

Review of Perspectives on Equality: Constructing a Relational Theory by Christine M. Koggel (U.S.A.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998)

Professor Koggel advocates a “relational” approach to political philosophy, which emphasizes the interdependence of human beings, the importance of dialogue, and the value of listening to disenfranchised voices. Here I shall provide an overview of her book, paying special attention to her critique of Rawls and to the positive theory she sketches.

Chapter 1 is introductory. In Chapter 2, the author argues that relationships underlie equality discourse. Often by “relationships” Koggel means “human relationships,” but here the term is used more broadly. The judgment that I am treating you “unequally,” she thinks, must relate to some implicit standard. (2) Employing Wittgenstein's method, she imagines a simple language game in which a group of builders believe that women, by definition, cannot be builders, thus illustrating her point that “the activity of classifying people . . . defines and circumscribes the activities and roles understood as appropriate for people identified as members of that category.” (41) On Koggel's “dynamic realism,” “categories are real in the sense that they describe real features of people, but also in the sense that they are created in factual moral and political contexts with concrete social practices that give significance to those features.” (47)

In Chapter 3, Koggel embraces the liberal principle that individuals should be treated with equal concern and respect. Why should we embrace that principle? “At the base of what makes us equal,” she says, “is a conception of moral personhood as an ongoing process of engagement with others in a network of relationships shaped by social

practices and political contexts.” (242) Thus, the basis for moral equality “is not any particular quality or qualities of a person's life, but takes shape in the whole network of activity and relationships within which people live.” (64) All this is left rather vague. One wonders why equal concern and respect would extend to hermits, on her view, as well as to those who have been forcibly isolated from others. Discussing matters like these would have helped clarify her position.

In Chapter 4, Koggel uses relational and Marxist insights against Nozick's libertarianism. At times, however, Koggel does Nozick insufficient justice. “Social practices and political contexts shape people's lives in ways that determine life prospects and levels of freedom,” she says. “Such an analysis goes a long way toward demonstrating the inadequacy of the Nozickean account of individuals who . . . are best able to flourish when there is no state interference in their lives.” (4-5) But Nozick's theory concerns individual rights, not the conditions under which individuals can best flourish. Koggel also says, “even if Nozick is granted his point about the importance of voluntary choices, voluntary choices do not guarantee fair or just outcomes . . .” (80) But Nozick is not interested in guaranteeing fair or just outcomes; he rejects ahistorical “end-state” principles in favor of the theory of just acquisitions. Nevertheless, even if Koggel hasn't refuted Nozick's theory, she is certainly correct in saying that “Rather than begin with 'the fact that there are distinct individuals, each with his own life *to lead*' (Nozick 1974, 34, his emphasis), we could just as easily use people's sense of community and cooperativeness as a starting point for theorizing about conditions for treating persons with equal concern and respect.” (84)

In Chapter 5, Koggel develops her view through a critique of Rawls. Following Okin, she charges Rawls with assuming the moral viewpoint of a “well-off, able-bodied male” in thinking about justice. (113) Koggel also thinks Rawls assumes the viewpoint of the rich. Following Cohen, she attacks Rawls' incentive argument, which justifies some economic inequalities on the grounds that the talented will better use their skills—thus benefiting the worst-off—if they can profit from doing so. “At the bottom of the incentive argument,” says Koggel, “is the threat that the well off will not produce if the unequalizing incentives are withdrawn.” (119) But, arguably, at the bottom of the incentive argument is a fact about human nature: people will work harder given economic incentives. Since people in the original position know general facts about human psychology and economics, they would know that fact, if it is one.

Koggel rejects Rawls' method of reasoning behind a veil of ignorance, saying that “we need people with all their encumbrances and in all their embeddedness in social and political contexts engaged in critical thinking about difference and perspectives to know what equality is and requires.” (5) We also need people who are empathetic. “Treating all people with equal concern and respect requires empathy of a kind gained from dialogue, a communicative approach that can give us knowledge of the particularities of how people understand and live their lives.” (103) In particular, we need to know “about the details and experiences of the lives of those who exist in oppressive and unequal relationships; information that contact, dialogue, interaction, imagination, and empathy can uncover and reveal.” (108)

Although Koggel rejects the veil of ignorance, she says she wants to retain the methodological device of the original position. (113) However, I wonder whether some

ignorance is essential to the original position. “The ingenuity of the original position,” Koggel says, “lies in the simple but powerful idea that moral principles derive their force not from some a priori reasoning removed from experience and the contingencies of the world, but from critical moral reasoning about and in the world we live in.” (113) But the original position, as Rawls understands it, abstracts away from *many* contingencies of the world. Moreover, Rawls is hardly alone in thinking that we should select our moral principles by a posteriori critical reasoning; that thesis is no argument for the original position.

Koggel imagines an original position in which there is “communication among multiple kinds of people about the inequalities generated by particular social practices and in specific political contexts.” (114) She says that the original position “needs to contain experiences of the widest possible variety of people . . .” (114) This stipulation implies that *everyone* would be included in the original position, thus making the thought experiment unwieldy. However, Koggel denies that everyone would be included in her original position. (115) This conception of the original position, she says, generates a second principle, in addition to the principle that individuals should be treated with equal concern and respect. This is the principle of “respect for human diversity and ways of being,” according to which “we ought to treat each other as concrete human beings whose capacity for self-definition is shaped by relationships and expresses ways of being and modes of human interaction that ought to be respected.” (106-107) Koggel leaves these two principles vague. One way to clarify them would have been to consider such questions as, “Should all tolerant ways of life be respected? Do criminals and pigs deserve equal concern and respect? Should intolerant speech be censored?” The policies

that would emerge from the original position, she says, “would not and could not be fixed for all time or for all contexts (even for particular contexts) but would be continually open to dialogue, up for negotiation, in need of justification, and subject to change.”

(121)

In Chapter 6, Koggel further elucidates the notion of the self employed in her theory. “A relational conception of the self as situated in a network of complex and ever-changing relationships,” she says, “provides a richer account of moral agents and agency than is evident in either liberal theory or care ethics.” (8) Koggel's abstract discussions of “the self” are often cast in terms of “ontological questions about personhood.” (6)

This sometimes obscures the real issue: the issue of which personhood-concept does the best work in normative political theory. To be fair, I should add that the author is hardly alone in framing the questions this way. While Koggel applauds the notion of a care ethic, she thinks that “we need to develop an ethic of care that is distinct from *concern* or *feeling responsible* for others.” (156) Here Gilligan is one of her targets. “Care,” she says, “is more appropriately described as an 'orientation to other,' a perspective that emerges in structures of power when those who are oppressed are forced to situate themselves in relation to their oppression.” (158) Care, on her view, is closer to justice than to sympathy.

In Chapter 7, Koggel discusses Minow's “dilemma of difference.” The dilemma arises for those who are different and oppressed: “either they assert their similarity to those in power and demand equal treatment, or they claim their difference from those in power, request special treatment, and risk being further stigmatized and disadvantaged.” (9) Koggel thinks that, once the moral situation is properly conceived, the dilemma

doesn't arise (9, 196), but I didn't follow her argument at this point.¹ (170-172) Chapter 8, the book's final chapter, defends and explores affirmative action. "Affirmative action," she says, "legitimizes inclusion of the different into current structures of influence and power, enables the questioning and reshaping of oppressive structures, and makes it possible for the powerful to respect the less powerful." (237)

In general, the book is nicely written and easy to read, if a bit repetitive. Koggel manages to discuss an interesting variety of issues, but I would also say that her sources are too limited to feminist political philosophy.² Much work outside that tradition could have been brought to bear on her questions. For example, she often refers to the oppression of minorities but says little about the history of sexist oppression or its current realities; she does not borrow from labeling theory in sociology, despite many references to its subject-matter; her discussions of moral psychology are mostly limited to references to Gilligan; and her discussions of the social aspects of meaning lacks references to recent pragmatic work in the philosophy of language.

¹ In correspondence, the author says that her dissolution of the difference dilemma "is less a matter of 'once the moral situation is properly conceived, the dilemma doesn't arise' than that once we understand the norms shaping the logic of judgments of same and different treatment, we move outside a framework that makes difference a dilemma." I am still not sure how the dissolution goes. In particular, I am not sure what oppressed people are supposed to do, given that Koggel surely doesn't think that their oppressors are going to "move outside a framework that makes difference a dilemma."

² In correspondence, the author takes issue with the claim that her sources are too limited to feminist political philosophy: "that is not altogether true. I also use disability theory

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and critical race theory.” Point taken. Let me say that I am using “feminist political philosophy” widely enough to include all these.