



# Caring for democracy

Comparing Tronto and Biesta on the freedom and responsibility  
of the democratic citizen

Joris de Jong

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# Caring for democracy: Comparing Tronto and Biesta on the freedom and responsibility of the democratic citizen

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University of Humanistic Studies (UVH)

Author: Joris de Jong

Date: 23-06-2023

Student number: 1038877

First reader: Isolde de Groot

Second reader: Pieter van Rees

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## Abstract

Freedom is an inherent quality of democratic politics. I discuss three interpretations of freedom, namely; rights-based freedom, the freedom to act politically and freedom as care. In their concepts of caring democracy and subjectification respectively, Joan Tronto and Gert Biesta both hold a notion of responsibility within democratic citizenship. This thesis explores how their notions of caring democracy and subjectification relate to debates on freedom and responsibility within democracy, and whether the two authors are compatible in their vision of democratic citizenship. In his theory of subjectification, Biesta values the freedom to think critically about democracy and to dis-identify with the existing political order. Tronto sees freedom in the voicing of one's needs and the freedom to care. Biesta and Tronto agree on the notion that freedom in a democracy is constituted through the ongoing practices of freedom. In regard to responsibility, Tronto argues that citizenship requires taking responsibility for care, and distributing these care responsibilities fairly within society should be a main topic of concern for democratic politics. To Biesta, citizenship involves acting politically as opposed to merely taking on the identity or being socialized as a citizen. Both Tronto and Biesta see room to improve democracy through moral and political evaluation of citizenship. Both recognise the dimension of responsibility within democratic citizenship towards democracy as a project and way of organizing society. Biesta and Tronto both see a responsibility in caring for democracy and a commitment towards the democratic values of equality, freedom and justice. To care for democracy means active citizenship and participation within the public sphere and concerning oneself with the public good, which for Tronto, involves the fair distribution of care responsibilities.

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## Preface

Over the course of the Master Citizenship, Professionalism and Civil Society I have learned a lot about the challenges that lie within citizenship and democracy. Developing an interest in care ethics opened doors to viewing things differently, both in terms of my personal life and my outlook on society. Viewing society through a lens of care means developing awareness towards people's needs and preferences as well as our interconnectedness and interdependency. It also helps in understanding society as socially constructed and therefore changeable. As so much of our behavior is guided by social norms that have developed historically and appear to be the natural way of doing things, sometimes it feels to me like we are stuck in ways that do not serve our best interest any longer. This goes to show that change does not happen automatically, and at the same time is ever achievable. However, positive societal or cultural change does not happen by cohering to outdated norms. As times change, new issues and challenges for democracy arise. At the same time, our needs and habits change, our outlook on life changes, our values change - and our priorities should change. To deal with issues such as climate change and a number of social issues such as poverty, inequality, loneliness, social segregation and radicalisation we need to become more appreciative towards the value of care in our lives and in society. We, as citizens, need to somehow renegotiate care in a manner that suits the way we want to live; to shape a society where care is not a burden but a responsibility that gives meaning to our lives.

Still, the role of the citizen remains difficult to grasp and imagine in a way that is not paternalistic, forceful and in opposition to the freedom that we value so much. Envisioning a form of citizenship that incorporates care requires us to think differently about both freedom and responsibility. As, at times, it seems that we value individual freedom over any other values, this is a hot topic to address. As I will explain in this thesis, the care ethical take on this is that the notion of individual freedom and personal responsibility is based on an assumption about human nature as atomist while care ethics regard humans as relational beings who are inherently vulnerable and dependent on each other and their environment. Citizenship and democracy are contested. Yet, how do we approach the question of what kind of citizen democracy requires?

Where do we draw the line between freedom and responsibility? As it turned out, my understanding of freedom and responsibility changed by writing this thesis. An often heard sentiment is that social cohesion in modern society is diminishing and that people are increasingly showing anti-social behavior. It makes you wonder how the social fabric of society is changing, and what direction modern democratic citizenship is taking.

Writing about freedom and responsibility has proved to be challenging due to the complexity and scope of the topic. I hope that I have given the reader enough guidance in understanding the complexities of freedom and responsibility in the context of democratic citizenship. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude towards those who have aided me in writing my thesis; my supervisor and readers, my fellow students for their feedback and my friends with whom I have had the pleasure of discussing the topics and challenges of this thesis.

# Introduction

## Deficits of care and democracy

As of 2023, Dutch society is facing multiple structural problems that relate to both democracy and care. Dutch democracy is faced with scandals relating to public administration, such as faulty and discriminatory social benefits systems which left tens of thousands of citizens in debt and poverty. Furthermore, as a result of the austerity measures and privatization over the last two decades, the healthcare sector suffers from waiting lists in youth care and psychiatric care as well as shortages of healthcare workers. Even though healthcare in the Netherlands is of high quality, the sector is under increasing pressure and in danger of becoming unaffordable and unequally accessible (Zorginstituut Nederland, 2022). In a broader sense, both government and market are increasingly failing to provide basic services and products, such as the shortage of affordable housing - a constitutional right within Dutch democracy. Professionals in education and healthcare are overloaded by the demand and increasing bureaucracy. Furthermore, there is an environmental crisis as the quality and diversity of nature in the Netherlands has been decreasing rapidly over the last decades (CLO, 2023).

The issues Dutch democracy faces can be interpreted as a state failing to deliver the desired level of care to its citizens. In a democracy, however, the argument can be made that citizens are responsible for their government, and by this logic, responsible for the way society is organized. Are the failings of a government to be attributed to its citizens? A counter argument can be given that a perfect democracy does not exist, and the notion of rule by the people is unrealistic or naive as it does not take into account the way power is situated in society nor does it take into account inequality between citizens. It all boils down to the question of who is responsible for this multitude of problems and who is responsible for solving them?

Dealing with the above mentioned issues has posed a challenge for Dutch democracy. Recent polls suggest that trust in political institutions is at its lowest point in 10 years, with only 30% of people trusting the House of Representatives and less than 25% trusting politicians in

general (CBS, 2023). Combining this with increasing protests by rightwing and leftwing activists, farmers and other groups in society, it seems many people in Dutch society feel unheard and uncared for, their needs and wishes not satisfied. Another trend is visible in the government increasingly emphasizing the self-reliance of citizens and moving away from the social-democratic model which characterized Dutch politics in the 1970's towards a neoliberal model of austerity, deregulation and market-led economics (Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013). The welfare state is on the retreat and citizens are required to 'participate' in order to receive social benefits (as is the idea of the '*participatiesamenleving*' or participation society) (Snel, Custers & Engbersen, 2018). In light of these trends, the question of how to assign responsibility in terms of care on a collective level is becoming an increasingly relevant one.

The socio-political situation in the Netherlands shows similarities to the analysis of American society by Joan Tronto in which she recognises both a *deficit of democracy* and a *deficit of care*. Tronto argues that decades of neoliberal policies "have made caring more difficult" (2017, p. 27). She sees care and democracy are intrinsically linked; the one being conditional to the other. Her assessment is that current democratic practices fall short, as do practices of care. Reviewing Tronto's book 'Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality and Justice' (2013), Tamara Metz aptly summarizes that: "[To Tronto] care [...] is at the heart of both our democratic deficit and our democratic potential" (2015). To Tronto, the solution to many of society's problems is to be found in strengthening and improving democratic and care practices and striving for, what she calls, both *caring democracy* and *democratic caring* (2013).

## Caring democracy and subjectification

This thesis revolves around two main concepts: Tronto's concept of caring democracy, and Gert Biesta's notion of democratic subjectification. Democracy is multifaceted - it can be regarded as a culture (de Groot & Eidhof, 2019), a system, an ideology (Bellamy, 2008), a morality (Gregory, 2000) and as an unfinished political project and experiment (De Groot & Lo, 2021; Biesta, 2011). Biesta, Maria De Bie, and Danny Wildemeersch see democracy as a "way of conducting our



common affairs with reference to the values of equality, freedom and solidarity” (2014, p. xiii). Democracy is often associated with liberalism. To Yascha Mounk, liberal democracy is “simply a political system that is both liberal and democratic - one that both protects individual rights and translates popular views into public policy” (2018, p. 27). Democracy itself is contested, and so is the meaning of citizenship (De Groot & Lo, 2021, p. 213; Biesta, 2011). As the meaning and organization of democracy is not fixed, the question as to what constitutes democratic citizenship - and what it *should* constitute - remains open for debate. Citizenship is historically seen as membership of a political community and presumes a kind of participation within that community (Bellamy, 2008, p. 1). However, Richard Bellamy notes that: “over time, the nature of the democratic political community and the qualities needed to be a citizen has changed” (2008, p. 2). As to the contested nature of democracy, the questions of what a truly democratic society looks like, what is necessary to achieve it, and what exactly the role of the citizen within democracy is, are open for debate and deliberation.

Biesta’s theory of *subjectification* relates to the ‘becoming’ of the democratic citizen (2011). As democratic skills can be learned and unlearned through democratic education and democratic experiences, becoming and being a democratic citizen is not a given nor does it occur naturally (De Groot & Lo, 2021, p. 213). This brings Biesta to focus on the question of how democratic subjectivity comes into being - what does it entail to be a democratic being? (2011). He seeks an answer to the question of what constitutes a ‘democratic person’, or specifically: “[what] kind of subjectivity [...] is considered to be desirable or necessary for a democratic society [?]” (2007, p. 741). Biesta explains that:

“[It is] only when subjectification enters the scene that we are in the domain of education, whereas when there is [not] a place for subjectification, we are in the domain of training[.] [That is] something we do to others, thus approaching them as things or objects, not with them, which would be approaching them as subjects” (2020, p. 102).

In general terms, Biesta argues that: “the democratic subject [...] is the one who is driven by a desire for democracy or, to be more precise, a desire for engagement with the ongoing experiment of democratic existence” (2011, p. 151).

In her notion of caring democracy, Tronto emphasizes the interrelatedness between responsibility, care and democracy. Although care has many meanings, for Tronto it: “expresses an action or a disposition, a reaching out to something” (2013, p. ix). If we would place care at the center of our politics, she argues, society would be a better place. In her assessment of our current democratic practices, Tronto finds that: “our social, economic and political institutions no longer fit with our modes of caring and need to be revolutionized” (2013, p. 13). She aims for an improvement of democracy and the just allocation of care responsibilities within society which, in turn, would strengthen democracy. This involves changing our views on care, equality and responsibility. Tronto envisions a form of democratic citizenship which places questions of care - who cares for who and who takes responsibility - at the locus of democratic politics.

## Problem definition and research question

Building on an ethic of care, Tronto offers an assessment of society’s underappreciation of care and shows the interrelatedness of care and democracy. Biesta proposes a theory to better understand and value the importance of the individual formation of the citizen within democracy. In doing so, both argue for the need to morally and politically evaluate democratic citizenship. In their respective notions of care and democratic subjectivity, Tronto and Biesta both recognise a degree of *responsibility* for the democratic citizen. This responsibility relates to care for Tronto and the becoming of a democratic subject for Biesta - both notions that exist within the context of democratic society. However, the question that remains is: what can be asked of the citizen, or rather; what can we expect from the citizen in terms of responsibility? Does following Tronto’s and Biesta’s ideas on citizenship lead to a new conception of the balance between responsibility and freedom? Can we incorporate care as responsibility within citizenship while still adhering to the democratic values of freedom, equality and justice? This thesis is an attempt to explore

answers to these questions and add to the understanding of the work of Tronto and Biesta in light of the responsibility and freedom of the democratic citizen.

Freedom is often juxtaposed to responsibility and makes for an important element of democracy as well as a symbol of Western society. This is captured in an idealization of freedom as the highest value and practices such as voting and free speech. However, what freedom and responsibility entail and how they relate within the context of citizenship is a complicated matter which requires moving away from the idealized notion of freedom and looking at freedom in a more nuanced manner. Using the work of Tronto, Biesta and other academic literature, this thesis aims to shed light on the relationship between freedom and responsibility. To authors such as Hannah Arendt, freedom is an inherent quality of democratic politics, namely: the freedom to act as a political being. Biesta's notion of subjectification holds a similar notion of freedom as part of being a democratic citizen - the freedom to think critically about democracy and to dis-identify with the existing political order. In her conception of the caring democracy, Tronto sees freedom in the voicing of one's needs and the freedom to care. However, how do these notions of caring democracy and subjectification relate to debates on freedom and responsibility within democracy, and are the two authors compatible in their vision of the democratic citizen? This brings us to the following research question:

*Are Tronto's notion of Caring Democracy and Biesta's theory on subjectification within democratic citizenship compatible in their understanding of the freedom and responsibility of the democratic citizen?*

In order to answer this question, it will be divided in the following sub-questions:

1. How do Tronto's and Biesta's understanding of freedom, grounded in their conceptions of subjectification and caring democracy respectively, relate?
2. How do Tronto's and Biesta's understanding of responsibility, grounded in their conceptions of subjectification and caring democracy respectively, relate?

The aim of the research is to add to the understanding of the compatibility of care as a value in regards to the responsibility and freedom of the democratic citizen. I will do so by positioning the work of Biesta and Tronto within broader academic debates on responsibility and freedom within democratic citizenship and adding my interpretation of their arguments and assessments. I understand science as an interactive process in which knowledge is constructed collectively through scientific exchange such as literature but also through the interpretation and personal histories and values of the scientists that write these articles. Research is, in my opinion, the result of human practices and thus shaped by one's own values as a researcher.

As morality and democracy can be regarded as socially constructed and negotiated, any vision of the citizen which incorporates care - as proposed by Tronto - is also a product of our social and political idealism. Adding care to the responsibility of the citizen might - in theory - provide solutions to a multitude of societal problems that follow from the deficits of care and democracy. In order to do so, we have to start thinking differently about responsibility and freedom within citizenship. As questions of responsibility to care - for ourselves, each other and our planet - are increasingly important in light of different societal challenges, the societal and academic relevance of this thesis comes from the need to better understand questions concerning democratic citizenship. Even though this thesis aims to add to knowledge on an abstract level, best suited for academic purposes, my hopes are that this knowledge translates to the improvement of real democratic practices.

## Thesis structure

The structure of this thesis is as follows. In the first chapter, I will position the topics of this thesis within relevant theory. First of all, I will elaborate on morality in the context of democracy by building on relevant literature from philosophy and political and social sciences. Secondly, I will discuss the way care relates to democracy and how care ethics can be seen as political theory using literature on care ethics. Thirdly, I will argue that our view on human nature shapes our

views on citizenship and that this view is contested by different ideologies. Lastly, I will discuss the need to rethink democratic citizenship using arguments of Tronto and Biesta.

In the second chapter, I will provide an answer to the first sub-question, namely, how Tronto and Biesta understand the freedom of the democratic citizen in their work. In doing so I will discuss to which extent *rights-based freedom* is sufficient for Tronto and Biesta and placing this within the academic debate on the distinction between positive and negative freedom. Furthermore, I will discuss the notion of *freedom as a political act* in both Tronto's and Biesta's work. Thirdly, I will discuss *freedom as care* using insights from Tronto and Biesta.

In the third chapter, I will provide an answer to the second sub-question, namely, how Tronto and Biesta view the responsibility of the democratic citizen. I will start with discussing the relationship between responsibility and freedom. I will then proceed to address responsibility in the context of democracy and Tronto's ideas on assigning responsibility in a fair and democratic manner. I will then elaborate on the proposal of Tronto and other authors within care ethics to develop an ethics of responsibility. Lastly, I will discuss Biesta's and Tronto's ideas on responsibility for democracy.

In the fourth chapter, I will answer the main question of this thesis in a conclusion, combining the two sub-questions.

In the final chapter, I will critically assess my conclusions within the wider discussion on democratic citizenship and reflect on the limitations and possible implications of my research for further research.

## Chapter 1. Theoretical positioning of Tronto and Biesta within care ethics and democratic citizenship

In order to make an interpretation and comparison of Tronto's concept of caring democracy and Biesta's concept of subjectification, I will outline the relevant theoretical discussion in which their work can be placed. In this chapter I will delineate the interrelatedness of morality and democracy, and care and democracy. Furthermore, I will sketch the debate on the moral subject within democracy. In doing so, I will provide an overview of the relevant conceptual problems within debates on responsibility and freedom.

### Morality and democracy

“Only through moral practices - the expression, agreement, and collaboration about the meaning of morality in any community - does moral life take form”  
(Tronto, 2013, p. 53).

Tronto provides us with an initial direction when thinking about the moral dimension of democratic citizenship. To Tronto, morality - considerations on what is right and wrong - is a social construct. To her, it takes shape through negotiation (Tronto, 2013, p. 54). In that sense, the role of the citizen within democracy, and the ideal of democracy itself are political and contested notions. These notions contain different moral opinions concerning the way society should be organized, and how the individual within society ought to behave. Therefore, any discussion on freedom and responsibility of the democratic citizen is bound to be a discussion on *values*. The values that we consider to be part of democracy, such as freedom, equality, tolerance

and so on, are the result of negotiation. In that sense, renegotiation of the values that constitute democracy, starts with acknowledging values as part of the public sphere.

To Selma Sevenhuijsen morality should be regarded as “situated questions of responsibility and agency” (2000, p. 10). To her, care is both “a concrete activity [as well as an] ethics or a set of values that can guide human agency in a variety of social fields” (2000, p. 6). It entails both a “sense of caring about and for daily needs” and “a moral orientation” (2000, p. 6). Morality, in that regard, stems from the particularity of these relationships and situations of care. What is determined as ‘good’ is defined by the needs of people and their relationship with others involved. Sevenhuijsen give us an idea of the way morality is regarded in care ethics:

“The moral subject in the discourse of care always already lives in a network of relationships, in which s/he has to find balances between different forms of responsibility (for the self, for others and for the relationships between them)” (2000, p. 10).

Following the logic of care ethics, morality takes shape through the relationship with others and in that sense contains a dimension of responsibility. Responsibility is an inherent dimension of care; take care for something means to take responsibility for something. It requires taking into account the particularity and context of care needs in order to assess what is the right action. Questions of care can thus be considered of inherent moral nature.

Tronto emphasizes the need to understand morality as “an outcome of an *expressive-collaborative* process in which various moral actors come to agreement about an acceptable set of moral standards” (2013, p. 54). This view on morality “looks at moral life as a continuing negotiation among people” (Walker in Tronto, 2013, p. 54). Viewing morality in such a way makes it into a ‘real-time’ practice, in which it can be analyzed as a social phenomenon, inside the realm of politics and human relations. The link between morality, democracy and care thus lies in seeing morality as “a social negotiation in real time, where members of a community of roughly or largely shared moral beliefs try to refine understanding, extend consensus, and eliminate conflict



among themselves” (2013, p. 54). To Tronto, it is essential for a flourishing democracy that its citizens have an equal say in the negotiation of moral values as caring needs and preferences differ among people. She finds it important to “engage everyone in the process of expressing and collaborating to produce an account of moral life with which everyone can live” (2013, p. 55).

Ideally, the negotiation of values in a democratic society is done in an equal manner. However, authors such as Foucault (Dyrberg, 2016) and Bourdieu (Noordegraaf & Schinkel, 2011) make it clear that such negotiation does not occur on equal terms but is subject to the power relations and structures within society. In thinking about freedom and responsibility within democratic citizenship, it is important to note that the outcome of such negotiating is not necessarily a reflection of society in its diversity but more a reflection of the power relations within society. In order to become aware of such power relations there is a need to *historicize* ideas and practices so that the way in which these configurations came into existence can be understood and the power which maintains them can be challenged (Tronto, 2013, p. 108). In short, these practices and concepts have to be *politicized*, meaning; considered to be a topic for debate and deliberation in the public sphere.

## Care, democracy and the political

From the 1990s onwards, Tronto and authors such as Eva Feder Kittay, Virginia Held and Sevenhuijsen started developing “full-fledged political theories” from the foundation of care ethics in which they started to “consider it the collective responsibility of all citizens to ensure an equal voice for, and access to, giving and receiving care” (Dronkers, 2021). Care ethics aims to transform the perception of what is often considered personal (such as care) to the political. As Petr Urban and Lizzie Ward explain:

“An ethic of care centres around the responsibility for human relationships, builds moral judgement on concrete knowledge of a particular situation and context,

emphasises the priority of connection and starts from the insight that there is no contradiction in acting responsibly towards oneself and others” (2020, p. 7).

Including a political dimension in care ethics, the phase of *caring with* was added to the original four phases or dimensions of care (which are: caring about, caring for, taking care of and care receiving) (Sevenhuijsen, 2000, p. 12). Caring with, or the final phase of caring, reflects the political dimension of care as it “requires that caring needs and the ways in which they are met need to be consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality and freedom for all” (Brannelly, 2016, p. 307). This dimension of care is of most importance to this thesis as the concept of caring democracy evolves around incorporating care as a public value and placing care in the political sphere. Tula Brannelly finds that: “the ethics of care creates the space for the personal and political to be considered together for meaningful renewal and change” (2016, p. 312). Urban and Ward find that in Western political theory, “care was considered as a matter of private life that lies outside the scope of the questions concerning citizenship (2020, p. 13). A political theory of care, they argue, “places the considerations regarding care firmly in the public domain and incorporates care, vulnerability and interdependency into the concept of a ‘normal’ subject of politics” (2020, p. 13).

As morality is socially and politically negotiated, Urban and Ward see a need to revise existing concepts of citizenship, equality, justice and solidarity so that it includes the dimensions of care. To realize such change they echo Sevenhuijsen’s idea of the need to “[situate] the ethics of care in ideas and practices of democratic citizenship” (2020, p. 13). This includes working towards “connection-based equality” and “social justice as a matter of collective responsibility” (2020, p. 13). Caregiving and care-receiving should be seen as ‘primary social goods’ in which all citizens have the possibility to “to be cared for in a responsive dependency relation” and “to meet the dependency needs of others without incurring undue sacrifices oneself” (Kittay in Urban & Ward, 2020, p. 13).

To Sevenhuijsen, the dimension of ‘caring with’ stems from the insight that care and democracy are related. One such value to be renegotiated in the public sphere is care. In her analysis of care

in modern capitalist society, Tronto finds that care responsibilities are unequally distributed along lines of gender, race, class and nationality (2013, p.71; p. 47). Current arrangements of care in society are characterized by “injustice, unfairness, inequality, and lack of freedom” (2013, p. 9). To Tronto, the logic of the market dictates the way we value the role of care in our society (2013, p. 77). This logic does not do justice to the importance of care in society and the fact that every individual is dependent on care throughout their lives; whether it is in their upbringing, by receiving education and personal services or in the availability of consumer products for the maintenance of our body’s. Tronto formulates the problem of market logic when it comes to care as follows:

“To follow the logic of the market, or of policy, rather than to start from the logic of care itself, means that the basic questions about the nature and purposes of care never arise [...]; how should care happen in an inclusive democracy?” (2013, p. 9).

To her understanding the way care is organized within a democratic society should follow the democratic values such a society upholds and currently this organization is failing as it occurs in an unequal, unfair and flawed manner. Care as a value and as a practice is contested: what people consider good care practices differs due to different moral convictions and life experiences (2013, p. 107). The main problem, Tronto argues, lies in the fact that we as a society suffer from “entrenched patterns of thought [that script] care as a private matter” (2013, p. 143). Instead, we should see care as a public matter that concerns all of society. We ought to consider care a public value and consider care as a *right*, that is; the right to care and to receive care (Tronto, 2013, p. 153). The plurality and particularity inherent in care comes from the notion that people’s needs for care differ, and their perspective on care and the value they place upon it can vary. To Tronto, the process of determining needs within society requires a political space:

“No caring institution in a democratic society can function well without an explicit locus for the needs-interpretation struggle - that is, without a “rhetorical space”,

a “moral space”, or a political space within which this essential part of caring can occur” (2013, p. 163).

For Tronto, care itself contains the moral aspects of attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, solidarity and trust (2013, p. 161). In a sense, this focus on care makes us think differently about our values within democratic society. Equality as a democratic value, for example, might be difficult to maintain in situations of care as inequality in care relationships often occurs (2013, p. 107). Relationships of care often contain inequality, as is the nature of caring, care receiving and interdependency.

From the notion that morality is socially negotiated, organizing society in a democratic way requires that our values - and democracy itself - are open for deliberation in the public sphere. As noted earlier, our practices of care, freedom and democracy have developed over time following different ideals, morality and historical circumstances. However, it is through a lack of *historization* that these established and institutionalized practices are often treated as the natural way of things - as *a-political* or existing outside the realm of politics (Tronto, 2013). Criticizing this tendency, authors such as Arendt (in Keenan, 1994), Chantal Mouffe (in Biesta, 2011) and Jacques Ranciere (in Biesta, 2011), Biesta (2011) and Sevenhuijsen (2000) argue that the concepts and practices of care, freedom and democracy are fundamentally political and therefore to be considered contestable topics which should be subject to democratic deliberation. To Arendt, ‘the political’, which to her consists of ‘the possibilities of new beginnings,’ forms the foundation for freedom (in Keenan, 1994, p. 299). This foundation can be seen as “the freedom to call something into being that did not exist before” (in Keenan, 1994, p. 300). What Arendt calls ‘the death of freedom’, in that respect, is the absence of such possibility and ‘forgetting our freedom’ and ‘thoughtlessness’ are dangers to democracy (in Skogen, 2010, p. 39). In order to not succumb to such danger, we should be aware of our ‘habits of mind’ or our unquestioned assumptions about how things are and should be (Skogen, 2010, p. 39). Our freedom, in a political sense, then lies in questioning societal arrangements and renegotiating them if necessary.

Viewing our practices of care and democracy, and our concepts of freedom and responsibility, as political topics in the public sphere as opposed to a-political or residing in the private sphere is what is necessary to maintain and improve democratic control over the way society is organized. Striving for the ideals of equality and freedom is part of this.

## The moral subject and human nature

In order to explore how care can be part of citizenship, it is important to discuss the notion of human nature that underlies care ethics, and how it differs from (neo)liberal notions of human nature. As we will see, our notions of human nature are shaping our notions of democratic citizenship. Historically, a conception of 'the democratic person' came into being that stressed particular qualities such as rationality and independence (Biesta, 2007, p. 740). According to Biesta, this conception of the moral subject within democracy has shaped our ideas on what constitutes good citizenship education, namely; "the production of the democratic person" as "an isolated individual with a pre-defined set of knowledge, skills and dispositions" (2007, p. 740). This view presumes rationality as a prerequisite to citizenship, thus making it a goal of citizenship education. Contrasting this view is Biesta who states that: "in every fundamental sense there is nothing rational about democracy - [it] is more driven by a desire for the particular mode of human togetherness" (2011, p. 152). Biesta criticizes the line of thinking in which the democratic citizen is required to be rational and "capable of their own free and independent judgments", reducing politics to a purely rational affair (Biesta, 2007, p. 742). Furthermore, it shows a narrow view of democratic politics in which the political act is reduced to formal acts within the democratic system, such as voting. However, to Biesta, the political subject, or the agent of democratic politics, "arises in and with democratic action itself" (2011, p. 150). To him, subjectification is about "the appearance - the 'coming into presence,' [...] of a way of being that had no place and no part in the existing order of things" (2011, p. 150). It is "through engagement in democratic politics that political subjectivity is engendered" (2011, p. 150). The liberal conception of the democratic subject is one of a rational and independent human being. The

democratic citizen is supposed to be able to make independent judgements about what is good for society and being free of influence by others while doing so (Biesta, 2007, p. 740).

Opposite to the individualist conception of human nature is the *relational* conception as promoted by care ethics (Tronto, 2013, p. 121). Care ethics views humans as inherently interconnected in which care forms an important part of one's relationship to others and one's surroundings. As Carol Gilligan puts it: "care is grounded in the assumption that self and other are interdependent" (1987: 24). This view on human nature contrasts liberal views that stress the importance of achieving autonomy and independence (Sevenhuijsen, 2000). Tronto finds that "an atomist, rather than a relational, conception of human nature fits best with the market" (2013, p. 121). She opposes the neoliberal view of human nature from a perspective of care. Tronto notes:

"In a society in which the lives of autonomous actors are taken as the norms for human action, that care will be discounted as an aspect of human life" (2013, p. 150).

She argues that we should surrender this "model of man" as a robust, autonomous, self-contained actor but instead see ourselves as vulnerable and relational beings that are dependent on the care of others (2013, p. 163). Tronto notes that "the capacity to see oneself as vulnerable is not highly valued in our culture" (2013, p. 150). Sevenhuijsen adds that "constructions of self-made autonomous man are based on the denial of care and dependency" (2000, p. 22). However, Tronto notes that "most democratic political theories simply assume the existence of autonomous actors as the starting point for democracy" (2013, p. 31).

In summary, the view of the moral actor as rational, independent and autonomous collides with the view of human nature in care ethics as well as the understanding of democratic citizenship along the lines of Biesta. Both authors stress the need for a different understanding in the way we look at democracy and citizenship.

## Rethinking democratic citizenship

To rethink democracy requires a revisioning of the citizens within democracy. In order to do so, we first have to ask: *what is the essence of democratic politics?* Biesta and Tronto both approach this question from a different angle from which their respective views and visions on democracy and democratic citizenship can be discerned.

Tronto calls for a re-thinking of our democratic institutions and practices in such a way that citizens are able to care *with* their fellow citizens. Her hopes are that: “as [citizens] learn how to renegotiate caring responsibilities, citizens’ care for democracy solidifies and reinforces the democratic nature of society” (2013, p. 13).

To Biesta, democracy happens sporadically, in moments. He focuses on the individual - the subject of democratic society - whom, as Biesta puts it, “arises in and with democratic action itself” (2011, p. 150). To him, “the ‘essence’ of democratic politics cannot be captured adequately if we think of democracy only as a stable political order” (2011, p. 151). Rather, democracy is “a process of subjectification”, a process in which new political identities and subjectivities come into existence (2011, p. 151). This process requires dis-identification from the existing political order, as opposed to mere socialization of the citizen in said order. As Biesta explains: “the democratic citizen is not a pre-defined identity that can simply be taught and learned, but emerges again and again in new ways from engagement with the experiment of democratic politics” (2011, p. 152).

Tronto focuses on the content of democratic politics, which to her should be the allocation of care responsibilities in a just way (2013, p. 155). Tronto sees the goal of democratic politics as committing to “genuine equality of voice” (2013, p. 33). She envisions a citizen who *cares* for democracy and a democracy which cares for its citizens. Tronto recognizes both a *deficit of care* and a *deficit of democracy* within society and argues that both interrelate. It is the task of democratic politics to ensure - *to care for* - the capacity of citizens to be able to voice their needs. In return, democracy requires a level of care of its citizens. This leads to the conclusion that democratic politics is all about the distribution and allocation of care responsibilities in a just way.



To her, this starts with the renegotiation of historically developed responsibilities and specifying who takes part in this decision-making process (2013, p. 57).

Care, Tronto argues, is: “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible” (2015, p. 19). It relates to many aspects of daily life, and the way society is organized, and therefore care ought to be seen as a *political* concept. The distribution of care and the distribution of power within society are closely related. As human beings all receive care and to a degree give care during their lifespan, the way the questions of *who cares* and *who should be cared for* are dealt with are politically mediated and subject to power relations. Furthermore, those who benefit most from care - those who receive better education, better healthcare, etcetera - can arguably reach and maintain a stronger position in society than those with a shortage of care (Tronto, 2013). This logic follows the notion of Sevenhuijsen that it is care that enables us to live freely in a positive sense. She states that: “the idea that democratic caring contributes to human flourishing and ‘relational autonomy’ encapsulates a norm of positive freedom” (2000, p.22). This relates to discussion on positive and negative liberty which remains a topic of debate within citizenship (Gregory, 2000). What can society ask of its citizens and what can citizens refuse? We live in a society where freedom and responsibility are often separated or juxtaposed. In neoliberal logic responsibility makes you less free and care is considered a burden for the individual and society. Neoliberalism aims to achieve a high level of independence for individuals. But can we really separate freedom and responsibility as different concepts? I will further elaborate on this question in the next chapter.

The distribution of care within society needs a democratic commitment in order to secure general equality for all citizens. Tronto states: “a democratic society makes a commitment to equality of all of its members, then the ways in which the inequalities of care affect different citizens’ capacities to be equal has to be a central part of the society’s political tasks” (2015, p. 10). Caring needs and the ways in which they are met need to be consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality and freedom for all’ (2013, p. 23).

## Chapter 2. Freedom of the democratic citizen

In this chapter I will provide an answer to the first sub-question:

*How do Tronto's and Biesta's understanding of freedom, grounded in their conceptions of subjectification and caring democracy respectively, relate?*

I will focus on three kinds of freedom to relate the work of Tronto and Biesta. First, there is *rights-based freedom* which Tronto and Biesta both criticize for not being enough to stimulate the kind of democratic citizenship they both envision. Secondly, I discern *freedom as a political act* as the freedom of the democratic citizen is related to the political in both Tronto and Biesta's work. Thirdly, I will discuss *freedom as care* in which I will argue, using insights from Tronto and Biesta, that freedom and responsibility are not opposites when within democratic citizenship.

### Rights-based freedom

In the modern liberal view of citizenship, the freedom of citizens is thought to be secured through *rights*. According to Richard Bellamy, these rights serve as “means for preventing illegitimate interferences with individual liberty” (2012, p. 469). He adds that the value of democracy as a system is that “democracy offers at best the most appropriate mechanism for upholding [rights] (2012, p. 469). Bellamy argues that citizenship secured by rights fit well with the idea of liberty as non-domination. Furthermore, he sees citizenship as the ‘right to have rights’ and states that:

“rights depend on the existence of some form of political community” (2008, p. 15). This shows the inclusive and exclusive nature of citizenship, as not everybody is included in the political community, thus not enjoying the same rights. Citizens are imagined as fundamentally equal in terms of their individual rights and duties (Urban & Ward, 2020, p. 13). However, Bellamy notes that: “by entrenching these rights in legally protected constitutions that are immune from political influence, [they] paradoxically [end] up subverting the actual exercise of democratic citizenship” (2008, p. 88). This paradox involves rights being the result of previous citizen activity and at the same time possibly resulting in obstructing or dampening future citizen activity. Bellamy elaborates:

“These ongoing political processes have been crucial for broadening and deepening rights and shaping them to accommodate the diversity and complexity of modern life. At the same time, they have altered what it is to be a political citizen - both who is a citizen, and how citizens can act within the political system and influence its decision and form” (2008, p. 88).

Bellamy’s argument fits well with Biesta’s vision on democratic citizenship. To Biesta, democratic citizenship is not merely something to be obtained - an identity or a set of rights - but occurs through democratic action, or in “the moment when one turns its head and speaks in a new and different way” (2013, p. 4). I will discuss this view of citizenship more extensively in the next section (freedom as a political act).

The subject of rights is further complicated when relating it to freedom of the democratic citizen from the perspective of care ethics. Isaiah Berlin’s essay “Two concepts of liberty” (1958) has been influential in thinking about freedom as he distinguished positive freedom from negative freedom, which entails, respectively, the freedom to follow a certain form of life and freedom from constraint or interference by others (Skinner, 2002, p. 238). This distinction is criticized, however, as Eric Nelson explains:

“All claims about freedom seem to be claims about the absence of some constraint; within this broad set, however, there are substantially different claims about the ends of human life, the character of human beings, and the elements that can constrain us” (2005, p. 73).

Although rights function to ensure negative freedom, rights can also be seen as to ensure positive freedom, such as the right to education or healthcare. However, the distinction between negative and positive freedom becomes problematic from a care ethical perspective. As Sevenhuijsen argues:

“Shades of negative and positive freedom run through notions of freedom that are built on abstract individualism: a feminist conception of freedom starts with responsibility and requires us to begin our understanding of human freedom from the perspective of interconnection and relationship” (2000, p. 22).

Furthermore, Maughn Gregory notes that negative and positive freedom complement each other as “the positive freedoms of association, co-operation and collective growth presuppose the negative freedoms of not being told how, when and for what purposes to associate” (2000, p. 452). As positive freedom involves the freedom to live how one wishes and having the opportunity or resources to live such a life, it needs a degree of negative freedom to make choices (as opposed to having others making choices for you). Although rights function to secure equal freedom and opportunities, there is feminist criticism on the notion that rights are *synonymous* with equality, or the ‘liberal idea of equality as sameness’ (Urban & Ward, 2020, p. 13). Urban and Ward summarize this argument as follows:

“A political theory of care reveals that the failure to secure the conditions of good caregiving and care-receiving in a society impairs the capability of many - especially the most vulnerable and dependent ones - to participate as equals in an otherwise well-ordered society” (2020, p. 13).

This argument is partly based on Tronto's work in which she proposes a revised care-oriented notion of equality. For Sevenhuijsen, moving away from the "individualistic rights-based normative framework" of citizenship - or the citizen-as-rights-holders - would: "[enable] a form of policy-making that is better attuned to the needs of persons living in networks of care and responsibility" (2000, p.29). Tronto adds that "inequality [is] a likely indicator that a form of dominating social construction has constrained people's liberty" (2013, p.91). To her, "the absence of equality becomes a useful tool for evaluating the absence of freedom" (2013, p. 91). Further on, I will discuss Tronto's vision of *freedom as care*, in which she makes an argument for revising the 'politics of needs interpretation' so that it aims for equality in terms of needs. Relating the discussion on positive freedom to care, Sevenhuijsen argues that "care is conceptualized in relation to negative freedom, as an entity that stands in the way of autonomous life" (2000, p.13). However, she adds: "this notion is indeed far removed from the idea that good care provides an indispensable contribution to human flourishing" (2000, p.13). If we interpret positive freedom as the freedom to lead a flourishing life, inequality inhibits the ability and possibility to live such a life. As care ethics values the freedom to care, to build relationships of responsibility as one seems appropriate, societal inequality is related to care inequality. The notion of equality, as with other democratic values, can be seen as normative - containing an idea of how things should be. As Sevenhuijsen states:

"A democratic politics of care cannot limit itself to invoking notions of freedom from (or negative liberty). The idea that democratic caring contributes to human flourishing and 'relational autonomy' encapsulates a norm of positive freedom in the first place" (2000, p. 22).

Seeing human flourishing as a goal is a humanist notion and contains a certain image of humans and life as malleable. Democracy falls into the same category as it is a political construct aiming to organize society as well as possible following the values of freedom, equality and justice. As Charles Taylor finds that "freedom resides at least in part in collective control over the common

life”, Quentin Skinner adds that: “the exercise of such control is the form of activity in which the essence of our humanity is most fully realised” (in Skinner, 2002, p. 242). He sees the freedom of human agents as: “[consisting] in their having succeeded in realising an ideal of themselves (Skinner, 2002, p. 242). To Skinner, freedom then means:

“To speak of a condition in which someone has succeeded in becoming something. Freedom is not being viewed as absence of constraint on action; it is being viewed as a pattern of action of a certain kind” (p. 242).

In reflecting on Berlin’s concept of positive freedom he states:

“What underlies these theories of positive liberty is the belief that human nature has an essence, and that we are free if and only if we succeed in realising that essence in our lives” (Skinner, 2002, p. 242).

Positive freedom, in that sense can be interpreted as either achieved through self-realisation or occurring through self-realization. What this self-realization entails, however, can be interpreted differently. Within the context of democracy, to Biesta and following the theory of subjectification, this could mean becoming a subject within democracy, therefore achieving a certain degree of agency and critical thinking. For Tronto and the perspective of care ethics, this could mean reaching the collective goal of fair and equal caregiving and care-receiving. For achieving equal positive freedom, the freedom of the democratic citizen is related to the quality of democracy. This makes it relevant to look at freedom as a political act.

## Freedom as a political act

To Arendt, “to be free and to act are the same” (in Keenan, 1994, p. 298). Freedom comes from acting in a political sense. She connects freedom to ‘the political’ in which ‘the possibility of new

beginnings' is an inherent quality of democratic politics. Freedom is thus connected to the political dimension of life - it is in the political domain and through power relations that freedom is negotiated (Bergen & Verbeek, 2020). Foucault argues that "freedom is only possible as a practice within and in relation to power structures" (in Bergen & Verbeek, 2020, p. 327). Following this logic, the freedom of the democratic citizen is situated in the structure of democracy.

Biesta's notion of the democratic subject seems to relate to the notion of *freedom as a political act*. His concept of subjectification is based on Arendt's work on the subject. In an interview Biesta explains that the term subject holds a double meaning: to be the origin of action and initiative, but also to be *subjected* to something outside our control.<sup>1</sup> We, as individuals, can start something, but for it to become meaningful others have to take on our beginnings, he says. This makes us and our actions subjected to what others do with our beginnings. Hence, we are free to act, at the same time subjected to the world around us.

As Biesta proposes subjectification as one of three dimensions of education, he offers a theory for understanding the way in which democratic citizenship comes into being. Johan Sandahl reflects on the meaning of subjectification and notes that: "[it] is about the emancipation of students as humans and about providing them with agency as citizens" (2015, p. 4). Building upon Foucault's works, emancipation can be seen as demanding freedom from society's oppressing structures. Democratic citizenship requires agency and Sandahl gives us insight into the way agency is practiced. He argues that, in the context of education, "the most important task of teachers in relation to subjectification is to allow students to express themselves and experience resistance from others" (Biesta, 2015, p. 4). Here the subjectification role of education is emphasized as opposed to mere socialization. This point can be extended towards democratic citizenship. Biesta notes that part of socialization is *identification* or the "taking up an existing identity, that is, a way of being and speaking and of being identifiable and visible that is already possible within the existing order" (2011, p. 150). Subjectification, in contrast, is about "the appearance [or] the 'coming into presence' [...] of a way of being that had no place and no part in the existing order of things" (2011, p. 150). Importantly, to Biesta, subjectification involves

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<sup>1</sup> Youtube: Subject: "1 Gert Biesta - Clip: Subject and World in Education"



a form of *dis-identification*. He reflects on this notion of citizenship as a process of dis-identification:

“Rancière argues that the moment of democratic politics is not a process of identification - that is of taking up an existing identity - but rather of dis-identification or, as he puts it, subjectification, that is, of becoming a democratic subject. It is the moment of the 'birth' of democratic agency. But this 'birth' is always 'out of order.' It is neither represented by the flock nor by the one standing out but is, as I have suggested, the moment when one turns its head and speaks in a new and different way” (2013, p. 4).

Whereas socialization relates to becoming part of existing groups or ways of being, subjectification implies the freedom to break away or, to borrow Arendts words, move towards 'new beginnings'. Subjectification - becoming a subject - requires a degree of freedom. However, in his assessment of current practices of citizenship education, Biesta notes:

“One potential danger [...] is that education is maneuvered into a position where it contributes to a domestication of the citizen - a 'pinning down' of citizens to a particular civic identity - and thus leads to the erosion of more political interpretations of citizenship that see the meaning of citizenship as essentially contested” (2011, p.142).

Citizenship (education) is in danger of becoming an a-political process in which socialization is preferred over the freedom to give meaning and shape to one's citizenship and democracy as a whole. To Biesta, the freedom to dis-identify from the existing order is therefore a crucial aspect of democratic citizenship. He acknowledges this in what he calls 'the ignorant citizen':

“The ignorant citizen is the one who, in a sense, refuses this knowledge and, through this, refuses to be domesticated, refuses to be pinned down in a predetermined civic identity” (2011, p. 152).

Relating this statement to Arendt, the freedom of the democratic citizen is not achieved merely through the rights obtained but through acting politically. In that sense, freedom can be regarded as a verb, not a noun; it is something one enacts, not something one has. Foucault makes the distinction between *liberation*, or the momentary act, and the *practices of freedom*, or the ongoing practices that constitute freedom (Nelson, 2021, p. 6). As noted before, in the view of Foucault freedom is only possible as a practice within and in relation to power structures to which we have to critically relate ourselves (Bergen & Verbeek, 2020, p. 327). Summing up, Skinner argues that “freedom is not [to be] viewed as absence of constraint on action; it is [to be] viewed as a pattern of action of a certain kind” (2002, p. 242). Sevenhuijsen voices a similar argument about freedom in relation to power structures:

“A politically formulated ethics of care should not aim to eliminate power in caring relations, but to provide an understanding that helps to differentiate between power and domination by making power recognisable and manageable” (in Urban & Ward, 2020 p. 12).

This insight comes from the fact that relationships of care often contain inequality, as is the nature of caring, care receiving and interdependency. However, in care ethics freedom is equated with the capacity for making choices (Tronto, 2013, p. 88). To be able to make choices one needs freedom as opposed to being dominated (others making choices for you); to choose what best fits with one’s needs and preferences. However, for care ethics, the goal is not to achieve the highest degree of freedom, but rather to have the freedom to voice one’s needs and choosing which care one likes to receive.

Tronto’s position on freedom as a political act therefore seems to agree with Biesta, as both emphasize the practice and the act of freedom in the positive sense of individual and

collective self-realization. Skinner agrees with Berlin about the notion of positive freedom as self-realization, as he notes that: “there are many different ends that we can equally well pursue” (2002, p. 243). To Tronto, this end would be care.

## Freedom as care

Whereas Biesta focuses on the freedom to act as an inherent part of becoming a subject, Tronto relates freedom to care. She questions the way we currently value and organize care within society - that is: unequally. In her opinion, “a truly free society makes people free to care” (2013, p. 170). She criticizes the unequal distribution of care responsibilities within society which results in broader inequalities such as educational and social-economic inequality. Furthermore, Tronto finds that “caring in current democratic societies often continues a vicious circle of unequal care” (2013, p. 175). In her assessment, economic inequality “produces good care for some and inadequate care for others” (2013, p. 177). As noted before, care ethics criticizes the individualistic approach to citizenship in which the citizen is envisioned as the holder of rights. Instead, we should aim for a democracy which is formed around the *needs* of citizens. The ‘politics of needs interpretation’, as Tronto calls it, refers to the contested nature of needs in which often people are not in control of the assessment of their needs. For Tronto, this issue revolves around the question of “what kind of care would each person wish for him- or herself?” (2013, p. 160). Freedom as care works in two ways; having the freedom to care, and through care becoming free. Tronto sees the need for democracy in order to guarantee this freedom.

We have seen that care ethics holds a notion of human nature as interdependent and interconnected which goes against the idea of the autonomous, independent and self-sufficient individual on which the concept of democracy is based (such as the capacity to make independent judgements). Following the logic of care ethics, one will always be constrained to some extent by the relationships one has with others; considering their needs and wishes. The notion of absolute freedom, in that sense, is ontologically untenable within care ethics. From a care ethical perspective, absolute freedom or independent individualism as promised by neoliberal ideology,

is an illusion. However, as Tronto argues, this notion is deeply embedded in Western culture. Absolute freedom goes against the notion that humans are relational beings - interdependent in their need for care. What Tronto calls “the idea of freedom as lack of attachment” contains the popular image of “men on the road, freed of binding ties” with an attitude of “nothing left to lose” (2013, p. 88). The conception of humans as autonomous beings becomes problematic in view of their dependency on others and in being subjected to the social and cultural context in which they exist. The question then becomes; what kind of freedom do we aim realistically and morally aim for in society?

In the dichotomy of positive-negative freedom, seeing freedom as the absence of constraint becomes problematic from a care ethical perspective. As one lives in a democratic society, one’s freedom is dependent on that society and its arrangements. In that regard, one’s freedom relates to the quality of democracy as a system. Relating this to freedom of the citizen, care ethics would argue that democracy needs to facilitate and guarantee the freedom to act politically, to have a voice in the politics of needs interpretation and distribution of care responsibilities (to which I will return in the next chapter). Part of this is striving for equality, as inequality often means less ability to do things, and thus, less freedom (Tronto, 2013, p.145). In this regard, Tronto criticizes the market’s increased influence on society. Of these ‘market democracies’ she says:

“Market democracies, committed to prioritizing market values, have reached a point where they are unable to advance either the democratic goals of greater freedom, equality, and justice or the caring goals of ensuring that both care-giving and care-receiving have their proper place in society” (2013, p. 139).

As Tronto does not see market democracies as up to the task of delivering democratic values such as freedom and equality. In envisioning a caring democracy, Tronto proposes five conditions:

1. No one's social opportunities or "life chances" would be constrained by gender, sexual orientations, race, or imposed creed.
2. People would be freed to live with and to affiliate with others in intimate arrangements of their own choosing.
3. All personal service work would be well paid.
4. Social institutions and practices would be organized so that vulnerable people, as well as able-bodied, strong, healthy, normative adults, can be accommodated.
5. No one should be asked to do so much caring work that there was no space in that person's life outside of the circles of care.

(2013, p. 160-161)

These conditions illustrate the relationship between care and freedom, as the absence of such conditions would limit the freedom of people to live and care as they wish. Inequality, such as being underpaid for doing caring jobs, or not having a choice in caring, results from unequal power relations, and limited agency for some, i.e. the possibility to act in the way they wish. In that sense, the conditions set by Tronto can be seen as emancipating towards greater freedom through democratic practices.

Although freedom in liberal society is hypothetically guaranteed by rights, Biesta and Tronto agree on the notion that freedom lies in the ability to act, whether politically or by caring. Furthermore, both agree on the idea that freedom is not a condition to be obtained but rather occurs in practice, such as the freedom to dis-identify with the existing order, or the freedom to choose which care one likes to receive and voicing one's needs. Lastly, Biesta and Tronto both seem to value the notion of what David Graeber and David Wengrow call "the freedom to reorganize social relations" (2021). In their vision of the freedom of the citizen, Biesta and Tronto emphasize the importance of organizing society according to the democratic values of freedom, equality and justice, as well as according to the needs and preferences of citizens.

## Chapter 3. Responsibility of the democratic citizen

*How do Tronto's and Biesta's understanding of responsibility, grounded in their conceptions of subjectification and caring democracy respectively, relate?*

### Responsibility and freedom

There is a relationship between responsibility and freedom. First of all, as the adage goes, with freedom comes responsibility. Secondly, as Tronto notes, “one is only free after one has accepted one’s responsibilities” (2013, p. 40). She opposes the view of freedom as lack of attachment and freedom interpreted as meaning not having to care. Tronto states: “what makes us free [...] is our capacity to care and to make commitments to what we care about” (2013, p. 94). What this responsibility entails and how it is best learned or negotiated within democratic citizenship is a topic of debate. Bellamy notes that: “rights can only be provided by people accepting certain civic duties that ensure [these rights] are respected, including cooperating to set up appropriate collective arrangements” (2008, p. 15). In her research on democratic school structures, Rochelle Skogen finds that: “students must be given freedom so they can learn how to choose (as often as possible) to act as *responsible* citizens in a democratic community” (2010, p.41). Following the subjectification theory of Biesta, her findings suggest that with freedom comes the possibility to ‘come into being’ as a democratic citizen and learn the values this entails. The freedom these students enjoy comes from structuring the school democratically and leads to the awareness of their responsibilities. Although freedom can be framed as the right to non-domination, or the

freedom from external restraint, a degree of responsibility is part of freedom. As we have seen in chapter 2, the freedom to act politically is at the same time a responsibility to act politically. Part of our responsibility as democratic citizens is *passing judgment* on the state of society. To Arendt, being political means passing judgment on what is considered good (in Zerilli, 2005). As passing judgment is part of democratic citizenship along the lines of Arendt and Biesta, Linda Zerilli states:

“In the judgment, we affirm our freedom and discover the nature and limits of what we hold in common. This is the simple but crucial lesson to be learned from Arendt’s account of political judgment” (2005, p. 183).

Following this logic, as we affirm our freedom through political action we are in a sense responsible for our own freedom. However, this freedom should be seen as freedom in relation to others and the freedom to negotiate - that is, taking into account other’s views - the way in which we practice freedom in a morally justified way. Because we can only practice freedom within and through our relations with others we have a shared responsibility to negotiate our freedom. A further implication is that freedom and responsibility are entangled. Maggie Nelson notes “liberation paves the way for new power relationships, which must be controlled by practices of freedom” (2021, p. 6). The practices of freedom, or the ongoing effort to achieve freedom, relates to acting in a political sense. This brings us to the topic of responsibility within citizenship.

## Responsibility and democracy

We have seen in Chapter 2 that, to Biesta, citizenship involves acting politically as opposed to merely taking on the identity or being socialized as a citizen. Within care ethics, responsibility takes shape through the relationships one has with others. In that sense, solidarity is part of the responsibility-taking process. Tronto discerns responsibility towards the just allocation of care

responsibilities within society and the upholding of the democratic values of equality, freedom and justice. According to her, care responsibilities should be allocated “in a way that democratic citizens think best achieves the goals of freedom, equality, and justice (2013, p. 141). For Tronto, responsibility is a key element within the concept of caring democracy as the practice of care revolves around *taking responsibility*. She quotes Virginia Held who states that: “the focus of the ethics of care is one the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility” (2013, p. 20).

Taking responsibility for care, and distributing these care responsibilities fairly should be a main topic of concern for democratic politics, Tronto argues. Part of this is dealing with what she coined the ‘privileged irresponsibility’ of some in society that have the power and position to be exempted from carrying out caring tasks and possess the ability to purchase care or outsource caring tasks to others (Tronto, 2013, p. 103). Often this comes with the inability to admit their dependence on care by others. Tronto distinguishes multiple ‘passes’ which serve as excuses not having to partake in certain caring activities, maintaining the status-quo of unequal caring in society. These include; the protection pass, the production pass, the charity pass and the ‘only my own’ pass (Tronto, 2013). Even though these activities can be seen as a form of care, all of these passes serve as arguments to not have to deal with other caring responsibilities. For Tronto, ‘collecting’ these passes - getting all of society involved and responsible for allocating care responsibilities - is the way forwards towards ‘democratic caring’ and make care more inclusive (2013, p. 171)

## Assigning responsibility

For Tronto, caring democracy comes down to allocating responsibilities of care fairly. Unlike rights which are claimed through citizen activity and subsequently fixed in laws and guaranteed through democratic institutions, responsibility requires a relationship and obligation (Tronto, 2013, p. 50). Responsibility comes from a response to something or someone and this responsiveness comes from the capacity to perceive needs (Tronto, 2013, p. 49). In that sense,



responsibility involves a degree of care; to care for something and taking care of a task of which one takes responsibility for. As noted before, Tronto values the freedom to care which involves having the freedom to take on responsibilities of care and making commitments to what we care about. However, assigning responsibilities on a society level comes with some challenges.

As responsibility involves a moral actor who can identify or discover needs of care, and taking responsibility for that providing said care, responsibility on a societal level needs to come from a much more abstract relationship. To Tronto, responsibility is therefore a political process - it stems from the values of attentiveness, competence, responsiveness and justice which itself are negotiated (Tronto, 2013, p. 161). Lorraine Code explains how practices of responsibility - in the theory of expressive-collaborative morality - revolve around the question of “moral agents, singly and cooperatively, [expressing] their sense of self, situation, community, and agency in the responsibilities they discover and/or claim as theirs” (in Tronto, 2013, p. 54). In expressing needs and being attentive to needs, moral agents shape their responsibilities. However, on a societal level, there is inequality as to which degree of responsibility a person can take on. Tronto reflects on this inequality:

“Different conditions of power, privilege, interest, and capacities for collective actions might make some more responsible than others. Thus, while everyone who perceives a situation of structural injustice has a responsibility to address it, by virtue of this structural positioning, different agents have different opportunities and capacities, can draw on different kinds and amounts of resources, or face different levels of constraint with respect to processes that can contribute to structural change” (2013, p. 52).

For responsibility within wider society to be distributed fairly, it should not be forced upon someone but taken on willingly, out of intrinsic motivation and according to capability. This leads to Tronto arguing that we need “a more nuanced account of responsibility”; one which takes into account the particularity of situations and contexts of care (2013, p. 11). The challenge then lies in building relationships that result in responsibility. Caring relationships and good practices of

care require sufficient time and space to develop. Julie White even argues that: “making time for democracy requires making time for care” (2020, p. 161). However, she finds that we suffer from a time deficit as well as “our habituation to a model of accelerated time” (2020, p. 166). Reducing the unequal degree in which people can take on responsibility to care would therefore result in more caring relationships. That being said, Tronto finds that: “relationship-dissolving effects of neoliberal ideology remove forms of responsibility” (2013, p. 64). Seeing responsibility as resulting from relationships, responsibility towards strangers with whom one has no relationship (as ‘caring with’ proposes) becomes problematic. Tronto sees the solution in collectively upholding the value of justice, which she sees as a “constant care for the common good” (Tronto, 2013, p. 182). Justice is something all citizens should strive for - a collective responsibility (Urban & Ward, 2020, p. 12). Justice in the modern liberal view is often seen as impartial. However, Kittay notes that:

“[An account of] justice which does not incorporate the need to respond to vulnerability with care is incomplete, and a social order which ignores care will itself fail to be just” (in Urban & Ward, 2020, p. 14).

The just allocation of responsibilities of care is therefore a responsibility for a society that upholds the democratic values of justice and equality. For Tronto this process of allocation should happen democratically:

“Democratic politics [should recognise] the centrality of “assigning responsibilities for care, and [ensure] that democratic citizens are as capable as possible of participating in this assignment of responsibilities” (Tronto 2013, p. 30).

This process requires that we “specify who will participate in the decision-making process” (Tronto, 2013, p. 57). In line with Arendt’s idea of passing judgment, Tronto argues that the democratic citizen needs to pass judgment on how care responsibilities are equally and fairly distributed within society. To ask ‘who is responsible?’, to her, is a basic democratic political

question (2013, p. 64). The importance of assigning responsibility to a certain party means freeing others from that same responsibility (2013, p. 51). Therefore, Tronto notes, “[if] one begins from assumptions of equality it is a key question how power differentials are deserved” (2013, p. 59). Responsibility requires sufficient power to be able to fulfill the required tasks (Tronto, 2013, p. 51). Following the expressive-collaborative model of meta-ethics (as discussed in Chapter 1), morality - including the interpretation of responsibility - comes from social negotiation which for a democratic community requires fair deliberation and collaboration. Interestingly, this is where the distinction between freedom and responsibility seems to become blurred, as a citizen ought to be both free and responsible at the same time in order to make judgments. In regard to the responsibility of the democratic citizen, Tronto values the responsibility for citizens towards the democratic system in upholding ideals of equality and freedom and the fair allocation of care responsibilities.

Moving on to Biesta’s concept of subjectification; this seems to contain a dimension of responsibility as becoming a citizen involves upholding democratic values and democracy as a system - indeed, caring for democracy. This responsibility includes: “responsibility towards democratic values of equality, freedom and solidarity” and responsibility towards maintaining the public sphere (Biesta, De Bie, and Wildemeersch, 2014, p. xiv). However, concerning the lack of citizenship responsibility, Biesta notes:

“Rather than to blame individuals for an apparent lack of citizenship and civic spirit, we should start at the other end by asking about the actual opportunities for the enactment of the experiment of democracy that are available in our societies, on the assumption that participation in such practices can engender meaningful forms of citizenship and democratic agency” (2014, p. 10).

For Biesta the responsibility for becoming a democratic subject does not lie with the individual but rather with society and the extent to which opportunities for democratic subjectification are offered. However, Biesta finds that these opportunities are declining, as he sees a “decline of the

public sphere [...] the very sphere where the experiment of democracy can be enacted” (2014, p.10). Specifying what this means in terms of citizenship education, Biesta notes:

“The focus should not be on telling citizens that they need to learn more in order to become better citizens, but that the priority should lie with keeping open those places and spaces where the experiment of democracy can be conducted” (Biesta, 2014, p.11).

## Developing an ethics of responsibility

Biesta and Tronto both seem to agree on the detrimental effects of neoliberal ideology and policy when it comes to democratic citizenship. In regard to the public sphere, Biesta and co-authors find that: “the public sphere is being replaced or even destroyed by private relationships of identity or market relationships of competition and financial gain” (2014, p. xv). What is necessary is transforming ‘private troubles’ into ‘public issues’ (Biesta, De Bie & Wildemeersch, 2014, p. xv). However, neoliberalism does the opposite. Wendy Brown notes that:

“[In the logic of neoliberalism] all dimensions of human life are cast in terms of a market rationality. [This results in] the production of all human and institutional action as rational entrepreneurial action, conducted according to a calculus of utility, benefit, or satisfaction against a microeconomic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, and moral value-neutrality” (in Tronto, 2013, p. 41).

Neoliberal ideology promotes the morality of ‘personal responsibility’, Tronto argues. As neoliberalism holds a view of humans as rational actors who are free to choose within a market-led society, people are held responsible for the “choices” they make. However, Tronto opposes this idealized market-focussed society as to her “the image of the autonomous chooser is [...] a myth” (2013, p. 39). Free choice - as is promised by the market following neoliberal logic -

becomes problematic once viewed through a lens of care. People do not exist as self-contained beings and choice is never free of consequences on others, nor can a choice be a self-contained decision. In a society of economic inequality, Tronto argues, “choice is not equality” and moreover “choice is not freedom” and “choice is not justice” (2013, p. 40). In addition to being a way of organizing the economy, neoliberalism can be seen as a moral ideology containing ideas of what is right for the individual and society as a whole. Responsibility within neoliberalism is limited to personal responsibility in which collective responsibility - such as caring for democracy - is valued little. In the logic of neoliberalism, there is no such thing as collective responsibility or, as Margareth Thatcher famously declared; there is no such thing as society. Tronto calls this the “road of neoliberalism and its moral ideology of personal responsibility” (2013, p. 144). She finds that “a fully realized neoliberal citizenry would be the opposite of public-minded” (2013, p. 43). Placing the freedom of the individual above all else, neoliberalism disregards the role of society for the individual and vice versa. This is what Tronto calls the “road of neoliberalism and its moral ideology of personal responsibility” (p. 144). Opposite of this would be taking the *road of care*, as she argues:

“The more people share responsibility for care publicly, the less they have to fear and the more easily they can trust others. From such positions of trust, the world becomes more easily open: more free, more equal, more just” (p. 146).

Tronto builds an argument as to why personal responsibility is not enough for democracy (2013, p. 46). First of all, responsibility is unequally distributed within society, due to different conditions of power, privilege, interest, and capacities for collective action, making it so that “different agents have different opportunities and capacities, can draw on different kinds of resources, or face different levels of constraint with respect to processes that can contribute to structural change” (Young in Tronto, 2013, p. 52). To distribute responsibility fairly within society, to Tronto, it boils down to the question: “which relationships are significant enough to create conditions of responsibility?” (Tronto, 2013, p. 52). Responsibility and obligation are features that constitute relationships (Tronto, 2013, p. 52). Expanding this notion of responsibility towards responsibility

within a democratic community, the expressive-collaborative morality approach (as discussed in Chapter 1) is concerned with the question: “how moral agents, singly and cooperatively, express their sense of self, situation, community, and agency in the responsibilities they discover and/or claim as theirs” (Code in Tronto, 2013, p. 54). Walker concludes that: “an ethics of responsibility as a normative moral view would try to put people and responsibilities in the right places with respect to each other” (in Tronto, 2013, p. 55).

## Responsibility for democracy

Tronto and Biesta seem to agree on the notion that democratic citizenship includes a degree of responsibility for democracy. For Tronto, “only democratic institutions are capable of guaranteeing the kind of expressive-collaborative practices that Margaret Walker described as necessary for properly allocating responsibility in a society” (2013, p. 155). To her, the transition towards caring democracy requires that “we have to reimagine democratic life as ongoing practices and institutions in which all citizens are engaged (2013, p. 169). Engagement in terms of caring is highly participatory (2013, p. 140). Tronto believes that “caring forms of democratic life result in better democracies”, and in turn, “care is better when done democratically” (2013, p. 155-156). Ultimately, Tronto finds that: “what it means to be a citizen in a democracy is to care for citizens and to care for democracy itself”(2013, p. x). It requires citizens to “think closely about their responsibilities to themselves and to others” (Tronto, 2013, p. x). Simply put, democratic caring requires citizens “to care enough about caring” (Tronto, 2013, p. xii).

Biesta’s vision on the responsibility of the citizen can be derived from his vision on democracy. He notes that: “democracy, the way of conducting our common affairs with reference to the values of equality, freedom and solidarity, does neither come easy nor does it come cheap” (Biesta, De Bie, and Wildemeersch, 2014, p. xiii). To Biesta, democracy is vulnerable and contains the ongoing challenge to keep the democratic values alive. However, he finds that “there is also the temptation to think that democracy neither requires investment (of time, resources, attention) nor ‘maintenance work’” (Biesta, De Bie, and Wildemeersch, 2014, p. xiii).

One way to uphold the democratic values is through citizenship education. However, as noted before, this should not lead to the 'domestication of the citizen' but stimulate subjectification. Biesta presses the importance of not seeing citizenship education as the 'production of citizens'. Instead, it should lead to commitment to democracy (Biesta, 2011, p. 151). His hope in regard to citizenship is the democratic subject as "the one who is driven by a desire for democracy or, to be more precise, a desire for engagement with the ongoing experiment of democratic existence" (Biesta, 2011, p. 151).

## Chapter 4. Conclusion

In this thesis I have used the following research question to which I will now provide an answer:

*Are Tronto's notion of Caring Democracy and Biesta's theory on subjectification within democratic citizenship compatible in their understanding of the freedom and responsibility of the democratic citizen?*

I will start by giving a small summary of my findings related to freedom and responsibility separately and then provide an overall conclusion to this question.

### Freedom

We have seen that freedom is an inherent quality of democratic politics. Alongside the rights that grant citizens their freedom, I have focussed on the freedom to act as a political being and the freedom to care. Biesta's notion of subjectification holds a notion of freedom to engage with democracy, to think critically about democracy and to dis-identify with the existing political order. However, Biesta sees a danger in citizenship education becoming an a-political process in which socialization is preferred over the freedom to give meaning and shape to one's citizenship

and democracy as a whole. To Biesta, democratic citizenship is not merely something to be obtained - an identity or a set of rights - but occurs through democratic action. Tronto's position on freedom as a political act seems to agree with Biesta, as both emphasize the practice of freedom in the positive sense of individual and collective self-realization.

Biesta and Tronto agree on the notion that freedom in a democracy is constituted through the ongoing practices of freedom in addition to the fixed rights and institutions. A fixed notion of citizenship can have the effect of entrenching existing societal arrangements and destimulating citizenship activity which, to Biesta, would go against his plea for stimulating subjectification of democratic citizenship. Equally, Tronto wishes to change existing societal arrangements towards more equal and fair care practices.

While care ethics emphasizes freedom as choice, Tronto argues that within a market democracy freedom of choice is limited. Although rights function to secure equal freedom and opportunities, there is feminist criticism on the notion that rights are synonymous with equality - which in practice is not the case as care is very unequally distributed in society both in terms of caregiving and care receiving. Freedom as care requires a society in which people are free to care, meaning: being free to care for what they find valuable and gives meaning to their lives. Freedom as care works in two ways; having the freedom to care, and through caring becoming free. Furthermore, in her conception of the caring democracy, Tronto sees freedom in the possibility and ability to voice one's needs and the freedom to care.

## Responsibility

In their respective notions of caring democracy and democratic subjectivity, both Tronto and Biesta recognise a degree of responsibility within citizenship. This responsibility relates to care for Tronto, and the becoming of a democratic subject for Biesta - both notions within the context of democracy. Taking responsibility for care, and distributing these care responsibilities fairly within society should be a main topic of concern for democratic politics, Tronto argues. Part of this is dealing with what she coined the 'privileged irresponsibility'. For Tronto, 'collecting' these



passes - getting all of society involved and responsible for allocating care responsibilities - is the way forward towards 'democratic caring' and making care more inclusive.

Both Tronto and Biesta see room to improve democracy through moral evaluation of citizenship. Both recognise the dimension of responsibility within democratic citizenship towards democracy as a project and way of organizing society. Tronto emphasizes care as a value within citizenship as well as the political challenge of organizing care fairly and justly in society. In this task she recognizes a responsibility for citizens to *care with* others and for democracy as a political project. She sees a responsibility to uphold the democratic values of equality, freedom and justice and treat care as a political topic that requires addressing. To her, care and democracy are intrinsically linked: better care makes for better democracy and better democracy makes for better care.

Both authors agree that citizenship requires commitment to democratic values. However, this commitment can be extended towards renegotiating these values over time as democracy is not a finished project. To Biesta, citizenship involves acting politically as opposed to merely taking on the identity or being socialized as a citizen. In similar fashion, Tronto discerns responsibility towards the just allocation of care responsibilities within society and the upholding of the democratic values.

## Caring for democracy

Tronto and Biesta hold a similar notion of the freedom and responsibility of the democratic citizen, albeit with emphasis on different elements. Both see a responsibility in caring for democracy and the upholding of the democratic values of equality, freedom and justice. To care for democracy means active citizenship and participation within the public sphere and concerning oneself with the public good, which for Tronto, involves the just distribution and allocation of caring responsibilities within society. To Tronto, democratic caring requires citizens to care enough about caring. To Biesta, citizenship (education) is in danger of becoming an a-political process in which socialization is preferred over the freedom to give meaning and shape

to one's citizenship and democracy as a whole. Mere socialization would take away from any form of 'caring with' or caring for democracy.

## Chapter 5. Discussion

First, I will reflect on the contributions and limitations of this thesis. Secondly, I will discuss the outcomes of my research and several questions that arise from these outcomes. Lastly, I will give my recommendations for future research.

### Research limitations

It is important to note that this thesis consists of theoretical research on the topics of care, citizenship and democracy and although it is based on academic literature, its conclusions will remain abstract and not directly applicable in policy-making or the development of practices of care, democracy or citizenship education. Even though this was not the aim of this thesis, it has to be noted as a limitation. Furthermore, due to limitations of time and scope, the literature research for this thesis has been selective, meaning; it does not serve as an comprehensive overview of literature or concepts concerning care, citizenship and democracy. It merely serves to discuss the topics of this thesis as well as possible. I have selected the relevant literature and concepts using a snow-ball method; searching through literature relevant to the work of Tronto and Biesta as well as relevant literature from my master's and my own interests and background in philosophy and political and social sciences.

## Topics for discussion

I will now discuss several topics for discussion in reflection of the outcomes of this thesis and in light of future research. First of all, Tronto makes an argument to place care at the heart of democratic politics, based on the notion that care is essential to human existence and human flourishing. However, she does not give clear criteria or recommendations for the context necessary for such care to develop and to thrive. As care requires sufficient time and space as well as relationships between people and her assessment that neoliberalism is counterproductive in this regard, should we not move away from our current economic model? Even though Tronto is critical of the market in providing sufficient and equal care, perhaps a more radical turn is necessary to allow for care to become a central and collective practice in our society. For example, the implementation of basic income could relieve people from certain obligations that currently limit their ability to care. Is the current working culture suited for sufficient caring as well as sufficient citizenship (which equally demands time and energy)? An even more fundamental question would be: can we achieve a caring democracy and democratic caring globally as long as we follow the nation-state model of politics?

Furthermore, seeing care as an important value within society and as a collective responsibility requires a change of perspective on life. The question remains, however, how such a perspective can spread in the collective mind of the public as long as we are living in a consumer society that stimulates hyperindividualism and competitiveness? How do we create awareness about the importance of care in a society that promotes the opposite? Due to social-economic inequality, being free to care - whether for one's social circle or for democracy or the environment - remains a privilege. In a way, Tronto calls for an emancipation of the caring citizen, relieving them from their burdens of care towards making them free to care. In regard to responsibility of the democratic citizens; if responsibility takes shape through relationships, and these are made more difficult by neoliberalism, how do we rebuild social cohesion and allow for these relationships to develop? Even though Tronto hints to such changes being necessary in her book *Caring Democracy* (2013), she does not provide us with a roadmap for getting there.

Building on the work of Tronto, Fabienne Brugère envisions a caring democracy as: “an inclusive society based on the idea that we are all more or less vulnerable, that all relations have to take into account collective responsibilities and to criticize hierarchy, verticality, and individualism” (2020). A similar argument for the lack of concrete steps can be made about the expressive-collaborative way of negotiating morality: how do we achieve such a model in practice?

Another challenge is avoiding the danger of ‘forcing’ responsibility upon citizens as is visible in the ideal of the *participatiesamenleving* or ‘participation society’ - the current dominant model for social benefits in the Netherlands. This model is criticized for forcing participation and responsibility on citizens by making participation a criterion for receiving social benefits. Including care in a notion of responsible citizenship does stem logically from the viewpoint of care ethics. However, people might hold different values when it comes to citizenship, such as the liberal view that values negative freedom over solidarity and ‘caring with’. Changing our views on citizenship would require an ideological change alongside a change of view on human nature and society. However, do we see this change as a personal responsibility, and if not; how do we educate people without being coercive or paternalistic? Thorben Dyrberg notes that democracy holds an inherent vulnerability in its attempt to solidify democratic practices in laws and institutions. He states that: “democracy can never be secured, because that which conditions it might also destabilize it” (2016, p. 285). Along the lines of Biesta, he recognizes “the challenges and pitfalls of democracy as a willed political community” resulting from the paradox of democracy being a never finished and fluid - meaning change can occur - and at the same time the tendency to solidify democracy (2016, p. 285).

Lastly, as both Biesta and Tronto value responsibility within citizenship, there is the challenge to translate the responsibility that takes shape naturally through the relationships one has with others in their social environment towards the often abstract relationship one has to other citizens and democracy as whole. Again, this requires a change of view on society and the common or public good. It requires a sense of trust towards and perhaps even psychological change to achieve this. How such collective change can be achieved remains to be seen.

## Recommendations for future research

For future research, the above mentioned questions and challenges might provide for good research questions. As care ethics hints towards a relational understanding of human beings and society, perhaps it is time to develop a different ontology of the democratic citizen. One in which freedom and responsibility are not juxtaposed, the notion of the individual not opposed to the notion of society, and the political not separated from the private. Even though such an ontology can already start from the insights of care ethics, further research is required within social and political sciences and humanistic studies. Another topic for research might be how a sense of meaning is contrived from active citizenship, or turning it around; how a lack of meaning can result from a lack of perceived or real citizenship.

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