

INTRODUCTION



TRACING THE ETHICAL TURN

The category of ethics is ascendant in recent democratic thought—that much is clear. Even a brief review of contemporary political theory reveals a development notable enough to have garnered a name: the “turn to ethics.”¹ This phrase, though helpful, is also misleading since it suggests a unified phenomenon, an implication belied by the multiple, competing understandings of ethics and ethos that shape the current conversation. The prevalence of an ethical vocabulary is undeniable, but this signals less the pursuit of a common purpose than a struggle over signification.

Still, one feature of contemporary democratic theory’s multivalent obsession with ethics is striking. Again and again, across work taking inspiration from highly disparate sources, ethics emerges as an indispensable treatment for a crippled democratic politics.² That is, despite divergent conceptions, ethics is cast as a response to (sometimes ill-specified) problems plaguing democracy today. Ethics is figured repeatedly as an animating supplement to politics, supplying democracy with something it cannot give itself but urgently requires. Indeed, perhaps the only belief uniting the diverse work identified with the turn to ethics is the conviction that ethics constitutes that missing something that can help cure what ails democratic life. This conviction increasingly circulates in non-

academic circles as well—ethos figures prominently in mainstream diagnoses of the ills afflicting liberal democracies.³

This book provides a sympathetic critique of the quest for a democratic ethos, cautioning against the directions this search often takes, while seeking to forge a different path. I affirm the significance of the democratic ethos question, yet I argue that prominent efforts to specify an ethics suited to democracy are, in the end, not especially democratic. Formulations of ethics inspired by the work of Michel Foucault and Emmanuel Levinas, I show, are inclined to undermine, rather than enhance, citizens' democratic activity. These therapeutic and charitable modes of ethics, which center on care for the self and care for the Other, respectively, may be admirable in their own right, but, despite claims to the contrary, they are ill-equipped to nourish associative democratic politics. The dyadic relations that are labeled ethical in both of these cases narrow attention to the figures of self and Other and obscure the worldly contexts that are the actual sites and objects of democratic action.

I elaborate and defend here an alternative ethos, one which focuses not on an individual's practice of care for the self or care for the Other, but on contentious and collaborative care for the world, an idea I develop with and against Hannah Arendt's political theory. The worldly ethics advocated here rests, first, on an account of democratic relations that highlights the sense in which citizens' joint action concerns *something* in the world, a simultaneously common and contested object that is the focus of mutual attention, advocacy, and debate. A viable democratic ethics honors this dynamic, recognizing that democratic relations are never simply intersubjective but involve relations between multiple actors and specific features of the world they struggle to shape. A world-centered democratic ethos aims to incite and sustain collective care for conditions, care that is expressed in associative efforts to affect particular "worldly things." Moreover, this ethos is tied to an explicitly normative conception of world as both a shared human home and mediating political space. Thus care for the world, which lies at the heart of democratic ethos, is expressed not only by associative action that tends to conditions but also by action that pursues particular substantive ends.

We must first ask, however, what gives rise to the turn to ethics in recent democratic thought? If, as I argue, this move often falters, it is nonetheless prompted by genuine concerns of the present. Two broad conditions are especially significant, in my view, providing the context in which

the question of democratic ethos has been posed: widespread citizen disengagement within the U.S. polity and the so-called fact of pluralism. The first, well-documented situation is characterized by Americans' low levels of participation across multiple sites and forms of citizen activity. The growing disaffection of many and the seeming withdrawal of large segments of the population from public life throw into question the basic premise of self-government. It also creates a vacuum that tends to be filled by the most extreme and dogmatic voices, which threaten to monopolize or at least greatly distort public discourse. In light of these circumstances, the concept of democratic ethos emerges as a way of thinking about what can inspire or motivate ordinary citizens' participation in democratic politics. Efforts to define an ethics for democracy are usually concerned with elaborating sensibilities or orientations that, if fostered, might draw more people into democratic activity. The challenge is, furthermore, to develop orientations that can encourage impassioned participation in the difficult, frustrating labor of democratic politics while avoiding the vitriol and demonization that characterize so much political debate today.

The belief that ethics of one kind or another can inspire and nourish democratic politics relies upon an implicit understanding of politics as irreducible to the formal features of government—a regime's institutions, laws, and procedures. Indeed, the inquiry into ethos asks one to think about the spirit of democracy, that is, the constellation of dispositions, habits of feeling, and qualities of character that serve to animate and sustain practices of self-government. If this spirit is in some sense weakened or even missing today, how might it be cultivated?⁴ What affects or sensibilities does it call for? And can such qualities be fostered among a varied citizenry in ways that respect diversity and liberty? The search for ethics is at least partly a response to a nominally democratic order characterized by only minimal democratic activity.

The second important context for understanding the proliferation of ethics talk is what Max Weber referred to at the beginning of the twentieth century as our "inescapable condition," or what today often goes by the name "the fact of pluralism." Growing recognition of the competing and irreconcilable goods, faiths, and ways of life that characterize human existence has thrown into question the idea of a single morality that would ground political life. In light of this development, the topic of ethics has assumed new importance. If politics can no longer be imagined as the instantiation of a universal Good in a world marked by multiple, incom-

patible comprehensive views, the ideas of ethics and ethos seem to open up ways of thinking about the normative dimensions of politics in non-absolutist ways. The foray into ethics signals an attempt to wrestle with questions of value, character, and commitment in a pluralist age.

But if the inquiry into ethics is partly in response to the fact of pluralism, now widely accepted as the starting point for political theorizing, this investigation should be distinguished from the influential work of Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls and their intellectual heirs, which also presents pluralism as the starting point. Although both Habermas and Rawls treat the existence of multiple, irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines or conceptions of the good life as a given, each responds to this condition in ways that the turn to ethics challenges.

On the one hand, Habermas acknowledges that no single answer to the question of the good life is possible; answers to that question are rooted in particular traditions and cultures that diverge and conflict without the promise of reconciliation. Yet he also claims that a moral point of view can be attained through fidelity to a special procedure of justification. This moral point of view is rational and universal, irreducible to concrete forms of *Sittlichkeit*, or ethical life.⁵ Habermas acknowledges a multiplicity of ethical values and corresponding ways of life as the lot of modernity, yet this ethical plurality is qualified and limited by a proceduralist morality that retains for liberal-democratic politics a form of universal normativity. Rawls, on the other hand, famously endeavors in his later work to provide a political, rather than moral, justification for his conception of justice, one which remains neutral between competing moral outlooks. The fact of pluralism itself leads Rawls to alter his theory of justice in such a way that its justification is held to be independent of any comprehensive moral ideal. Justice as fairness does not aspire to universality but is instead, according to Rawls, self-consciously rooted in a particular historical context, that of modern constitutional democracy. But while Rawls seeks to avoid the moral universalism that Habermas retains, his nonmetaphysical account of justice includes a defense of “public reason” that strictly limits the expression of pluralism in political life. Although the nuances of Rawlsian public reason continue to be heavily debated, its function is clear: it specifies the kind of reason giving and argumentation that Rawls holds should and should not characterize public debate in a diverse, liberal society.⁶ Under conditions of pluralism, Rawls writes, “there are many nonpublic reasons but only one public reason.”⁷

The turn to ethics in postfoundational democratic theory takes pluralism as a point of departure, then, but its orientation toward this fact is distinctive from both Habermasian and Rawlsian approaches in two primary ways.⁸ First, when ethics of one kind or another is offered up as nourishment for democratic life, the gesture usually disavows more conventional forms of morality. Work that draws on Foucault and Levinas, for example, presents ethics as an explicit challenge to morality, however formal or procedural. Indeed, ethics in this vein is sometimes called post-moral in recognition of its departure from familiar moral traditions that are thought to deny or do violence to the plurality of values, goods, and faiths. Speaking very schematically, ethics is understood to be more particular and affective than universal, reason-governed models of morality. While conventional moralities tend to aspire to the status of law, ethics privileges the cultivation of dispositions over rule-following, suggesting a way of being in the world that cannot be formulated in codified, universal terms.⁹ Second, the pursuit of post-moral ethics is usually understood as an effort to expand, rather than contain, the expression of pluralism in public life. For thinkers like William Connolly, Judith Butler, and Simon Critchley, for example, who draw on Foucauldian and Levinasian ethics in support of radicalized democracy (and whose work I address in the following chapters), the task is not primarily understood to be one of limiting the presence of pluralism in political debate and decision making.¹⁰ Instead, the aim is to conceptualize and develop the qualities of character and habits of feeling that might enable lively and respectful exchange across deep difference, fostering even further pluralization of collective life. What virtues, they ask, might guide and animate citizen action in a liberal-democratic polity marked by competing and irreconcilable comprehensive views, which are not and cannot be left at the door?¹¹

If the search for a democratic ethos is motivated largely by these distinctive problems of the present, we can see that it also revives some very old concerns within political theory. Although the history of political thought does not offer any simple consensus on the matter, it reveals a persistent preoccupation with the question of how ethics might be connected to politics, a preoccupation that spans time and competing intellectual traditions. Several important strands of that lineage, including ancient, civic republican, and liberal, constitute the backdrop against which the latest inquiry into ethos is taking place.

Most notably, the recent reappearance of the term *ethos* in political

theory points to its original ancient Greek context, in which *ethos*, “the characteristic spirit, prevalent tone of sentiment, of a people or a community,” was understood to be a crucial complement to *nomos*.¹² Together, they were thought to constitute a “universalizing pair” in which the principles of order, written and unwritten, were joined with a particular, shared sensibility.¹³ The Greeks’ defining belief in a mutually influential relationship between city and soul, elegantly captured in Plato’s references to “the *politeia* of the soul,” was informed by the conviction that the soul, though belonging to an individual, was shaped and directed by the surrounding political order, consisting of both official institutions and a communal spirit or character, *nomos* and *ethos*, which together served as a source of moral education for its members. “Soulcraft” was closely bound up with the organization of collective life, in both its legal and extralegal dimensions. *Ethos* in this context referred neither to a code of rules nor to an attribute of the individual, but to a distinctive, shared way of being that complemented but was irreducible to the government’s formal structure. In the work of Plato, Aristotle, and other thinkers of the period, *ethos* connotes disposition, character, and bearing, understood in collective rather than strictly personal terms and held to be susceptible to purposeful shaping and cultivation.¹⁴ The *ethos* of a city or constitution was its “moral ambience,” coloring a whole way of life and exerting an important influence on the children reared there.¹⁵

The belief that political life is inevitably inhabited by an *ethos* also characterizes the civic republican tradition, which approaches the topic largely through the conceptual vocabulary of civic virtue. Republican thinkers regard such virtue as fundamental to sound citizenship, insisting that a healthy republic depends not only on well-designed institutions capable of upholding the rule of law, but also on citizens’ qualities of character, which orient them toward pursuit of the public good. While the tradition ranging from Cicero to Machiavelli to Tocqueville is far from unified, the attention devoted to the question of citizens’ “habits of the heart” is one of its defining features.¹⁶ Inspired by classical thought and practice, republicans understand the formation of subjects to be a central problem for politics. According to Tocqueville, for example, American institutions of self-government both cultivated and required citizens who shared certain dispositions and orientations, such as a felt sense of collective responsibility and a spirit of continual improvement. From the civic republican vantage point politics and ethics are distinguishable, with politics refer-

ring to a community's institutional arrangements and ethics to its citizens' character and sensibilities, but they are necessarily bound up with one another in a relation of reciprocal influence and together constitute a society's political culture.

Finally, although not always as readily recognized, liberal thought through the ages has focused attention on those qualities of character or ethical preconditions thought to make a successful liberal order possible and investigated how these might be encouraged. An anemic account of liberalism, according to which liberals are entirely unconcerned with the good life and seek only an impartial umpire in government, still circulates, despite the difficulty of finding any liberal thinker, past or present, who actually articulates such a position. Yet many contemporary liberals affirm the significance of citizen virtue to present-day liberal orders and have brought to light the extent to which canonical liberal political theory has been concerned with its own version of civic virtue from the start.¹⁷ Peter Berkowitz, for example, has shown that the achievement of a liberal way of life for Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and Mill, among others, depends upon certain virtues which are not automatically generated by liberalism's central institutions and which are sometimes even discouraged by them.¹⁸ Similarly, Mark Button has convincingly argued that the social contract, so central to liberal thought from its inception to today, is more than a device for conceptualizing legitimacy (as is usually assumed). It also serves to theorize a "transformative ethos" that can foster in citizens the "civic character" and "ethical sensibility" that a liberal order requires.¹⁹ What Berkowitz, Button, and others help identify is less a unified account of liberal virtues across thinkers than a shared conviction that there *are* such virtues, quite variously defined, and that their cultivation is a difficult but pressing question for liberals. The abiding interest in an ethics that animates liberal politics is complicated, however, by liberalism's core commitment to individual liberty and skepticism toward government intrusion. Liberal thought is characterized by simultaneous enthusiasm for and aversion to virtue.²⁰ Without discounting this ambivalence, it is important to acknowledge that enthusiasm for virtue, sometimes overlooked, is a prominent feature of liberal political theory. The inquiry into ethos and its role in political life is integral, then, not only to classical and civic republican thought but also to liberal philosophy.

When thinkers today turn to ethics or ethos (usually used interchangeably) to address contemporary democracy, they tap into these traditions.

They draw on ancient Greek insights, for example, even as they put them in the service of visions of political life that bear little resemblance to the classical *polis*. Most significant, they take their bearings from the ancient conviction that character and disposition matter politically, that is, by the belief that a polity is irreducible to its formal features. From this perspective, every political community is shaped, for good or ill, by its collective spirit no less than by its laws. Many contemporary democratic theorists, explicitly or not, are returning to an ancient concern and affirming the Greek notion that “just as the *ethe* and the *nomoi* of a city are closely connected, so too the study of ‘ethics’ is itself a part of ‘politics.’”²¹

Likewise, the quest for a democratic ethos revives a central feature of republican thought by asking after the habits of the heart that could enable more robust, respectful forms of participation by a broader range of citizens in a diversifying American polity. Contemporary thinkers seeking an ethics for democracy are reimagining civic virtue for the present, exploring which sensibilities and orientations can prepare citizens for co-action with one another and how these virtues, which seem to be in rather short supply, might be promoted under current conditions. At the same time, proponents of the turn to ethics, though focused on the question of cultivation, evince some of liberalism’s ambivalence, remaining alert to the danger of paternalism that attends any effort to shape citizens’ character. Theorists of democratic ethos strive to conceptualize a kind of moral education that avoids normalization and, further, actually aids pluralization.

Given the extent to which contemporary democratic theory builds on these prior strands of political thought, it is tempting to label the turn to ethics a *return* to ethics. Yet while ancient and modern influences are undeniable, recent inquiries into ethics are not simply continuous with earlier modes of thought. Most important, ancient and civic republican sources connected ethos and civic virtue, respectively, to fairly homogeneous and self-contained political communities, characterized largely by face-to-face relations within relatively small territories.²² The question of ethos today takes its bearings from a very different set of conditions, as the previous discussion of pluralism noted, and asks whether the idea of citizen virtue can be adapted and reimagined for a diverse, mobile, and expansive society. Are there certain habits of the heart uniquely suited to the practice of democratic politics among a vast, heterogeneous, increas-

ingly globalized citizenry?²³ And can desirable dispositions be nurtured in ways that protect and extend plurality rather than seek monistic unity?

While proponents of the ethical turn answer these questions affirmatively, today's search for a democratic ethos is not without its critics. I want to clarify the nature of these objections and explain why my project critically participates in, rather than rejects outright, the ethical turn.

A major charge leveled by skeptics at those seeking an ethics for democracy is that such efforts are poorly disguised exercises in moral absolutism. That is, while ethics is usually presented as a less rigid alternative to conventional forms of morality, some critics of the ethical turn allege that the attempt to locate an ethics for democracy expresses the desire to ground democracy in an extrapolitical foundation.²⁴ For example, Ernesto Laclau argues that "ethicization" reverts to a discourse of "first philosophy." To seek an ethics for democracy is to seek an ultimate authority beyond political practice; it is an attempt to evade politics' "radical contingency."²⁵ Chantal Mouffe voices a similar concern when she claims that the tendency among contemporary democratic theorists to adopt an ethical vocabulary is driven by the fantasy of a "final guarantee" that authorizes political arrangements. The hunt for ethics, she avers, is the hunt for a "more profound or more solid" ground than "the practices, the language games that are constitutive of [a] particular form of life."²⁶

The worry is not just that proponents of the ethical turn posit a ground where there is none, but that the preoccupation with the category of ethics, however soothing, signals a very real "contraction of political ambitions."²⁷ Wendy Brown, for example, warns against the temptation to embrace a moralizing imperative that substitutes for engagement in the messy, frustrating work of struggling for power, with and against others, in the field of politics.²⁸ Like Mouffe, who labels the turn to ethics "a retreat from the political," George Shulman argues that part of the allure of ethics is its apparent promise of a truth that precedes or is external to political contestation—a truth that would seem to relieve citizens of the difficult work of organizing together to make public demands and mobilizing others on behalf of the demands they advocate.²⁹ He notes further that the obsession with ethics is a symptom of despair over the prospects for such collective action today. Perhaps there is comfort in the thought that one's task consists in affirming the right ethical outlook, from which desirable political consequences will hopefully follow. When "action in

concert” appears to be rare or unlikely,³⁰ we may be attracted to the notion that democracy can be rescued by something other than itself, namely, the discovery of the proper ethics.³¹

Although these claims are compelling, it is a mistake to dismiss the turn to ethics as a dead end. Rather than eschew the category of ethics in the name of the autonomy of the political or insist upon the primacy of politics, this project interrogates, but also contributes to, democratic theory’s investigation of ethos. The critics cited earlier are partly correct: the turn to ethics can assume absolutist forms and at times does signal an attempt to evade the realities of democratic struggle, points I have insisted upon elsewhere.³² But this is not necessarily so; ethics is not a monolith. There are many competing conceptions of ethics, just as there are of politics. Some versions of ethics are likely to discourage rather than inspire collective action by democratic citizens. Two of my chapters, in fact, focus on the problems posed by ethical models that center on dyadic relations of care—a serious limitation largely overlooked, even by those who are otherwise skeptical of the ethical turn in democratic thought. Yet it is also possible to conceptualize and defend an ethos that is uniquely suited to the challenges of associative democracy, as this book’s account of worldly ethics will show.

Ethics, I believe, remains a valuable idiom for thinking and talking about the normative and affective orientations and sensibilities that are inevitably part of political life. It is not a matter of whether we want to bring ethics into politics; the phenomena that tend to travel under these names are already combined, for better or worse. Indeed, the language of ethics and politics renders as separate dimensions of cultural existence that are actually quite difficult to pull apart. Nonetheless, ethics continues to provide a useful, albeit imperfect, conceptual vocabulary for investigating those elements of democratic life that are left out of strictly institutional and rationalist accounts. More specifically, my book deploys an ethical vocabulary in order to consider the spirit that already inhabits associative democratic action—which I name care for the world—and to argue for its importance and purposeful cultivation. In doing so, I resist the tendency to cast ethics per se as unworldly in opposition to the worldly character of politics. Bonnie Honig, for example, rightly insists, following Arendt, that politics is both in and about the world and that the romance with ethics may serve as an escape from the “exposure” worldly engagement entails.³³ But if politics is not confined to formal procedures and

institutions, what dispositions and sensibilities are at work when citizens undertake the demanding, uncertain, but also often pleasurable work of world-centered democratic action? Certainly, as I will show, some forms of ethics—which I conceptualize as therapeutic and charitable in character—can aptly be characterized as unworldly and therefore as generally unsupportive of democratic activity. But it is a mistake to declare that ethics as such is always and only alienated from the world, understood as the messy, power-laden, varied space of democratic association. This book argues, on the contrary, for a distinctively worldly ethics, not only as a possibility but as a reality, one that is already expressed and enacted today by admirable forms of joint action.

This is a critical and constructive project. The argument offered here aims to reveal unacknowledged costs of the turn to ethics. I demonstrate that Foucauldian and Levinasian approaches, each focused on a different dyadic relation of care, are inclined to enervate rather than enrich associative action by democratic citizens. My critique does not conclude with a call to abandon the quest for a democratic ethos, however. Instead, I conceptualize and defend an alternative ethical orientation, one focused on inciting citizens' collective care for worldly things. And I argue that worldly ethics, implicit in certain collective citizen efforts, is a promising resource for democratic action today.

The book's case for worldly ethics centers on an associative conception of democratic politics that emphasizes joint action by citizens aimed at shaping shared conditions.³⁴ This view of democracy grants primacy to public practices in which differentiated collectivities struggle, both with and against one another, to affect features of the world in which they live. The term *associative* refers to three interlocking features of such a politics: (1) it involves collaborative and contentious action, born out of association among multiple citizens; (2) such action is not confined to the official channels of government but frequently appears at the level of civil society, within so-called secondary associations; and finally, most significant: (3) democratic actors are both brought together and separated from one another by common objects. In other words, they always associate around something.

First, *associative* signals a nonholistic understanding of democratic collectivity. Relations of association are ones in which distinct individuals coordinate their actions with others in order to pursue goals not achievable by a single actor.³⁵ Democratic politics thus understood does not de-

pend on the existence of a unified demos or a single people. Rather, associative democratic politics involves collectivities that are constituted by multiple “co-actors.”³⁶ In addition, these relations of solidaristic association are situated within broader, more contentious forms of association in which competing collectives vie publicly with one another over specific practices, laws, policies, and norms.

Second, although certain political institutions and spaces serve as enabling conditions for the enactment of associative democratic politics, this politics is not confined to the official channels of government. As many of the most powerful examples of associative democratic politics in recent American history indicate, these projects frequently involve creative forms of advocacy that take place on the margins of or in opposition to the state apparatus. Whether in pursuit of African American civil rights, environmental protections, a humane AIDS policy, or economic policies that benefit the so-called 99 percent, direct collective action has typically involved the creation of new institutions and the reconfiguration of public space, not simply the occupation of preexisting political venues. We cannot fully anticipate where or how associative democratic politics will appear.³⁷

Finally, *associative* indicates that democratic relations are not simply intersubjective, if by that we mean they involve two or more subjects. Rather, democratic politics involves relations among plural individuals which are mediated by shared, yet also disputed, objects of attention. These third terms around which democratic actors associate serve as sites of mutual energy and advocacy. Citizens are simultaneously brought together and separated from one another by specific, worldly matters of concern, which “*inter-est*” or lie between them.³⁸ Relations of both cooperation and antagonism among democratic constituencies are mediated by something in the world that is the focal point of their activity.

This portrait does not claim to depict democracy as such; certain features of democratic politics are emphasized at the expense of others. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that associative activity by ordinary citizens is central to almost every conception of democratic politics, including philosophical formulations and practical understandings alike. Citizen association is certainly not always interpreted in the way sketched above—indeed, as I will show, the central role played by mediating worldly things is especially neglected—yet there is a pervasive, shared understanding that the “art of association” is absolutely central to

any satisfactory account of democratic politics.³⁹ David Held’s influential *Models of Democracy*, for example, reveals the extent to which associative activity by citizens is regarded as a distinctive, indispensable characteristic of democracy, even according to competing philosophies which otherwise diverge considerably.⁴⁰ It is not only direct democrats, but also Dahlian pluralist democrats and more conventional liberal democrats, among others, who assign an important role to citizen association when defining democracy.⁴¹

Moreover, everyday language suggests that people regularly identify associational practices by which plural citizens aim to affect their environment as specifically democratic, even in the context of regimes that would not themselves be so categorized. For example, media coverage in the United States in early 2011 often described the collective protests in Egypt leading up to the revolution as part of a “democratic uprising” or as the expression of “democratic freedom.”⁴² These characterizations, also prevalent in informal conversations among nonexperts, indicate that people tend to understand public action in concert precisely as an enactment of democracy, wherever it occurs. The identification of the protests in Tahrir Square in the spring of 2011 as democratic had less to do with the fact that some participants were calling for democratizing reforms than with the shared insight that the protesters were already practicing democracy by joining together to generate power and produce effects collectively that they could not alone.

If associative action is integral to nearly every philosophical and practical definition of democracy, then this book’s investigation of ethos is perhaps of some general interest. The book’s central questions—Does the practice of associative democracy have an ethos? How should it be characterized? Can it be purposely fostered? How?—will, I hope, resonate with democrats of varying stripes who share the conviction that ordinary citizens’ joint action, and not merely individuals’ right to vote, is essential to democratic life.

The book’s initial, ground-clearing project centers on work that takes inspiration from Foucault and Levinas. Theorists who turn to these thinkers in order to develop an account of democratic ethos are typically interested in nourishing activist forms of democracy that involve significant associational activity among citizens. Yet, as I show, the ethical orientations they conceptualize are ill-suited to enriching the associative dynamics outlined above, in which collaborative and contentious forms of action

take place in plural sites and are mediated by disputed common objects. In particular, care for the self and care for the Other describe ethical orientations that celebrate dyadic relations in which the primary actor, a single self, tends to herself or to another. These models of care cannot simply be extended to associative democratic politics. Neither the face-to-face immediacy of the Levinasian encounter nor the reflexive intimacy of Foucauldian arts of the self leaves room for the crucial third term, a common and disputed object, that inspires democratic projects and draws citizens into relations of support and contestation with one another. In response to this neglect, the book elaborates an alternative ethics, also centered on practices of care. Yet the care that is central to associative democracy, I show, is enacted by many persons, not one. And the recipient of that care is neither a self nor even selves but a particular feature of shared conditions—a worldly thing—that is both a common and contentious object of concern.

One final note, before offering a map of the book's contents: the three central thinkers in this project, Foucault, Levinas, and Arendt, whose work and its appropriation by others I examine in relation to the question of democratic ethics, are heirs to a specific, shared intellectual heritage.⁴³ This lineage, existential phenomenology in general and Martin Heidegger's thought in particular, is not the focus of my inquiry, yet the fact that all three theorists' writings are shaped by and responsive to this singular theoretical tradition is important.⁴⁴ Most notably, it may help to explain why their work is especially fertile ground for today's investigations into ethos, investigations which, as discussed earlier, are undertaken from a nonessentialist, postmoral vantage point.⁴⁵ Despite the distinctiveness of their respective approaches and the unique relations of care each conceptualizes, Foucault, Levinas, and Arendt can be regarded as participants in a common theoretical endeavor, one which is marked, first of all, by a "critical orientation to rationalism, abstract system-building, and other objectifying modes of thought such as positivism."⁴⁶ In addition, the focus of existential phenomenology on "worldly relations" and "concrete lived experience" rather than on "mental contents" is evident in all three thinkers' work and connects with their readers' interest in ethos as an embodied, enacted way of being.⁴⁷ Finally, because the existential-phenomenological perspective is especially alert to "non-rational dimensions of human existence: habits, non-conscious practices, moods, and passions," it is unsurprising that writings emerging from this tradi-

tion have captivated contemporary audiences interested in ethics, where ethics is understood as dispositional and affective, an important extrarational aspect of political life.⁴⁸ The following analysis focuses primarily on exploring the differences between therapeutic, charitable, and worldly ethics, which take their bearings from Foucault, Levinas, and Arendt, respectively. These competing approaches to ethics are not simply or only at odds with one another, however; a shared existential-phenomenological orientation informs the work of all three and seems to resonate with those seeking a democratic ethos today.

The book's argument proceeds as follows. Chapter 1 focuses on how Foucault's late work has been taken up by theorists seeking a contemporary democratic ethos. Foucault's interest in ancient aesthetic/ascetic modes of self-elaboration, which he describes as an ethics of "care of the self," has intrigued those interested in cultivating new forms of democratic subjectivity that might spur deeper, more respectful forms of citizen engagement. Building on Foucault's recommendation that the ethics of self-care might be reinvented for the present and help to foster selves who "play games of power with as little domination as possible," William Connolly, for example, has advocated ethical tactics performed by the self on herself as indispensable for contemporary pluralist democracy.⁴⁹

In this chapter I examine both Foucault's and Connolly's work, focusing on Connolly's contention that arts of the self, or "micropolitics," have a vital role to play in inspiring and shaping collective democratic action, that is, "macropolitics." I argue that although this idea is appealing, an ethics capable of animating associative democratic activity cannot take the self's relationship to itself as a starting point. Even though Foucault and Connolly conceptualize a self that is continually recrafted rather than discovered in its ultimate truth, their work nonetheless advances a therapeutic ethics, which treats the self's relationship with itself as primary and envisions democratic activity as a consequence or extension of that reflexive relation. The chapter illuminates this therapeutic ethical orientation and tries to dispel the belief that it is by caring for oneself that one comes to care for the world. I argue that unless the self's relationship to itself is driven from the start by shared concern for a worldly problem, there is no reason to believe that it will lead in an activist, democratic direction. Indeed, focused care for the self too readily substitutes for tending to the world that is shared with diverse others.

In light of the critical perspective cast on Foucauldian ethics, I turn in chapter 2 to Levinas's ethical theory, which condemns egoism in the name of the self's infinite responsibility to the Other. This understanding of ethics, centering on the Other and its summons to the self, privileges an intersubjective rather than an intrasubjective relation.

For theorists such as Simon Critchley and Judith Butler, this focus on the self's obligation to tend to a needy Other appears especially useful to a democratic ethos because it confronts self-interest, calling on us to concern ourselves with the fates of others. My readings of Levinas, Critchley, and Butler, however, show that it is a mistake to assume that a charitable ethics, centered on the self's provision of aid to a singular, suffering other, can support collective democratic endeavors. The tendency to present a Levinasian-inspired ethical truth as the key to political transformation is falsely reassuring; it evades the difficulties of democratic mobilization by implying that associative action simply awaits acceptance of an indisputable ethical reality: the self's total obligation to the Other. Yet an ethics focused on the self's care for the Other, even if understood in less foundational terms than this, is unable to nourish associative democratic action. Levinasian ethics may be compelling, but it revolves around a dyadic, hierarchical relation that is focused on addressing immediate needs. Such charitable relations have value, but, as I show, they are distinct from, even at odds with, democratic ones, which involve collaboration among co-actors who struggle to tend not to a singular Other, but to the worldly conditions under which selves and others live.

I argue that the therapeutic and charitable models of ethics promoted by Foucault, Levinas, and key interpreters such as Connolly, Critchley, and Butler are unlikely to inspire and sustain collective democratic activity, in which participants cooperate and contend with one another in an effort to affect worldly conditions. Care for oneself or care for the Other, though perhaps valuable, does little to encourage associative relations among citizens. Moreover, it is a mistake to assume that forms of democratic engagement somehow follow from proper care for the self or for an Other. Indeed, I show that the therapeutic and charitable orientations others have advocated in the name of a democratic ethos need to be resisted if we seek to foster activist forms of democratic citizenship.

Chapters 3 and 4 are dedicated to theorizing a world-centered ethos.⁵⁰ I argue that the spirit of care for the world, which already animates some associative democratic projects, deserves to be explicitly thematized and

purposefully cultivated. The first step toward elaborating this ethical orientation, which I argue is especially important to democratic life, is to articulate the central concept of world. Chapter 3 develops this notion, first, by defining *world* as the array of material and immaterial conditions under which human beings live—both with one another and with a rich variety of nonhumans, organic and technological. This portrait draws on Arendt’s understanding of world as an “in-between,” that is, both the site and object of politics, yet, as the above statement indicates, I challenge her restriction of world to what is man-made. In addition, I claim that coercion among citizens is best understood not as being directed at the world per se, as Arendt would have it, but at particular worldly things, which are more plural, dynamic, and disputed than her theory recognizes. In reference to *thing*’s original meaning, worldly thing, a central concept in this book, indicates not a generic object but a “matter of fact” that has been reconstituted as a public “matter of concern.”⁵¹ This thing, I show, is crucial to every democratic undertaking; it is the contentious third term around which people gather, both in solidarity and division. A viable democratic ethos honors this dynamic, seeking to inspire mutual care for worldly conditions.

Chapter 3 engages with the work of Arendt, John Dewey, Bruno Latour, and others in order to reveal the structure of citizen association in which worldly things both connect and divide constituencies, a structure that is eclipsed by dyadic models of ethics. Chapter 4 builds on this account of the crucial role played by worldly things in democratic politics in order to specify the normative ends that care for the world pursues. This chapter clarifies that not all forms of collective organizing in relation to a worldly thing or matter of concern count as instances of care for the world. The democratic ethos I defend is refined to mean care for the world *as world*. Here I advance an explicitly normative conception of world—as both a shared human home and mediating political space—that allows for critical distinctions to be made between competing projects undertaken by democratic actors. The chapter elaborates these concepts by examining contemporary organizations and movements, including No More Deaths/No Más Muertes, the Beacons programs in New York City Public Schools, and the Right to the City Movement, which embody the democratic ethos I advance.

A brief epilogue revisits the distinctions between care for the self, care for the Other, and care for the world that inform the book’s argument

in support of an ethos that can and does animate associative democratic politics. Here I consider whether and how the dyadic, intimate modalities of care emphasized by Foucauldian and Levinasian ethics can be transformed into collaborative practices of care focused on shaping collective conditions. What strategies of politicization, for example, can activate feelings of care and concern and direct them toward worldly things? I consider the techniques that can help foster care for the world even under circumstances seemingly inhospitable to it.

One image in particular, from the margins of Arendt's work, can help illuminate the distinctive orientation that defines worldly ethics. In the summer of 1963, Gershom Scholem, the renowned Jewish scholar, wrote a letter to Arendt concerning her recently published book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which reported on the trial of the former ss officer Adolf Eichmann.⁵² At the time of its appearance *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was the subject of intense dispute, debates that continue to shape its reception today. One of the most controversial points in the book was Arendt's charge that the Judenräte, or local Jewish governing structures, had, in their maintenance of Jewish public order in the ghettos, enabled the Nazis to slaughter greater numbers of Jews with greater efficiency than they might otherwise have done. Many people, Jews and non-Jews, were shocked by this seemingly harsh and unempathic claim. Scholem's letter to Arendt accuses her of adopting a "heartless" tone in her discussions of "Jews and their bearing in the days of catastrophe." By way of elaboration, Scholem explains to Arendt, "In the Jewish tradition, there is a concept, hard to define and yet concrete enough, which we know as *Ahabath Israel*: 'Love of the Jewish people.'" And he declares that he finds "little trace of this" in her book.⁵³

In her response to Scholem, Arendt directly addresses this charge. She writes of the "love of the Jewish people," "You are quite right—I am not moved by any love of this sort." She states, "This 'love of the Jews' would appear to me, since I am myself Jewish, as something rather suspect. I cannot love myself or anything which I know is part and parcel of my own person." And she writes, as a point of contrast, that "the greatness of this people was once that it believed in God, and believed in Him in such a way that its trust and love towards him was greater than its fear. And now this people believes only in itself? What good can come of that?—Well, in this sense I do not 'love' the Jews, nor do I 'believe' in them."⁵⁴ Arendt's response to Scholem calls into question the self-oriented nature of *Ahabath*

Israel, the love of the Jewish people by the Jewish people. She reminds him of the real “greatness” of the Jews, which concerned their trust in and love for an entity outside themselves in relation to which they came to be: God, who acted as a common object of devotion and thus constituted a shared world for them, an in-between. It is not the Jews’ love for themselves or even for one another that Arendt wants to recall and honor, but their regard for a third term, their God, around which they constituted a community.

This book invites readers to see in Arendt’s exchange with Scholem a nascent democratic analogy. Scholem’s invocation of a self-oriented relation of love and faith (of Jews to themselves) evokes a dyadic ethical relation of the sort I call into question. Arendt’s radical shift in perspective, which brings into view a relation involving multiple individuals and a shared object of love and faith, offers a religious analog to the democratic relations with which this book is concerned. The third term, God, is akin to those secular, worldly objects that, as I argue, inspire the labors of democratic actors and mediate relations among them. The book tracks how these democratic modes of relation—in which individuals are connected to and separated from one another by a common object which they attempt to affect—are occluded by popular ethical approaches. And it urges us to see that a sensibility focused on collective and contentious care for worldly things is an ethos uniquely fit for democracy.

