

**Radicalising Caring Democracy: A Conceptual Inquiry into
Aesthetic and Agonistic Political Theory and Epistemic Hegemony
and its Relevance for a Political Care Ethics**

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Politics is aesthetic in that it makes visible what had been excluded from a perceptual field, and in that it makes audible what used to be inaudible. It inscribes one perceptual world within another - for example, the world in which proletarians or women may participate in a community within another in which they both are "visibly" domestic being outside the life of the community; the world in which they both can speak within another in which they both "evidently" were capable only of moans of pain, cries of hysteria, or groans of fury. Politics is completely an affair of the antagonistic subjectivication of the division of the sensible

- Jacques Rancière in *the Philosopher and His Poor*

All forms of consensus are by necessity based on acts of exclusion.

- Chantal Mouffe in *The Democratic Paradox*

Facts do not at all speak for themselves, but require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain and circulate them.

- Edward Said in 'Permission to Narrate'

Summary

This thesis concerns a conceptual inquiry into the relevance of post-foundational political thought, exemplified by the works of Jacques Rancière and Chantal Mouffe, for political care ethics. This thesis emphasizes that knowledge is politically situated and constructed, and draws on an illustration of the handling of the Dutch government of the COVID-19 pandemic. By problematizing the way in which particular types of knowledge, especially knowledge derived from positivist science, are privileged, while other types and sources of knowledge are subordinated and obscured. Following from this initial problematization, the argument is made that political care ethics, itself a heterodox field of inquiry, requires a consciousness and response to the politically situated nature of knowledge. By drawing on the concepts of the aesthetic nature of the political, agnostic politics, and (epistemic) hegemony, this political situation of knowledge is explicated and problematized. Subsequently, these concepts are brought into a conceptual dialogue, in which it is argued that the epistemic aspects of depoliticisation and hegemony should be at the forefront of an understanding of the political. Finally, the ramifications for such a notion of the political for care ethics are discussed, and it is argued that a political care ethics could utilize the concepts of aesthetic and agonistic politics and epistemic hegemony in an invigorated notion of the political.

In Chapter 1, the societal and scientific problematization are elaborated on, and the main research questions and aims are defined. The manner in which the COVID-19 crisis is handled in the Dutch context, and the manner in which knowledge is used in this context, is argued to be highly relevant for care ethics. In addition, it is argued that current political care ethics has neglected the relevance of post-foundational thought in a conception of the political. In Chapter 2, the method for this conceptual inquiry is elaborated upon, and key quality criteria are explicated. In Chapter 3, a genealogical account of political care ethics is provided, to ensure a thorough understanding of the conceptual context of this inquiry. A preliminary argumentation for the relevance of post-foundational thought, rooted in care ethics' relational ontology and epistemic pluralism, is provided. In Chapter 4, post-foundational political thought is explored and described, utilizing the work of Jacques Rancière and Chantal Mouffe. In Chapter 5, the concept of epistemic hegemony is introduced, and illustrated by drawing on the Dutch handling of the Coronacrisis. In Chapter 6, the findings of the previous two chapters are related to each other, and an emphasis on the epistemic nature of depoliticisation and hegemony are argued for. In addition, this chapter concerns a problematization of the work of Mouffe and Rancière. In the final chapter, the

earlier concepts are brought into a conceptual dialogue with political care ethics. An understanding of epistemic hegemony and post-foundational thought in care ethics is argued for, and the ramifications and objections to such an understanding are discussed. In addition, the concept of a radical caring democracy is introduced. Finally, in the Conclusion, the findings of the earlier chapters are summarized, the weaknesses of this study are explicated and possible avenues for future research are identified.

Preface

Studying both care ethics and health economics during a global pandemic has been a thrilling and, at times, confusing experience. While these academic disciplines sometimes have distinctly different focus points and methods, they both aim to generate knowledge concerning care practices and their governance. Immersing myself in these fields of study simultaneously sometimes felt like moving between worlds, with different conceptions of ‘good’ care, its place in society, and the knowledge that can be gathered from, or generated by, these fields of study. Particularly this last point, concerning the different epistemologies within these fields of inquiry has caught my interest, albeit accompanied by some ‘epistemological stress’. This stress partly arose from my inability to reconcile the conviction that both fields can contribute valuable knowledge, with the understanding that both fields operate from seemingly mutually exclusive epistemological frameworks. During my quest to further develop my understanding of this tension, and to mitigate some of this stress, I found Margaret Urban Walker’s (2007) *Moral Understandings* to be simultaneously insightful and comforting. Her description of the “metamoral funk” she experienced, and her remedy for it, namely to make the problem a topic of inquiry, have inspired me to select the topic for my thesis (Walker, 2007, p. xii).

Throughout the process of writing this thesis I have become more convinced of the value of care-ethical research in general, and the radical potential for a political care ethics specifically. This thesis has further instilled in me the realization that my relation to the world around me is one of concern (Sayer, 2011). I wish to thank the University for Humanistic Studies, and especially the professors of the master Care Ethics and Policy, for providing me with a new insights pertaining to ethics, care, and politics, which have not only equipped me to write the thesis you see in front of you, but also a new outlook on the world and my place in it. In particular, I wish to thank Dr. Merel Visse, my supervisor during this project. Her critical and constructive feedback, and enthusiasm for the political and aesthetic aspects of care ethics have substantially contributed to the quality of this thesis, and have made this process both stimulating and pleasant. I would also like to thank Dr. Alistair Niemeijer for helpful feedback in the earliest stages of this process.

In addition, I would like to thank my friends and family who have supported me throughout this challenging period. They have provided me with the caring environment a project like this requires, and their critical questions about my argumentation and writing style have been essential to the clarity of the arguments within this paper.

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1. Problem Statement and Relevance

1.1. Motivation

One of the topics that exhibited the epistemic tensions that seem so prevalent and pressing in contemporary society concerns the Coronacrisis and the political and policy response to it. The sources and types of knowledge that are, and should be used, are elaborated on and discussed within my academic environment. Outside of my academic bubble debate started on epistemological questions too, albeit in different terms and primarily focused on the differences between the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences, rather than the philosophical frameworks on which these are based.¹ Therefore, in this thesis I explore questions of epistemology in relation to the COVID-19. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the lion's share of this paper concerns a conceptual inquiry into the way in which knowledge is politically situated. My initial scoping of the literature resulted in the realization that the repercussions of this idea, that knowledge is politically constructed, had broad implications for the conception of politics, and the political, in care ethics. In this thesis, I focus on exploring the ramifications of this idea for a political care ethics.

1.2. Societal Problematization

The effects of the pandemic and subsequent policy responses to it, including (partial) lockdowns and social isolation requirements, have been detrimental to different groups, especially so for vulnerable and marginalized groups including the elderly (Cheung et al., 2020; Roest et al., 2020), children and youth (Loades et al., 2020), those with intellectual disabilities (Courtenay & Perera, 2020; Villani et al., 2020), and those dealing with mental health issues (Chatterjee et al., 2020; Hamada & Fan, 2020; Kavoor, 2020). Thus, the COVID-19 crisis, and the governmental response to it, create a situation in which a lot is at stake for large swathes of society. Therefore, it is highly relevant to critically reflect on the policy response so far, and particularly on the type of knowledge and argumentation these responses are based upon, and how these are politically constructed. As I will elaborate on later in this thesis, the epistemic frameworks on which governmental action, in all its diversity, is founded is fundamental for the manner in which the problem is represented, and subsequently the policy responses which are deemed appropriate following from this problem representation.

¹ See for example Canoy & Dijk (2020) in *Sociale Vraagstukken* and Ostaijen (2020) in the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*.

In addition, I am concerned about the fact that the COVID-19 crisis has exhibited features of a broader, concerning, development in Western neoliberal regimes, namely a process of depoliticisation and post-democratic technocratic governance (Flinders & Wood, 2014; Mouffe, 2005b, 2005a; Rancière, 1999, 2007; Swyngedouw, 2014). Currently, the Netherlands is relying heavily on the epidemiological and medical advice coming from the Outbreak Management Team (OMT), which consists of medical doctors, epidemiologists, virologists, and other medical professionals.² The pivotal importance of the advice of this expert group can be seen in the words of Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who in the early days of the Coronacrisis stipulated that the government would never take less measures than advised by the experts.³ This hegemony of epidemiology in the political decision-making concerning COVID-19 can be considered problematic, as it has resulted in a representation of the crisis as essentially a public health phenomenon, while the crisis has distinct socioeconomic aspects, and seems to deepen inequalities within Dutch society. This high dependence on epidemiology has been criticized by a diverse plethora of individuals and institutions, ranging from grassroots activist groups as *Viruswaanzin/Viruswaarheid* to groups of elite intellectuals including *Herstel.NL*.⁴ This diverse public critique further justifies an analysis of the kind of knowledge that underlies much of the decision-making and policy responses concerning COVID-19. However, as I will elaborate throughout this thesis, this type of reliance is not simply a feature of crisis policy, but can be said to be a structural occurrence within contemporary regimes, thus justifying a broader, conceptual, inquiry in to these phenomena.

1.3. Scientific Problematization

Besides the societal relevance sketched above, this thesis can also be considered to be responding to several gaps in current academic debate concerning COVID-19, epistemic hegemony, and depoliticisation as a neoliberal strategy. In this paper I will argue that the post-foundational political theory concerning depoliticisation and post-democratic technocracy has so far underemphasized the central role of epistemic hegemony in its processes. I believe that the COVID-19 crisis, and the political response to it in the Netherlands provide a prime illustration for further showcasing this relationship. In addition, I will argue that care ethics,

² See <https://www.rivm.nl/coronavirus-covid-19/omt>.

³ For a full transcript of the press conference of the Prime Minister on the 20th of March see: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/mediateksten/2020/03/20/letterlijke-tekst-persconferentie-na-ministerraad-20-maart-2020>. Note that while writing this thesis the Dutch Government has taken measures that conflicted with the proposals by the OMT (see: *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, Kraijenoord, 2021).

⁴ See www.viruswaarheid.nl and www.herstel-nl.nl for overviews of their critique and proposals. Please note that I do not want to suggest that these groups are very similar, I merely aim to exhibit the diversity of groups that critique this focus on epidemiology in COVID decision-making.

and its relational ontology, and expressive-collaborative model of ethics, provides a useful analytical lens to further uncover the problematic aspects of this depoliticisation and epistemic hegemony. Moreover, I hold that a political care ethics would benefit from learning from post-foundational thought.

While the scientific relevance of this thesis will be elaborated on, and contextualized, in the conceptual study in the following chapters and the conclusion, I will now briefly sketch the main hiatuses in the scientific literature to ensure my intentions for this paper are clear at the outset.

1.3.1. The Political in Political Care Ethics

Within political care ethics neoliberalism has been extensively critiqued (Brugère, 2020; Slote, 2015; Tronto, 2017; Tronto, 2013; White, 2020). Tronto (2013, 2017) stipulates that care ethics, and a democratic theory integrating insights from care ethics, can provide an alternative paradigm to neoliberalism. In her work, Tronto (2013) argues that democratic theorists have focused too much on the process of democracy and the nature of democratic dispute, rather than the substance of democracy, which according to Tronto should centre around the concept of care. While I concur that a care-ethical democratic theory requires a focus on the substance of democratic politics, I will argue that a conception of the concept of the political is required. In doing so, I do not intend to dismiss the conceptual contributions of Tronto or other care ethicists to this substance of democracy. Rather, I intend to show that without a clear conception of the political, rooted in post-foundational political theory, care ethics will be unlikely to be able to challenge the neoliberal paradigm. Thus, by integrating these insights concerning ‘the political’ I aim to supplement, rather than replace, the existing care ethical literature pertaining to democratic theory. This, in turn, requires me to juxtapose and compare care ethics and post-foundational and agonistic political theory, which I will do in Chapter 7. For now, it should be noted that Cloyes (2002) has highlighted the possibility of constructing a political notion of care, gathering insights on the convergences and divergences of agonistic feminism and care ethics. However, Cloyes’ (2002) work can be improved upon by highlighting the epistemic dimension of the political, and its ramifications for a political notion of care, which brings me to my next point.

1.3.2. Centring the Epistemic Dimension of the Political

In addition to bringing about a dialogue between care ethics and post-foundational political theory, I will argue that the epistemic dimension of the political should be at the centre of this

dialogue. The epistemic dimension of politics becomes increasingly visible in an era that is partly defined as post-truth, in which traditionally respected sources of knowledge, academia being a salient example, are delegitimized. So far, care ethical literature has focused on the significance of attentiveness and listening within politics, within the context of deliberative democracy (Bourgault, 2020; Gilligan, 2016). According to Bourgault (2020), drawing on Gadamer's account of conversation, democratic citizenship requires us to deeply listen and converse to uncover deep solidarities and our interdependent relationship. Which, in turn, requires epistemic humility, and allows for ambivalence. While I recognize the need for attentiveness, listening and conversation within democracies, and while I hold that forging solidarities will be aided by doing so, I will argue that it will not prove to be a successful strategy to critique, or overthrow, the neoliberal paradigm we observe in liberal democracies today, and thus will not be able to constitute a caring democracy. I will argue that care ethics needs to develop an understanding of neoliberalism as hegemonic epistemic project, and that this project will not facilitate a democratic citizenship founded (partly) on deep listening conversation, as the outcomes of such practices are not deemed knowledge at all, or deemed irrelevant to politics.

In *Caring to Know*, Dalmiya (2016) provides a different epistemological account relevant for care ethics, which is rooted in a care-ethical ontology of people as embodied, interdependent, vulnerable, and relational beings. Knowledge, within this care-based epistemology, requires 'a certain way of being', it requires a relational humility of the knower. Dalmiya (2016) also notes the possible political implications for such a care-based epistemology, in stressing that it can contribute to crafting a feminist political future by emphasizing the vulnerability (in knowing) of all people. While it goes beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the care-based epistemology Dalmiya (2016) constructs, my aim is to indicate that this work also seems to neglect, or at least underestimate, the vulnerable position care ethics finds itself in. Within the neoliberal paradigm, which postulates a universalist and rationalist conception of truth, the results of inquiry that is not founded on these principles is not deemed scientific, and thus not relevant in the context of technocratic government.

I want to stress again that I do not intend to critique the substance of the care ethical literature mentioned above, but rather the practical infeasibility that these works seem to exhibit. If care ethics truly wishes to be constructive, as well as critical, it needs to recognize that within a neoliberal regime which privileges positivist research and posits a universalist-rationalist conception of truth, an understanding of neoliberalism as an epistemic hegemony is required.

And, if care ethics accepts this understanding of neoliberalism, and the concept of the political underlying it, it also requires theorizing possible responses to this hegemony, for example in the form of a counter-hegemonic project. Thus, while this section of my problematization is scientific at its core, it cannot be seen apart from the societal (or political) implications of these problems.

1.4. Research Questions

Considering the above, the core question I will pursue in this thesis is:

How do the concepts of epistemic hegemony and depoliticisation interrelate, how are these exhibited in the current handling of the COVID-19 crisis in the Netherlands, and how can these concepts contribute to care ethics?

This core question can be divided in the following sub-questions:

1. How does the concept of epistemic hegemony relate to the theories on depoliticisation of Mouffe and Rancière?
2. How can we interpret the processes of epistemic hegemony and depoliticisation from a care ethical perspective?
3. How does epistemic hegemony contribute to the depoliticisation of the COVID-19 response within the Dutch context?
4. (How) can care ethics appreciate the conception of the political as set out by post-foundational theories, and respond to the neoliberal strategies of depoliticisation and epistemic hegemony?

1.5. Research Aim

The aim of this research, flowing from the societal and scientific problematization sketched above, concerns the following. This thesis aims to develop a care-ethical understanding of the phenomena of depoliticisation and epistemic hegemony. Moreover, by developing this understanding, a care-ethical appreciation of these phenomena will be constructed. Finally, these phenomena will be identified in the context of the COVID-19 response within the Netherlands, and critiqued.

2. Methods

This thesis concerns a conceptual study into the interrelation of epistemic hegemony depoliticisation, and political care ethics, accompanied by an illustration focusing on the actualization of these concepts within the COVID-19 response in the Netherlands. As such, there is no predefined methodology, in the social scientific sense, that I have followed. This section will focus on the route I travelled in developing this study, focusing on the data collection and analysis and the quality criteria.

2.1. Data Collection

2.1.1. Conceptual Study: Identification of Authors and Theory

The lion's share of this study concerns a conceptual study into the aforementioned concepts and their position within political care ethics. As noted, the focus will lie on the work of Mouffe (Mouffe, 2005b, 2005a) and Rancière (Rancière, 1999, 2007). However, their work will be further enriched and supported by other data. To collect the necessary data, here referring mostly to peer-reviewed journals, and authored and edited monographs, I have built upon the literature already referenced throughout this proposal. In many instances these academic works constitute a treasure trove of conceptual knowledge and theory. In addition, these works also reference relevant other works, which I have consulted in case I identify missing (conceptual) knowledge. I have made use of Google Scholar, the Erasmus University Library Catalogue, PubMed, and other online search engines, to find additional sources.

Note that the set-up of this thesis, and the order in which I present my findings, are intentional. First, I will provide a genealogical account of political care ethics, in order to situate the conceptual context of this thesis. To ensure I communicate the core aspects of both Mouffe and Rancière in a comprehensive manner, Chapter 4 focuses on their writings alone. In Chapter 5 I elaborate on the concept of *epistemic hegemony*, as introduced by Brough (2013), and sketch what this may look like in practice by drawing on the COVID-19 crisis and its political and policy response. In Chapter 6 I will bring the concepts and literature on depoliticisation and epistemic hegemony into dialogue, and critically reflect on some of the core tenets of these works. In Chapter 7 I will consider these concepts in the light of a political care ethics, and discuss the ramifications of appreciating or adopting insights from these concepts.

2.1.2. Illustration: News and Archival Sources

To be able to illustrate the phenomena of epistemic hegemony and depoliticisation I will be making use of an illustration: the COVID-19 response in the Netherlands. It concerns an instrumental illustration, meaning that I include it in order to provide a more thorough and applied understanding of the aforementioned phenomena (Stake, 2003). Thus, the illustration will be organized around several issues, aiming to further concretize or contextualize particular concerns (Stake, 2003). These issues will mainly be illustrated by drawing on news and archival sources, including press conferences, parliamentary proceedings and television appearances of key figures. Note that this illustration is not intended as an in-depth analysis of these phenomena, but rather as a tool to concretize these concepts and situate them within contemporary society.

2.2. Data Analysis

3.2.1. Thinking Along, Counter Thinking, and Rethinking

In this study I will be employing the thinking along, counter thinking, and rethinking approach (Baart & Vosman, 2015; Vosman & Niemeijer, 2017). In this conceptual study, this comes down to the following application. First, the existing theory on the core concepts, as identified in the first three chapters, will be further developed and appreciated from a care ethical perspective. Second, the existing theory will be critiqued, drawing on authors from different fields, and schools of thought. Subsequently, by employing the insights of care ethics on, *inter alia*, epistemology and ontology, my aim is to bring about a conceptual dialogue between these post-foundational political theorists and philosophers and political care ethics. Finally, the concepts of epistemic hegemony and depoliticisation will be constituted in a way that draws upon the insights of care ethics, and contributes to it.

3.2.2. Writing in the Dark

In this study, I follow Max van Manen (2016) in asserting that “[w]riting is not just externalizing internal knowledge, rather it is the very act of making contact with the things of our world” (p. 237). Although van Manen wrote these words in the context of phenomenological research, I believe these words hold for a conceptual study as well. Practically, this means that writing is not merely putting in words the conceptual study occurring ‘elsewhere’, but writing constitutes part of the research process. Through my writing I have aimed to explicate further the meaning and value of the data I have collected in

earlier stages, thereby enhancing and clarifying the interpretation of these concepts in the context of a political care ethics.

3.2.3. Quality Criteria

Within conceptual research, clarity and traceability are of the utmost importance. Therefore, I have prioritized these criteria in the editing process. Of course, this should not impede with the quality and comprehensiveness of argumentation. To test these criteria, I have found several fellow students, friends and family members to read along. In addition, I relied on the feedback from my thesis supervisor. Finally, alongside drafting this thesis, I maintained a reflexive journal to keep track of my lines of reasoning and to provide myself with a developmental account of the arguments found within my final product.

3. A History of Political Care Ethics

This section will describe several core tenets of care ethics, on the basis of a genealogical account of its development. Note that I do not intend to provide an entirely comprehensive overview of its development, as this would go beyond the scope of this thesis. In addition, I want to stress that care ethics as a field is plural, diverse, and decidedly non-monolithic, i.e. *the* care ethics does not exist (Leget et al., 2019). Therefore, the reader should appreciate this section as an overview of core tenets of care ethics that are deemed especially relevant for the aim of this study, namely constructing a dialogue between post-foundational political theory and care ethics.

The roots of care ethics can be found in a seminal work by moral psychologist Carol Gilligan (1982), *In a Different Voice*. In this empirical work the first delineations of a contemporary ethic centred around relations and people, rather than rules and principles, were described (Gilligan, 1982). In her empirical study, she found this relational moral reasoning to be predominantly present in girls, and therefore emphasized the feminine character of this different voice (Gilligan, 1982). Her work was later critiqued for the methods it was founded on and a seemingly essentialist view of gender and a resulting dichotomous view of moral development (Heyes, 1997; Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Tronto, 1993). Nonetheless, Gilligan's initial work allowed for the development of a new view of ethics and resulted in a diverse field of moral scholarship. The development of care ethics, and the authors present within this field, can be categorized in two 'generations' (Hankivsky, 2004). The first generation, exemplified by Noddings (1984) and Ruddick (1995), focused on a distinct women's morality and caring activities as traditionally associated with women, including mothering (Hankivsky, 2004). The work of this first generation has been heavily debated, both inside and outside of feminist ethical scholarship, for several reasons (Hankivsky, 2004). One seminal feminist criticist of the ethic of care was Susan Okin, who in several works criticized an ethic of care for relying too much on subjectivist epistemological underpinnings and a relational ontology (Okin, 1989, 1998; Sevenhuijsen, 1998). This critique falls in a broader category of feminist concerns pertaining to an ethic of care, that hold on to objectivist epistemologies and are concerned by the fundamental uncertainty that care ethics encompasses (Allison, 1991; Clark, 1993; Sevenhuijsen, 1998).

A second generation of care ethics, exemplified by political theorist Joan Tronto (1993) and her seminal work *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, responded to these concerns pertaining to essentialism and subjective epistemology (Hankivsky, 2004).

Tronto (1993) argues for a strategic employment of an ethic of care, including a move away from the essentialism she identifies in Gilligan's work. Moreover, she elaborates on the need for a feminist critique of moral objectivism and moral absolutism within an ethics of care (Tronto, 1993). In addition, this second generation broadened the concept of care, moving care beyond the sphere of the feminine (Hankivsky, 2004; Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Tronto, 1993). An embraced definition of care became:

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. That world includes our bodies, our environments, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Fischer & Tronto, 1990, p. 40)

These developments in the conceptual understandings of care also required an elaboration of epistemological underpinnings of care ethics. The feminist philosopher Margaret Urban Walker, and her work *Moral Understandings*, have been vital in the development of this epistemological framework of care ethics. (Walker, 2007) introduced the expressive-collaborative model of morality, which holds that morality and moral knowledge emerge within practices, not theories (Leget et al., 2019). Walker (2007) juxtaposes this model to the theoretical-judicial model, the dominant form of ethics in the Western moral theory, expressed in (neo-)Kantian (deontological) and utilitarian ethics. The expressive-collaborative model denotes that the creation of moral knowledge, expressly referred to by Walker (2007) as moral *understandings*, are embodied and socially constructed within practices. Note that Walker builds upon the work of Ruddick (1995), who exhibits a practicalist notion of truth, meaning that what is truth, what is knowledge, and what evidence is required to be considered either, is a socially construed and embedded practice. In the context of this paper, this is especially relevant, as care ethics thus rejects epistemological realism, or objectivism, which are dominant epistemologies in much of biomedical and political practice.

Another influential contribution of political care ethics is the relational ontology that grounds much of the conceptual and empirical research in this field of inquiry (Held, 2007; Leget et al., 2019; Robinson, 2011; Tronto, 1993, 2013; Visse et al., 2015). In essence, care ethics departs from an understanding that "relations of interdependence and dependence are a fundamental feature of our existence" (Robinson, 2011, p. 12). This means that care ethics rejects the notion of the autonomous rational individual as *the* moral agent, and criticizes moral theories that are built upon such a notion (Tronto, 1993). By focusing on people as relational, vulnerable, and interdependent beings, morality can no longer merely focus on one individual's behaviour towards another individual. Instead of focussing on mere individuals,

networks of people engaging in relations become a focus point. This also matters for our conception of politics, as the traditional focus on politics as arbiter or arena of competing interests no longer seems to fit.

In addition, a focus on responsibility and responsibility setting processes, is a central focus of much care ethical scholarship (Pettersen, 2012; Tronto, 1993, 2013; van Nistelrooij & Visse, 2019; Walker, 2007). Walker (2007) emphasizes the seminal role for the assignment of responsibilities in morality, and how this assignment is influenced by the positionality of individuals. This *geography of responsibilities*, i.e. the relations of responsibility within a society and the manner in which these are assigned, provides the moral philosopher with the starting point for mapping the moral understandings within societies. This focus on responsibility is relevant to this paper as the assignment, and in this context the deflection of responsibility, is an ever-present phenomenon in political practice.

Care ethicists have been conscious of the political implications of care ethics, and the political relevance of care and caring. One work in particular has elaborately developed the political and practical ramifications of a democracy that takes seriously an ethic of care, namely *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice*, by Tronto (2013). In this work, Tronto (2013) critiques contemporary democratic theorists with being concerned only with the *procedural* aspects of democracy, rather than *substance* of democracy. According to Tronto, the end, or goal, of a democracy that seriously incorporates care ethical insights is to enable humans to live well, and achieve the values of democratic life: liberty, equality and justice. According to Tronto (2013), citizens of democracies should be able, and be enabled, to participate in the responsibility-setting processes pertaining to care, which she argues to be central processes of democracy. These processes should be inclusive, and require a commitment to the earlier mentioned democratic values (Tronto, 2013).

Several care ethicists have taken up the challenge of theorizing the implications and requirements for a care ethical political practice (Bourgault, 2020; Heier, 2020; Visse et al., 2015). These developments have focused on deliberation, and caring democracy has been described as an extension of, and an addition to, the scholarship on deliberative democracy (Heier, 2020). However, as Heier (2020) notes, the tenets of caring democracy also bring to the fore the ‘contestedness’ and epistemological problems, ignorance and injustice. Heier (2020) points out that the theory of caring democracy emphasizes the inadequacy of traditional deliberative theories. According to Heier (2020), “[d]emocratic caring with’ becomes the gauge to measure whether or not the more inclusive responsibility-setting

processes that Tronto suggests as a remedy to unpoliticalness function well by being both democratic and caring” (pp. 68-69). However, the exact machinations of such gauging, its meaning, and whether democratic caring actually can be a remedy to unpoliticalness, or depoliticisation, remains unanswered. In addition, Heier (2020) also points out how democratic *caring with* also accentuates epistemological dimensions of political debate, such as epistemic ignorance and injustice. While Heier (2020) thus analyses valuable contributions of Tronto’s (2013) theory, a thorough development of these ideas is lacking. Moreover, I hold that the ramifications of care ethics’ relational ontology, and the plurality of moral knowledge that flows from it, for any democratic practice are more substantial than is currently acknowledged within the care-ethical literature. If knowledge is indeed plural, the potential for deep disagreements, also partly resulting from epistemic injustice, is substantial (Lagewaard, 2021; Ranalli, 2018). The consequences of this potential on the viability of deliberative processes in ‘reaching’ a caring democracy are substantial. Therefore, I hold that this potential requires further analysis, which this essay aims to provide.

Considering the above, I intend to rethink care ethics by adopting insights from post-foundational political theory, including the work of Mouffe (2005b, 2005a) and Rancière (1999, 2007). In order to situate and understand the epistemological issues mentioned above, I draw upon the work dealing with epistemic hegemony (Brough, 2013). To concretize these issues, I will describe the COVID-19 crisis response in the Netherlands, and how these exhibit these issues. This concrete application also allows me to develop a care-ethical critique incorporating the insights of depoliticisation and epistemic injustice.

4. Post-Politics and Depoliticisation

In order to be able to bring about a dialogue between care ethics and the literature of ‘post-politics’ and depoliticisation, it is necessary to properly define the scope, and meaning, of these terms.⁵ As has been argued by (Beveridge, 2017), the theory on depoliticisation is diverse, sometimes covers different phenomena, and entails differing ontological commitments. Beveridge (2017) identifies three conceptions of politics within the literature on depoliticisation. The first strand, which defines politics as institutions of government, focusses on depoliticisation as a form of statecraft, a political strategy (Beveridge, 2017). Here, the spatial context of processes of depoliticisation are confined to the (actions of) government (Beveridge, 2017). The second strand, which defines politics as choice and contingency, broadens the scope and focusses on depoliticisation as the moving of issues from a (political) sphere of choice and possibility, to a (non-political) sphere of fate and necessity, i.e., a process in which issues are constructed as relevant for political concern or not (Beveridge, 2017). The third and final strand defines politics as “politics as the apparatus of order and consensus versus ‘political’ moments of antagonism” (Beveridge, 2017, p. 590). This strand takes a more radical approach, in juxtaposing the political, defined as unique moments of genuine conflict, and politics, defined as the negation of this conflict, exercised through the institutionalised practices of politics that foster, or create, order and consensus (Beveridge, 2017; Rancière, 1999).

In this paper I consider the latter, exemplified by the work of Chantal Mouffe (2005b, 2005a, 2009) and Jacques Rancière (1999) to be most relevant, for several reasons. First, the first two strands mentioned above operate within an universalist-rationalist logic, which is exactly the type of logic I intend to problematize within this paper. Conversely, the work by Mouffe and Rancière, fundamentally criticize this universalist-rationalist logic, thereby allowing me to rethink it from a care-ethical perspective. Secondly, and related, Mouffe and Rancière theorize politics and ‘the political’, from an explicit ontological standpoint, and they explicate their normative position. As I intend to rethink the political within political care ethics, this literature is most relevant for the intentions set out in this paper. In the following section I will begin with a comprehensive overview of Jacques Rancière’s social and political ontology, as I contend that this ontology underlies both Rancière’s own conception of the political, as well

⁵ Throughout this text I will refer to these concepts as ‘depoliticisation’ for sake of clarity, unless I believe it is of interest to juxtapose competing meanings of depoliticisation. In these instances I will clarify why I opt for one term over the other.

as Mouffe's theories. In addition, I will provide an overview of the core tenets of Mouffe's theory on the political, and her arguments for a re-appreciation of the agonism within politics. In Chapters 6 and 7 I will appreciate these theories from, and relate them to, a care ethical perspective.

4.1. Jacques Rancière's Politics, Police and Disagreement

In Rancière's seminal work *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, politics means something radically different from how it is colloquially understood (Rancière, 1999). According to Rancière, politics constitutes an aesthetic moment, during which those who were previously not perceptible as a part, whose voices were not audible, become perceptible, it constitutes "the partition of the perceptible" (Rancière, 1999, p. 24). This partition occurs when "the natural order [...] is interrupted by a freedom that crops up and makes real the ultimate equality on which any social order rests", thereby emphasizing the contingent nature of the political (Rancière, 1999, p. 16). Politics is the response to *a wrong*, that is the wrong of inequality, and a reconstitution of the political community, in the sense that those who were previously excluded from the community of the political are included by a recognition of their equality to (those constituting) the dominant order, those who were previously included (Rancière, 1999). In these terms, politics consists of a struggle for recognition of political subjectivity of those who were initially not perceived and thus not recognized as political, as having a voice, and who thus did not exist as a political subject. Note that this 'cropping up of freedom' need not always occur in response to a particular injustice, and that the political thus constitutes a contingent phenomenon. This phenomenon can only be appreciated as truly political if a reconstitution of the political community occurs.

To clarify what this means, Rancière (1999) draws upon an example from Roman history, in which a conflict on the Aventine Hill between patricians and plebeians becomes political once the former recognize that the latter are capable of having a political voice, and thus become visible as political subjects. Initially no real political conflict existed, as the patricians did not recognize that the plebeians, so different from and lesser than them, had a political voice (Rancière, 1999). However, once the plebeians started to act and speak as the patricians, once they started to mimic them, they made themselves of some account, they made themselves visible politically, and they make the pre-existing inequality visible as a wrong (Rancière, 1999). The political can be said to have occurred when the patricians recognized the plebeians as equally capable of having a political voice, after the latter started to conduct themselves as people who own such a voice. Examples of this conduct are the appointment of emissaries

and representatives, and the facilitation of public debate among the plebeians (Rancière, 1999). On an ontological level, politics thus consists of a “contradiction of two worlds in a single world: a world where they [meaning those previously unrecognized and thus non-existent as political subjects] are and the world where they are not” (Rancière, 1999, 27). Rancière (1999) stresses the contingency of any political moment by stressing that the above-mentioned confrontation between worlds, where those who had no part become instituted, can never occur and can at any time occur. Thus, for Rancière, the nature of the political is one of contingent disagreement over the equality and existence of political subjects.

Rancière juxtaposes the political, or politics, as described above with *la police*, the police (Rancière, 1999). According to Rancière (1999), the police is that what is colloquially understood as politics, namely “the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution” (p. 28). It is important to note here that Rancière (1999) does not equate the police with the state, or the ‘state apparatus’ in Althusserian terms, since the police order “stems as much from the assumed spontaneity of social relations as from the rigidity of state functions” (p. 29). Rancière (1999) emphasizes the social and aesthetic nature of the police order when he states that:

[t]he police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise. (p. 29)

Note here that the political is thus the antithesis of the police order. The political occurs when the police order is fundamentally contested by making visible that what used to be made invisible by that very same police order (Rancière, 1999). In addition, and especially relevant for this paper, this definition of the police order lays bare the manner in which disagreement is political in nature (Rancière, 1999, 2004b). The police order determines whether particular speech is understood as discourse, i.e. intelligible, justified, and in the context of neoliberal society, rational, and thus of relevance. And it determines which speech is understood as noise, as simply indicating pain, pleasure or inconvenience, and thus not relevant for consideration within a police order.

The understanding of politics described above allows Rancière (1999) to criticize the current state of democracy, characterized by a commitment to consensus, and deem it post-political. According to Rancière (1999) consensus democracy concerns

a reasonable agreement between individuals and social groups who have understood that knowing what is possible and negotiating between partners are a way for each party to obtain the optimal share that the objective givens of the situation allow them to hope for and which is preferable to conflict. (p. 102)

The problem here is that the existence of all parties is presupposed, thereby negating the possibility of contention over the make-up of those who can be considered legitimate parties to a conflict (Rancière, 1999). In other words, consensus democracy is a “regime of perception”, foreclosing at the start those entities that are visible, whose voices are audible and acknowledged within the regime (Rancière, 1999). In this sense, by disappearing the possibility of genuine political conflict, a consensus democracy can be justifiably considered post-political (Rancière, 1999).

Now that Rancière’s notion of the political as conflict over political subjectivity has been described, I will move on to the agonistic political theory of Chantal Mouffe. Mouffe (2005) builds upon this conflictual nature of politics, while emphasizing the hegemonic nature of what Rancière would call police orders. This use of the concept of hegemony will allow me to further concretize the ramifications of this conception of the political for care ethics, and a care ethical perspective on knowledge.

4.2. Chantal Mouffe’s Conception of the Political and Agonistic Political Theory

While there are differences between the work of Mouffe and Rancière, both theorists aim to reintroduce the fundamental conflictual and adversarial nature of the political. Mouffe intends to reformulate an approach to democratic politics that acknowledges this nature, and criticizes approaches that do not do so, most notably deliberative democracy. In *On the Political* Mouffe (2005a) chastises contemporary democratic theorists for trusting in the possibility of a universal rational consensus and basing their theories on such a notion. Mouffe (2005a) contends that such a trust in universal rational consensus, which is informed by the acceptance of the premises of liberalism, inhibits theorists to acknowledge the “dimension of antagonism which [she] take[s] to be constitutive of human societies” (p. 9). Liberalism may be diverse, but most are founded on understandings universal rationalism and atomistic individualism. Thereby, liberalism forecloses an understanding and acknowledgement of the nature of

collective identities, as this is incompatible with its atomistic conception of the self and the pluralistic nature of society. According to Mouffe (2005a), due to an inability of liberal thought to allow for plurality of knowledge, liberalism negates a possibility of “conflicts for which no rational solution could ever exist” (p. 10). Consequently, liberalism is unable to observe the antagonistic dimensions of social life, that flow from the existence of this plurality of knowledge, and thus of the antagonistic dimension of politics.

According to Mouffe (2005a), politics concerns “the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political” (p. 9). In her conception of politics, Mouffe crafts space for an acknowledgement of the fundamental disagreements that may occur at any time within the context of all social relations. Mouffe (2005a) argues, building upon the work of Carl Schmitt and poststructuralists like Derrida, that due to the need for a ‘constitutive outside’ in the process of identity building, there is an ever-present possibility of social relations to become antagonistic. She aims

to highlight the fact that the creation of an identity implies the establishment of a difference, difference which is often constructed on the basis of a hierarchy, for example between form and matter, black and white, man and woman, etc. (p. 15)

Thus, because identity formation requires the formulation and demarcation of a ‘we’ and a ‘they’, and because this is often constructed within structures of power and hierarchy, identity formation can result in the constitution of friend/enemy relations (Mouffe, 2005a). While Mouffe (2005a) acknowledges that this need not always be the case, she argues that the possibility of such potentially destructive formulation of identity, and its contingent nature, need to be accounted for within politics, and thus in any democratic theory.

A different concept that informs Mouffe’s (2005a) work on politics, concerns hegemony, and stems from the above described contingent nature of every (social or political) order.

According to Mouffe (2005a), we should recognize the “hegemonic nature of every kind of social order and the fact that every society is the product of a series of practices attempting to establish order in a context of contingency” (p. 17). This means that societies, and the practices that are based upon them, are not based upon some external objective foundation, and are, for that reason, always open to be challenged by counter-hegemonic structures.

Rather, Mouffe (2005a) states

[w]hat is at a given moment considered as the ‘natural’ order – jointly with the ‘common sense’ which accompanies it – is the result of sedimented practices; it is never the manifestation of a deeper objectivity exterior to the practices that bring it into being. (p. 18)

Mouffe’s ontology of social relations has deep implications for the ‘proper’ way to structure politics. Mouffe (2005a) contends that the above-described possibility of antagonism within social relations, and the constant hegemonic struggles and counter struggles due to society’s lack of an objective foundation, necessitates a politics that allows for conflict without destroying the political community. Drawing on earlier work of Mouffe and Laclau (2001), a commitment of conflicting parties to a *common symbolic space*, and the core values of that space, is necessary to avoid conflict turning into antagonism in the Schmittian sense, meaning that conflicting parties view each other as enemies (Mouffe, 2009). Rather, within Mouffe’s conception of politics, agonistic politics, conflicts are in a sense muted because conflicting parties commit to the values espoused within the common symbolic space. Nonetheless, parties are still conflicting and the conflict is not solvable by invoking a universal rationality through extended deliberation, and thus this approach still differs substantially from deliberative democratic theories (Mouffe, 2005a). It is important to note here that the ethico-political values that Mouffe ascribes to the liberal democratic common symbolic space are not predetermined. In fact, much of the possible conflict within agonistic politics pertains to the interpretation of these values. Mouffe (2005a) holds that within the framework of liberal democracies that has proliferated throughout the West, the notions equality and freedom seem to be key in shaping the common symbolic space.

In this chapter I have explicated several of the key features of both Mouffe and Rancière’s theoretical contributions to post-foundational thought on the political. While I will explicate the convergences and divergences of their work in Chapter 6, some pertinent ideas can already be summarized. First, both Mouffe and Rancière understand the social realm as a contingent sphere, thereby refusing to adopt a mechanical view of human interaction which would allow for the possibility of an objective rationality. Thus, both authors argue against a universalist-rationalist conception of knowledge, and thus stress that consensus is a process of exclusion rather than merely truth-seeking. Second, both Mouffe and Rancière emphasize the possibility of conflict within social relations, and advocate for a politics that accommodates rather than negates this fundamental aspect of social life. In the subsequent chapter I will focus on the epistemic issues concerning consensus, to be able to appreciate the above described post-foundational literature within the context of epistemology.

5. Epistemic Hegemony

In this chapter I will draw upon the work of (Brough, 2013). Brough (2013) develops a notion of epistemic hegemony in the context of epidemiology, which is especially relevant in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Following, I will argue that the current COVID-19 response exhibits features of epistemic hegemony, and explain why this is problematic.

5.1. Theoretical Considerations

According to Brough (2013) epistemological hegemony is in essence “the domination of one view of knowledge and the subordination of all other forms” (p. 34). Here, Brough (2013) draws on the conception of hegemony by Gramsci, a Marxist intellectual, who developed the idea of the ideological domination by a normalization of the worldview, including ideas and values, of the ruling class through both consensus and force (Bates, 1975). In epidemiology, and research more broadly, legitimating knowledge becomes a continuous and agonistic process, where by revering particular types of knowledge as true, or valid, also implies the de-legitimization of other types, or productions, of knowledge (Brough, 2013). By stating that these legitimization procedures are cultural, or ideological, it opens up space to critically reflect on the dominant singular logic of knowledge as portrayed in, *inter alia*, the research practice of epidemiology (Brough, 2013). Brough (2013), focussing on epidemiology in the context of the academy, identifies several sources of epistemological hegemony, focussing on neo-colonial dynamics. The homogenous make-up of the academy, its whiteness, can be argued to contribute to a proliferation of one type of knowledge advocated for in these spaces. In addition, Brough (2013) identifies Hegelian influences, whereby accessibility and knowability are assumed, and the not-known is framed as still-to-be-known. These sources result in an epistemic hegemony, which in the context of epidemiology, exhibits itself in the form of three drivers: 1) positivism; 2) counting culture; and 3) evidence-based practice (Brough, 2013).

Brough (2013) draws on a definition of positivism by (DiGiacomo, 1999), which entails views the universe as “a mechanism endowed with an essential reality prior to and autonomous from the meanings human subjectivity may project upon it” (p. 439). Deriving knowledge in such a universe then becomes a process of atomizing parts of this mechanism, and focusing on the relations of cause and effects between these atoms, often referred to as variables (DiGiacomo, 1999). Thereby positivism requires reducing complex processes, or phenomena, into variables and causal links, as this is the only manner in which knowledge

can be derived (Brough, 2013). Note that within such a positivist framework the knower is seen as a possible contaminant, or bias, in the discreet causal relations between variables of interest, and is thus required to detached herself from that which she studies (DiGiacomo, 1999). A positivist framework thus implies an absolutist or universal notion of truth, and by doing so it avoids requiring any “critical epistemological reflection” since the boundaries of knowledge are given, known, and incontestable (Brough, 2013).

Practically, in the context of epidemiology, such an epistemological framework results in a counting culture, where the phenomena of interest are atomized into quantifiable and surveyable entities (Brough, 2013). In addition, note that such a model also views disease incidence on population level as the aggregation of individual cases, thereby diminishing or ignoring the relational or social aspects (DiGiacomo, 1999). This is problematic, as it justifies taking a non-holistic approach and ignores aspects of disease that do not fit in this universalist notion of truth, such as meaning, or factors that transcend the individual. In addition, it allows for the de-legitimization of knowledge that does not fit within this model, which may founded upon different epistemic assumptions.

Finally, the effects of this type of conception of knowledge are not limited to the academy, but also spill over into practice and policy, in the form of evidence-based practice (Brough, 2013). According to Brough (2013), a positivist framework not only provides an intellectual logic for applying it to practice, but it also provides a moral imperative to do so. As the positivist framework implies an absolute notion of truth, and identifies scientific work according to the methods prescribed by it as the only valid reflections of that truth, it de-legitimizes other sources of knowledge, including experiential knowledge and clinical judgement (Avis & Freshwater, 2006; Brough, 2013). Traynor (2000) denotes that the ‘evidence-based movement’ adopts similar strategies to evangelicals, as they both discredit those who disagree or criticize, and normalize their own position (Brough, 2013). Here one can recognize the hegemonic strategies of evidence-based practice in general, and positivist research more generally.

In sum, epistemic hegemony results in a privileging one type of knowledge over all others, and voiding the legitimacy or validity of all other types. Often positivist scholarship is deemed as the only way of arriving at accurate or true knowledge, which requires reducing complex phenomena and processes to variables, and their cause-effect relationships. Furthermore, epistemic hegemony comes into existence by employing strategies that normalize this view of knowledge through discursive practices, involving both force and

consensus. The definition of epistemic hegemony, and the explanation of its core drivers, enable a contextualization and description of this phenomenon in practice.

5.2. Epistemic Hegemony in Practice: Homogeneity, Reductionism & Rhetoric

While the core of this paper concerns a rethinking of political care ethics, this illustration enables me to problematize current political practice, and thus justifies why care ethics needs to consider issues of depoliticisation and epistemic hegemony.

5.2.1. Privileging the Positive: the Homogeneity of Knowledge in Decision-Making

On the 24th of January 2020 the first Outbreak Management Team (OMT) was convened by its chairman, Jaap van Dissel.⁶ The OMT is the main advisory body of the Dutch government concerning infectious diseases, epidemics and pandemics.⁷ The OMT consists of chairman, who is also the director of the Centre for Infectious Disease Control (CLb) of *the Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu* (RIVM), currently Jaap van Dissel. The secretary of the OMT is Aura Timen, the head of the Coordination Unit of Infectious Diseases at the RIVM. In addition, there are a number of permanent members of the OMT, who due their representative function at professional associations relevant for infectious disease control are always invited, regardless of the specific topic of the OMT.⁸ These include representatives of the associations of physician-microbiologists, internist-infectiologists, general practitioners, and occupational physicians.⁹ Besides these permanent members the OMT has a pool of experts who can be invited depending on the relevance of their expertise for the topic discussed, including virologists, epidemiologists, geriatric physicians, child and youth physicians, and lung specialists.

Note that all of these experts have a medical, biomedical, and/or epidemiological background, and that the knowledge they intend to produce is essentially medical knowledge, as they state on the RIVM website.¹⁰ While the website states that the behavioural unit (*gedragsunit*) of the RIVM also provides information and advice to the Dutch government, this input is separate from the OMT advice.¹¹ This focus on the ‘medical content’ was reiterated in the advice following from the 113th OMT, in which they specify that the “OMT meets periodically to determine and interpret *the medical status of COVID-19*, to monitor actions and to answer

⁶ <https://www.rivm.nl/coronavirus-covid-19/omt>

⁷ *Landelijke advisering bij infectieziektedreigingen en -crises*, 2020.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ <https://www.rivm.nl/coronavirus-covid-19/omt>

¹¹ Ibid.

questions from the Dutch government” (emphasis added).¹² Merely the staffing of the OMT as described here indicates a privileging of a certain type of knowledge, namely positivist medical knowledge, within the context of the pandemic response. However, this fact in itself need not necessarily be considered epistemic hegemony, if this type of knowledge does not dominate or subordinate other forms and sources of knowledge. I will now argue that this domination and subordination does occur.

It should be noted that the advice of the OMT is leading in governmental decision-making concerning the COVID-19 response. While the government makes the final policy decisions, they do this based on the advice provided by the experts of the OMT, as noted by Hugo de Jonge, the Minister of Health, in a tweet commemorating the one year anniversary of COVID-19 OMT meetings.¹³ Moreover, requests to diversify the staffing of the OMT, for example by adding social scientists, by opposition parties have been put aside by the government, with the Prime Minister pleading to keep the OMT medical.¹⁴ In addition, other sources of knowledge, from for example behavioural scientists and anthropologists has been deemed relevant mostly within the context of relaxations of the policy measures, and not with regards to the origin or development of the crisis itself.¹⁵ A particular case in which the subordination of specific types of knowledge became painfully clear occurred following riots that broke following the instalment of a nation-wide curfew. Prime Minister Rutte declared that he was not looking for sociological explanations of what happened, since rioting was simply criminal.¹⁶ Note that this is not the first time that the Prime Minister has exhibited such a distaste for sociology in particular, and has in earlier cases of riots and protests against the COVID-19 policy measures that he did not want or need to look explain these, they simply needed to stop.¹⁷

Considering the above, we can note that within the context of COVID-19 decision-making, positivists knowledge, and medical knowledge in particular, has been dominant. The homogenous makeup of OMT, the government’s main advisory body on this matter, being the prime example. Simultaneously, other sources of knowledge have been portrayed as either

¹² See van Dissel (2021) at <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/brieven/2021/05/16/advies-nav-113e-omt>.

¹³ See de Jonge (2021) at <https://twitter.com/hugodejonge/status/1360176895548129281>. See also the press conference of April 15th 2020, in which de Jonge states that they will always follow the advice of the experts of the OMT at <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/mediateksten/2020/04/15/letterlijke-tekst-persconferentie-minister-president-rutte-en-minister-de-jonge-na-afloop-van-crisisberaad-kabinet>.

¹⁴ See the transcripts of the parliamentary debate on April 16th 2020, concerning the developments on the coronavirus at: https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/plenaire_verslagen/detail/c0ba7b5e-008d-4fdd-8ad7-48ded6aba8c4.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See Duyvendak et al. (2021) in Dutch newspaper *Trouw* and van Schoonhoven (2021) in *EW Magazine*.

¹⁷ Ibid.

merely supportive of medical positivist knowledge, or have been de-legitimized, as was the case with sociology. This heavy reliance on positivist knowledge also manifests itself in the manner in which the crisis is governed, namely by relying on numbers.

5.2.2. The Spectre of the R^2 : Reductionism in Decision-Making

Resulting from the above-mentioned homogeneity of voices in decision-making, the inputs for policy are heavily based on ‘Big Data’, epidemiological modelling, and reductionist reasoning, since these are key tenets of positivist science in general. This heavy reliance on reductionist reasoning, and the models and data that accompany it, can be found in the advices the OMT provides, on which the Dutch government bases their policies. The recommendations which constitute these advices are based on epidemiological modelling performed by the RIVM. By definition, these models are reductionist and based on assumptions that do not completely correspond with reality, for the sake of simplicity and practicality.¹⁸ This reliance on modelling also exhibits itself in the prominence several indicators are assigned within decision-making, such as the reproduction number (R^2) and the occupation of intensive care (IC) beds within the Dutch hospitals.

One example in which this reductionist reasoning becomes clear is the so-called *Corona Dashboard* of the Ministry of Health.¹⁹ This dashboard shows a number of graphs indicating the development of the crisis on a number of units, including mortality, hospital occupation, IC occupation, R^2 , and number of vaccinations. Initially, the decisions concerning the relaxation or intensification of measures was based upon the numbers on this dashboard, in addition to the OMT advice which contextualized these numbers. Here, one can clearly observe a counting culture as described above. In order to fit within the positivist conception of the virus, it needs to be atomized and quantified, thereby being able to be observed and controlled. Deaths become mortality rates, and care processes become beds to be vacated as soon as possible.

In addition, phenomena or factors that cannot be quantified are not taken into account, at least not in a clear or transparent manner. An example may be helpful in explaining how this occurs. As has been mentioned, the Dutch government installed a nation-wide curfew in January 2021. Initially, this was supposed to be for a short-time period, and Mark Rutte

¹⁸ The underlying models can be found at the website of the RIVM, but the manner in which these models and the results translate into the given advice remains unknown, as the minutes of the OMT remain confidential. See: *Landelijke advisering bij infectieziektedreigingen en -crises*, 2020.

¹⁹ See: <https://coronadashboard.rijksoverheid.nl/>.

indicated that it would be the first measure to be lifted when possible.²⁰ Eventually the curfew was only lifted on the 28th of April, after a number of other relaxations including increasing access to education and shops had already been implemented. The reasons for not suspending the curfew earlier ranged from references to the public opinion that was fairly favourable to the measure, to the need for broadening the possibility for commercial activity. However, the effects on the psychological, emotional or spiritual well-being of this restrictive measure have not explicitly or transparently been taken into account.²¹

In sum, it can be observed that the focus on positivist knowledge results in a reductive logic that limits the factors or phenomena that can be considered relevant in the context of the governmental response to the COVID-19 crisis. An example of this are the psychological, emotional and spiritual effects of the curfew on the public.

5.2.3. *Viruswappies* versus Experts: Rhetoric in the Public Debate

As described, epistemic hegemony also entails strategic employment of rhetoric to distinguish relevant and valid knowledge from invalid and irrelevant knowledge. In addition, it entails discrediting those who disagree or postulate different types of knowledge. In this section I will argue that this also occurred within the context of the Coronacrisis, and I will focus on the strategic use of the term *viruswappies*.

While the etymology of *viruswappies* is unclear, in general it seems to refer to a diverse group of people, including those who deny the existence of the Coronavirus, those who deny its severity, or those who claim that the measures are not proportional to the risk the virus poses.²² In an interview in the *Algemeen Dagblad*, a large Dutch daily newspaper, in March 2021, Minister of Health de Jonge indicates that he is increasingly concerned about people voicing *viruswappiegeluid*, especially in parliament. Here, he is referring to *Forum voor Democratie* (FVD), a right-wing party which has criticized the severity of the measures, and downplayed the severity of the virus itself. By framing his biggest political critics as *viruswappies*, de Jonge's comment points towards the weight this emblem has gathered over the course of the pandemic. De Jonge also denoted the explicit danger these and associated views constitute. The construction of this frame of *viruswappie* as a danger to society also has

²⁰ See the press conference of January 20th

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/mediateksten/2021/01/20/letterlijke-tekst-persconferentie-minister-president-rutte-en-minister-de-jonge-20-januari-2021>.

²¹ See <https://mindplatform.nl/nieuws/breid-het-omt-uit-met-een-adviseur-psychische-gezondheid>.

²² For possible etymologies of the word *viruswappies* see Boon (2020) in newspaper *Trouw* at <https://www.trouw.nl/opinie/over-de-herkomst-van-wappie-is-het-laatste-woord-nog-niet-gezegd~b18cb7db/>.

implications for the general terms of, and participation in, the debate on the handling of the corona crisis by the Dutch government. Here, a prime example concerns the so-called *RedTeam*, which can be described as an alternative OMT and as one of the government's main critics in the first few months of the pandemic, who turned silent following months of voicing dissent. Reflecting on the *RedTeam* in an interview, its initiator Wim Schellekens states "we thought we would make ourselves incredible if we would continue to nag... then one becomes activist, a whiner, a pusher".²³ Conversely, those academics and elite institutions that support the government policy, most notably the OMT, are referred to continuously as experts, and the knowledge they produce as expert knowledge.²⁴

In this section I have tried to illustrate how the COVID-19 political and policy response can be understood as epistemic hegemony. Note that I thereby do not mean to imply that a reliance on epidemiology or virology in crisis response is necessarily a problematic phenomenon. However, what I do problematize is the *hegemonic* nature of this reliance, meaning that other forms, or sources, of knowledge are subordinated, thereby ensuring a preconfigured understanding of what the pandemic is and what it means.

In sum, the COVID-19 response of the Dutch government exhibits core tenets of epistemic hegemony as described by Brough (2013): homogeneity, reductionism, and strategic rhetoric. This ascertainment allows me to argue for a centring of the epistemic aspects of hegemony within agonistic political theory, after which I will bring this adapted version of post-political theory in to dialogue with care ethics, in the next chapters.

²³ See Lievisse (2021) in the *NRC* at: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2021/02/03/ineens-was-het-stil-rond-red-team-we-hebben-alles-al-gezegd-a4030439>.

²⁴ See de Jonge (2021) at <https://twitter.com/hugodejonge/status/1360176895548129281>. See also the press conference of April 15th 2020, in which de Jonge states that they will always follow the advice of the experts of the OMT at <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/mediateksten/2020/04/15/letterlijke-tekst-persconferentie-minister-president-rutte-en-minister-de-jonge-na-afloop-van-crisisberaad-kabinet>

6. Understanding the Political: Learning from Rancière and Mouffe

Comparing notions of political hegemony and epistemic hegemony, one observes striking similarities. Of course, this is due to the same conceptual foundation on which these notions are built, namely hegemony as introduced by Gramsci (Bates, 1975; Gramsci, 1991). Within this section I argue that centring the *epistemic* hegemonic nature of neoliberalism should be at the forefront of (care-ethical) critique. Subsequently, I will consider problematic aspects of Mouffe's and Rancière's theoretical contributions. For Rancière, I will focus on the central role of the notion of equality in his work, and problematize how it necessitates a contemporary understanding of intelligence, thereby reducing the radical potential of his work. Second, I will respond to several criticisms of Mouffe. I will focus on a critique brought forward by Aytac (2020) which holds that an agonistic conception of the political is overly permissive towards science-denialism, which is of course a highly relevant critique in the context of concerns over a post-truth society in general, and in the context of COVID-19 crisis in particular. While I share the concerns over science-denialism as set out by Aytac (2020) and the problems this might give in any political practice, I hold that the solutions proposed are not compatible with the underlying premises of agonistic theory. By critiquing, comparing and cross-pollinating the post-foundational thought and work on epistemic hegemony described above I am able to consider its implications for care ethics within Chapter 7.

6.1. Centring The Epistemic Nature of Postdemocracy and Hegemony

6.1.1. Voice, Noise and the Aesthetic Nature of Epistemic Hegemony

In this section I will argue that neoliberal regimes are *per definition* also epistemic hegemonies. By this I mean that within neoliberal regimes some views of knowledge dominate, while all other forms of knowledge are subordinated, thereby following Brough (2013) in his definition of epistemic hegemony. While Brough (2013) locates the phenomenon of epistemic hegemony within the academy, I intend to extend it to the realm of the political, and the neoliberal state in particular. In doing so, I draw on Rancière's aesthetic characterization of the political, and his concerns pertaining to the rise of *consensus democracy* (Rancière, 1999). Moreover, I will emphasize Mouffe's concerns pertaining to the hegemonic nature of neoliberal regimes, and the identified need for a counter-hegemonic project.

As described in Chapter 4, Rancière (1999) defines the political as an aesthetic phenomenon during which those previously unobserved, and thus unrecognized, as political subjects become visible by establishing their equality to the dominant order, rendering them political subjects. In his description of the rise of consensus democracy, the contemporary form of *postdemocracy* Western liberal democracies are currently exhibiting, Rancière notes the apparent paradox that consists of the celebration of democracy as the victor over totalitarian regimes, while at the same time all truly democratic forces, including parliamentary representation, are disqualified, ignored or eliminated (Rancière, 1999). Instead, political power is shifted to unaccountable experts, and the powers of the executive branch are expanded and privileged (Rancière, 1999). Here, we can recognize the epistemological nature of the police order within a *postdemocracy*: in recognizing the voice of some, political subjects who are deemed holders of expertise, who are deemed *knowers*. Using Rancière's language, these knowers are recognized as having a *voice*, which is to be understood as a rational, intelligible and politically relevant form of speech. Conversely, those who are not visible and recognized as political subjects, cannot have a *voice*, they cannot enter into discourse, as this requires political subjectivity. Rather, these invisibles only produce *noise*, which is unintelligible, passionate, in the sense that it 'merely' refers to experience, and thus politically irrelevant within the postdemocratic police order.

The requirement of political subjectivity for entering into political discourse and debate also points to the problem that deliberative theorists face, when recognizing the nature of the political Rancière sets out. According to Rancière, the problem with deliberative democratic theory, is that it

presupposes ... that both the interlocutors and the objects about which they speak are preconstituted; whereas, from my perspective, there can be political exchange only when there isn't such a preestablished agreement - not only, that is, regarding the objects of debate but also regarding the status of the speakers themselves. It is this phenomenon that I call *disagreement*... (Rancière & Panagia, 2000, p. 116)

The notion that political exchange fundamentally concerns a contestation over the status of speakers, which Rancière refers to as disagreement (i.e. disagreement over whose voice is deemed *political* and whose voice is not), also allows us to recognize the centrality of epistemic positions within a police order. As police orders (e.g. neoliberal democratic regimes) assign some to the realm of the visible, and others to the invisible, it constitutes the boundaries between those who can participate and those who cannot participate within

political exchange. In different phrasing, the police order constructs *the knowers*, *the ignorant*, and *the invisible*. The former, the knowers, being those with observed and recognized political subjectivity and voices, who we may recognize as experts in the public debate concerning COVID-19. The ignorants are those non-subjects who produce only noise, for example the *viruswappies* described in Chapter 5. And the invisible are those possible configurations of people who are not perceived at all, those groups who have no registered voice.

It is important to emphasize the contingent nature of the political *disagreement*, and the ramifications of this contingency. As noted, the political need not occur, and according to Rancière only occurs very rarely (1999). The political can only be said to have occurred *ex-post*, when those previously not-perceived are perceived, and recognized as having a voice. In epistemological terms, the political occurs when those previously not recognized as possessors of knowledge, those perceived as part of *the ignorant* or *the invisible*, are recognized as full political subjects capable of entering into discourse. Then they are perceived as knowers. The aesthetic nature of the political moment also points to the primacy of political subjectivization in engendering political change, rather than the primacy of political or policy content. This means that politics “requires an initial breakthrough which introduces into the community of speaking beings some who were not hitherto of its number” (Rancière, 2007, p. 85). Through such breakthroughs, people become political subjects and thus recognized as *knowers*, and are subsequently able to contest the injustices that had been hidden from sight.

By understanding the political as such, it also becomes clearer why deliberative democratic theory will not be able to overcome some types of injustices within a particular police order. As mentioned above, deliberative theory presupposes a configuration of either groups or a configuration of individuals, which can enter into dialogue to finally foster consensus on the right course of action. In the light of Rancière’s theory this becomes immediately problematic, as such initial configurations presuppose their visibility, which is precisely what they are missing. They are not perceptible as a political subject until the political moment, which in itself constitutes their becoming-visible. Thus, besides the universalist-rationalist conception of knowledge that underlays much deliberative theories, even those who criticize such conceptions of knowledge face a problem: namely the requirement of perceptibility of those previously imperceptible (cf. Feola, 2014; Young, 1997).

Of course, considering the above, the pertinent question becomes how to initiate such breakthroughs in which the perceptible is reconfigured to enable those previously invisible or ignorant to be seen *and recognized as knowers*. Within his works, Rancière mostly uses historic examples of the political, such as the plebeians and patricians on the Aventine hill, as described in Chapter 4. This is not surprising, as Rancière emphasizes the contingent and unique nature of the political moment. Within the example of the Aventine hill, the political occurred once the patricians recognized the plebeians as political subjects, as holders of knowledge relevant to the realm of politics. In this example, the plebeians became visible as political subjects once the patricians recognized them as their equals, since they acted and spoke just like them, and were thus confronted with the wrong that was inequality between them. The political moment, then, was the re-articulation of equality. In other words, they had to “act to create a stage on which problems can be made visible—a scene with subjects and objects, in full view of a ‘partner’ who does not ‘see’ them” (Rancière, 2004b). Once this had occurred, and the perceptible had been reconfigured, now allowing for the recognition of plebeians as political subjects, the political moment ceased to be, and the police order can be said to exist again albeit in a different configuration. This fact, that the political is of such a temporary nature, is the paradox of democracy, and indicates that democracies are never, and can never be complete, total, or pure.

The temporary nature of the political as conceived by Rancière can be problematic when theorizing about the possible implications for a critique of the status quo and the epistemic police regimes that enforce and reproduce it. If we accept that the political is a rare event, we must also acknowledge that every political moment also reinstitutes a new police order, which assigns to each their role and place in society, and which imposes its own partition between those visible and those invisible. Even if this new police order may be preferable to the previous, it remains a police order still. This point provides us with a critical insight, as it warns us to be too idealistic or optimistic, and reminds us that the political is imposed in a context of contingency. The ramifications of this point include the need to be reflexive and sensitive to the aesthetic nature of the political. While this may sound somewhat vague as of now, I will discuss these ramifications more elaborately within Chapter 7, as I believe that care ethics can contribute to this reflexivity and sensitivity, *inter alia* in the form of fostering a caring sensitivity through deep listening.

The temporary nature of the political also points to the limits of the use of the work Rancière in developing a critique of the status quo, as it provides us with no manner in which to

constitute this new police order. I recognize that Rancière also has no intention of providing an account for a practical constitution of a new police order, as it was his goal to problematize more broadly the manner in which politics, and especially democracy, was conceived of in the West. However, the question then remains what to do *after* the political (Kenis & Mathijs, 2014; Myers, 2016). To be able to answer that question, I will utilize the concepts found within Chantal Mouffe’s work on the agonistic nature of politics and the emphasis on the hegemonic nature of social orders. I hold that these concepts may provide a fruitful addition to Rancière’s conception of the political, while also providing possible pathways for constructive and political action.

6.1.2. Recognizing the Epistemological Aspects of Hegemony

As the work of Mouffe has been described in Chapter 4, I will limit myself here to the core tenets of her work, and how those relate to epistemic hegemony. Similar to Rancière, Mouffe stresses the contingent nature of the social domain, and emphasizes how social orders are created through “practices of articulation through which a given order is created and the meaning of social institutions is fixed” (Mouffe, 2018, p. 88). These practices of articulation are always based on the exclusion of other configurations of power relations, and is not founded on a deeper objectivity or on rational grounds (Mouffe, 2018). The key point here being that such articulations can always be contested, since what appears to be the natural order of things, and the natural order of power relations in particular, is, to put it simply, just one of the possible configurations of those power relations (Mouffe, 2018). This insight is key as it crafts the space for contesting the *seemingly* natural order through the disarticulation of that hegemonic order and re-articulation of different counter-hegemonies (Mouffe, 2018).

As has been elaborated upon in Chapter 5, epistemic practices also exhibit such hegemonic tendencies, in the sense that certain types of knowledge, and ways of knowing, are privileged while all others are subordinated.²⁵ However, if we understand that this epistemic hegemony is merely one of the possible articulations of an order within the context contingency, we are able to contest it on that basis. Of course, contesting what constitutes knowledge already happens all around. Epistemology knows many conflicting, and often exclusionary, types, and

²⁵ While this paper utilized the COVID-19 crisis as an illustration, I wish to stress that the privileging of knowledge founded on universalist-rationalist epistemologies does not contain itself to the field of health in general, or virology in particular. For example, economics, the social science that has taken up the goal to emulate the natural sciences furthest, has permeated nearly all domains of life (Earle et al., 2017; Self, 1975). While it goes beyond the scope of this paper to consider all the ramifications of this proliferation of economic logic, it should be noted that the paper at hand is not intended to only be relevant in the context of health and health care.

what counts as valid knowledge is heavily debated within the academy. However, I argue that this debate should not be confined to the academic (and governmental) elite, precisely because the constitution of that order which configures some knowledge as valid, others as supplemental, and others again as useless, is *political* in nature. Academics in general is structured within the context of a broader social and political regime (in many Western countries those could be classified as neoliberal regimes) which *per definition* privileges some type of knowledge over others, as neoliberal regimes operate within the framework of a universalist-rationalist conception of knowledge.

In Chapter 5 I have described how specific types of knowledge are privileged, including the positivist, reductionist and quantifiable. To be sure, I have no intention of delegitimizing this knowledge in its totality. As I have explained in Chapter 5, these types of knowledge are a vital part of understanding the world, especially in the context of a global pandemic. In addition, I believe it important to emphasize that I recognize that many working in these quantitative and positivist fields are very aware of the limits of their work. However, the manner in which this knowledge is privileged over others, and how other types of knowledge are subordinated, is what I deem problematic. Moreover, understanding that this process of privileging and subordinating is not a purely academic affair, points us to the need for extra-academic action.

By understanding that the academy is a constitutive part of the hegemonic articulations described above, we can also consider the need for a counter-hegemonic project, as it is within the sphere of the political where the status quo is articulated.²⁶ To be sure, this paper does not concern a full-fledged counter-hegemonic strategy. However, Mouffe (2018) identifies several key features of any counter-hegemonic strategy, which will allow me to contextualize that within political care ethics (in Chapter 7). The first feature is the importance of the signifiers democracy, equality, and freedom. Mouffe (2018) notes that, within the framework of a liberal democracy, equality and freedom seem to be the signifiers that make up the common symbolic space.²⁷ The crucial point here is that those signifiers do not have an objective foundation, but are what the articulation (and re-articulation) is about. The reason for holding on to these signifiers is founded upon the empirical observation that

²⁶ That is, if one is convinced that the current hegemonic articulation, which I have referred to as neoliberalism throughout this paper, is problematic.

²⁷ Remember that for politics to be agonistic, rather than antagonistic, the parties to a regime require an dedication to the signifiers of the common symbolic space, however different they may construct and interpret these.

insurrectionist and populist movement, for example the Indignados in Spain and the global Occupy movement, have utilized these signifiers, and the signifier of democracy, as a rallying cry (Mouffe, 2018; Swyngedouw, 2014). According to Mouffe (2018) this indicates that these signifiers continue to play a crucial role in the political imaginary. They are part of the symbolic arsenal which any counter-hegemonic can draw from.

A second point concerns the need to construct a people, while maintaining congruent with the conception of the subject as emergent, non-fixed, and non-essential. As described earlier, Mouffe (2018) holds that the requirement of a constitutive outside is required for the formation of an identity (among the many identities subjects are constituted by). Thus, a construction of the people, or another identity, requires an opposite. In the context of a populist strategy, Mouffe notes that the construction of *the people* as opposed to *the oligarchy* could be a successful strategy. But, this particular construction need not necessarily be the case, and this construction cannot be completely defined *ex-ante* (Mouffe, 2018). Moreover, as subjects contain multiple, intersecting identities, the construction of a people should not be considered as a homogenization of those identities. To account for this multiplicity of identities, Mouffe draws on the concept of *chain of equivalence*, which she introduced together with Laclau in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). This *chain of equivalence* requires an acknowledgement of the intersecting manners in which subordination and oppression (often resulting in violence) occur, based on identities such as class, sex, gender, race, and ability. The precise interpretation of that chain of equivalence, i.e. which struggles against oppression and domination should be recognized, depends on the historic and discursive context in which the struggle takes place.

Now that the main aspects of Mouffe's work relevant for appreciating hegemony as an epistemic project have been identified, it is important to consider what the implications are for the broader aims of this thesis. In the next section, I will consider both Mouffe and Rancière's conceptions of the political, and assess what we can learn from their works. Note that it is not my aim to forge some overarching theory. Rather, I intend to identify the ideas and argumentations within their work in relation to epistemic hegemony, and utilize these as generative concepts in rethinking political care ethics.

6.1.3. Assessing Mouffe and Rancière Together

While the works of Mouffe and Rancière exhibit large overlaps, particularly in their critical stance towards deliberative democratic theories and the proliferation of consensus democracy, there are some differences that need to be explicated, to be able to determine whether these

insights can exist next to each other. Note that Mouffe starts from the a poststructuralist premise, which holds that her description of the social realm as possibly antagonistic is founded upon the conviction that “every identity is relational and that the affirmation of a difference is a precondition for the existence of any identity” (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 15). This means that for the construction of a social group, always based on some type of identity, social groups always require a ‘constitutive outside’, an Other to be able to differentiate the ‘we’ from the ‘they’ (Mouffe, 2005a). Rancière, on the other hand, does not preface his work with such a conception of the social, while agreeing with Mouffe that the social order is always contingent, in the sense that is in flux, not fixed.

Rancière emphasizes the aesthetic nature of the political moment, and emphasizes that the political moment itself is momentary, and can only be said to truly be political if it constitutes a reconfiguration of the visible. Once this reconfiguration has taken place, a police order again exists, assigning to each their role and place. Mouffe on the other hand, holds that the political is the moment of contestation between hegemonic projects. I would argue that these conceptions need not be incongruent. The conflictual nature of the political moment is clear in both conceptions. However, for Rancière, the politics stops immediately following the conflict during which the perceptible is changed. I think that in Mouffe’s work we can also identify the fleetingness of the political, as she makes clear throughout her work that a counter-hegemonic project is still a hegemonic project.

In essence, I utilized both the work of Mouffe and Rancière as generative concepts to draw a conception of the political that brings to the fore its aesthetic and conflictual nature. Rather than viewing politics as a domain of life in which consensus is crafted between rational individuals, it is a domain in which the hierarchical power structures within society are contested. In addition, both authors emphasize the contingent nature of this political domain. While Rancière (1999) holds that the political concerns an aesthetic moment during which those previously unrecognized are suddenly recognized as equals through a process of political subjectivization. Mouffe (2018), on the other hand, emphasizes the contingent nature of every social order (the police order, in Rancière’s terminology), and the hegemonic practices which aim it is to establish order in this context of contingency. In addition, I have emphasized the role of epistemology and epistemic positions within these processes. Concerning Rancière, those unheard and unseen can only be said to qualify as knowers once they are politically recognized. Mouffe enlightens us by stating that, if the goal is to make

those unheard and unseen visible, a counter-hegemonic project needs to be formulated that accommodates that visibility *for some*, simply because all politics is hegemonic.

But, accepting that the political moment is fleeting, and that politics (or the police) is always hegemonic does not mean that there are no ways of ensuring a ‘better’ hegemonic practice. It is my contention that counter-hegemonic projects may be aided by integrating insights from care ethics pertaining to the need for forging understanding and broadening the visible. Of course, this does not mean that these measures constitute a fix-all solution to the problems accompanying struggle, conflict, and oppression. Rather, I would argue that these approaches constitute an additional challenge, to increase the possibility of forging a counter-hegemonic project in which domination and oppression are *less* pervasive. Again, I want to stress this point, conflict and power are ever-present phenomena in every social order. However, by acknowledging this, rather than negating it, I believe we have a better basis of both investigating and reconstructing this conflictual and power-ridden understanding of society.

6.2. Considering Equality in Rancière’s Political Aesthetics

In this section I will consider the concept of equality within the work of Rancière. I will look into the meaning of equality within his aesthetic theory of politics, and the manner in which it is constructed throughout his texts. Remember that the *wrong* in politics pertains to the deep inequality within a polity that portrays itself as committed to equality, a (if not the) core value of democracy (Rancière, 1999, 2007). The aesthetic moment described above occurs when the real equality is uncovered, when it is made visible. For example, in the case of the Aventine hill earlier discussed, the equality among the political subjects was assumed until it was made clear that those previously not considered political subjects, the plebeians, were found to be equal to the patricians. However, as I will argue in this section, the heavy reliance on equality as the axiom assumed in all social configurations within Rancière’s political aesthetics can be problematized. It is not only through an uncovering of inequality that the political (aesthetic) moment can occur.

To be able to better comprehend the source of Rancière’s conception of inequality, and its political ramifications, it is important to understand that this conception can be traced back to Rancière’s work on pedagogy, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Rancière, 1991). Rancière’s work is founded upon an understanding of equality that has its root in the work of Jacotot, a radical French 19th-century pedagogue. In an interview pertaining to his work, Rancière emphasizes

that “[e]quality is not a goal to be attained” and that it “must be seen as a point of departure and not as a destination” (Guénoun et al., 2000, p. 3).

By understanding equality as an axiom, which he stressed to be an assumption with no basis in ‘reality’, Rancière provides a wholly different conception of equality compared to conceptions that view equality as a goal, whether in the context of pedagogy, as equal *knowers*, or in the context of politics, as equal *citizens*. The problem with such a goal-oriented approach to equality is its possibility of enforcing inequality in the present, while reducing equality to something to be reached in a distant future (Myers, 2016). As he states in *The Philosopher and his Poor*:

[e]quality is not a goal that governments and societies could succeed in reaching. To pose equality as a goal is to hand it over to the pedagogues of progress, who widen endlessly the distance they promise they will abolish. Equality is a presupposition, an initial axiom—or it is nothing. (Rancière, 2004a, p. 223)

Thus, Rancière (1999, 2004a, 2007) emphasizes the paradoxical nature of this axiomatic equality. Equality may be a founding principle, an axiom, of many regimes, especially democratic regimes, in practice these regimes are far from egalitarian. In the configuration of the perceptible, the police order are distinctly inegalitarian in the distribution of bodies, in the partition of the perceptible, whether it be on basis of class, race, gender, income, education attainment.

In analysing the role of Jacotot’s conception of equality, Myers (2016) denotes that

Rancière’s analysis of Jacotot’s unconventional approach places special emphasis on the status of the ‘equality of intelligence’ postulate, stressing that it is nothing more than an assumption, but one that has major consequences for action (p. 48).

It is important to emphasize that Rancière saw this postulate of equality of intelligence not as a matter of fact, but as a premise from which to start thinking the political, and consider the ramifications of such a premise. He stated that the philosophical problem

isn’t proving that all intelligence is equal. It’s seeing what can be done under that presupposition. And for this, it’s enough for us that the opinion be possible – that is, that no opposing truth be proved. (Rancière, 1991, p. 46)

While this idea of an axiomatic equality stems from the domain of education and pedagogy, it has transcended this field and Rancière has given this axiomatic conception of equality a central place in his works on the political (Rancière, 1999, 2004a, 2007). But what is the

meaning of an axiomatic equality in the realm of the political, and what role does it play in Rancière's aesthetic political theory?

In *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière* Todd May (2008) takes on these questions, among others. According to May (2008) we should not understand this postulate of the *equality of intelligence* as Rancière claiming that all people will score comparably on an IQ test, or that we are all comparably smart. Rather, May (2008) holds that this postulate “concerns the ability of each of us, in concert with others, to engage in the project of a reflective construction of lives” (p. 60). According to May (2008), this postulate is central to all progressive politics. As progressive politics are concerned with criticizing and reconstructing contemporary power hierarchies, and the manner in which these hierarchies structure the social, economic, and political lives in an unjust manner (May, 2008). Progressive politics, according to May (2008), is committed to increasing the participation of those that are currently marginalized within these hierarchies. Thus, May (2008) argues progressive politics must presuppose “that those who are oppressed are *capable* of greater participation, that they will not make things worse for themselves through such participation” (p. 61). In emphasizing that all progressive politics presuppose this type of equality of intelligence, May (2008) seems intent on stressing the universality and the necessity of this presupposition.

Within Rancière's own work we find that this presupposition of equality of intelligence is required as it constitutes a core aspect of the political moment. The political occurs when the equality between groups is uncovered, and through this uncovering of equality these previously invisible become visible as political subjects (Rancière, 1999). Rancière seems to suggest that, while this equality of intelligence need not be *real*, it should be presupposed within a possibly political moment, in order to attain political subjectivity. Here it is helpful to once again consider the plebeians and patricians on the Aventine hill. The plebeians were recognized as political subjects when they started to act like the patricians, by holding public forums and appointing representatives. This recognition was thus (partly) hinged on two factors. First, a self-consciousness among the plebeians as a political subject. And second, a performance of replication and imitation, in which the equality of intelligence was presupposed by the plebeians and subsequently performed. In this manner, it seems that the presupposition is, at least partly, a pragmatic concern in that for the political to occur, for a reconfiguration of the perceptible in which political subjectivity is attained by some of those previously uncounted (and perhaps lost by others), there is a need for a recognition by others

within society, perhaps most pertinently those in the center of power. And this recognition of political subjectivity seems to require a literal re-cognition, meaning that it needs to an observation of something previously known, something familiar.

Note that this emphasis of mimicry or emulation is not necessarily explicated by Rancière, but nonetheless assumed. Rancière's political oeuvre hinges on a conception of the political that is radically contingent, in the sense that it cannot be predicted, and can only be said to have occurred *ex-post*. And while Rancière does not stipulate a manner in which the political can be *made* to occur, in each (historic) example, the necessity of a recognition of the previously uncounted group's intelligence is clear, whether it's the plebeians on the Aventine hill or the students of the Parisian universities in May '68, they are politically *subjectified* once, and only when, they are recognized by others.

Here, it is important to understand Rancière's work as not aimed at explicating an institutional framework, or an elaborated theory of democratic procedure. Rather, it is aimed at the *demos*, the people, and thus brings forward a conception of equality that is rooted in its political expediency as well as its potential for a truly democratic politics. As Rancière (2007) states

[t]he essence of equality is in fact not so much to unify as to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with the controversial figures of division. (p. 32-33)

It is through this subversion that the implicit hypocrisy of an inegalitarian society which propagates equality becomes explicated, when those who have no part, those with unrecognized political subjectivity come forward and presuppose and perform equality. In this manner, they subjectify themselves politically. Subsequently, those with recognized political subjectivity have a few options (cf. May, 2009). Either the already perceptible recognize them as their equals, granting the previously imperceptible political subjectivity. Or, they come forward as not supporting the principle of equality, which would be incomprehensible within the context of a democratic regime, a police order, that portrays itself as founded upon that very same principle.

To sum up, equality in the Rancièrian sense can be best understood as a logic, a logic that is always in tension with the logic of inequality, the logic of domination. Whereas Rancière (1999) associates the logic of inequality (and domination) with the police order, equality is considered the presupposition that allows for politics. For Rancière, equality is not an ordering principle or a substantive goal as is the case in much liberal thought, but a "mechanism of disordering" the police order, "a logic that calls any system of domination into question" (Chambers, 2013, p. 29). In this sense, equality is not so much an analytic concept,

as a “polemical term”, empowering those seeking political subjectivity a discursive concept that can lay bare the injustice that constitutes their oppression or domination (Chambers, 2013, p. 27).

While I find this axiomatic and polemical conception of equality convincing, in the sense that it points out the incongruence of many contemporary democratic regimes which postulate equality while practicing inequality, I am concerned about the necessity of equality *of intelligence* in a conception of the political, and what this means for possible political subjects, as of now imperceptible, that cannot fulfil that requirement, even in its axiomatic form. I hold that the radical potential of axiomatic equality as equality of intelligence is limited, and will argue that it would be preferable to interpret this axiomatic equality as an equality in humanity.

To be sure, Rancière’s conception of equality of intelligence refers to the ability of people to “invent objects, stories and arguments” (Rancière, 2014, p. 279). As it is an axiomatic conception, Rancière would object to my concerns about fulfilling this requirement to invent objects, stories and arguments, as it is not about fulfilling, but it is about acting in a manner that assumes this equality of intelligence, whether the requirements set out by that assumption are likely to be fulfilled or not. However, even acting out in such a way that assumes equality of intelligence as described above, can be considered problematic. First, the assumption of equality of intelligence puts high demands on those previously invisible political non-subjects that seek out political subjectivity, for example people with intellectual disabilities. Second, I will argue that this axiomatic equality can also be interpreted as an equality of humanity, an ontological equality, which allows for a similar radical juxtaposition between the police order’s inegalitarianism, and the political aesthetic moment, without the high demands put on the invisible.

While Rancière’s work can be considered both radical and emancipatory in many ways, by perpetuating an idea that an assumption of equality of intelligence is required for political action, the opposite effect could occur. Gustaaf Bos, researcher in disability studies, has examined the role of equality (*gelijkheid*) and alterity (*andersheid*) in policy and practice of care for people with intellectual disabilities (Bos, 2016). He finds that, while differences and diversity are acknowledged within the discourses and practices of intellectual disability care, there seems to be a focus on the sameness and equality, which constitutes a commitment to bridging the differences (Bos, 2016). Especially relevant in the aesthetic theory of politics of Rancière, is that Bos (2016) argues that this commitment to bridging negates some of the

most pressing issues, as these cannot be bridged, and can thus be deemed beyond the scope of what can be expected. In other words, these problems become invisible within the discursive context. I concur that this mechanism may also occur ‘within the political’ if equality is framed as equality of intelligence, thereby negating the possibility of this conception for a radical emancipatory politics for people with intellectual disabilities, or others that are different to such a degree that they do not meet this requirement.

Considering the above, I would argue that an interpretation of the axiomatic equality as *equality of humanity* allows for a more flexible use, thereby creating interpretive space to contextualize this equality. When I use the term *equality of humanity* I refer to the idea that people’s lives should all be valued equally, that we are ontologically equal, and that the political could occur once this is performed by a previously unrecognized subject whose lives, within a specific police order, are not valued equally. In my view, this would still constitute a radical break with the status quo, without putting high demands on some groups of performing an equal intelligence, even in the limited meaning of intelligence that Rancière purports. My concern for these high demands is partly rooted in the feasibility of this performance of equality. As I have argued above, Rancière seems to suggest that, for the political to occur, those who already possess political subjectivity need to be convinced of the other group’s equality. For some groups, equality of intelligence may certainly be a strategic manoeuvre to attain such recognition. However, for others, including people with disabilities, or those who for another reason exhibit such a high level of alterity, such as stigmatization or language barriers, this may be not the case. For these people, or groups, another strategy may be more successful, such as a performance of a common humanity, through for example their ability to love, play, work or emote, like those already perceived. Thus, I do not replace Rancière’s conception of equality, but expand it.

6.3. Counter-Thinking Mouffe’s Agonistic Theory

As this thesis argues that care ethics would benefit from an integration of Mouffe’s agonistic theory, critiques of Mouffe’s theory should be considered. While the problems of integrating or ‘putting into dialogue’ agonistic theory and care ethics will be discussed in Chapter X, here I will consider broader objections to Mouffe’s theory. Following Aytac (2020), I will focus on three themes of criticisms. First, some authors claims that agonistic theory itself relies on consensus, on the level of the common symbolic space, and thus cannot reject a consensus-based (deliberative) democratic theory (Aytac, 2020; Erman, 2009; Knops, 2007). Second, some authors claim that due to the poststructuralist foundation of Mouffe’s arguments, this

leads to relativism without a normative orientation (Aytac, 2020; Townshend, 2004). The third pertains to the problem of *overly permissive pluralism*, as described by Aytac (2020). Since this latter is most relevant in the context of this thesis, which pertains directly to the epistemic aspects of hegemony, I will focus on this problem.

The first problem with Mouffe's agonistic theory of politics can be found in its reliance on a minimum level of consensus, namely in the form of accepting the *common symbolic space* (Erman, 2009). Note that Mouffe claims that by allowing for a recognition of the possibility of conflict within society, politics needs to accommodate for an outlet of this possibility of conflict to ensure that antagonistic struggles within society do not result in the destruction of one party by the other. To ensure that these struggles are indeed *muted*, in the sense that they do not lead to explicit violence (antagonism), politics needs to be structured in a manner that ensures that, while these conflicts can be made explicit, they do not result in the framing (or understanding of) the other party (or parties) as enemies, but rather as adversaries. The difference between the two being a recognition of the other party as a valid political subject (or group of political subjects), rather than an enemy to be destroyed. The way in which politics should accommodate for this is a recognition of all parties of the common symbolic space, which in the context of liberal democratic regimes, concern *at least* equality and freedom. Deliberative theorists have responded to this requirement of the common symbolic space by pointing out the apparent need for a consensus over the key signifiers which make up that symbolic space.

For example, Knops (2007) holds that deliberative democracy and agonistic theory are not as incompatible as Mouffe portrays it to be. He argues that deliberation, and even rational consensus, can be understood as agonism (Knops, 2007). Knops (2007) starts by stipulating that rational consensus is possible, and should be pursued within the context of politics. In addition he argues that Mouffe also, implicitly, acknowledges the possibility of rational consensus, even within the context of agonistic politics. Because Mouffe sets out a requirement for an adherence to the common symbolic space, which Knops (2007) holds to be a form of consensus. And because "she argues for this consensus using reasons", her theory can be seen to be deliberative (Knops, 2007, p. 125). There are several problems with Knops' arguments. First, just because Mouffe uses reasons and argumentation to build up her conception of the political, and her theory of agonistic democracy, does not mean she supports a universal-rational conception of consensus. The use of reasons and argumentation

does not immediately indicate an acceptance of, or argument for, of a conception of universal-rationalist consensus, and Mouffe does not provide one in her extensive oeuvre.

Second, the dedication to the common symbolic space by adversaries need not be the result of a rational process of deliberation and consensus. Mouffe stipulates, throughout her work, the importance of the affective dimension of politics in general, and the common symbolic space in particular (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 2005b, 2018). Knops (2007) seems to assume that committing to the common symbolic space can only be the result of a rational process of deliberation, but it could be, and according to Mouffe most likely is, the result of an identification with the signifier of democracy, which still holds substantial symbolic power within the Western and neoliberal political imaginary (Mouffe, 2005b, 2005a).

Similarly, Erman (2009) critiques Mouffe's conception of antagonistic conflict for not considering that to have a conflict one needs to deliberate on the content of the conflict, i.e. what the conflict is about. She states that "Mouffe's notion of antagonism fails because it does not embrace the idea that deliberation is constitutive of conflict" (Erman, 2009, p. 1045). According to Erman (2009) "the actors involved can only identify an antagonistic conflict as such through some common presumptions about each other as *subjects*", which is something Mouffe would never do since antagonists have nothing in common, that is their defining relationship (p. 1046). This critique of Mouffe falls short for several reasons. First, this argumentation seems to conflate the common symbolic space with the possibility of common understanding *tout court*. Mouffe holds that antagonists, as opposed to agonists, do not share a common symbolic space, this is the defining difference. However, this does not mean that antagonists do not or cannot have anything in common. Even if this were the case, for conflict to occur, a rational understanding, reached through deliberation *with* those antagonistic opposed to you, is not required. Mouffe holds that within a contingent social world, in which identification occurs based on a constitutive outside, an Other within the context of power and hierarchy, social relations *may* turn antagonistic, and thus may turn violent. However, this does not mean that a deliberation between the One and the Other is necessary for that to occur, it can occur on the basis of the perception of the One, the self, as opposed to the Other. Thus, deliberation is not required for conflict to occur.

A second grouping of criticism pertains to the relativism and non-normativity of Mouffe's agonistic theory, of which Townshend (2004) can be considered an example. Townshend (2004) considers both Laclau and Mouffe in his paper, and criticizes, among other things, the space for relativism within Mouffe's work. According to Townshend (2004) the argument for

radical democracy, rather than some other, alternative regime, is thin and seems to hinge on an uncritical acceptance of democracy, freedom and equality as *the* symbolic resources of the societies she addresses, mostly Western neoliberal democratic regimes. What Townshend (2004) misses is precisely what Mouffe would never provide, a foundational argument on which to base the choice of democracy as the preferred regime. While I acknowledge that Mouffe's work on agonistic politics knows little normative foundation, we should remember two things. First, it is not Mouffe's goal to write up an extensive universal theory of agonistic politics, which would be self-defeating considering her critique of universalist-rationalist conceptions of democracy. Second, Mouffe writes specifically for the context of Western democracies, and thus considering those common symbolic resources is vital for a strategically and practically oriented theory of politics. If these would not underlay her work, her theory would have no chance of being put into practice.

The third critique I will consider here pertains to the problem of overly permissive pluralism (Aytac, 2020). According to Aytac (2020), Mouffe's agonistic theory of politics extends the scope of legitimate political adversaries too much. Since the only limit concerns the acceptance of the *common symbolic space*, a "lack of [other] principled limits on what should be politicized is likely to justify the most scientifically inadmissible policy positions as a legitimate political adversary within a polity" (Aytac, 2020, p. 5). Aytac (2020) considers this problematic as it allows for science-denialism to occur within the political space, and draws on the example of the anti-vaccine movement, which claims that there is a relationship between autism and MMR vaccines. The politicization of such science-denialism is problematic since

[a]ccepting such problematic instances of politicization as legitimate adversaries would significantly deteriorate the quality of public deliberation and the performance of political institutions. A substantial amount of time and effort would have to be allocated to dealing with overly irrational convictions in political life. I believe this degree of pluralism is unhealthy for any functioning political system including contemporary democracies. (Aytac, 2020, p. 6)

Aytac (2020) proposes an adoption of a quasi-Wittgensteinian conception of language, which would allow a rejection of certain instances of politicization which are based on the incorrect use of concepts, notably 'scientific truth' and 'evidence'. This would allow "a more nuanced position according to which there are prepolitical standards to draw the boundaries of the political" (Aytac, 2020, p. 8). Aytac (2020) proposes to extend the common symbolic space, those signifiers that adversaries commit to, to include "relevant epistemic values" such as authority of science and accuracy. The application of a quasi-Wittgensteinian conception of

language would then allow an assessment of whether political adversaries use concepts such as science, scientific authority and truth, or validity correctly. This approach to language holds that the meaning of certain concepts is rooted in the customs of language use that are fostered through repetitive social practices (Aytac, 2020; Haslanger, 2012). A key term in this approach is *operative concept* which refers to the regular use of that concept in socio-empiric circumstances (Aytac, 2020; Haslanger, 2012). By employing this approach, it would be possible to deem “an individual’s language use would be unwarranted to the extent that their beliefs and utterances are not coherent with the operative concepts, which depend on the patterns” (Aytac, 2020, p. 9). In the case of the anti-vaccine movement, their use of the term scientific authority, when referring to pseudo-scientists’ findings on a relationship between MMR vaccines and autism, would be incongruent with the operative concept scientific authority, i.e. its widely accepted meaning (Aytac, 2020). Thus, Aytac (2020) claims, we could deny anti-vaccine movements a status as ‘legitimate’ adversary, thereby overcoming the problems associated with overly permissive pluralism.

The solution Aytac (2020) provides is ingenious, but unacceptable for several reasons. First, if we accept the poststructuralist ontology that Mouffe builds upon in her work, which she introduced together with Laclau in *Socialist Strategy and Hegemony*, this would require us to abandon this ontology as it is this ontology that allows for exclusionary understandings of knowledge (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Aytac (2020) recognizes that if we were to accept his suggestion of using a quasi-Wittgensteinian conception of language to police what is and what is not justified within the common symbolic space, we need to abandon the poststructuralist ontology. This is problematic, as this poststructuralist ontology underlays Mouffe’s entire argument, and necessitates her intervention of the *common symbolic space* and agonism (instead of antagonism). Remember that this ontology purports that antagonism is a central feature of social life due to the need of a constitutive outside, a ‘they’ to construct a ‘we’. As I argued for in the previous chapters, this construction also disbars us from making grand universal claims of what constitutes proper manner of conducting science, or what makes a claim ‘true’. Since these meanings (of science and of truth) are also discursively structured, contingent, and hinging upon the particular articulation of social relations at that place and time, and these articulations are not the ‘natural’ or ‘true’ articulation, but a hegemonic articulation. In addition, what can be considered relevant information (which of course need not be ‘scientific’) in political decision-making, is also articulated within a particular

hegemony, and thus this needs to be able to be ‘conflicted over’ by adversaries, as long as it commits to the signifiers of the common symbolic space.

Second, the influence of the scientific community and that which it produces is an especially important issue to discuss politically, due to the power it holds over our everyday lives and the legitimacy it grants to hegemonic articulations (at least in contemporary neoliberal regimes). As I have shown in Chapter 5, on epistemic hegemony, the scientific community also exhibits hegemonic practices in which some articulations of what is scientific, of what is evidence, and of what is relevant for policy are privileged and proliferated. By adopting the common use of terms such as scientific authority and validity as qualifiers for ‘entering the political’ Aytac (2020) seems to underestimate the hegemonic nature of the scientific community itself. And that the scientific community operates within a hegemonic articulation which already privileges scientific output above most, if not all, forms of knowledge. To be sure, I am not claiming that science should not play a role in politics, or that anti-vaccine movements are right. But, I am arguing that barring the politicization of science, to render it incontestable, is problematic due to the political and hegemonic nature of science. And that we cannot accept that “the proper politicization of the scientific hegemony should primarily take place within the scientific community itself”, as it is not only within the scientific community that the hegemony is articulated, but in the overarching political conflict between adversaries (Aytac, 2020, p. 6).

In sum, the above mentioned critics of Mouffe have pointed out possible incongruities and issues within her work. However, I find that these critiques either misread Mouffe, or are themselves problematic. Of course, this does not mean that there are no other critiques that do a better job at taking on Mouffe’s propositions. However, as my goal in this thesis is to provide care ethics with a new take on the political, and use the work of Mouffe and Rancière as generative concepts, I have limited myself to the main critiques I have identified. In further research the ramifications of different critiques of both Mouffe and Rancière need to be explicated and worked out.

7. Re-Thinking Care Ethics: The Promise of Aesthetic and Agonistic Theories of Politics and Epistemic Hegemony

Within this Chapter I will demonstrate the value of an aesthetic theory of politics, as introduced by Rancière, and (epistemic) hegemony which is founded on the agonistic theory of Mouffe for political care ethics. I intend to demonstrate this by providing an overview of possible ramifications of taking on these theories and relating these to the dominant notions of the political within care ethics. Note that this demonstration is non-exhaustive, as I believe there are always other ways in which these theories can be related. However, I focus on these as I believe them to be the most relevant at this point in the development of care ethics as a field of inquiry. To be sure, I do not intend to synthesize all aspects of aesthetic, agonistic, and care-ethical theories of politics and the political, ending up with one encompassing theory of everything. Rather, I intend to show how both Mouffe and Rancière can be considered ‘fellow travellers’²⁸ of care ethics, and provide care ethics with a new point of view pertaining to politics.

To do so, this Chapter will adopt the following structure. First, I will argue that care ethics, and especially the work of Joan Tronto, can be compatible with the post-foundational theories of politics set out above. In addition, I will argue that the concept of epistemic hegemony can provide care ethics with the conceptual device in order to criticize the reliance on specific epistemic practices within care. Second, I will argue what post-foundationalism can offer care ethics, in the form of a renewed critique of essentialism. I will also argue for an introduction of deconstruction in the care-ethical repertoire of inquiry. Third, I will argue that care ethics can benefit from adopting insights from aesthetic and agonistic theories of politics, as this fills the gap left by an overreliance on consensus within conceptions of the political in care ethics. I will argue that a *radical caring democracy* may provide a fruitful notion of the political within care ethics.

7.1. Moral Boundaries, Hegemony and Care Ethics

In 1993, Joan Tronto published *Moral Boundaries*, thereby crystallizing the political relevance of care ethics, and the relevance of politics for care ethics. As this book has been a, if not the, major work in political care ethics, I will use this book to draw a comparison between post-foundational thought and care ethics. As I previously expressed, care ethics is a diverse field of inquiry, and knows a multiplicity of voices. Therefore, the compatibility, or

²⁸ See: Frans Vosman (2017) on the Ethics of Care weblog.

usefulness of post-foundational thought will likely differ among these varied visions on care ethics. In this section I hope to convincingly argue that post-foundational thought can be an interesting, and valuable point of view for the political care ethics described below.

In this book, Tronto (1993) points out three moral boundaries which exclude some theories of morality from consideration: 1) a boundary between morality and politics; 2) a boundary of the moral point of view; and 3) a boundary between the public and the private. The existence of these boundaries impeded a political care ethics from coming into existence, since it contains a morality that is rooted in feminist thought and relies heavily on contextuality and non-rational sources of knowledge, to the private sphere (Tronto, 1993). In her rich argument, Tronto (1993) provides an elaborate genealogy of the universal, rational, public-minded, and de-politicized moralities that became dominant in the 18th century, (neo-)Kantianism and utilitarianism, and remain dominant today. To describe this, Tronto (1993) draws on economic, social, and cultural developments that lead to the privileging of a type of *public man* as the subject of morality. While Tronto (1993) never uses the concept of hegemony to describe the manner in which universalist moralities are privileged, while feminist contextual moralities, including care ethics, are marginalized, I will argue that what she is describing is an articulation of a hegemonic order. And subsequently, I will argue that understanding Tronto's argument as a description of hegemonic articulation is beneficial, as it urges a particular response in the form of counter-hegemonic articulations.

As described in Chapters 4 and 6 'natural orders' do not exist, in the sense that they are not natural but the result of exclusionary processes in which sedimented practices of doings and sayings become the status quo, they become the common sense of practice. The ingenuity of Tronto's *Moral Boundaries* is that she uncovers and explicates how morality, even within the context of Western European ('enlightened') societies, did not always rely so heavily on this gendered, universalist, rationalist, and individualist morality. For example, by drawing on the work of Scottish Enlightenment figures, including Adam Smith and his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Tronto (1993) indicates how emotions had an important place within Western moral thought in the 18th century. Thereby Tronto emphasized that what is deemed the proper form and substance of the particular social institution of morality has developed over time. By stressing the role of economic, political, and social practices in the articulation, or construction, of the dominant morality, Tronto also emphasizes that these rationalist theories of morality are not (solely) dependent on rational argumentation or an objective foundation, but heavily dependent on their social, economic, and cultural expediency or usefulness.

Here, it is helpful to remember that hegemonies, in Laclau's and Mouffe's conception, are a response to the radical contingency of any social configuration, they are a manner in which order is constructed within a context of chaos (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). This is exactly what the moral theories of the 18th century, most notably Kantianism and utilitarianism provide. The economic, cultural and social practices of the 18th century demanded a morality that would accommodate, inter alia, for a gendered view of the private sphere, the *man* as a public figure, and an interaction of cultures due to globalization, in order to make these practices intelligible form a moral point of view. Concomitantly with the articulation of these moral theories, the boundaries described by Tronto (1993) were instituted, thereby delimiting the scope of what could be considered a proper, appropriate, morality. This circumscription of morality *proper* is exactly how a hegemonic articulation functions, it delineates the meaning and scope of social institutions such as morality. It naturalizes a particular, and artificial, configuration of meanings and thus determines the common sense.

Another example that allows me to emphasize that Tronto's arguments in *Moral Boundaries* describe hegemonic articulation is the manner in which the ascent of universal theories of morality was accompanied by the containment of women to the realm of the private. As Tronto (1993) states, in the 18th century women increasingly become members of the public, in the sense that they took up roles outside of the household. As a result, women's morality became, increasingly, a public issue. And, considering the need for reproduction of power relations within the context of a hegemonic articulation, a strategy to contain women to the private was required. Tronto (1993) argues that the rise of universal moral theories allowed for an understanding of *man* as a public figure, and *woman* as a private figure, thereby relegating women to the household again. Similarly, what can be considered public and universal became associated with the masculine, while the contextual and relational became associated with the feminine (Tronto, 1993). This, in the long run, had consequences for the development of contextual theories of morality, as these were associated with the feminine, and thus the private (Tronto, 1993). Again, we can observe here how hegemonic articulations partition what is intelligible, reasonable, useful, within a particular social configuration and what is not.

My argument here is that Tronto's (1993) boundaries can be considered as a hegemonic articulation of a social order, in which some types of people, lives, theories, knowledge, and morality are privileged over others and normalized. In the examples above, I pointed out the manner in which emotions and the feminine were excluded, how they were deemed irrelevant

or unnatural. This is exactly what a hegemonic articulation does, it excludes some possibilities of social configurations, e.g. a configuration in which morality takes in to account context, acknowledges the relevance of emotions in moral problems, and accepts that not-knowing is an integral part of moral life. Of course, just pointing out that we can understand one work of moral theory in a particular way does not justify doing so. In the subsequent paragraphs I will argue that understanding moral boundaries as a hegemonic articulation is valuable, as it points in the direction of a way (or strategy) of questioning and problematizing these boundaries. Here, an understanding of hegemony as an epistemic project, as elaborated on in Chapter 5 and 6, will also be of use.

If we understand Tronto's moral boundaries as an articulation of hegemony, we can seek out Mouffe's work to find possible responses to these boundaries, and possible problems with how care ethicists have approached these boundaries so far. Mouffe contends that every articulation of a social and political order is hegemonic, in the sense that it excludes certain practices while privileging others (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 2005a, 2018). If we understand the neoliberal order as hegemonic, and as perpetuating the ideas about morality as universal and rational, and social practices enforcing these ideas, those wishing to contest these ideas run into a problem, since the arguments and strategies aimed at contesting these ideas are excluded from what is considered reasonable or valid, as it is precisely the hegemonic structure that determines this validity. As I have described in Chapter 6, hegemonies have a distinct epistemic function. They determine what does and what does not constitute proper knowledge and it prescribes manners of producing this knowledge, e.g. the scientific method rooted in a universalist-rationalist conception of knowledge and truth. This is what makes a care-ethical critique of neoliberal systems so difficult, since the ontologies, epistemologies, and argumentation utilized within care-ethical critique are barely recognized within a neoliberal hegemony. The neoliberal hegemony functions as to render these argumentations, and the philosophical foundations on which they are based, unintelligible.

Let me emphasize here that this does not mean that care ethical arguments are never heard, never adopted, or never transformed into policy. Of course, this is not the case, as can be seen in the production of care ethical critique in the form of articles, monographs and the influence care ethics has on specific policies. However, many care ethical critiques have a desire to fundamentally re-think the manner in which we structure society, how we appreciate and perform care, and how we view humankind and the world. The contributions of care ethics can be said to be of such a radical nature, or in other words they break, expand or shift so

much boundaries constituted by neoliberal hegemony, that it constitutes such a deviation from neoliberal common sense, that these contributions are rarely recognized *and adopted* within these regimes.²⁹

If we accept that care ethics is incongruent with the premises of neoliberal epistemic hegemony, this has important ramifications for a strategy of political change.³⁰ Hegemonies are articulated, re-articulated and contested within the political realm, and a critical school of thought, or community of inquiry, interested in contesting the hegemonic articulations of neoliberalism, including its reliance on universalist-rationalist framework, requires political action. This does not mean that care ethicists, or other critical scholars and knowledge producers, need to invest all their efforts in formulating political responses, and divest their efforts from knowledge production within the academy or other knowledge institutions. On the contrary, as we have seen in the examples of the morality-politics boundary, and the public-private boundary, these articulations have been refined and articulated utilizing the work of academics (Tronto, 1993). It is within the academy that many aspects of a hegemonic articulation find their legitimation.³¹ Thus, what I am arguing for is a self-consciousness among care ethicists, and other critical scholars, of the hegemonic nature of neoliberalism, and their possible contributions to a counter-hegemonic project. This, in turn, would require considerations of the hegemonic nature of neoliberalism within care-ethical critique.

I argue that epistemic hegemony may provide a useful heuristic device in future care-ethical research and critique pertaining to the role of knowledge in care and society. As I have elaborated on the meaning and context of epistemic hegemony in Chapter 5 and 6, I will here only repeat the definition as introduced by Brough (2013): “the domination of one view of knowledge and the subordination of all other forms” (p. 34). A tenet of this thesis has been to expand on this notion, by arguing that epistemic hegemony does not occur within the ivory

²⁹ Note that I do not mean to imply that heterodox scientific work *never* gets published, recognized, or integrated into governmental policy. However, I do argue that this work often remains marginalized, it does not become the point of departure and often remains a critique of the status quo.

³⁰ To some, a reference to a strategy for political change may seem unscientific, and too activist. Something that does not belong in an academic paper or thesis. However, as I explained in this Chapter, and in Chapter 3, political care ethics exhibits a desire for change, and change does not occur without strategy. See *inter alia* Tronto (1993; 2013) Brugère (2020).

³¹ To be sure, I am not arguing that everything produced in the knowledge institutes of our societies serves as legitimizing a particular configuration of social relations, i.e. the hegemony. I recognize the plurality that these institutes produce, and the critical-constructive stance of some academics, policymakers, and other knowledge producers. What I am arguing is that it is in the academy that the legitimations are often produced, especially in the context of neoliberal hegemonies which seek to legitimate their actions utilizing the wealth of knowledge that is produced within a universalist-rationalist framework.

towers of the academy, but it is a phenomenon that is co-constituted through the articulation of political hegemonies.

The reason for suggesting this concept as a heuristic device is its ability to capture the structural, and political nature of knowledge, thereby widening the scope from the particular institutional or personal context to the political context. Within care ethics, epistemic questions pertaining to issues like the appropriate role of clinical expertise, the role of experiential knowledge in research, and the epistemic positions of different stakeholders within care processes, are brought forward. While many care ethicists do take into account the political context of such epistemic practices, I believe that acknowledging the interrelatedness between epistemic practice and political articulation can be developed further.

7.2. Care Ethics and Post-Foundationalism: *Contradictio in Terminus*?

In this section I will consider whether care ethics and post-foundationalism are compatible, in a limited sense. As expressed before, I do not intend to synthesize care ethics and post-foundational thought, but explicate the relations, and opportunities, for cross-pollination. To be able to do so, I also need to provide the ways in which care ethics and post-foundationalism diverge and converge. While the dialogue between care ethicists and post-foundational theorists has been limited, I deem it necessary to briefly go over these cross-references, as it allows me to illustrate the manner in which care ethics and post-foundational thought have moved closer towards each other, rather than diverged. I will first consider essentialism and anti-essentialism, and how these views have developed within care ethics.

In her essay “Feminism, Citizenship, and Radical Democratic Politics” Mouffe (2005b) describes care ethicists as arguing for

[a] set of values based on the experience of women as women, that is, their experience of motherhood and care exercised in the private realm of the family. They denounce liberalism for having constructed modern citizenship as the realm of the public, identified with men, and for having excluded women by relegating them to the private realm. According to this view, feminists should strive for a type of politics that is guided by the specific values of love, care, the recognition of needs and friendship. (p. 79)

She continues by arguing that care ethicists, and other adjacent streams of feminist political theory, by defining liberalism as masculine, and their alternatives as feminine, exhibit an essentialism that is unacceptable. It is important to remember here that Mouffe’s argument falls within the scope of the poststructuralist project, in the sense that she problematizes constant and essential identities and meanings (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 2005a, 2005b). Responding to critiques of anti-essentialism she stresses that it is not the case “that

the critique of an essential identity must necessarily lead to the rejection of any concept of identity whatsoever” (Mouffe, 2005b, p. 87). Conversely, within her anti-essentialist account of political subjectivity there is room for multiple subject positions, based on a sense of identity, but this subjectivity is rooted in a commitment to the signifiers of the common symbolic space, equality and freedom.

I hold that Mouffe’s description of care ethics may have rung true at the time she wrote this essay, in the 1990s, but that care ethics has developed substantially since then. As described in Chapter 3, care ethics’ second generation has problematized essentialized and absolute gendered notions of care ethics, while maintaining the argument that caring activities are gendered (see Kittay, 1999; Tronto, 1993). In addition, Tronto (1993, 2013) has duly politicized care ethics, and accommodated for an understanding of the power relations within care, thereby moving away from an idealist discourse pertaining to care. In this sense, I believe political care ethics has ‘moved towards’ post-foundational thought, and thereby shows considerable overlaps in theoretical grounding with scholars such as Mouffe and Rancière.

However, in addition to this differing account of political subjectivity, and her non-gendered account of politics, Mouffe (2005a) provides an understanding of identities and meanings as a (part of the) process of hegemonic articulation. This is vital in the context of this paper, as it would also understand the concept of care as a hegemonic articulation (Cloyes, 2002; Mouffe, 2005b). As suggested by Cloyes (2002), this may be a difficult proverbial pill to swallow for some in care ethics. Within much care ethical literature the concept of care is portrayed as an essential human activity, a fundamental aspect of social life, and a necessary fact of living. See for example the much-quoted conception of care as introduced by Fischer and Tronto (1990), who define care as a species activity. And while there certainly have been voices who criticized idealized and essentialized notions of care, there are still much care-ethical accounts which seem to portray care as an ideal, natural and romantic phenomenon (Cloyes, 2002; Hankivsky, 2014; Sevenhuijsen, 1998). However, I argue that an understanding of the concept of care as articulated, as part of a hegemonic discourse that facilitates the configuration of social (power) relations is actually helpful to care ethics, and may provide promising roads ahead for a political care ethics. While I will elaborate on the ramifications for an understanding of the political in care ethics when learning from post-foundational thought in the next section, I will limit myself here to the ramifications of understanding care as a articulation, from a poststructuralist perspective.

First, let me reiterate that conceiving the concept of care as an articulation does not mean that it is mere discourse. As explained by Laclau and Mouffe (2001), understanding a concept as an articulation means recognizing the manner in which the meaning of a concept (or identity or political subject) is discursively structured, through materials, practices and languages. Articulations are never complete, always hinge on their relative position towards different articulations, they are unstable, and are thus subject to be challenged (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). By understanding concepts as articulations, Mouffe and Laclau (2001) bring to the fore the undecidability, the contingent, and the ambiguity of our world. This does not mean that the world becomes unintelligible, as these hegemonic articulations produce a system of meanings, subjects, relations, and identities, that is relatively stable (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). If we understand the concept of care as an articulation this would require care ethics to take on a critical position to this concept, and acknowledge that any assertion of the nature of care, or what constitutes good care, is in fact a political claim, and thus requires a humble approach in such claim assertions.

While I acknowledge that for some the understanding of care as a hegemonic articulation is unacceptable, I would like to propose a consequence of accepting such an understanding, which pertains to a recognition of a manner of inquiry that goes under recognized within the Utrecht School of care ethics so far.³² I argue that if we understand care as a hegemonic articulation, this requires from us a commitment to deconstructing the concept of care, both within and outside of the care ethical literature and praxis. Here, I avoid the use of the word method, as methods are seen as antithetical to, and incompatible with, deconstruction which cannot provide *ex-ante* a procedural form to analysis (Wood & Bernasconi, 1988). While the definition of construction is highly contested, I believe that Caputo (1997) has identified a goal of deconstruction that may clarify its use in the context of care ethics:

The very meaning and mission of deconstruction is to show that things - texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices of whatever size and sort you need - do not have definable meanings and determinable missions. (p. 31)

Deconstruction as a starting point of inquiry may provide us with a deeper, or different, understanding of the role of the concept and practice of care within our social relations and the broader ethico-political context. It may help care ethicists to uncover the differences

³² Within Leget et al. (2019) the authors describe phenomenology, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, institutional and auto-ethnography, visual data analysis and responsive evaluation as the appropriate methodologies within care ethics, as these enable care ethicists to understand focus on lived experiences, practices of care and the way society is organized.

within care, and can provide a care-ethical understanding of care that eschews ideal and pure definitions. Moreover, it enables care ethicists to seek out the tensions within ‘our own’ literature, thus enabling a reflexivity that is a core disposition within care ethics (Leget et al., 2019).

While deconstruction primarily focuses on text, this need not be exclusively the case, as can be seen in the feminist appropriations of deconstruction, including Judith Butler’s deconstruction of sex, gender, and sexuality (Butler, 2006; cf. Gunnarsson, 2014; Nash, 1994). Thus, deconstruction should be understood as a broader concept that allows for questioning the discursive structures which constitute social life, discursive meaning here the broad systems that defines and redefines the configuration of meanings, identities, subjects and relations that constitute our lived realities.

7.3. The Political in Care Ethics: Recognizing Conflict

In this section I will argue that this post-foundational political thought may be conducive to a care-ethical conception of the political, as it is congruent with the relational ontology and plural epistemology of care ethics. I will introduce the notion of a radical caring democracy, in which I aim to apply what Mouffe and Rancière set out in their agonistic and aesthetic theories of the political. Following an assessment of this congruence, I will consider whether deliberative democratic theories may be more appropriate, which I do not find to be the case.³³

As I have written in the first chapter and Chapter 3, much of care-ethical literature has focused on conceptualizing democracy as a method of seeking consensus. If we take care ethics to be an ethics with at its core responsibility, in the sense described by Walker (2007), this should come as no surprise, as she states that ethics then becomes “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*” (p. 71, emphasis added). However, in the context of this paper, the defining phrase is ‘among themselves’, since, as becomes clear from the quote above, this consensus-seeking occurs within a preconfigured community. This, considering what we have learned from Rancière and Mouffe, can be considered problematic in two ways. First, those preconfigured

³³ I wish to preface this section by acknowledging that post-foundational and deliberative democratic theories are not the only theories that may be informative for a conception of the political within care ethics. However, as recognized by Tronto (2013) these strands have been dominant within discussions about how democracy should work.

communities of like-minded, are not alone, in isolation. Within the social realm, the plethora of configured communities is endless, and conflict between those can always occur. In my opinion, care ethics should further develop the consequences of this social fact. Second, if we understand the aesthetic and hegemonic nature of the political, we should not presume that communities are preconfigured. Thus, by adopting an aesthetic and hegemonic view of politics, in which we do not assume communities, requires an openness and an acceptance of the contingent nature of the political.

Political care ethics, as described in Chapter 3, argues for a relational ontology, which conceives the

moral agent not primarily in terms of independence, equality of power and influence, enjoying almost unrestricted freedom to enter and dissolve contracts. Rather, it conceives agents as mutually interconnected, vulnerable and dependent, often in asymmetric ways. (Pettersen, 2011, p. 52)

This relational ontology is not only relevant for an understanding of humans in their capacity as moral agents, since “care ethics claims that relations of interdependence and dependence are a fundamental feature of our existence”, thus moving beyond merely our capacities as moral agents (Robinson, 2011, p. 11).

Human interconnectedness and interdependence affect the manner in which humans think, and what they consider to be knowledge. In Walker’s *Moral Understandings*, she argues, building upon a practicalist notion of truth introduced by Ruddick (1995), that knowledge and truth are embodied and socially constructed within practices. This can also be observed in the research practices that care ethics supports, in that a good understanding of a phenomenon, or of the moral good, can only be constructed “when we acknowledge and relate different positions, perspectives and types of knowledge to each other” (Leget et al., 2019, p. 24). This means that care ethics rejects a universalist-rationalist conception of knowledge. And, care ethics allows for a plurality of knowledge, thus considering and relating different types of knowledge.

This plurality of knowledge also points to the vulnerable position we occupy as knowers. If knowledge is embodied and socially constructed, we can never be absolutely certain about whether what we know corresponds more to ‘reality’ than what another embodied, socially situated knower knows. This does not imply a total relativism of knowledge. What counts as knowledge is socially constructed, and this construction also exhibits rules and norms about validity and truth (Ruddick, 1995). Nonetheless, the notion that these epistemic norms are socially constructed, and need not correspond to some ultimate meta-epistemological account

of reality, requires from care ethicists (and others who adopt a similar outlook on knowledge) epistemic humility.

This plurality of knowledge can also lead to something else, namely conflict. While underdeveloped within the care ethical literature so far, this has major implications for a notion of the political in care ethics. If it is so that multiple truths can exist, in the sense that different relational and embodied knowers can provide a different answer to the same question and both be correct, then conflict is inevitable. Of course, not all conflict needs to result in the antagonistic conflict that Mouffe describes, in which friends are differentiated from enemies, which are to be destroyed. However, the likelihood that conflicts come into being, especially when concerning moral issues, is high from the perspective of care ethics. Thus, a notion of the political needs to be able to accommodate for that possibility of conflict.

Here, we can draw on the work of Mouffe, as explicated in Chapter 4. Mouffe, with her conception of a radical democracy, suggests we consider democracy as a political space that enables conflicting groups with an avenue to manifest that conflict. While Mouffe crafts this space due to her conception of the social realm as exhibiting an ever-present possibility of conflict, care ethics needs not adopt this social realm, to still be able to learn from her theory of democracy. As I have shown in the previous paragraphs, care ethics' relational ontology and epistemic pluralism allow for the existence of "conflicts for which no rational solution could ever exist" (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 10). Thus, even without accepting the premises of Mouffe's argument, her work on democracy can be valuable for care ethics as it provides us with an idea of how to craft space for conflict in democracy.

My second point pertains to the aesthetics of the political, in the sense that it pertains to the visibility (in the broadest, not only visual sense) of political subjectivity, as introduced by Rancière (1999). As I have explained in Sections 4.1, 6.1.1. and 6.2, Rancière points to the aesthetic nature of politics. According to Rancière, the political constitutes a moment in which those previously invisible, in the sense that these invisibles were a non-political *and not knowing* subject, become visible. It constitutes a moment wherein those who were previously thought to produce merely noise, unintelligible chatter pertaining to the base experiences of the human condition. This is relevant to care ethics, as it points out the radical contingency and emergence of those communities which share moral beliefs. These are not pre-constituted, as these communities also exist within the aesthetic regime which is the police order, which allows us to recognize some communities, while obscuring others to the realm of the invisible. If we accept this notion of the aesthetic nature of the political and the police, we

have to acknowledge that we cannot assume that the communities we know are the communities that may possibly exist. And, if we acknowledge that this is the case, we should at least attempt to widen our field of perception, while acknowledging that we are ultimately not able to consider all possible configuration of moral communities due to the contingent nature of the political. I will elaborate on possible manners in which to widen our scope of perception in the last paragraphs of this chapter.

Now, let us consider what we can learn from Mouffe and Rancière for a care-ethical notion of the political. In the following paragraphs I will provide, tentatively, the outlines of a conciliation of radical democracy and caring democracy, what I will call a *radical caring democracy*. Note that the aim of this paper is not necessarily to convince the reader that this is *the way* ahead for a care-ethical conception of democracy. My aims are humble, I merely try to illustrate the manner in which the lessons of Mouffe and Rancière *may* allow care ethicists to think differently, and seek out new ways of reinvigorating a political notion within care ethics. Of course, there could be a plethora of other avenues to take, as my interpretation, however much I am convinced this is a fruitful avenue to take, remains just that.

First, let us consider how to accommodate the plurality of knowledge, and the conflict that may arise from that plurality. Here, the use of the concept of the *common symbolic space* may be helpful, as it provides a manner in which we can distinguish those who simply disagree, mere adversaries in Mouffe's terminology, from those who explicitly threaten the fabric of our democracies, the enemies which reject the signifiers of democracy, including equality and freedom. Note that while care ethics has a distinct interpretation of these signifiers, differing substantially from more liberal-oriented theorists, and even Mouffe and Rancière, this is still compatible with the concept of a common symbolic space, as it allows for a rigorous reinterpretation of those signifiers. In addition, I believe that care ethicists have provided an intellectual legacy that could suggest that care could be a concept that, emergently, contributes to this common symbolic space. While I have earlier criticized naturalized conceptions of the concept of care, this does not mean that care is not a central phenomenon of living together, of society. I believe it is, and I think we should take seriously Tronto's (2013) plea for centering care within *the content* of democratic life, i.e. what democracy is about.

This also brings me to a second aspect of a radical caring democracy, which pertains to an appreciation of affective dimension in politics. Both within Mouffe's agonistic democracy, as in political care ethics, emotions are recognized as valuable sources of knowledge and

motivation. Several care ethicists emphasize the role emotions play in caring, and how emotions should not be regarded as the opposite of reason (Bourgault & Pulcini, 2018; Held, 2007; Pulcini, 2017). This recognition of emotions as integral aspects of the human experience are vital to a notion of the political within care ethics, as democratic life should fit the human experience and not vice versa. Mouffe (2018), drawing on inter alia the psychoanalytic work of Freud and Lacan, stresses the need for any configuration of the political to recognize that what motivates people to be political, to enter into democratic life, is the need for connection and recognition. The way we *feel* about politics matters. In strategic terms, this is especially relevant, since any movement wishing to change something politically in a democratic context needs to ensure a popular legitimacy. Recognizing and responding to emotions and affective needs, together with reason and argumentation, are important manners in which this popular legitimation can occur. Thus, a radical caring democracy needs to recognize and respond to the emotional needs of the *demos* through which it intends to rule.

Besides the need of any political regime, or alternative, to recognize this affective dimension of politics, it also needs to respond to this dimension by providing a vision that incorporates these emotional needs. Here, *Caring Democracy* may be of use (Tronto, 2013). Within this work, Tronto (2013) sets out an argument for democratizing care, and caring for democracy. By centring care within democratic life, and recognizing the caring responsibilities of the citizens living this democratic life, Tronto (2013) finds a way to respond to the needs of the *demos*. Brugère (2020) provides an account of a caring democracy which suggest it as an alternative response to both neoliberalism and populism. By arguing for an adoption of the values of plurality, communication, trust, and respect within democratic practice, Tronto (2013) responds to the caring and affective needs of democratic citizens (cf. Brugère, 2020; Sevenhuijsen, 1998). I hold that a *radical* caring democracy should do the same, while acknowledging that a centering of these values would not negate the possibility of conflict.

This brings me to an important distinction between caring democracy and radical caring democracy. A radical caring democracy acknowledges the possibility of conflict, whether it is from a poststructuralist perspective or a pluralist epistemological perspective. This means that a radical caring democracy crafts space within the sphere of the political for agonism, and does not foreclose the democratic space by focusing on consensus-seeking. This does not mean that within a radical caring democracy consensus is never possible, or that it should not be sought. But a radical caring democracy recognizes the impossibility of rational consensus for all conflicts, and thus views those who disagree with the tenets of its regime as legitimate

adversaries. This means that a radical caring democracy does not eschew conflict and agonistic debate, but celebrates and facilitates it, as these are signs of a healthy democratic space. While this conflict and debate may sometimes result in broad consensus, there will be times that it will not, and that political decisions will be made regardless.

A different implication for a radical caring democracy pertains to the concept of axiomatic equality. As set out in Section 6.2., equality can be understood in an axiomatic sense, as the presumption that we are all ontologically equal. Within *Caring Democracy*, Tronto (2013) discusses the role of equality in contemporary democratic theories, and highlights the different interpretations that exist. Tronto proposes that, in the context of political care ethics, we understand equality as “all humans are equally receivers of care”, and that “[the] quality of being needy is shared equally by all humans”, while stressing that this does not mean that we all have the same or similar needs (p. 29). This seems to suggest that Tronto (2013) takes a similar axiomatic approach in her conception of equality, in the sense that she *presumes* that all humans require care, and that this is true for all human beings. However, in the remainder of her work Tronto (2013) conceptualize equality as a goal to be reached, rather than an axiom, in the sense that reducing inequalities becomes a *telos* of a caring democracy, together with freedom for all and increasing levels of trust (p. 182). This is an explicit divergence from the conception of axiomatic ontological equality set out in this thesis, as this conception of equality does not construct equality as a goal, but as assumption from which to act.

I pointed out in Section 6.2. that Rancière seems to construct this axiomatic equality as a polemical and politically strategic concept, pointing us towards the manner in which the unseen can become visible. By appreciating equality as an assumption, rather than a goal, this requires from a democratic practice that it takes this insight into account in both its response to current regimes, and in its alternative democratic procedures. While an elaborate discussion on the implications of such practices goes beyond the scope of this paper, I wish to explicate two concrete ramifications for a radical caring democracy. First, it requires a political answer to neoliberal hegemonies that go *beyond* advocating for incremental encroaching inclusion projects, in which more and more voices are appreciated within the democratic arena. These incremental processes of inclusion are precisely the danger that Rancière points towards when he stresses that the conception of equality as a goal puts the burden of action in the future and not the now (Rancière, 2004a). Rather, the assumption of ontological equality provides us with a lens to critique and problematize current democratic practice, by uncovering the inegalitarianism of these regimes. Second, within a radical caring democratic regime itself, it

requires democratic processes that rely on the before mentioned axiom. Thus, democratic processes should no longer be merely about increasing the seats at the table, but about bridging the gap between the table and the *demos*. In practice, this could mean that political discourse should no longer be centered on elite figures, whether they be dignitaries, policy or business elites, or media personas, but on the lived experiences of people. Thus, policy should not be an elite exercise, utilizing mostly insights from policy and academic expertise, but should be informed, crafted and authorized by the people it affects. The people affected by policy are no longer assumed to be just that, affected, but are assumed to be ontologically equal, and thus not lesser equipped to be democratically relevant and influential.

As a consequence of Rancière's aesthetic theory of the political, and thus differing from the radical democratic theory of Mouffe, a radical caring democracy requires a commitment to sensitivity to the limits of our perception. Since every social is a police order, and thus constitutes an aesthetic regime which obscures some while spotlighting others. One could argue that, since this is a constitutive fact of any police order, we need not even attempt to uncover the unseen. However, this would be a too nihilist simplification, and would ensure that any alternative, including a radical caring democracy, would fall in to the trap of perpetuating oppression and obscurity evenly. This is unacceptable, which is why I suggest that a radical caring democracy takes upon itself the commitment to uncover the unseen, while acknowledging the limits in doing so. Here, we can learn from the care ethicists who have emphasized the necessity of receptivity and attentiveness. Through, *inter alia*, deep listening and practicing epistemic humility, a radical caring democratic regime *may* be able to uncover what is yet unseen. In practice, this could mean that subjects of governmental policy are first listened to, with an open and reflexive attitude.³⁴ This would require a deepening of democracy, which would move beyond the representative function that current democracies seem to focus on.

³⁴ In the first chapter of this thesis I have been critical of the care-ethical literature focusing on attentiveness and listening as solutions for a democratic deficit exhibited by neoliberal regimes (see Bourgault, 2020). Here, my argument for integrating these ideas and practices in a radical caring democratic alternative should not be understood as a holistic solution to the problem of obscurity and invisibility. However, practicing these traits with a distinct understanding of the aesthetic nature of the political, may sensitize us to the limits of these practices, without requiring us to abandon them. Moreover, within the context of a *radical* caring democracy, attentiveness and listening could be practiced while recognizing that conflict is an ever-present phenomenon, thereby emphasizing that these practices cannot be aimed at universal consensus. Finally, these practices of listening and receptivity should not be viewed, or practiced, in silos but understood as supplements to other practices aimed at uncovering the seen, such as deconstruction of the texts and practices governing our democratic lives, while always recognizing that ultimately, we will never succeed in uncovering *all* that is obscure.

While the practical workings of a radical caring democracy require more explication and elaboration, the point of a radical caring democracy is that we do not only view *policies* as a moment for inclusion, but we view the functioning of democracy itself as requiring democratic measures. In principle, this means that within the context of this paper I cannot foreclose the possibility that what I have set out in this paper does not resonate with the *demos*. However, what I intended by introducing this concept of a *radical caring democracy* was to put into dialogue post-foundational political thought and care ethics, and provide an example of what such dialogue may result in.

Of course, there could be arguments against a such a dialogue, or at least against the fruits of such dialogue, as I have tried to explicate throughout the preceding chapters. Some may argue that deliberative democratic theory provides a better partner for a reinvigoration of the political in care ethics. I hope to have shown in the paragraphs above that care ethics, with its relational ontology and epistemic plurality, requires a recognition of the political as a site for conflict. While deliberative democratic theory is diverse, and there may be strands that accommodate this, I have found that the post-foundational theories described above provide rich and insightful avenues for care ethics to seriously consider. The rejection of universalist-rationalist frameworks, which much deliberative theory seems to be based upon, is an important factor in this consideration. Nonetheless, any argumentation that provides manners in which deliberative democratic theory may be compatible with a caring democracy can and should be considered in further research, since it is in this confrontation of ideas, in this conflict, that we learn, even if we end up disagreeing.

7.4. Revisiting Epistemic Hegemony and COVID-19: A Radical Caring Alternative?

While this paper has focused on the conceptual inquiry into the relevance of post-foundational thought for care ethics, the COVID-19 political and policy response has been brought forward as an illustration of the epistemic hegemony as elaborated on in Chapter 5. In this section I will briefly consider the implications from the theoretical insights described above for both a radical caring critique of the current pandemic response and the possibilities for a policy response within a radical caring democracy.

Concerning the possibilities for a radical caring democratic critique of the epistemic hegemony exhibited in the Coronacrisis, the following can be brought forward. First, a radical caring democratic critique would recognize that the manner in which the current political regime handles the pandemic, and the way in which it relies on specific type of (positivist,

universalist, and rationalist) knowledge, are not mere accidents, nor are they necessarily founded upon a deeper objective rationality. Rather, it would recognize that this is a process of hegemonic articulation, in which a specific (neoliberal) regime is legitimized, and in which a certain type of knowledge is privileged. Thus, it would be conscious of the need to move beyond academic critique, and look for ways in which it can contest these hegemonies *within* the political sphere. An example could be the identification of a need for public protest, or an alignment with political entities, whether political parties or other political influencers, that are equipped legally to *politically* contest this hegemonic articulation. Note that this does not necessarily mean that academics themselves should be the driving force behind such a political translation of their conceptual or empirical critiques, although this could also be possible, but that political engagement and cooperation should be sought.

Another type of critique that could be brought forward would consist of questioning the heavy reliance on epidemiological and medical knowledge in political and policy decision-making, as it is clear that the repercussions of both the pandemic and any response are highly likely to impact most, if not all, spheres of life. The way in which this reliance preconfigures the construction of the problem, and forecloses other possible avenues of inquiry, will be pointed out. For example, the reliance on medical knowledge, although understandable as it concerns a virus outbreak, has resulted in a portrayal of the crisis as first and foremost a medical crisis. While a radical care ethical critique would not (necessarily) problematize a focus on medical knowledge, it would question why and how other types of knowledge pertaining to social, economic and spiritual wellbeing are not explicitly considered within the advices. While these factors have played a role within decision-making, how and why these were considered was not always made explicit.

A radical caring democratic alternative may point towards the need to explicitly integrate other sources of knowledge, including experiential knowledge, derived from the assumption of ontological equality, in decision-making. Such an alternative could maintain that a global pandemic is not only an expert issue, but requires the insights and opinions of citizens, regardless of their 'level of expertise' on these issues. Thus, a radical caring democratic regime should not rely only (or mostly) on the advice of a group of experts such as the OMT, but should accommodate a multiplicity of voices that were not previously heard. As a radical caring democracy, in the construction I have provided above, acknowledges that not all possible configurations of peoples can be perceived, such accommodation should not only consist of integrating interest groups and organizations. Rather, it should be possible for

people to voice their concerns regardless of their affiliations with these kinds of collectives. I recognize that it is infeasible to hear everyone, but this does not mean that such a democratic regime should not attempt to uncover ways in which this may become more practical, for example through additional elections, lotteries, or public fora.

Moreover, a radical democratic caring regime would recognize that politics needs to accommodate opposing views. The above-mentioned ways of increasing the voices considered should not be seen as fostering consensus, but should be viewed as a manner in which conflicting views can be expressed and clash. Of course, this will result in situations in which opposing views are also exclusionary, and thus not reconcilable. In these instances, a radical caring regime would still take action, and make a political decision. This would be, and is, the case in any regime. The difference that a radical caring democracy makes is that it genuinely crafts space for these opposing views within the political arena, without requiring a consensus. In practice, this would mean that those currently opposing the policies in response to the pandemic are allowed to voice their opinions within the political arena, while recognized as legitimate political adversaries. A difference with current political practice consists of this latter part, as currently opposing views are often framed as ‘out of this world’ (e.g. *viruswappies*) and/or a danger to democratic order. The reason for crafting this space is the understanding that deep disagreements over the right course of action may always occur, and that no party can call on a higher rational objectivity to legitimate their own claims vis-à-vis the other. This does not mean that a radical caring democratic regime would not craft a pandemic response that is also based on scientific inquiry, in addition to other sources of knowledge, but that conflict is allowed to occur between adversaries even if their knowledge claims are different. Of course, this conflict pertaining to the right course of action with regards to the pandemic already exists within the social realm (and could always occur at different points in the future), but is currently subverted and hidden and thereby risking an escalation.

In sum, the conceptual inquiry in the sections and chapters above stress the need to focus critique on the manner in which knowledge is political, and politics is about knowledge, within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The concept of epistemic hegemony points towards the need to critique the way in which some knowledge is privileged over others, and how this occurs in the Dutch government’s handling of the crisis. It suggests a broadening of our understanding of politically relevant knowledge within a radical caring democracy.

Moreover, it emphasizes the manner in which the scope of politically relevant knowledge is

articulated within the political arena, thus necessitating political action and cooperation. Finally, it points towards the need to appreciate the conflictual nature of the social, and subsequently recognizing the need to craft a political space that allows and facilitates conflict, rather than negating it, in the context of opposing views pertaining to the Coronacrisis.

8. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to investigate the concepts of depoliticisation, from the perspective of post-foundational political thought, and its relevance for care ethics. And, by building upon these perspectives, to reinvigorate and rethink a notion of the political within political care ethics. In the chapters above I have shed some light on these concepts, and argued that the work of Mouffe and Rancière can contribute to a notion of the political within care ethics. In this conclusion I will briefly consider my arguments, possible weaknesses, and avenues for further inquiry.

In this paper I have first argued that care ethics currently seems to focus on a deliberative understanding of democracy. I believe that this focus on deliberative democracies is incompatible with the relational ontology and pluralist epistemology of care ethics. If no rational objectivity exists, or if this is not comprehensible or perceptible to the human mind, conflicts may occur for which no rational solution exist. The existence of these conflicts necessitates a facilitation of conflict within the political sphere, for which the work of Mouffe and Rancière can be drawn upon. To do so, I have introduced the concept of a *radical caring democracy*, which maintains that care is a central notion to human (democratic) life, but which recognizes the ever-present possibility of conflict and addresses this possibility.

Moreover, I have drawn on Rancière's aesthetic conception of politics to stress how consensus democracies function as exclusionary regimes, in which some are able to be perceived, while others are invisible. This insight, that political regimes (or police regime's in Rancière's terms) function to make some visible, whose voices are recognized as politically salient and relevant, while obscuring others, and deeming some merely noise producers. This is a highly problematic notion for a deliberative theory of democracy within care ethics. It points us to the necessity to reconsider the necessity to uncover the unseen, and to critically reflect on the ways in which this is possible while recognizing the impossibility of diminishing invisibility altogether.

In addition, I have emphasized and elaborated on the epistemic aspects of hegemonic articulations, by drawing on the notion of epistemic hegemony. I have utilized the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic within the Dutch context as an illustration, to concretize the manners in which hegemony operates, and to indicate how political hegemony and epistemic hegemony are interrelated and interdependent processes. I have brought forward a radical

caring critique and alternative to these epistemic hegemonic articulations, and explained that it requires questioning the epistemic legitimacy which underlays much of current policy.

Throughout this paper I have critically reflected on the foundations and ramifications of the conceptual inquiry I have constructed. My focus on post-foundational thought, while intentional, has undoubtedly obscured other possible avenues of exploratory inquiry into dealing with the political ramifications of either the poststructuralist ontology or the existence of irreconcilable disagreements discussed. Moreover, some may argue that poststructuralist thought or a conception of the social as a field of conflict is incompatible with the core tenets of care ethics. I hope to have persuaded, through argumentation, those who are sceptical about the relevance of post-foundational thought for a political care ethics.

As this concerns a conceptual inquiry, rather than an empirical study, clarity of argumentation and traceability are vital quality criteria. Throughout the text I have endeavoured to do those criteria, and the reader, justice by explicating ,elaborating and specifying where necessary. This necessity has lead me to sometimes quote authors at length, and required an extensive treatment of their work. Nonetheless, I hope to have shown that this elaboration was of value in my argumentation, and aided the quality of this paper.

As the work of post-foundational thinkers like Mouffe and Rancière has been limitedly treated within care ethical scholarship, this work constitutes a paper that is exploratory in nature. This means that this paper has provided an array of new questions and routes for future research, rather than providing a comprehensive conclusion for a care-ethical notion of the political. Nonetheless, I have argued that these insights may provide particularly useful in contemporary society, in which epistemic security seems to be increasingly contested. Future researchers could focus on the implications of epistemic hegemony within the context of care practices and the lived experiences. Moreover, more conceptual research into the ramifications of an adversarial politics can be useful. Finally, my concept of a radical caring democracy requires further explication, and the ramifications of such a concept in practical terms need to be considered.

In sum, I have attempted to construct a new understanding of the political within care ethics, which recognizes the way knowledge is politically situated, and the necessity of facilitating conflict within democracy. While the reader may not be convinced by all aspects of my argumentation, I hope to have instilled a sense of urgency and necessity to consider the relevance of post-foundational thought, thereby invigorating the political within care ethics.

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