

Abstractions Can't Be Good But They Can Be Dangerous

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In Barbara Applebaum's thought provoking paper she poses an intriguing question: Does caring have intrinsic value? She also offers us some interesting reasons for adopting the view that it does. My response can be stated simply: Barbara Applebaum may be right, and because she is right we should reject her thesis.

As I read it, there are two parts to her essay. In part one she argues that in *rejecting* the thesis that caring has intrinsic value we run certain undesirable risks, while *adoption* of her thesis allows for two big payoffs, namely (1) a better understanding of some of the dynamics of gender oppression and (2) a reduction of resistance to its recognition. In part two of her essay, Applebaum explicates the notion of intrinsic value which she thinks makes sense of the claim that caring is inherently good.

Similarly, my response has two parts. First, I argue that Applebaum gets herself caught in some false dichotomies which make the intrinsic value hypothesis appear more compelling than it is. Second, I consider just one of her arguments for accepting the intrinsic value hypothesis and I propose that we should reject the claim that caring has intrinsic value for precisely the reason she herself advances for acknowledging it.

Throughout part one of her essay, Applebaum marshals reasons why it would be a mistake to *reject* the thesis that caring has intrinsic value. All her reasons seem to me to rest on the dubious assumption that either caring has intrinsic value or it has no value. But these, I submit, are not the only alternatives available.

A quick and easy way to see that we are not limited to these alternatives is to consider the case of money. Now here is something that we say has value. We also warn of dangers associated with its use. We criticize specific uses of money, indeed we sometimes assert that specific money has no value, as we do when we declare it counterfeit, ill gotten, or a bribe. However, despite the rejection of certain dangers we do see that money retains value, and *not* intrinsic value.

Other alternatives? Well, we might claim that some specific acts of caring or particular caring relations have moral value, while some do not. But I suspect it is her uneasiness with this alternative that prompted Applebaum to investigate the sense that might be made of the claim that caring is inherently good. So I turn now to her other arguments.

Applebaum gives three positive reasons for acknowledging that caring has intrinsic value. It will: (1) help us explain how women may implicate themselves in their own oppression; (2) assist us in distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate caring; and (3) reduce the resistance to acknowledging dominance. I am not persuaded of this last reason, but I lack the space here to enter that discussion. Instead I will focus on her first two claims .

In order to assess the claim that acknowledgment of caring's inherent value may explain (in part) why we women are sometimes implicated in our own oppression we first need to clarify an ambiguity and have some specific examples. In explicating the ambiguity let me introduce what I take to be some instances of women implicating themselves in their own oppression.

Concerning the ambiguity, when Applebaum says that caring is inherently good, we need to know what exactly it is that "caring" refers to. Does it refer to individual *acts* of caring? For example, a mother, believing this is the best way to care for her daughter who has complained of peer sexual harassment, counsels her to not dress so provocatively and to not go where the boys are. Or, does it refer to particular caring *relations*, for example, a woman who remains in a caring relation, primarily as the one-caring, with an abusive husband. Applebaum does not say which of these interpretations she has in mind and so I propose, I think not unreasonably, to have it mean both.

Now we are ready for our questions: Does accepting the intrinsic value hypothesis help us to explain these sorts of examples of implication in one's oppression? And if so, what follows?

To see how such an explanation is possible we need to understand what it means to say caring has intrinsic value. If I understand her correctly, Applebaum claims it means that (1) part of the meaning of caring is that it is valuable; (2) caring's value is conditional, it can be overridden; and (3) caring retains moral goodness even when overridden, that is, caring acts which should not be done still have value; caring relations which should not be maintained still have value.

It is the third claim postulating a sort of value residue that causes problems. Why? How? The answers are best revealed in considering Applebaum's own example. I do not know if the example of promising to kill an innocent victim is Ross's example or not, but the choice is a useful one in helping us to see how empty and dangerous it is to say that promise keeping is a *prima facie* good. From Applebaum's explication of her example, "promise keeping is a *prima facie* good" implies, "Keeping a promise to kill an innocent person is good even though it is something I should not do." She says, "the *prima facie* goodness of keeping promises is not compromised on the grounds that there are some situations in which, all things considered, the keeping of a promise is not the right thing to do."

I wonder, under what description is promise keeping a *prima facie* duty? If the answer is, under the description "keeping a promise to murder an innocent person," then it seems to me obvious that we do not have a duty to keep this promise, and that there is no inherent goodness in keeping this promise. On the other hand if we say, well, no, it is simply under the description of "promise keeping" that we can say promise keeping is a *prima facie* duty, and has inherent goodness, can we then not see by Applebaum's example, that such a claim is at the least peculiar and at the worst obviously false. It is peculiar because on this interpretation promise keeping is an abstraction, and to say it has inherent goodness makes no sense. There are no such abstract acts called "promise keeping," there are only specific acts of promise keeping, the keeping of this or that particular promise.

Similarly with caring. To claim that caring has inherent goodness goes no distance in helping us figure out whether or not a particular act is caring, or morally appropriate caring. Nor does it help us to determine who should care for whom when. Yet these are exactly the sorts of questions we need to answer if we are to recognize and eschew the actions or relations which implicate us in our own oppression. In short, to postulate an inherent goodness of this sort can be both misleading and dangerous. It could mislead a woman to think there is some moral weight on the side of caring in circumstances in which she would endanger her physical or ethical self. There may be moral weight to *someone else* caring for the abusive husband, but not for the wife.

We can now see that Barbara Applebaum is right about the explanatory power of the intrinsic value hypothesis. But what follows from this recognition? Well, not what Applebaum thinks. Central to my argument is the recognition that in order to explain how women are sometimes implicated in their own oppression we do not have to accept that caring *has* intrinsic value, we only have to accept that women *believe* this is so. And, far from this being a reason to accept the idea, it is, I should think, a reason for dissuading those women who might hold it.

Is there an alternative way to view these matters? Yes. I think we can usefully shift our focus from the question, "Does caring have intrinsic value?" to inquiry about our specific valuing. One implication of my rather paradoxical disagreement with Barbara Applebaum's thesis is this: I am willing to bet that Barbara Applebaum and I do not at all differ on our valuing of specific acts of caring and particular caring relations.