Social connection, interdependence, and being sure of ourselves.

HELEN BROWN COVERDALE

1. Introduction

Being sure of each other is the blossoming of Kimberley Brownlee's earlier work on the intrinsic value and qualities of human connection (2013, 2016c, 2016b), opening with a scene from A. A. Milne's *House at Pooh Corner*: lost in the woods together, Piglet takes Pooh's paw 'just to be sure' of his friend. The importance of social connection is often overlooked because it is central to our lives, like breathable air. Brownlee's work highlights the need for social connection, as deserving of more philosophical attention and practical protection through rights. But her key insight is that receiving relational goods isn't all that matters: being able and permitted to provide relational goods to others, as Piglet and Pooh receive *and offer* each other reassurance, is just as essential for our wellbeing. Brownlee argues these interests are strong enough to ground rights (2016c: 28).

2. Overview

Most of the book carefully establishes social connection as an important need for everyone, which Brownlee defends as a human right against social deprivation. The first chapter identifies social connection as a need of great importance for everyone. We are identified as mutually dependent social beings, with 'non-contingent, fundamental social access needs and social-contribution needs that generate morally urgent demands' (Brownlee 2020: 38). The second chapter locates our social connection needs among our human rights, since other rights, such as rights to education and healthcare, depend on social connection. The

third chapter explores the rights-grounding interests we have in social connection, including our need for being able to contribute to the survival and wellbeing of others, and chapter 4 offers a consideration of what happens to our freedoms of personal association when these conflict with the rights of others to social connection. Chapter 5 offers a Kantian analysis of our freedom to associate (or disassociate), methodically categorising cases and providing systematised examples to argue that, since we cannot universalise a position that might leave some without necessary access to social connection, we cannot have an individual permission to associate only as we please. Chapter 6 defends the claim that our freedom to (dis)associate with others is in at least some circumstances secondary to the claim-rights of others to connection through some simple examples. Chapter 7 builds on these examples with more complex cases, illustrating the moral messiness possible (and probable) in real human lives, and showing the perverse outcomes and incentives produced by approaches other than Brownlee's right against social deprivation. Chapter 8 is applied, considering stigmatising language and segregating institutions such as hospitals and prisons. Most of her examples are persuasive. Yet, even where I do not share the intuition, I will argue that the examples go further than Brownlee suggests to illustrate the complexity, and importance to us, of the social connection that Brownlee calls us to recognise.

It is refreshing and encouraging to read about dependence from an influential liberal philosopher. Brownlee acknowledges the contribution of feminist care ethics (2020: 14) in developing dependence and vulnerability as the most plausible reading of the human subject (Gilligan 1993; Tronto 1993; Sevenhuijsen 1998; Held 2005; Collins 2015). While a care or relational ethics route could have been taken to Brownlee's destination, this is not her path. I am excited to see what will follow from discussions of Brownlee's work, since she provides further scope to conceptualise ourselves as interdependent.

The interdependency of care and relational perspectives illustrates why Brownlee's right against social deprivation is as important as she argues. In sections 4 and 5 I suggest a care ethics-like approach might help us put Brownlee's right into practice: what may count as connection, and how can we identify duty-bearers and duty-content in practice? Section 6 considers segregation in the prison, care, and the role of connection in desisting from crime. First, I examine interdependence and the overlaps with care and relational ethics in more

depth to show how these approaches overlap with Brownlee's right against social deprivation, and hence why they might be a relevant source of practical guidance.

3. Individuals as interdependent.

Feminist care ethics focuses on the practices of meeting needs, and the needs-meeting responsibilities that follow from our chosen and unchosen relationships. Hence, care ethics is 'situated': informed by the personal, social and practical context in which needs must be met. Caring aims to meet needs, build capabilities or avoid unwanted harms (Engster 2007: 75–76), guided by values of attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness (Tronto 1993: 127–37). Caring practice consists of noticing needs, making provisions for needs-meeting, giving care, and receiving the responses of the person cared for (1993: 105–7) in a responsive, respectful and engaged manner (Engster 2007: 37; Kittay 2002: 259–60).

Focusing on the need for giving *and receiving* social connection, Brownlee argues that the needs of vulnerable others may circumscribe our freedoms of association. The dependent self Brownlee identifies is distinct from mainstream liberal expectations of the independent, autonomous, self-sufficient individual (Code 1991: 77–78), *who never really existed* (since there was always someone else washing his (usually) socks, making his lunch, and raising his children in the background). Brownlee critiques this fictional individual, since 'we cannot flourish … without one another' (Brownlee 2016d). When we recognise ourselves as interdependent and our wellbeing as connected, we flourish together or not at all. Relational ethics is rooted in care ethics, but prioritises connection rather than needs-meeting practices (Koggel 1998; Llewellyn and Downie 2012; Sherwin 2012). While the central insight of classical liberalism as the treatment of each person with equal concern and respect (Koggel 1998: 46), mainstream liberalism recognises relationships as important for individuals, but not central to understanding what it is to treat another with equal concern and respect (Koggel 1998: 128). Meanwhile, a relational reading of concern and respect demands recognition of our connection and interdependence in order to understand what equal concern and respect means in a particular context (Llewellyn 2012). When we understand ourselves as interdependent, vulnerable selves in connection, supporting each other is a normal part of life, and other's needs as occasional limits to our choices become more readily intelligible.

To be sure of each other, to give and receive social goods, as Brownlee spotlights as an essential human need in her book, is to recognise our connection to others and a broader group of which we are part. That group might come in various sizes with different salient connecting factors: family members, neighbourhood residents, university communities, fellow citizens, fellow book-lovers, international religious fellowship, membership of a nation in diaspora, right up to the global human family. Following Brownlee we flourish together. To be sure of each other, then, is also to be sure of one another's inclusion in an 'us', and part of being sure of ourselves.

Brownlee offers four types of arguments for the moral urgency of social connection needs: empirical arguments (the role of connection in the socialisation and development of children); phenomenological arguments (our subjective, first-person comprehension of the world comes from our socialisation and our shared experiences of the world); respect-based arguments (following a Kantian duty to respect others as reasoning, feeling agents and as ends in themselves); and general arguments (Aristotelian friendship, Rawlsian self-respect, Buddhist cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion, and other non-Western perspectives). For Brownlee's purposes, these arguments show the importance of connection across many cultures, and applicability to several existing theoretical paradigms. These approaches further overlaps with care ethics, showing how this perspective might also contribute to recognising the importance of, and realising, Brownlee's social connection rights. Her empirical and phenomenological arguments meet: caring begins 'at home' (Noddings 2002), and expects interdependence and connection in our first unchosen relationships with our parents. Even very young children attempt to provide care to their caregivers (Hollway 2006: 43, 60). Appreciating relational connection and interdependency inform what constitutes respectful, dignified treatment (Koggel 1998: 128; Llewellyn 2012). The interdependence of care ethics also chimes with several non-western perspectives, including Buddhism (White 1999), Confucianism (Li 2002; Sander-Staudt 2015) and Ubuntu (Gouws and van Zyl 2015). But this is perhaps not surprising: most caring requires Brownlee's social connection. Brownlee further identifies that many of our basic rights can only be realised through social connection, to which I now turn.

4. What counts as connection?

Brownlee frames social connection as a secure claim-right against social deprivation with correlative duties, that limit our freedoms of (dis)association: parents may not permissibly use their freedom of association to deny connection to their own young child, ignoring the child's bids for, and attempts to provide, social connection (2020: 136). Furthermore, she argues that rights against social deprivation cannot depend on 'good behaviour or standing' (2020: 59), since other human rights presuppose connection - 'civil and political rights, subsistence rights, education rights, healthcare rights' (2020: 59). There might be circumstances in which one's political or civil rights are limited, for example, in the case of lawful criminal punishment. Imprisonment truncates liberty, and for at least some prisoners, many states suspend or permanently curtail voting rights. But rights to healthcare are universal: even prisoners in the US and in England and Wales receive healthcare. If these human rights are to be realised, then we first need to secure social connection for all.

Brownlee likens the right against social deprivation to the right against hunger, which protects against *involuntary* hunger and the health problems this produces. Some individuals *choose* hunger as religious observance, or a means of protest (Delmas 2018: 38) and do not assert their right against hunger. The unchosen absence of connection similarly damages our wellbeing, and Brownlee's right against social deprivation will help to articulate some of the wrongs of prolonged solitary confinement. Brownlee's parallel seeks to take account of people choosing a solitary life, to mirror those who fast. But choosing to withdraw need not be choosing disconnection, in the same way that refusing food is to choose hunger, purposefully leaving a need unmet. For the fasting person or protestor, temporary hunger, the opposite of a met need, has purpose and value. Turning away need not be rejection. For at least some who permanently withdraw, connection may still be important, rather than a valuing of disconnection.

Some seclusion might be best explained as a choice to connect differently: relinquishing human connections to deepen other relationships, for example with God (or with nature, or to oneself). My mother's friend, previously a nurse and teacher—roles exemplifying connection—became a cloistered Carmelite nun. Despite the social connection and care she shared with her Sisters, the purpose of seclusion is contemplative: to serve God and the

human family through prayer. This presumably includes cultivating connections with God. For the devoutly religious, praying for others might go some way to meet our own need to offer support and contribute to other's wellbeing, albeit indirectly. Although this is not Brownlee's position, withdrawal from worldly society need not always be a severing of connection when it is a choice to connect differently. If I am right, this suggests offering and receiving Brownlee's social connection is still important for some of those who would choose not to assert Brownlee's claim-right against social deprivation.

Brownlee considers objections around providing connection to potentially 'intolerable' people with whom no-one wants to connect, and considers connection with non-human beings and online connections for this purpose. She cautiously describes these as 'imperfect' forms of connection, relieving the pain of disassociation without meeting needs, and leaves open whether these are acceptable ways of meeting core social needs (Brownlee 2020:68). But these are not necessarily poor relations, and may sometimes be preferable, and not just for difficult people. Disabled scholars have found seminars more accessible with remote attendance options during the pandemic, a flexibility which is denied when 'going back to normal' is fetishized above what serves human needs. Providing advice and support via a telephone helpline may help to reassure callers that their anonymity is protected (since the support worker cannot identify them), making the caller feel safe enough to receive the help they need. Telemedicine can successfully provide healthcare in remote areas, or those for whom accessing medical facilities is difficult (Barnes 2012: 120), although technological limitations mean this is not without drawbacks, and not appropriate in all cases. Virtual relations cannot provide 'direct, interpersonal human contact' (Brownlee 2020: 68) through touch, but what matters is choosing the right approach to meet the need for connection in context. Choosing different, situation-appropriate means of connection emphasises the broad appeal of Brownlee's need for social connection.

Mats Steen's experience was documented on the BBC website. A wheelchair user from an early age due to muscular dystrophy, Mats was a keen player of the online game *World of Warcraft* for at least 10 years prior to his death. His parents were sad that their adult son spent most of his time alone in his room. But when his father posted an announcement of

Mats's passing on his son's blog, he received messages of condolence from across Europe, as the community of friends he had not known his son had reached out to share his grief.

Warcraft guilds are social spaces, allowing players to come together to share the game: taking part in solving collective action problems, where every individual must play their part to ensure the wellbeing of others, in tasks that no single player could complete alone (Williams et al. 2006). This might involve uniting against powerful forces that threaten harm. It could equally involve fishing, picking flowers, and crafting items. Mats had written of the 'escape' he felt in the game: 'my handicap doesn't matter, my chains are broken and I can be whoever I want to be' (Schaubert 2019).

Through the social life of the guild, players of all ages and backgrounds across Europe came to know and respect Mats's chosen character, Ibelin, giving and receiving connection and building relationships. Fellow players from the Netherlands, UK, Finland, and Denmark, attended Mats's funeral service in Oslo after guild members pooled money to help those who could not afford travel. Those who could not travel lit candles in his memory (Schaubert 2019).

Online relationships can provide real social connection. In the same way one may choose to withdraw from human community to meet a need for specific *type* of connection (e.g., with God), we may choose other *means* of connections. A choice to interact online may be shaped by a disability that makes in-person connection difficult. A choice to build a closer connection with God may be shaped by the necessity of withdrawing from society. But both choices recognise the importance of the need to connect that Brownlee seeks to protect. At least some examples of apparent chosen isolation may be modified forms of connection. While Brownlee does not mean to exclude these cases (only the possibility that chosen isolation might undermine her argument for a right against deprivation), these chosen cases of connecting differently add weight to her insight that connection is essential for most of us, most of the time.

5. Identifying duty-bearers and duty-content

On Brownlee's account, the social connection claim-rights of vulnerable others can limit our freedom of association, when those connections are necessary to avoid social deprivation. One potential challenge that Brownlee considers is Onora O'Neill's view, which holds that a claim-right cannot be operationalised in the absence of identifiable duty-bearers who are under specific duties. Drawing on John Tasioulas's argument, Brownlee counters that on an interest-based account of rights, identifying particular duty-bearers is a further step, not needed for identifying the right (2020: 59–61).

In practice we still need to know how this duty may be fulfilled, by whom, and what counts as successful discharge of the duty, and I suggest that care ethics approaches may help us. I consider some of Brownlee's examples. Existing relationships indicate primary duty-bearers, but ultimately vulnerability and proximity seem more important. Yet, even where I disagree with her discussion, these cases illuminate the importance and complexity of the social that connection Brownlee articulates. Brownlee considers that our duties to connect with some types of others persist even when the duty is severely burdensome. For example:

- Parents may not deny connection to their child, even in the case that the child is 'wanted by the police.'
  (2020: 136–37)

Here, connection might be as simple as responding to conversational advances, talking over difficulties, providing empathy and reassurance or solution-seeking brainstorming, offering a hug. Brownlee does not specify. Nor are we told the age of the child, or the reason the child is 'wanted' (presumably suspected criminal conduct). We need more information about this particular situation. Generally, we should preserve parent-child relationships wherever possible, and in complex cases parents should have access to extensive support – but preserving relationships may not always *be* possible. In England and Wales, the age of criminal responsibility is 10, and so very young children may be 'wanted', who need connection with their parents. But, on some occasions, it can be necessary for the wellbeing of at least one party to suspend or end a relationship. When an older or adult child is 'wanted' in relation to a pattern of criminal behaviour that is abusive, violent, or otherwise dangerous, towards either the individual themselves, or the parent, or the parent's other

dependents; suspending or severing the relationship may be in the best interest of the parties. Relationships matter, but they matter *for* individuals. Bad relationships can be harmful.

If things are this bad, this might be indicative of broader systemic failings of support for the family, and past political decisions about how to value, resource, and provide care. But protecting individuals in the here and now is also important. The parent may do the right thing, all things considered, withdrawing connection to protect themselves and other dependents, but still breach a pro tanto duty to connect with *their* child, acknowledging the pro tanto wrong in the failure to connect. Anyone concerned that Brownlee's right against social deprivation is too demanding or restrictive of individual freedoms of association should be reassured. This all things considered permission *not* to connect, hints at the extent to which even intimate others' rights against social deprivation may constrain our freedom of association when they become severely burdensome. Put another way, our vulnerability matters as well as that of the person we connect with, and without attending to our own needs we cannot offer support to others. Needs-meeting which demands self-sacrifice or erases the care-giver's autonomy is distorted care (Clement 1996: 43), whereas mature care recognises the needs of both parties (Pettersen 2012).

The limits on our associative freedom are then less about the duties or 'special nature' of the parent-child relationship; and more about vulnerability and capacity to help. Another of Brownlee's examples helps clarify this:

- a small boy, *Kevin*, attempts to befriend his 'grumpy, retired neighbour, Mr Gustafson,' following him around while Kevin's parents work long hours. (2020: 136–37)

I share Brownlee's view that, where parents fail to provide connection to their children, any adult that the child attempts to engage with has a similar duty to accept social connection. 'Mr Gustafson has some moral duty to associate with Kevin given both Kevin's need … and Mr Gustafson's proximity and awareness of Kevin's situation' (2020: 137). Moreover, while accepting Kevin's conversation is not burdensome, Brownlee argues that Mr Gustafson still

has this duty even if it becomes burdensome, since he is able to prevent the harm of Kevin's neglect (2020: 137).

Mr Gustafson's duty to offer and receive social connection with Kevin stems from Kevin's *need* and *vulnerability*, and Mr Gustafson's *proximity* and *capaci*ty to help. Our duties to meet a right against social deprivation comes from our comparative ability to prevent harm, not necessarily the relationships. Kevin's parents have the first responsibility, but when they fail, others must step in. Robert Goodin similarly suggests that relationships and duties within families are not 'special', rather those closest to us are more vulnerable to our actions and decisions to withhold assistance. For Goodin, an imprudent skater who ignores warning signs and falls through thin ice depends on bystander's willingness to help. Goodin argues that the bystanders have duties to help because of their capacity to prevent serious harm (1985: 129).

But how Mr Gustafson's duty is fulfilled, as Kevin and Mr Gustafson offer and receive connection, must be informed by their individual preferences and resources. Suppose Kevin wants to play soccer, but Mr Gustafson is too infirm to do so. Suppose Mr Gustafson prefers to speak the language of his childhood, which Kevin does not understand. The content of the duty must be moulded to fit Kevin's need and Mr Gustafson's ability. Presumably, although Brownlee specifies Mr Gustafson's duty persists even when burdensome, there must be some point at which Mr Gustafson's burden is too great: Kevin wants to talk, but Mr Gustafson should visit a sick friend (other-directed care responsibilities), or needs to rest (self-care). Mr Gustafson's wellbeing matters too, and shapes how he is required to fulfil the duty.

Identifying who the proximate duty-bearer is, and what the content of the duty to provide social connection demands of us in practice, requires attention to the context and parties. This type of situated, context-sensitive, continuous approach to identifying and refining what acts are required overlaps with the practices of care ethics. Care ethics can help us determine who bears a duty, and what that duty requires. The situatedness and attention to context of care ethics prompts the gathering of contextual information about needs, other responsibilities, and resources, to give a better understanding of the need and appropriate

available ways of meeting it. This additional information can help us to make more informed judgements about who bears the duty, and how they may fulfil it. As Seyla Benhabib observes, 'more knowledge rather than less contributes to a more rational and informed judgment' (1986: 417).

In addition, care ethics can also help us when we are not sure which set of principles to apply. Grace Clement argues care ethics provides a framework to guide our choices when it is not clear what justice requires in this context, or competing views of justice (sets of principles) diverge (1996: 103). Even if we cannot immediately identify a duty-bearer for the right against social deprivation in the abstract, care ethics provides a complement to rights that enables us to puzzle this out in practice. Care is not a complete political theory, and Joan Tronto argues that rights are an essential complement to care. Rights can avoid needs being pitted against one another, particularly when publicly-funded care services face cuts (2013: 153). In *Kevin's* case, Mr Gustafson is the duty-bearer, but a care ethics reading provides space for Mr Gustafson to consider his own needs, responsibilities and preferences along with Kevin's important need for connection.

I share Brownlee's view that freedoms of association are more limited than we tend to assume, but I think her *Lalit* example misses its mark.

- A young woman, *Lalit*, cannot be obliged to marry against her wishes because her tribe's survival is at stake, but is obliged to be friendly to other adult members since this isn't overly burdensome, *and* any burden is less than the threat to the tribe. (2020:137)

Here, the preservation of the *tribe*, rather than the *individual members' rights* against social deprivation, seems to be what imply Lalit's duties involving connection with them. If Lalit remains as part of the tribe, she should try to be friendly. But she should also be, as Mr Gustafson is, open to the friendly social advances of needy others. If Lalit has a duty to offer and accept connection with members of her tribe, it is at best a pro tanto duty: to the extent that they are friendly to her. If they are rude, or Lalit dislikes their company, or prefers to pursue her education in another city, she has no over-riding duty to stay. Unlike *Kevin*, these

other adults are not vulnerable, and can offer social (and cultural) connections with each other. The last two speakers of a language cannot oblige each other to engage in conversation only for the sake of preserving the language, even when this causes one of them great anguish. But unless she rejects her origins entirely, Lalit may have some obligation to learn her culture (requiring a teacher and connection), and perhaps to visit or write. But preserving shared cultural goods is distinct from the important and immediate need for social connection highlighted in *Kevin's* case that Brownlee's work emphasises.

It seems that, for Brownlee, where others are vulnerable, when we have a duty to connect, we have a stronger duty to offer and receive social connection with that other. We saw in the *'wanted'* case that, we may, when the duty is severely burdensome, all things considered permissibly fail the duty to connect in order to protect ourselves or our dependents. Nevertheless, the duty is failed, and the one we owe the duty to is pro tanto wronged. *Kevin's* case suggests that duty passes to the nearest available capable other. If I am right about *Lalit*, the duty to provide social connection is less pressing when those who make social advances are not vulnerable with respect to social connection opportunities. But what *Lalit* also highlights is that the content of the duty will vary over time. She may have some duty to engage in activities that require connection, but visiting and learning from her tribe might be occasional practices within an ongoing relationship. Likewise, Mr Gustafson might be too ill to engage with Kevin today, but this need not mean that he has failed in a duty to provide connection considered across their relationship. Likewise, that the exhausted parent pro tanto wrongs their '*wanted*' child by turning away to care for the child's siblings need not mean that the duty to connect with their wanted child has not previously been, or will never again be, fulfilled. As Brownlee's book helpfully emphasises, social connections are most valuable when they deepen and persist over time.

6. Segregation

Stigmatising labels and segregating institutions are related since labelling is part of the practices of these institutions. Brownlee has criticised essentialising labelling in criminal justice (2016a), a view I share. Broad-brush terms, such as 'offender', can be problematic, especially when the criminal record is minor and old, and the person has changed a great deal. Shadd Maruna and others identify building a 'new' identity as a law-abiding person as

necessary for successful desistance from offending – an identity that must be accepted by those around the individual (Maruna and Toch 2001: 55), which requires Brownlee's social connection. To minimise potentially counter-productive essentialism, I use person-centred language where possible: *people* with convictions, punished *people*, *people* who live in prison, are all people with families, presents, and futures, as well as pasts (Coverdale 2013: 37–38).

There is however cause for some optimism about penal practice. While 'in many prisons, officials refer to the people in their care by their surname only, as 'Smith' and never as 'Mr Smith', which is a demeaning form of address in this context that fits with broader, reductive, dehumanizing practices in criminal justice' (Brownlee 2020: 175), and in at least some cases in England and Wales, and the US, people who live in prisons are further dehumanised when they are addressed only by their prison number,[i] some institutions have better practices. James Q Whitman reports that German Prison Officers are required to address people who live in prisons as *'Herr last-name'* (2003: 8), and must knock prior to entering a cell, to respect the dignity of the occupant (2003: 90).

Rights are purposefully limited during imprisonment, so respecting residual rights is an important part of treating people who live in prisons inclusively as members of our communities. This makes recognising a right to connection more important in the case of segregation. Care in prisons can also contribute to this end, and can further help meet the aims of punishment: reducing recidivism, and preparing people for life in the community (Coverdale 2018, 2021). The often overlooked peer-to-peer care of prisoners - reading a letter from home to another who cannot read it for themselves, or talking over problems - are acts of care and human connection, both for the person-receiving support, *and* the person-giving support. In agreement with Brownlee's focus on our need to both give *and receive* social connection, offering support to others has been shown to be instrumentally helpful in the support-giver's own process of desisting from offending (Lebel, Richie, and Maruna 2015: 109). In addition to the value of social connection for individual wellbeing, rights against social deprivation for people living in prisons might then be instrumentally valuable to us all, in supporting people with convictions in desisting from offending.

7. Conclusion

Fabric and thread metaphors abound in writings on care ethics. The gordian knot of morally messy human lives binds us together and should be celebrated, not cut. We need each other, but we also achieve more when we support one another. I've offered some reflections on what it is to connect, how we can identify the content and bears of duties to connect, and briefly, the importance of connection even in cases of enforced segregation. Connection is inescapable and essential for most of us, and when I understand myself as part of 'us', being sure of each other is bound up with being sure of ourselves. Brownlee offers us the tools to recognise and protect a human need for giving *and receiving* social connection as a right, and more fundamentally an opportunity to recognise ourselves as interdependent.[ii]

Political Science Department, University College London,

London, UK

h.coverdale@ucl.ac.uk

York Law School, University of York,

York, UK

helen.coverdale@york.ac.uk

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