasions in which we need to distinguish our ‘selves’ from our relationships, but it would be a vicious abstractionism to separate the self completely from these transactions and claim that it is somehow prior to them. To postulate a self as antecedent to interactive activity is to read back the results of inquiry into antecedent existence.”<sup>40</sup> Pappas is addressing a significant ontological question: *how does the self come to be?* The traditional answer, as we have repeatedly shown, is that the self develops rationally within—traditionally male—individuals, and only when each individual exists in their own capacity do social and political associations begin to form. In other words, the traditional answer has favored the state-of-nature theory—a masculine notion of pure individuals who forfeit pure and absolute freedom in favor of protected liberties through political associations.

Dewey summarizes this ontological understanding when he writes that “the underlying philosophy and psychology of earlier liberalism led to a conception of individuality as something ready-made, already possessed, and needing only the removal of certain legal restrictions to come into full play. It was not conceived as a moving thing, something that is attained only by continuous growth.”<sup>41</sup> Again his description echoes the arguments made by traditional Enlightenment thinkers as well as more contemporary spheres such as liberalism, neo-liberalism, capitalism, and libertarianism. Each of these fields, as well as their millions of advocates within the American context, all share this common understanding of the individual as an isolated, ready-made agent whose purpose is to promote their own flourishing apart from social and political association. Dewey again clarifies this sentiment when, as referenced earlier, he writes

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>41</sup> Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, 46.

that “the whole temper of this philosophy is individualistic in the sense in which... it held to the primacy of the individual over the state not only in time but in moral authority.”<sup>42</sup> The masculine individual, in this traditional sense, exists prior to association and comes to be with others only through a rational choice aimed at promoting individual liberties.

But it is not enough to simply criticize a way of viewing the self or the world. Instead, our criticism ought to have the goal of determining possible errors in a given ideology and subsequently presenting possible solutions aimed at providing a more fulfilling existence. The error here, as I see it, is grounded in the ontological notion of the individual advanced by the aforementioned traditions. Therefore, our next step is to remedy this error by presenting a novel ontological understanding of the individual.

### **The Actual Ontological Development of the Individual**

The human infant is modified in mind and character by his connection with others in family life and the modification continues throughout life as his connections with others broaden...The actual ‘laws’ of human nature are laws of individuals in association, not of being in a mythical condition apart from association. In other words, liberalism that takes its profession of the importance of the individuality with sincerity must be deeply concerned about the structure of human association.<sup>43</sup>

If the individual doesn’t exist *prior* to associations, then it follows that the individual comes to exist *through* associations. That is, the individual develops not as a ready-made, circumscribed self, but as a being that can only grasp their individuality through associations with others. While this ontological distinction may seem trivial, this section will demonstrate the incredible extent of its influence on how we understand ourselves, our relationships with others, and finally, our sense of responsibility.

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 48.

Our individuality is defined through associations with others. In fact, the very development of our physical existence is completely out of our hands; the individual is physically brought about through the associations of others. In our lives, from infancy till death, we find ourselves in association with others; ties of dependency shape our relationships, and we have no choice but to interact with others. In other words, the state-of-nature theory fails to describe our *actual* ontology. We do not spring from the ground as rational individuals, but instead come to cultivate a sense of self through continual and persistent connections with others. Judith Butler does a fantastic job at grasping this point when they write that “we could wish ourselves to be wholly perspicacious beings. But that would be to disavow infancy, dependency, relationality, primary impressionability; it would be the wish to eradicate all the active and structuring traces of our psychological formations and to dwell in the pretense of being fully knowing, self-possessed adults.”<sup>44</sup> As Butler clarifies, the appeal to state-of-nature theories contradict our actual development as beings.

Understanding this point can be aided by imagining an infant left alone in the woods. Abiding strictly by the traditional understanding of the individual, the infant would be entirely free to engage their capacity for reason in order to find food, shelter, and fulfillment in life—this infant would be left to choose whether or not they want to form associations with others, perhaps for the purpose of protecting their freedom. Of course, described this way the idea seems absurd; in reality, the infant would suffer and have no hopes of survival. This thought experiment helps reveal our *actual* ontological condition, namely, a state of dependency in which we rely on the care and consideration of others to help shape and preserve ourselves throughout life.

---

<sup>44</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 102.

This ontological position is shared by Dewey and revealed clearly when he writes that “the sick cannot heal themselves by means of their disease, and disintegrated individuals can achieve unity only as the dominant energies of community life are incorporated to form their minds. If these energies were, in reality, mere strivings for private pecuniary gain, the case would indeed be hopeless.”<sup>45</sup> Challenging the traditional understanding of the individual, Dewey clarifies that a life aimed merely at “private pecuniary gain” is hopeless insofar as it fails to recognize and utilize the supports of one’s community. To clarify further, these supports are not opt-in; remembering the infant thought experiment, states of dependency necessarily shape our lives, and only through community support and the actions of others can we hope to live a fulfilling life. Butler echoes this point when they write that “I speak as an ‘I,’ but do not make the mistake of thinking that I know precisely all that I am doing when I speak in that way. I find that my very formation implicates the other in me, that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others.”<sup>46</sup> This is to say, our ontological development demands immediate ethical consideration of the other; since we come-to-be through associations with others, then realizing ourselves as ethical agents requires considering our associations. This claim, which follows directly from our ontological reorientation, is what will be finally explored in the third section of this paper. Specifically, how is responsibility conceived in an ethical system that demands immediate consideration of our social and political associations?

Before turning to this question directly, it is important to outline a nuance that will be crucial to bear in mind through the rest of the paper. While we can now recognize the individual as being socially cultivated, this is not to say that the concept of ‘the individual’ or ‘the self’ is

---

<sup>45</sup> Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*, 33.

<sup>46</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 84.

without use. Understanding the individual as a rational ethical actor does not contradict the ontological reorientation, but instead supports it and gives it life. While we as individuals realize ourselves only through associations with others, we still maintain a degree of individuality that allows us to act as moral agents. The self still exists, it just doesn't exist as something *prior to* or *outside of* associations. Referencing Dewey's philosophy, Pappas helps clarify that if "the self is relational, interactive, and processional, then the self is always one with its activity, i.e., it is an agent, a participator... The self is not *behind* what one does but *in* what one does."<sup>47</sup> By this, Pappas means to say that the self certainly exists and is in fact integral to developing a coherent understanding of morality and responsibility. By challenging the traditional understanding of the individual as a ready-made masculine agent I don't mean to contend that the individual is entirely mythical; rather, I mean to argue that the historical *way in which the individual has been constructed* fails to reflect how we actually develop as human beings. We certainly *are* individuals, but we are not the mythical individuals described in tradition. Instead, we are individuals that come to exist through the direct participatory activity of others; we are dependent, helpless even at times, and in need of strong socio-political associations in order to arrive at existential fulfilment. To return briefly to our discussion of freedom, this ontological reordination would posit that discussions of liberty must always consider our associations, not just in the negative sense of interference, but in the sense that we as moral actors can only come to be free by cultivating institutions that engage our shared ontological origins.

At this point, we have revealed the ontological underpinnings of traditional political from Enlightenment through the contemporary American context, and subsequently challenged its ability to describe how we *actually* develop as individuals. Through this challenge, our

---

<sup>47</sup> Pappas, *Dewey and Feminism*, 86.

ontological reorientation has shown that our individuality only develops through complex interpersonal networks and associations of dependency that shape our lives from before birth till after death. While individuality and the self are still important tools for discussing agency and responsibility, these discussions must always recognize the ethical grounding of the self in the other, as Butler puts it. With this in mind, we are prepared to turn to the third and final section of our paper, in which we will adopt this ontological reorientation in order to synthesize the moral philosophy of John Dewey and the field of feminist care ethics, which together will help us consider our relationship to responsibility as morally attuned and socially engaged individuals.

## **Section III: The Individual Re-Imagined: Concerning Our Responsibility**

### **So what? The Significance of the Ontological Reorientation**

If we choose to accept the validity of the ontological reorientation, what follows from it? While the reorientation may appear trivial, the opposite is in fact true. Specifically, what follows from this shift is a conception of the individual as a socially engaged, interdependently developed, and morally responsible agent—it is a conception of the individual that starkly contrasts traditional political thought. Again, this doesn't mean there is no such thing as the individual, but rather that the individual only develops as a result of social relations and not prior to, as suggested by the tradition. As we'll come to see, this new understanding of the individual has considerable ramifications on how we conceive of agency, morality, and responsibility. We'll begin by working through Dewey's understanding of ethics as a process of moral deliberation; this will provide us a robust understanding of the process of decision-making as engaged individuals. However, we will also reveal the risk of relativism in Dewey's system; this critique will lead into the introduction of a feminist ethics of care, which both supports and expands Dewey's philosophy. We will end by examining the synthesis of these two disciplines as a means of engaging the question of our responsibility as moral agents in a socially conditioned environment.

### **Dewey and Moral Deliberation**

A large part of our presentation of Dewey relies on his work contained in *Human Nature and Conduct*, a morally profound book that provides a detailed account of his process of moral deliberation. Before diving into an outline of this process, it bears value to first confirm Dewey's ontological position. He writes: "We can recognize that all conduct is *interaction* between

elements of human nature and the environment, natural and social. Then we shall see that progress proceeds in two ways, and that freedom is found in that kind of interaction which maintains an environment in which human desire and choice count for something.”<sup>48</sup>

Immediately we can see that Dewey doesn’t subscribe to the traditional concept of the individual as a ready-made being; rather, the individual is a unit that is constantly being shaped by the interaction between the self and the natural and social environment. When he describes progress as occurring in ‘two ways,’ Dewey is therefore describing the activity of changing either the self or the environment—freedom can then be understood not as a pre-political masculine condition, but as a careful balancing act achieved through attentive care to both the self and the environment. To explore this process more in depth, we’ll first explore how moral deliberation functions to cultivate an environmentally attentive and responsible agent.

Central to much of Dewey’s work, and particularly to his process of moral deliberation, is the idea of habits. He writes that “all habits are demands for certain kinds of activity, and they constitute the self. In any intelligible sense of the word will, they *are* will. They form our effective desires and they furnish us with our working capacities.”<sup>49</sup> Habits are the developed—either consciously *or* subconsciously—dispositions that shape how we interact in particular situations. To give a silly but telling example, if I crave a McDonalds burger, it is only because I live in a context in which that has been a continuously present option; if I were to have never heard of McDonalds, it would be absurd to imagine that I might crave a McDonalds burger. This is to say, experiences going to McDonalds, seeing McDonalds advertisements, and driving by McDonalds on my way home have all functioned to create a habitual response of desiring McDonalds when I feel myself getting hungry. As Dewey confirms, “habits as organized

---

<sup>48</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 9.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

activities are secondary and acquired, not native and original...The *meaning* of native activities is not native, it is acquired. It depends upon interaction with a matured social medium.”<sup>50</sup> This is to say, habits are not natural or pre-social, but are instead conditioned through one’s experiences in the world.

To clarify another distinction, habits can be consciously or subconsciously developed. Sometimes we tend towards certain ways of acting or responding out of habit without ever intending to do so; maybe it’s the way our parents did it, or maybe we saw a childhood mentor act that way, and now we have adopted that same habit subconsciously. Other times, we intentionally develop a habit for the purpose of shaping our expressed sense of self. For instance, one might actively develop their communication skills in order to have a successful relationship with a partner. Whether developed subconsciously or intentionally, these habits come together to form us as moral beings. Dewey therefore concludes that “character is the interpenetration of habits.”<sup>51</sup> The important consideration in this statement is that habits do not exist in isolation, but rather constantly affect and influence each other, resulting in character as the embodied self. Habits, therefore, can be understood as the interdependent forces operating at varying levels of consciousness that shape our actions and determine our character. So, what role do habits serve in the process of moral deliberation?

The process of moral deliberation first begins when there is a breakdown of habits. To return to our previous example, this breakdown of habits might occur when I drive to the local McDonalds only to find it closed down for the day. A breakdown of greater moral significance could occur if I become aware of the environmental impact of meat, and therefore decide to cut McDonalds out of my diet. Whether the breakdown is physical *or* moral, it marks the moment in

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 30.

which the habit that has conditioned us to act in a particular way comes into conflict with an environment or decision that is unable to support its extension. We must decide, *what now?* This question spawns a process that Dewey believes is central to the cultivation of a responsible self and a reciprocal environment. Oftentimes this moment can be challenging, especially if the habit is deeply engrained within the individual. This moment of rupture can be uncomfortable, but it is precisely in this discomfort that we see the potential for significant change. In deciding ‘what now,’ we begin the process of moral deliberation by imagining possible solutions. Each solution varies in its appeal and is further accompanied by a course of action that might best achieve the desired solution. In this sense, Dewey concisely summarizes the process when he writes: “Deliberation is a dramatic rehearsal (in imagination) of various competing possible lines of action.”<sup>52</sup> This ‘imaginative dramatic rehearsal’ of possible actions opens us to new ways of being, and can hold significant influence on the overall trajectory of the self; when I see that McDonalds is closed, maybe today will be the day that I decide to cut out fast food and improve my diet and physical health.

An important nuance is that Dewey sees deliberation not as an endpoint, but rather as a means by which action occurs. Revealing his pragmatism, Dewey’s focus is on action as the locus of moral advancement; deliberation is a means by which we imagine possible courses of action, *and then act*. This action is not final, but instead becomes novel activity that will eventually spur more deliberation and further action. In his own words, “all deliberation is a search for a *way* to act, not for a final terminus.”<sup>53</sup> Deliberation culminates in action which influences our habits and shapes our character. Then, inspired by new influences, we are prepared for the next moment in which our habits will breakdown, prepared to begin the process

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 134.

of moral deliberation and action again—in this sense, Dewey’s moral system is cyclical. To summarize, moral deliberation begins when habits breakdown. From this moment, deliberation occurs as a ‘dramatic imaginative rehearsal’ of possible courses of action. Once we have landed on a favored course of action, we then must act, which instigates changes in both the self and the environment. However, one critical nuance has been left out of this summarization: how do we decide between competing courses of action?

An important clarification to begin with is that “the object of foresight of consequences is not to predict the future. It is to ascertain the meaning of present activities and to secure, so far as possible, a present activity with a unified meaning.”<sup>54</sup> Dewey clarifies here that deliberation is not concerned with perfectly guessing future outcomes, but instead with judging courses of action according to their ability to unify the meaning of present activity. Yet even this clarification is difficult to fully grasp. To come to a complete understanding of this claim, we must examine how Dewey suggests we decide between competing courses of action, and how this process can produce a unified meaning for the self.

Dewey, who was ardently opposed to dichotomies, had much to say on this historical bifurcation of reason and emotion. While Dewey certainly valued reason as a factor in deliberation and action, his conception of reason *included* an attentiveness to one’s emotional state. Gregory Pappas helps us understand the presence of emotion in Dewey work, writing that Dewey doesn’t “assume a faculty called reason apart from impulses, emotions, and habits; there is no dualism between the cognitive and the noncognitive. Instead, there is a continuity between these distinct but complementary functions.”<sup>55</sup> Pappas is accurate in his assessment of Dewey. Emotion and reason are not separate faculties but are always already engaged together in the

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>55</sup> Pappas, *Dewey and Feminism*, 81.

processes of deliberation and action. Pappas clarifies the significance of this synthesis, writing that “in our initial confrontation with a morally problematic situation there is a direct and spontaneous *emotional* response to situations that is indispensable for moral inquiry.”<sup>56</sup> Pappas is describing here the moment in which habits breakdown; the process of realizing and grappling with this breakdown is not without emotion, but is rather substantially shaped by it. I might be furious to find that the McDonalds is closed, and this emotion will certainly play a role in my deliberation and decided course of action. Therefore, the answer for Dewey “is not that the emotional, passionate phase of action can be or should be eliminated on behalf of a bloodless reason. More ‘passions,’ not fewer, is the answer. Rationality, once more, is not a force to evoke against impulse and habit. It is the attainment of a working harmony among diverse desires.”<sup>57</sup> In the process of deliberation, we therefore decide between competing courses of action by *rationally* considering and comparing the merits of each, a process which is not devoid of but rather *defined by* emotional considerations. To put it simply, the decided course of action should be the one that *feels* like it provides us with unified meaning and sense of self as emotional individuals.

At this point we understand how moral deliberation begins, what the process entails, and how we decide between competing courses of action. Before challenging Dewey’s work, we must consider the overall goal of this process. We already identified the immediate goal of deliberation as action. The long-term goal, however, is described by Dewey as follows:

The moral is to develop conscientiousness, ability to judge the significance of what we are doing and to use that judgement in directing what we do, not by means of direct cultivation of something called conscience, or reason, or a faculty of moral knowledge, but by fostering those impulses and habits which experience

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>57</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 136.

has shown to make us more sensitive, generous, imaginative, impartial in perceiving the tendency of our inchoate dawning activities.<sup>58</sup>

For Dewey, the goal of moral deliberation and life more generally is to develop *conscientiousness*, a state of being that is constantly aware of one's habits, their interaction in the world, and how we might act so as to become a more emotionally considerate and environmentally responsible ethical agent. This state of being, even if never fully realized, should be the goal of deliberation and action; it should shape how we act and guide what kind of person we want to become. In this sense, Dewey's conclusion echoes the sentiment described by Butler when they write that "I cannot think of the question of responsibility alone, in isolation from the other."<sup>59</sup> Instead, responsibility must be considered as an immediately social obligation. Our moral responsibility as individuals should not aimed at removing social ties, but rather at fostering those relationships that make us 'more sensitive, generous, imaginative,' and considerate of the world we depend on. As we continue, this socially engaged notion of responsibility will be further considered. Understanding his entire process of deliberation, we are now prepared to challenge Dewey's work and introduce a feminist ethics of care to better understand the question of responsibility in moral action.

While Dewey's work is monumental in challenging the traditional understanding of the individual as a ready-made masculine agent possessing the capacity for self-defined reason, I argue here that he falls short in two key respects: (1) he fails to outwardly reject the male orientation of politics and philosophy, as evident in his use of pronouns and (2) his process of moral deliberation and the attainment of emotional unity through action risks slipping into moral relativism. Firstly, much of Dewey's writing utilizes male pronouns, thereby sharing with

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>59</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 84.

traditional thinkers a male orientation that is not only incredibly harmful to the field of ethics but also inaccurate in identifying whom the field of ethics concerns. In his defense, Dewey philosophy suggests that his ideas are not limited to men but are rather fundamental processes by which all humans live and act. However, it is still disappointing that he fails to outwardly reject the masculine tendencies of philosophy and ethics.

This second failing presents itself through the distinction between his concepts of valuing and valuation. Valuing for Dewey describes the individual's immediate emotional response to a given situation. Valuation, on the other hand, posits that values are flexible and open to being conditioned through deliberation. Dewey considers valuation as the process of constantly assessing the worth of a given value. While this distinction is not wholly problematic, Dewey fails to provide a system or framework to guide this process of valuation. The resulting issue is that we are left without a larger system of values to assess our emotions and actions. Refusing to present one single 'system' was in fact Dewey's intention, since he believed that having a singular moral theory was too rigid to account for changing environments and contexts. For Dewey this doesn't result in an absolute relativism, since many courses of action can still be ruled out through deliberation; however, it does mean that multiple courses of action will appear morally viable, and that it is up to the individual to decide upon one and act. He argues, therefore, that his theory of deliberation is conducive to cultivating thought and action in a variety of contexts, and that implementing an overarching framework would hinder the flexibility of his system. However, I believe that having several general values to shape valuation, deliberation, and action actually supplements Dewey's work. Implementing a guiding system of values doesn't mean we abandon contextual consideration, but instead means that each moment of deliberation and action is informed by general values that confirm and validate our

engaged ontology and social belonging. In other words, when we are left with several morally viable courses of action, having a general framework of values can help us decide which path might produce an affectively unified relationship between the self and the environment.

How then can we preserve Dewey's robust account of ethics at the individual level while implementing guiding values that shape deliberation and action? The most hopeful answer comes through considering the field of feminist care ethics and how it informs our processes of valuation, deliberation, and action as socially engaged individuals.

### **The Feminist Care Orientation**

Through this section, it will become evident that both Dewey and the field of feminist care ethics maintain a similar understanding of the individual as a radically social, interdependent, and emotional being. To situate this discussion, our first step is to paint a brief historical picture of feminist philosophy and feminist care ethics. The field of feminist philosophy is comparatively new; this is not because women have only recently begun to engage philosophical questions, but rather because female voices have been historically silenced, as evident through the masculine orientation of traditional political theory. As Erin McKenna and Scott Pratt describe, "much of the work opening philosophy to feminism was done by women who came to age during the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Because of this, feminist philosophy is still a relatively new field; the first journal of feminist philosophy, *Hypatia*, was not established until the mid-1980s."<sup>60</sup> This mid-century surge of feminist philosophy became known as 'second-wave feminism,' with 'first-wave feminism' being used to describe the suffrage movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

---

<sup>60</sup> McKenna & Pratt, *American Philosophy: From Wounded Knee to the Present*, 299.

Around the time of *Hypatia*'s founding, "feminist philosophers also took up ethical theory, often intertwined with issues of social and political philosophy. Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*, published in 1982, gave rise to the field of ethics (and politics) of care."<sup>61</sup> Gilligan's publication opened a floodgate of feminist ethics, and the ensuing decades were marked by numerous publications within the field, including Sarah Lucia Hoagland's *Lesbian Ethics* (1988), Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1989), Claudia Card's *Feminist Ethics* (1991), Virginia Held's *Feminist Morality* (1993), Eva Kittay's *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (1999), and Peggy DesAutels and Joanne Waugh's *Feminists Doing Ethics* (2001), to name several key works. While each philosopher adopted different approaches and angles of ethical consideration, a majority of the field shared a common understanding of the individual not as a ready-made masculine agent, but as a dependent, socially developed, and engaged being whose entire existence and continuation relies on a vastly interconnected web of social belonging. At the center of these webs of connectedness is the concept of care, which describes the traditionally feminine labor of cultivating and supporting individuals from birth till death. Together these thinkers revealed a new dimension of ethical philosophy that considered questions of power and "reiterated the need for moral theory to be tied to social practices and experiences."<sup>62</sup>

However, while *Hypatia*, and feminist philosophy more generally, grew at a rapid pace, ongoing patriarchal structures continued to suppress and discredit the importance of these works. As McKenna and Pratt describe, "while many of these women wanted to make philosophy relevant to life and grew disillusioned with mainstream analytic philosophy, to do so came with the cost of not being seen as doing 'real philosophy.'" Since many assumed that women were not

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 302.

up to the task of doing ‘real philosophy,’ this complicated the efforts to be taken seriously in the profession.”<sup>63</sup> This claim is evident in that fact that most introductory courses in ethics still focus largely on Aristotelian, Kantian, and Utilitarian ethics as the pillars of contemporary ethical thought. Conversely, both feminist and pragmatist ethics are rarely taught in ethics courses. Therefore, this project is in part aimed at challenging the traditional schools of ethics and instead providing a space in which we can recognize the incredible value of feminist and pragmatist ethics as a tool for understanding our place in the world.

Having come to a general understanding of the timeline of feminist ethics, let us closer examine the field of feminist care ethics in order to understand both its principal values, how it can supplement Dewey’s ethics, and what understanding of responsibility results therefrom.<sup>64</sup> Returning to a previously discussed passage from Butler, they write that “we could wish ourselves to be wholly perspicacious beings. But that would be to disavow infancy, dependency, relationality, primary impressionability.”<sup>65</sup> This sentiment lies at the heart of feminist care ethics; it is a field that’s first consideration is with our *actual* ontological development. It sees the individual not as a primary, pre-political entity, but rather as a phenomenon that develops through a social ontology that is rooted in the activity of care. As Eva Kittay puts it, the practice of care concerns the “inevitable dependencies and asymmetries that form part of the human condition.”<sup>66</sup>

Understanding the activity of care as integral to the development of individuals, it becomes evident that the field of feminist care ethics is not interested in ethics as an abstraction.

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 309.

<sup>64</sup> To remind ourselves of an earlier point, the field of feminist care ethics is ‘feminist’ in two distinct ways: (1) it originated from the field of feminist philosophy, which is to say it was founded largely by women and (2) it discusses care as a traditionally feminine activity. However, its description as a ‘feminist ethics of care’ *does not* mean that the principles or conclusions it produces apply strictly to women; in fact, the opposite is the case.

<sup>65</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 102.

<sup>66</sup> Eva Kittay, *Love’s Labor*, 14.

Referencing Sara Ruddick, Regina Leffers writes that “the ethics of care has been characterized by a focus on responding to the real needs of others, and its ‘primary virtue’ is to be caring.”<sup>67</sup> We see here the theme of care ethics as concerning social practices and experiences—it does not engage abstract musings about the individual as a metaphysical agent, but instead focuses on how the *real* activity of care is the keystone of individual and social development. Kittay echoes this point when she writes that “questions of who takes on the responsibility of care...who sees to it that the caring is done and done well...and who provides the support for the relationship of care—these are social and political questions.”<sup>68</sup> In this sense, care ethics posits a radical shift away from the traditional focuses of ethical philosophy. Instead of focusing on the individual as willed being who abstractly considers various ethical principles, the philosophy of care considers ethics as a material and embodied practice that is essential to the human condition and the development of ourselves as moral agents.

Maurice Hamington, a key contemporary thinker in the field of care ethics, emphasizes this point that care is an *embodied* activity. He writes that the activity of care is radical precisely because “it calls for a fundamental shift in our thinking about morality, a move toward an aspect of epistemology and ethics that has been largely ignored in philosophy: the body.”<sup>69</sup> Hamington is raising a significant point, namely that care is not merely a mental activity but is carried out in bodily activity. This shift, while seemingly obvious, brings the field of ethics out of the metaphysical and into the material—it defines ethics not merely as a practice of mental deliberation, but *also* as a practice of embodied activity. Immediate similarities can be drawn between this claim and the pragmatism of Dewey previously discussed. Hamington further

---

<sup>67</sup> Leffers, *Pragmatists Jane Addams and John Dewey Inform the Ethics of Care*, 65.

<sup>68</sup> Kittay, *Love’s Labor*, 1.

<sup>69</sup> Hamington, *Embodied Care*, 7.

develops his understanding of care when he writes that caring acts are “those acts in which the caregiver actively concerns herself with attending to the individually expressed needs, feelings and interests of the care-for and strives to create a shared self with people who are similarly committed to a secure world in which beings are nurtured and given an opportunity to realize fully their individuality.”<sup>70</sup> Hamington is touching directly on the ontological shift that we’re arguing for; that is, he understands how the practice of care as an ethical attitude and disposition unifies the individual in their social ontology. Further, caring for others and recognizing ourselves as social beings *does not* contradict the fact that each person possesses a unique individuality. Rather, it is only through cultivating a caring attitude and being cared *for* that we come to recognize ourselves as individuals.

To summarize, the field of feminist care ethics has been regularly overlooked and overpowered by traditional schools of political theory and ethics that regard the individual as a self-made masculine agent who possess the capacity for reason, and whose freedom is essential to their individuality. The feminist orientation, however, rightfully challenges these problematic themes by revealing the significant role of feminized care labor and its significance historical and ontological role in developing individuals. As Hamington writes, “care, too, is so basic to human functioning that we can easily overlook it as a significant element in moral decision making.”<sup>71</sup> It *has* been overlooked, and the purpose of this paper is to help support its reintroduction to popular ethics and political theory by showing how it supplements the work of Dewey. Therefore, let us turn to our final discussion in which we explicitly outline how the two fields are related, and how their synthesis provides us with a novel understanding of the individual and their relation to responsibility.

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 1.

## Cultivating Care: Responsibility through Dewey and a Feminist Ethics of Care

If a [human]<sup>72</sup> lived alone in the world there might be some sense in the question ‘Why be moral?’ were it not for one thing: No such question would then arise. As it is, we live in a World where other persons live too. Our acts affect them. They perceive these effects and react upon us in consequence. Because they are living beings they make demands upon us for certain things from us. They approve and condemn—not in abstract theory but in what they do to us.<sup>73</sup>

We have shown how Dewey understands ethics as the ongoing process of cultivating habits and activity towards an ideal state of conscientiousness; conjunctly, we have discussed the field of feminist care ethics and how it views care as an essential human activity that pre-exists individuality. What is left is to directly synthesize the two in order to show how the feminist care orientation can resolve the shortcomings in Dewey, thereby providing us with a unique angle to understanding our relation to responsibility.

Beginning with their connection, both Dewey and the feminist care tradition recognize the individual as an integrated unit, cultivated not just through self-practice but *also* through our interactions with the world. Dewey writes that “each person is born an infant, and every infant is subject from the first breath [she] draws and the first cry [she] utters to the attentions and demands of others.”<sup>74</sup> Both fields agree that the activity of care follows directly and *necessarily* from our being. This relation is further distinguished insofar as Dewey recognizes ethics as an interaction between the individual and the environment, both physical and social. This is to say, Dewey would agree that ethics certainly concerns the individual, but it doesn’t concern them alone. In writing about Jane Addams and Dewey, Leffers claims that “in reading of ethic of care through Addams and Dewey, what appears to be most important is the continual striving to

---

<sup>72</sup> Changed “man” to “human” to challenge Dewey’s use of male pronouns and reveal how a feminist ethics can immediately supplement this shortcoming in his work. Similar modifications are present in subsequent quotations of Dewey.

<sup>73</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 223.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

maintain and expand our awareness of our interconnection with others, the sensible awareness that we are a part of any concrete whole that is within the scope of our perceptions, and to respond with care from the center of our own creative strengths.”<sup>75</sup> In other words, Dewey’s ideal state of ‘conscientiousness’ would agree on principle with the feminist care tradition in the sense that it encourages the individual to “[foster] those impulses and habits which experience has shown to make us more sensitive, generous” and “imaginative.”<sup>76</sup>

However, we described earlier that Dewey’s project had two distinct shortcomings: (1) its failure to disavow the traditional male orientation and (2) its risk of relativism considering it lacks underlying principles for guiding the cultivation of ethical habits. The first shortcoming is immediately resolved by introducing a feminist ethics of care. While Dewey’s use of male pronouns is unfortunate, his shared ontological position with the feminist tradition helps maintain the validity of his claims. That is to say, while Dewey’s work is held back by his use of male pronouns, the conclusions he draws are not limited to male individuals. Just as feminist care ethics is both accessible and important to masculine individuals, so too is Dewey work accessible and important to feminine individuals. The largest takeaway is that care, habits, and ethical social engagement are practices that apply to *everyone*, regardless of any biological, political, or social orientation.

The second shortcoming of Dewey’s work is more significant and deserves more attention. If we accept that adopting principles for guiding deliberation and action would benefit Dewey’s project and help overcome the risk of relativism, we are left to ask: what sort of principles are worthy of adopting? If we were to ask Dewey this question, he would likely answer that those principles worth maintaining and cultivating are those that line up with the

---

<sup>75</sup> Leffers, *Pragmatists Jane Addams and John Dewey Inform the Ethic of Care*, 75.

<sup>76</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 144.

ideal of ‘conscientiousness.’ At this point, it is simple to see that Dewey’s ideal of conscientiousness shares similar themes of reciprocity, sensitivity, and generosity with the feminist care tradition. In other words, the practice of intelligent care is almost directly in line with the ideal of conscientiousness of Dewey. Therefore, we can conclude that if we are to supplement Dewey’s work with underlying values, it follows that these values can be derived from the field of feminist care ethics since it shares similar ontological and moral themes with Dewey. This is all to say, while Dewey’s process of moral deliberation and the cultivation of habits are well-detailed and crucial to understanding how we navigate this necessarily ethical world, these processes must be guided by an underlying principle of care that both informs intelligent deliberation and guides considerate action. The field of feminist care ethics can support Dewey’s work from below by providing a clear framework of values that are flexible to changing circumstances and considerate of the individual’s social ontological foundation. Understating how the two philosophies can function together, we’ll now provide more detail regarding what sort of ethical agent this synthesis produces.

Our present discussion is aided by what Maurice Hamington distinguishes as the three interrelated aspects of embodied care: (1) caring knowledge (2) caring imagination and (3) caring habits.<sup>77</sup> Caring knowledge describes the extent of knowledge an individual has about the person for whom they are caring and the given situation. For instance, a father who stays at home with a newborn child will develop extensive knowledge of the child and will often know the unique intricacies of how to care for this specific being. Further, caring knowledge describes one’s ability to consider these various webs of knowledge in the process of moral deliberation. Hamington describes this process as embodied as the body being able to pick up on “the

---

<sup>77</sup> Hamington, *Embodied Care*, 4.

subtleties of emotions communicated outside explicit language,”<sup>78</sup> subtleties that are more easily recognized by those possessing caring knowledge for that particular being. Caring imagination can be largely correlated to Dewey’s process of moral deliberation and demonstrates how care as an underlying value can inform and shape deliberation in novel environments. Our caring imagination develops out of caring habits, which Hamington describes as the embodied practice of cultivating those habits which encourage and enact activities of care in our daily lives. Just as Dewey sees habits as constitutive of our character, so too does Hamington and a feminist ethics of care recognize habits as an embodied activity that can be shaped and directed towards idealized ends. What we get from these three dimensions of embodied care is a more complex and considerate understanding of Dewey’s project. Synthesizing Dewey’s project with a feminist ethics of care allows us to see moral deliberation, habits, and action as interconnected practices that if imbued with the values of care, expedite the path towards fostering Dewey’s ideal of ‘conscientiousness.’

Pappas helps us confirm the value of synthesizing Dewey with the feminist tradition, writing that “Dewey would welcome the emphasis of many feminists on sympathy, nurturance, and care.”<sup>79</sup> As we discussed earlier, Dewey’s project is by no means devoid of affective consideration. As Pappas continues, “the fuller, broader, and expansive development of the self is not the moral end but the consequence of emotional engagement in growing and enriching relationships...The kind of character that is interested in growth (and continuous readjustment) is one and the same with the one that is interested in the expansions and deepening of relationships.”<sup>80</sup> In his description of Dewey, Pappas does all the work of reading in a feminist

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>79</sup> Pappas, *Dewey and Feminism*, 84.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 87.

ethics of care. The kind of moral character that Dewey establishes as the ideal is guided not just by their own growth, but by the growth of their relationships with others and with the world. Grounding Dewey's moral philosophy in the values of feminist care ethics allows us to understand how we can cultivate ourselves to become not only better moral agents but more considerate and socially responsible individuals.

This synthesis is concisely summarized when McKenna, quoting Maurice Hamington in *Contemporary Feminist Pragmatism* (2012), writes the following:

On the most basic level, pragmatism values the primacy of practice, the importance of experience, and the acceptance of fallibilism. Similarly, feminism views women's lives as important sites of knowledge, and seeks to transform society toward social justice. The mixing of these two traditions generates a more robust framework that can creatively address the intimate connections between theory and practice.<sup>81</sup>

Dewey's pragmatism indeed places practice at the heart of ethical activity and joining it with a feminist ethics of care provides us with a moral system that is considerate of our social ontology, imaginative in its consideration of avenues of action, and embodied to the values of care.

Together, and *only* together, do we arrive at an understanding of morality that both focuses on the individual's continual cultivation of moral imagination *and* recognizes care as a thematically universal principle that ought to shape deliberation and action. At this point, we can finally turn to our conclusion, in which we will highlight how this particularly powerful synthesis provides us with a new angle for understanding our relation to responsibility.

---

<sup>81</sup> McKenna & Pratt, *American Philosophy: From Wounded Knee to the Present*, 306.

## Conclusion: Towards a Shared Moral Future

These two facts, that moral judgment and moral responsibility are the work wrought in us by the social environment, signifies that all morality is social; not because we *ought* to take into account the effect of our acts upon the welfare of others, but because of facts. Others *do* take account of what we do, and they respond accordingly to our acts. Their responses actually *do* affect the meaning of what we do. The significance thus contributed is as inevitable as is the effect of interaction with the physical environment...Our conduct *is* socially conditioned whether we perceive the fact or not.<sup>82</sup>

*Morality is Social.* The entire project up until this point has been focused on challenging the traditionally isolated and masculine notion of the individual, and instead demonstrating how synthesizing Dewey's moral philosophy with a feminist ethics of care provides us with a more robust understanding of the individual and their moral relationship to the world. The conclusion therein is that *morality is social*. We cannot conceive the question of ethics outside of our social engagement because humans do not exist in isolation from one another. The ontological reorientation helped us realize that understanding the individual as a pre-political, masculine, and rational agent is simply not representative of our *actual* condition. Instead, we are social beings who, from before birth and following death, are deeply interwoven in a social community that requires extensive care to be preserved.

With this conclusion in mind, we can understand ourselves as responsible in two interconnected ways: (1) we are responsible to cultivate the most knowledgeable, imaginative, intelligent, caring, and active versions of our self and (2) we are responsible to apply our cultivated selves towards caring for the world we live in, because all morality is social. The first dimension of responsibility is achieved directly through the synthesis of Deweyan morals with the field of feminist ethics. As Dewey writes, "[we] cannot escape the problem of *how* to engage

---

<sup>82</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 217.

in life, since in any case [we] must engage in it in some way or other.”<sup>83</sup> The process of moral deliberation and action is so incredibly fundamental to our human existence that we have no choice but to engage in it. The real question, as Dewey points out, is not whether or not we want to engage, but *how* we want to engage. This question is answered through the introduction of feminist care ethics, which—as Dewey would agree with—informs us that we must engage by cultivating habits that are considerate of our social ontology and allow us to best embody caring activity. We engage because we must, but we *choose* the method of our engagement to be one that conditions us to be thoughtful, considerate, imaginative, active, intelligent, sincere, and most of all, *caring*.

The second dimension of our responsibility rests in our responsibility to that outside of the self. As we have shown repeatedly throughout this paper, morality is social. Our individuality, while certainly important to ethical action, only develops out of a more primary social belonging. Therefore, to discuss moral questions first demands a return to our social ontology, simply because we don’t live in isolation from each other. As individuals, therefore, we have a responsibility to cultivate those habits and dispositions that best prepare us to support our communities; that is, we have a responsibility to cultivate habits of *care* and to enact those practices out in the world. We are responsible not just for ourselves, but for the impact we have on the world—we have shown that this conclusion is ontologically unavoidable. Our responsibility both to ourselves and to the world outside us comes down to cultivating, in the Dewian sense, those habits and practices which make us more open to the activity of care. Further, through caring for the world around us we are simultaneously caring for ourselves

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 58.

insofar as we are working to improve an environment that is always already impacting and shaping us.

Responsibility, as it concerns us as moral agents, can therefore be summarized as a *responsibility to care, both for ourselves and for the world in which we live*. We have a responsibility to both ourselves and our community to develop those habits of care which lead us to become conscientious participants in an ever-changing world. The social and political implications of such a responsibility are countless. Every decision, every moment, becomes an opportunity to shape both ourselves and the world around us. By adopting, expanding, and embodying caring activity, we can all improve ourselves and our communities. On this note, Dewey provides us with a final and poignant remark:

The thing actually at stake in any serious deliberation is not a difference of quantity, but what kind of person one is to become, what sort of self is in the making...Our minor decisions differ in acuteness and range, but not in principle. Our world does not so obviously hang upon any one of them; but put together they make the world what it is in meaning for each one of us.<sup>84</sup>

Every decision, no matter how minor it may appear, plays a significant role in constituting the self and our world. It is our responsibility to be attentive to each of these moments and to keep in mind the questions: *what kind of person do we want to become, and what kind of world do we want to create?* If nothing else, I urge you to ask yourself these questions and to consider that by adopting a feminist care approach to Dewey's moral philosophy, you might change both yourself and the world for the better, one moment at a time.

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 150.

“And people in their Sunday best  
Stroll about, swaying over the gravel  
Under this enormous sky  
Which, from hills in the distance,  
Stretches to distant hills.”<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>85</sup> Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 9.

## Bibliography

- Arendt, Hannah. "What is Freedom?" In *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, 143-171. New York: The Viking Press, 1961.
- Berlin, Isaiah. "Two Concepts of Liberty." In *Four Essays on Liberty*, 118-172. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Buchanan, Allen E. "Assessing the Communitarian Critique of Liberalism." *Ethics* 99, no. 4 (July 1989): 852-882.
- Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.
- Dewey, John. *Human Nature and Conduct*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008.
- Dewey, John. *Individualism Old and New*. New York: Prometheus, 1999.
- Dewey, John. *Liberalism and Social Action*. New York: Prometheus, 1999.
- Hamington, Maurice. *Embodied Care: Jane Addams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Feminist Ethics*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- Hildebrand, David. "John Dewey's Political Philosophy." In *A Brief Account of John Dewey's Ethics, Political Theory, and Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics*. Colorado: University of Colorado Denver, 2018.
- Hobbes, Thomas. "XIII: Of the Natural Condition of Mankind as Concerning their Felicity and Misery." In *Leviathan*. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968.
- Kafka, Franz. "Description of a Struggle." In *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories*. New York City: Schocken Books, 1995.
- Kant, Immanuel. "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'" Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994.
- Kittay, Eva Feder. *Love's Labor*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Leffers, M. Regina. "Pragmatists Jane Addams and John Dewey Inform the Ethic of Care." *Hypatia* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 64-77.
- Locke, John. "Chapter 2: Of the State of Nature." In *Second Treatise of Government*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980.
- Marx, Karl. "On the Jewish Question." *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C Tucker, 2nd ed., 26-53. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978.

- McKenna, Erin, and Scott L. Pratt. "Feminist Philosophy and Practice." In *American Philosophy: From Wounded Knee to the Present*, 297-310. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Nozick, Robert. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books, 2013.
- Pappas, Gregory Fernando. "Dewey and Feminism: The Affective and Relationships in Dewey's Ethics." *Hypatia* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 78-95.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract*. Harlow: Penguin Books, 2004.
- Sumner, William Graham. "The Forgotten Man [1883]." In *The Forgotten Man: And Other*
- Turner, Frederick Jackson. "The Significance of the Frontier of American History (1893)." Accessed March 31, 2022. [https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/the-significance-of-the-frontier-in-american-history-\(1893\)](https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/the-significance-of-the-frontier-in-american-history-(1893))
- Wokler, Robert. *Rousseau: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.