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Commentary on Davies

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In Response To: Jacqueline Davies's [Critical thinking, charity and care: reason and goodness both](#)

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This is a rich paper, full of topics that interest me and could lead to digressions which I would enjoy, but which lead away from the main points of the paper. I see two main points, first, that the ethics of care is analogous to the principle of charity, and second, that both of these are not justified solely by concern for others, but have prudential value. The analogies are interesting, and the argument for prudence is valuable.

Both the ethics of care and the principle of charity emphasize relations, making connections, expanding justified beliefs in the one case and expanding moral beings and relationships on the other.

Davies notes that care is accused of being other-directed - even leading to self-sacrifice. Clearly one can raise a similar charge against the principle of charity. After all, trying to find the best rendering of a text by someone else actually helps that person. And in a competitive situation it harms me. Davies correctly claims that I am helping myself as an epistemic agent. The analogy in the case of the ethics of care is somewhat less clear to me. I certainly can agree, however, that sensitivity to developing the standpoints of different moral subjects can give us a greater appreciation of issues, types of moral characters, and moral dilemmas. So we can increase our moral capacities in much the same way that we can increase our epistemic ones. So I agree that there are good self-regarding grounds for both charity and care. I think that there can be good other-regarding grounds for not adopting charity, and for using the justice mode of moral reasoning. When Socrates misinterprets the claim that justice is in the interests of the stronger, suggesting that it is about muscle building and diet, he can be seen - I doubt that he must be seen - as aiding Thrasymachus to speak clearly, unambiguously and to think more clearly. In a similar vein we can criticize our friends by showing them how their actions look from the viewpoint of justice reasoning, not because we are unsympathetic to them, but because such reasoning can bring them to a better awareness of how their choices can be reasonably interpreted by others and how they can become better aware of their choices. This is not to deny that in general both charity and the ethics of care are on the side of connections. It is simply to repeat the old theme that context can determine how a method of reasoning is used.

I will conclude these very brief comments with some comments about reasoning concerning decision making. One of the cardinal tenets of rational decisions involving others is that the agent should understand the utilities and the subjective probabilities of the others involved. If we are to read those observations charitably, they seem to have a great deal in common with both the principle of charity and with the ethics of care as Davies describes it. Being able to grasp what other people value, what connections they make among the values, and what they think will happen in the future - all these contribute to the kind of sensitivity to moral agents that she describes. By contrast, the argumentative modes, the uncharitable criticism of arguments, the argumentative forms of justice reasoning seem to resemble what are called heuristics and stereotypical thinking in the literature on decisions. They have the advantage of speed and simplicity, but often go wrong. But examining that subject would take us in a very different direction from the present paper.

