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The Emotional Foundations of Political Legitimacy: Beyond Procedural Democracy

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Abstract. Political legitimacy possesses an irreducibly emotional dimension that proceduralist and recognition-theoretic accounts systematically fail to capture. A society that maintains procedural correctness while generating widespread psychological suffering is substantively illegitimate regardless of its institutional achievements. Drawing on Max Scheler's phenomenology of sympathy and on the distinction between organic and formal communities, this paper develops an account of emotional legitimacy, which requires that a political order manifest genuine care for its members' wellbeing rather than mere respect for their procedural rights or formal status. The argument engages critically with three positions in contemporary political philosophy: Habermasian proceduralism, which subordinates ethical life to moral principle; Honnethian recognition theory, which inadequately distinguishes recognition from care; and Williamsian political realism, which correctly identifies the priority of politics but leaves underspecified the substantive emotional conditions of legitimate order. The widespread epidemic of mental health crises in procedurally democratic societies constitutes evidence that these societies fail to meet the emotional conditions of genuine political authority. This failure is analysed through the distinction between character-based and action-based evaluation of persons, which carries direct implications for how care, justice, and belonging can be coherently theorised. The paper concludes with constructive proposals for a politics of genuine institutional care.

Keywords: emotional legitimacy, proceduralism, recognition theory, political realism, sympathy, care, liberal democracy, mental health

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Эмоциональные основания политической легитимности: по ту сторону процедурной демократии

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Аннотация. Политическая легитимность обладает необратимо эмоциональным измерением, которое процедуралистские и признанчески-теоретические концепции систематически упускают. Общество, сохраняющее процедурную корректность, но порождающее массовое психологическое страдание, является по существу нелегитимным, вне зависимости от своих институциональных достижений. Опираясь на феноменологию симпатии Макса Шелера и на различие между органическими и формальными сообществами, в статье разрабатывается концепция эмоциональной легитимности, требующей, чтобы политический порядок проявлял подлинную заботу о благополучии своих членов, а не лишь уважение к их процедурным правам или формальному статусу. Аргумент критически рассматривает три позиции в современной политической философии: хабермасовский процедурализм, подчиняющий этическую жизнь моральному принципу; хоннетовскую теорию признания, недостаточно разграничивающую признание и заботу; и политический реализм Уильямса, который правильно определяет приоритет политики, но оставляет неуточнёнными существенные эмоциональные условия легитимного порядка. Широко распространённая эпидемия кризисов психического здоровья в процедурально демократических обществах является свидетельством того, что эти общества не отвечают эмоциональным условиям подлинного политического авторитета. Эта несостоятельность анализируется через различие между оценкой личности, основанной на характере, и оценкой, основанной на действиях, что имеет прямые последствия для теоретизирования заботы, справедливости и принадлежности. Исследование завершается конструктивными предложениями в пользу политики подлинной институциональной заботы.

Ключевые слова: эмоциональная легитимность, процедурализм, теория признания, политический реализм, симпатия, забота, либеральная демократия, психическое здоровье

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Introduction

The advanced liberal democracies present a paradox. By most procedural measures, including free elections, constitutional protections, and the rule of law, they have achieved an unprecedented degree of institutional legitimacy. These same societies are simultaneously experiencing what can only be described as an epidemic of psychological suffering: rising rates of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and what Anne Case and Angus Deaton have termed deaths of despair [1]. The connection between these two phenomena runs deeper than is typically acknowledged in political philosophy. A society can be procedurally legitimate yet substantively illegitimate; the mass psychological suffering produced by liberal democracies constitutes a failure of political legitimacy itself, and not merely a policy problem awaiting administrative correction.

Making this claim requires rethinking the foundations of legitimacy theory. The dominant approaches in contemporary political philosophy share a common limitation: they fail to articulate the irreducibly emotional dimension of legitimate political order. A legitimate society must not only follow correct procedures, recognise the standing of its members, and solve what Bernard Williams called the first political question of order; it must also care for its members in a substantive sense that manifests in its institutions, practices, and in the lived experience of citizens [2].

The distinction between procedural and substantive legitimacy deserves careful elaboration. A society that is perfectly procedurally legitimate while simultaneously causing its citizens to suffer from mass depression, exhaustion, and interpersonal isolation is substantively illegitimate regardless of its institutional achievements. Liberal societies are notorious for epidemics of existential distress that manifest in mass consumption of psychotropic drugs, rampant depression, and widespread psychological difficulty. This is a politically troubling fact that proceduralist theories cannot adequately address, because such theories take for granted precisely what requires justification: the assumption that formal correctness exhausts the requirements of legitimate authority.

The account of emotional legitimacy developed here draws on Max Scheler's phenomenology of sympathy and fellow-feeling [3] and on the distinction between organic and formal communities that has been central to communitarian critiques of liberalism but has not been adequately incorporated into legitimacy theory. This distinction connects to the analysis of character-based moral evaluation developed

in earlier work on the emotional dimensions of the moral personality [4]. The argument proceeds through an examination of the limitations of proceduralism, recognition theory, and political realism in turn, before developing a positive account of emotional legitimacy and its implications for contemporary political life and institutional reform.

The Limits of Proceduralism

Habermas has argued, across a body of work concerned with the relationship between morality and ethical life, that a political community can be legitimate through the mechanism of discourse ethics alone, understood as the formal requirements for rational consensus among all affected parties [5; 6]. His account acknowledges Hegel's fundamental insight about the limits of abstract Kantian moralism: a moral principle that cannot motivate action in the context of lived habits and social practices fails as a political principle. Yet Habermas holds that this concession to social realism need not compromise the priority of morality over particular forms of ethical life [6]. From this position, legitimacy derives from the possibility that all those affected by a norm could rationally accept it under idealised conditions of discourse. The emphasis falls on procedural requirements: the absence of coercion, the inclusion of all relevant voices, the force of the better argument.

Understanding what is missing from this account requires a distinction developed within communitarian thought but not adequately incorporated into mainstream legitimacy theory: the distinction between organic and formal communities. Organic communities are grounded in substantive values, emotional transparency, and genuine fellow-feeling among members. Their authority structures emerge from lived practice and embody what Max Weber called charismatic authority [7]. Formal or institutionalised communities operate through procedural rationality and bureaucratic administration. They can process individuals efficiently but cannot genuinely care for them, because the very logic of bureaucratic rationality precludes the kind of personal engagement that care requires.

The process by which organic communities become institutionalised is fateful for legitimacy. Consider the transformation of Christianity from a community based on love and mutual care to the institutionalised Roman Catholic Church with its legalistic hierarchy and bureaucratic procedures. The early Christian community was organised around substantive emotional bonds; members were expected to care for one another as fellow participants in a shared spiritual life. As the Church institutionalised, this organic character was progressively replaced by formal structures: canon law, administrative hierarchy, procedurally regulated sacraments. What was lost in this transformation was the emotional dimension itself, the experience of being cared for as a member of a community rather than processed as a case within an institution.

This historical example illuminates the structural limitation of proceduralism. Habermasian legitimacy theory takes for granted what might be called the

institutionalised condition, the situation in which political community already has the formal character of bureaucratic administration. From within this condition, procedural correctness is the primary desideratum, since formal institutions can at best aspire to process their subjects fairly. The question suppressed by proceduralism is whether the transformation from organic to formal community was itself legitimate, whether something essential to political authority was lost in that transformation.

Consider a society that meets all relevant procedural requirements: its laws are enacted through democratic deliberation, its institutions protect basic rights, dissent is permitted. This same society, through its economic arrangements, its organisation of work, and its patterns of social interaction, produces in its members a pervasive sense of alienation, loneliness, and despair. Citizens are formally free but experientially miserable. Habermasian legitimacy theory registers no legitimacy deficit here. The psychological suffering of citizens, however widespread, remains peripheral to any assessment of legitimacy, so long as the basic institutional structure could be justified through rational discourse.

The problem is structural. Organic communities preserve and cherish families as the primary locus of emotional life and moral formation, distinguishing them from liberal societies, which encourage the marginalisation of family in favour of individual autonomy and market participation. The proceduralist response, that family structures belong to the sphere of private choice, misses how the privatisation of care is itself a political achievement. When emotional life is relegated to the private sphere, the public sphere becomes structurally incapable of manifesting care. Procedural legitimacy then appears as the only available public form, not because it is adequate to human needs, but because the conditions for any alternative have been foreclosed.

The phenomenon of institutional corporatisation sharpens this point further. Democratic institutions tend to develop corporate interests of their own that corrupt their participatory character. The capture of regulatory agencies by the industries they regulate, and the subordination of electoral politics to campaign finance, are visible at every level of contemporary politics. Even a government elected on an explicitly anti-corporate platform must adapt to corporate imperatives or face economic punishment. The experience of Syriza in Greece is instructive: elected on a mandate to resist austerity, the Greek government was forced by European financial institutions to implement the very policies its voters had rejected. The procedural legitimacy of the election was impeccable. The substantive relationship between popular will and governmental action was severed by corporate power operating through formally legitimate institutions.

The deeper point is this: proceduralism cannot accommodate the idea that a society's emotional posture toward its members, whether it cares for them or merely processes them, is constitutive of its legitimacy rather than merely instrumental to it. A society that habituates its members to alienation, normalises loneliness, and treats psychological suffering as a private problem has failed at the level of ethical life regardless of its procedural achievements.

Recognition Without Care: The Insufficiency of Honneth's Framework

Recognition theory offers the most developed attempt to bring affective dynamics into political philosophy. Axel Honneth's project, elaborated across his analysis of the moral grammar of social conflicts, explicitly grounds social and political philosophy in the dynamics of interpersonal recognition [8]. His account identifies three forms of recognition: love, which provides the affective foundation of basic self-confidence through intimate relationships; respect, which manifests in legal recognition of rights and supports self-respect as a member of the political community; and esteem, expressed through social valuation of one's contributions. When any of these forms is systematically denied, the result is social pathology, a distortion of the conditions necessary for human flourishing.

This framework has clear advantages over proceduralism. It places affect at the centre of political philosophy and provides a criterion for evaluating social arrangements beyond their procedural correctness. Societies can be criticised for failing to provide the recognitional conditions of self-realisation, and the framework connects political philosophy to social psychology in a way that proceduralism's emphasis on rational justification cannot.

Recognition theory nonetheless falls short of articulating genuine emotional legitimacy. The problem lies in the distinction between recognition and care, a distinction Honneth does not draw with sufficient precision [9].

To recognise someone in Honneth's sense is to acknowledge their status: as a unique individual deserving love, as a rights-bearing citizen deserving respect, as a contributor deserving esteem. Recognition is fundamentally about seeing the other correctly, about according them their proper standing. It is a cognitive and evaluative achievement. One can fail to recognise another by failing to perceive or acknowledge their status.

Care, by contrast, concerns response rather than perception. To care for another is to be concerned for their wellbeing, to be moved by their suffering, to act for their good. Care involves what Scheler called fellow-feeling, not merely knowing that another suffers but responding to that suffering in a way that motivates engagement [3]. The distinction matters because recognition can be formal where care cannot. One can recognise another's status while remaining emotionally indifferent to their actual condition. This is precisely what happens in bureaucratic recognition: the welfare office recognises the claimant's right to assistance, processes the application correctly, grants or denies benefits according to procedure, all without any genuine concern for the person behind the claim. Such recognition satisfies Honnethian criteria while manifesting the opposite of care.

This limitation becomes visible through what I have analysed elsewhere as the distinction between action-based and character-based evaluation of persons [4]. The dominant tradition in Western moral philosophy, from Kant through contemporary liberalism, evaluates persons on the basis of their individual actions: what did they do, and was it right or wrong? Justice, on this view, should be blind, ignoring who the person is and attending only to what they have done.

This approach, which underlies Honnethian recognition just as it underlies proceduralist legitimacy, misses something essential about moral life. In organic communities characterised by genuine emotional bonds, people are treated primarily on the basis of their character rather than their individual actions. A good person can commit wrongs, just as a person of poor character can perform many constructive acts. What matters for how we relate to someone is who they are, what kind of moral personality they have developed [4]. The blindness of justice, symbolised in the familiar figure of Justitia, embodies precisely this action-based approach. It misunderstands the moral life of communities that genuinely care for their members.

Recognition theory inherits the action-based bias of liberal moral philosophy. It asks whether individuals are accorded their proper status, respected as rights-holders, esteemed for their contributions, but not whether they are known and cared for as the particular persons they are. Bureaucratic recognition can treat each person identically while treating no person as an individual. The claimant at the welfare office is recognised as a rights-bearer, but this recognition is generic: it sees the person as an instance of a category rather than as a particular human being with a particular history and character. The implication is that Honneth's three levels of recognition remain inadequate unless supplemented by what one might call character-recognition: the acknowledgment of persons as the particular moral beings they are, with their individual histories of virtue and vice, their patterns of response, their characteristic ways of being present to others. This form of recognition cannot be provided by impersonal institutions; it requires the kind of intimate knowledge that only genuinely caring communities can sustain.

Honneth might respond that his theory already includes care at the level of love, and that love is precisely the form of recognition that attends to particularity. But love, in his framework, is confined to intimate relationships and does not extend to the political realm. The recognition operative in politics is respect and esteem, and these are extended impersonally, without the affective engagement that characterises care. A society could, in principle, satisfy all three levels of Honnethian recognition while remaining fundamentally careless: its intimate relationships could provide love, its legal system could protect rights, its economy could distribute esteem, and yet its overall emotional posture could be one of bureaucratic indifference to how its members actually fare. Honneth's insight that the I-Thou relation is always already embedded in a We that provides substantive norms of recognition is valuable [9], but it does not resolve the problem. The We of a political community can have many different emotional characters. Honneth's framework establishes that recognition must occur within a We without specifying what emotional quality that We must possess to generate legitimacy.

Political Realism and the Missing Positive Criterion

The political realism associated with Bernard Williams represents a third major approach to legitimacy. Williams argues that political philosophy must begin from

politics itself rather than from pre-political moral principles [2]. His formulation of the Basic Legitimation Demand holds that every political order must offer a justification of its power that does not itself rely on that power; the justification must be acceptable to those over whom power is exercised in a sense that is not merely a reflection of their powerlessness. This rules out might-makes-right while leaving open what positive justification might look like. Williams suggests that acceptable justification requires that the order solve the first political question of providing security and trust, doing so in a way that does not itself become a source of fear and insecurity.

The realist tradition descending from Williams has developed this account in productive directions. Realism as Geuss understands it insists on beginning from the actual configuration of power, interests, and values in a given society rather than from ideal principles that may have no purchase on political reality [10]. Sleat's liberal realism develops a defence of liberal political arrangements that does not depend on comprehensive moral doctrines, attending instead to the conditions under which political stability and freedom can be mutually sustained [11]. These contributions are genuine, but they share a crucial limitation with the approaches they criticise: none provides a positive account of what makes an order that meets the Basic Legitimation Demand genuinely legitimate rather than merely non-illegitimate.

Williams is clear that avoiding domination is necessary for legitimacy, but says remarkably little about what, positively, legitimacy requires beyond this negative criterion. The gap in political realism can be filled by attending to the distinction between organic and formal communities already developed above. Williams rightly insists that legitimacy cannot be determined from outside politics by applying pre-political moral standards. This need not mean that legitimacy has no positive content. What gives an order genuine authority, not merely the absence of domination but the presence of something worth belonging to, is its character as a community of care rather than a mere apparatus of control.

Organic communities possess what formal institutions lack: a substantive basis for loyalty that goes beyond the avoidance of domination. In such communities, members experience the order not as an external constraint but as an expression of shared concern. They belong to the community not merely because they cannot escape it but because they find in it a home, a context in which they are known, valued, and cared for. This experiential quality is what the Basic Legitimation Demand, with its purely negative formulation, cannot capture. Analyses of trust and transparency as conditions of legitimacy fill a related gap [12], but trust and transparency are formal conditions. A society could be transparent about its operations and maintain trust among its members while treating those members with cold indifference.

The distinction between organic and formal communities provides what is missing. Williams's analysis remains within the framework of formal institutions: he asks what makes such institutions legitimate, what keeps their exercise of power

from being mere domination. He does not ask what it would mean for political community to have the organic character that generates genuine belonging rather than mere compliance. An order that solves the first political question through procedural management, efficiently and fairly without domination, has not thereby achieved full legitimacy. What is absent is the positive content that only organic community can provide: the experience of belonging to a social whole that genuinely cares about one's flourishing.

Political philosophy must therefore attend not only to the conditions under which power is justified but to the conditions under which community is possible. These are distinct questions, and the second cannot be derived from the first. A society could have fully justified power, meeting all the criteria of procedural, recognitional, and realist legitimacy, while failing to constitute a genuine community in the emotional sense. Such a society would be legitimate in form but hollow in substance. Its citizens would comply with its laws, acknowledge its authority, and perhaps even recognise its necessity, while experiencing it as something alien to their lives rather than as a shared home.

Emotional Legitimacy: A Schelerian Account

Having identified the limitations of proceduralism, recognition theory, and political realism, I now develop a positive account of emotional legitimacy. The resources for this account come primarily from Max Scheler's phenomenology of sympathy and fellow-feeling, developed in relation to the distinction between organic and formal communities elaborated above and to the analysis of the emotional foundations of the moral personality developed in earlier work [4] (cf. [13]).

Before proceeding to the phenomenological analysis, I should provide a working definition of care in the political context. Care, as I use the term, is an institutional orientation characterised by three features: genuine concern for the concrete wellbeing of those encountered; responsiveness to particular circumstances rather than mere application of general rules; and the disposition to treat persons as individuals with histories and characters rather than as instances of administrative categories. Institutional care is thus distinguished from mere service provision by the quality of its engagement: the caring institution asks not merely what the person is entitled to but what the person needs, not merely how to process the case but how to help this particular human being.

Scheler distinguished several phenomena that are often conflated under the heading of sympathy [3]. Mere emotional contagion involves being infected by another's emotional state without recognising it as theirs, as when a crowd's panic spreads to someone who does not know its cause. Emotional identification involves a more developed but still inadequate relation, one in which there is a merger of self and other in which the distinction between one's own feelings and the other's is lost. This can occur in intense romantic love, in mystical experience, or in pathological states where ego boundaries are weakened.

Genuine fellow-feeling, by contrast, involves participating in another's emotional situation while maintaining the awareness that it is their suffering to which one responds. Fellow-feeling requires both cognitive and affective components: one must understand that the other suffers and respond to that suffering with an emotion of one's own, not an identical emotion but a responsive one. When one feels sympathy for another's grief, one does not grieve; one is moved by that grief in a way that orients attention and action toward the other's wellbeing. For Scheler, fellow-feeling carries epistemic as well as motivational significance: it is a mode of cognition, not merely a ground for action. Through genuine sympathy, we gain access to the other's situation in a way that mere observation cannot provide. Sympathy functions as what one might call a social grammar, the fundamental structure through which we understand and respond to others as fellow subjects rather than objects of administration.

This Schelerian framework makes it possible to articulate the emotional dimension of legitimacy that proceduralism, recognition theory, and political realism all miss. A political order is emotionally legitimate to the extent that it embodies and cultivates genuine fellow-feeling among its members and between its institutions and citizens. This means something precise: not mere emotional contagion, the manipulation of mass emotion for political purposes; not emotional identification, the fusion of individual and collective that characterises authoritarian politics; but genuine sympathy, an institutional orientation toward the wellbeing of citizens that maintains their distinctness as individuals while caring for their flourishing.

The concept of emotional transparency is crucial here. Emotionally transparent communities are those in which members have genuine access to one another's emotional lives, not in the sense of total visibility, which would be oppressive, but in the sense of mutual understanding. Such transparency requires greater familiarity between members than formal institutions typically provide. It requires contexts in which people encounter one another as whole persons rather than as role-occupants or claim-bearers, and it requires what might be called emotional literacy: the capacity to read and respond to others' affective states with appropriate care [13].

Several clarifications follow. First, emotional legitimacy is a matter of institutional character, not individual psychology. The claim is that a society's institutions must be designed and operated in a way that expresses concern for the wellbeing of those they serve. This can be a matter of structural design, institutions that make care possible, as much as individual affect. A caring welfare system and a bureaucratic welfare system might distribute identical benefits; what differs is whether recipients experience themselves as objects of concern or as cases to be processed. This experiential difference tracks something real about the institutional relationship.

The phenomenology of this distinction is instructive. When treated as a case, one experiences oneself as an instance of a category. The institution relates through what Scheler would call a type, a generic form that captures certain features while

ignoring others. One is a claimant, a taxpayer, a patient, a student. The interaction proceeds by determining which type applies and executing the corresponding procedure. Particularity, history, circumstances, character: all are irrelevant except insofar as they bear on categorisation. When treated as a person, by contrast, one experiences oneself as recognised in one's individuality. The institution relates through direct acquaintance rather than typification. Particular circumstances matter, and the interaction proceeds by understanding rather than categorising.

Second, emotional legitimacy is a necessary but not sufficient condition of full legitimacy. A caring tyranny would still be illegitimate on procedural grounds; a caring society that systematically denied recognition to some of its members would be illegitimate on Honnethian grounds. Procedural correctness and adequate recognition are not sufficient for legitimacy without the additional element of institutional care.

Third, emotional legitimacy cannot be reduced to welfare provision. A society could provide generous material support while remaining emotionally cold, as many advanced welfare states demonstrate in practice. What matters is not merely that needs are met but that they are met in a manner that expresses concern. The difference between caring and bureaucratic welfare lies in the quality of the relation established between institution and person, not in the quantity distributed.

Fourth, the cultivation of emotional legitimacy requires attention to the relational emotions: empathy, sympathy, and solidarity. These are distinguished from self-directed emotions in that they are essentially oriented toward others. A society that cultivates these relational capacities, that educates its members in the practices of fellow-feeling, creates the conditions for emotional legitimacy in a way that a society focused only on individual wellbeing cannot. Solidarity, properly understood, is active enthusiasm for collective identities, a willingness to identify oneself with a larger whole from genuine fellow-feeling rather than from calculation [13]. This understanding of solidarity has direct implications for participatory democracy. The participatory ideal presupposes that citizens care about the outcomes of collective decision-making not merely for themselves but for their fellow citizens. Without such care, participation degenerates into the aggregation of competing interests, a procedure that may be fair but cannot be genuinely democratic in the fullest sense. Participatory democracy therefore requires a substantive virtue community, a context in which citizens are bound by fellow-feeling and oriented toward the common good [4].

The Contemporary Legitimacy Crisis

The epidemic of psychological suffering in advanced liberal democracies constitutes evidence of a legitimacy crisis, a failure to meet the emotional conditions of genuine political authority rather than merely a policy failure requiring administrative correction.

The data are by now familiar. Depression, anxiety, loneliness, and other forms of psychological distress have increased dramatically in recent decades, particularly

in the wealthy democracies of North America and Western Europe. The deaths of despair identified by Case and Deaton, from suicide, drug overdose, and alcohol-related liver disease, reduced life expectancy in the United States for the first time since the 1918 influenza pandemic [1]. Social trust has declined, civic participation has eroded, and survey data repeatedly report rising unhappiness and dissatisfaction with life across these societies.

The standard interpretation treats these trends as public health problems requiring policy responses: better mental health services, drug treatment programmes, community development initiatives. This interpretation is incomplete. It treats psychological suffering as exogenous to the political order, as a problem the state must address rather than a condition the state has helped create.

If antidepressant medications are sold in enormous quantities to millions of citizens in one society while their use remains negligible in other societies with comparable material conditions, the cause cannot lie in individual pathology randomly distributed. Something about the social order itself produces mass depression. Just as individuals can develop pathological character structures through formative experience, so cultures can develop pathological value systems that fail to provide security, encouragement, and a sense of meaning to their members [13]. The symptoms of cultural pathology include precisely what is observable in contemporary liberal democracies: widespread depression, alienation, addiction, and the various forms of despair manifest in rising suicide rates and declining life expectancy.

The argument advanced here is that mass psychological suffering in liberal democracies is at least partly a product of their emotional carelessness, their systematic failure to manifest genuine concern for the wellbeing of their members. The erosion of solidarity is central to this diagnosis. Liberal societies, with their emphasis on individual rights and procedural fairness, systematically erode the conditions for solidarity. Corporatisation of democratic decision-making destroys these conditions further.

Consider the organisation of work in advanced capitalist democracies. For most citizens, employment is the dominant structuring activity of adult life. Employment is organised almost entirely according to the logic of production, with minimal attention to the experience of the worker. The result is what David Graeber called bullshit jobs, positions that even those who hold them cannot justify as genuinely useful [14], and a well-documented intensification of work demands that leaves decreasing space for relationships, rest, and personal development.

The failure to cultivate solidarity through substantive moral community produces structural alienation: the sense that one does not belong to any community that genuinely cares about one's flourishing. This alienation can take extreme forms. The phenomenon of radicalisation, of young people in liberal democracies turning to violent extremism, is often analysed in terms of ideology or grievance. A deeper explanation lies in the failure of liberal societies to provide the emotional conditions of belonging. Organic communities, whatever their other faults,

integrate their members into structures of meaning and care that formal liberal institutions cannot replicate. When a young person raised in a liberal society encounters a community that offers genuine fellow-feeling, clear values, and a sense of purpose, even if that community is organised around violence, the appeal reveals something about what the liberal order has failed to provide. The radical community offers the experience of being known, valued, and integrated into a moral whole. Understanding radicalisation in these terms is not excusing it; it is identifying a symptom of legitimacy failure.

Character pathologies are readily induced by the ideologies implicit in the structures of liberal society itself. The ideology of competitive individualism systematically produces characters marked by anxiety, distrust, and inability to form deep attachments. When such character formations become widespread, the society loses its capacity for solidarity regardless of how sophisticated its procedures or how generous its recognitional achievements. The pathology lies in the cultural system that shapes character formation [4; 13].

The role of elites deserves particular attention. In organic communities, elites bear responsibility for steering collective awareness, for creating the conditions under which members can reflect on their values and circumstances. Liberal societies have largely abandoned this function. Political elites offer technocratic management rather than moral leadership; cultural elites oscillate between ironic detachment and performative outrage. The result is a vacuum where moral guidance should be, leaving individuals to navigate meaning-making without collective support.

These observations amount to a diagnosis: liberal democracies may meet the procedural conditions identified by Habermas, the recognitional conditions identified by Honneth, and the minimal conditions identified by Williams, yet they fail to meet the emotional conditions elaborated above. Their authority, whatever its procedural basis, is not grounded in genuine care for the wellbeing of those over whom it is exercised. This is a legitimacy deficit, real and consequential, that the dominant frameworks in political philosophy have no tools to identify, let alone address.

Toward a Politics of Care: Constructive Proposals

The argument of this paper has been primarily diagnostic, identifying a dimension of legitimacy that is systematically neglected and showing how this neglect renders certain failures of actually existing political orders invisible as legitimacy deficits. A politics of genuine care is a set of concrete institutional possibilities that could be pursued within existing democratic frameworks.

A politics of care requires reimagining the character of public institutions, not merely their extent or efficiency. The welfare state in its bureaucratic form is part of the problem: it addresses needs while remaining emotionally indifferent to those whose needs it addresses. The question is whether large-scale institutions can be designed to manifest care rather than mere administration. The best primary

healthcare systems, including certain integrated care models in Scandinavian countries, assign patients to specific practitioners who come to know them over time, rather than routing them through anonymous emergency services. The key structural feature is continuity of relationship: institutions designed so that citizens encounter the same officials over time, allowing mutual familiarity to develop. This is a condition for care. Similar principles could be applied to social services, education, and welfare administration. A welfare office in which claimants are assigned to case workers who follow their situations longitudinally, who have discretion to respond to particular circumstances, and who are trained in relational skills, would be a fundamentally different institution from the bureaucratic processing centres that currently prevail. Such reforms require significant investment in training, reduced caseloads, and a cultural shift away from metrics of efficiency toward assessments of relational quality. Pilot programmes demonstrating their feasibility already exist.

A legitimate worry about any politics of care is that state-enforced or institutionally mandated care could become patronising, homogenising, or oppressive, a new form of perfectionist imposition at odds with value pluralism and individual autonomy. The answer lies in distinguishing between substantive prescription and structural provision. The care advocated here concerns the state ensuring that citizens have the relational and material conditions under which they can pursue their own conceptions of the good effectively. A caring institution asks what citizens actually need and responds to that need with genuine concern. Genuine care cannot be homogenising because it attends to particularity rather than imposing uniformity. Bureaucratic treatment is far more homogenising than caring treatment, since it processes all cases according to the same rules regardless of circumstance. The protective space for dissent and value re-examination is crucial here. Any politics of care must guard against enforced conformity by maintaining robust protections for dissent, institutional spaces where prevailing values can be questioned, and mechanisms through which those who feel excluded or oppressed can voice their concerns effectively.

The structural sources of alienation in contemporary life require fundamental reconsideration, particularly the organisation of work and urban space. The evidence now strongly supports reducing working hours, increasing worker control over scheduling, and redesigning workplaces to facilitate collegial relationships. These are conditions for the kind of community that work can provide when organised for human purposes rather than solely for production. More radically, a politics of care would question the dominance of employment as the structuring activity of adult life and would explore alternatives such as universal basic income, which decouple survival from labour market participation and thereby create space for forms of life organised around relationship rather than production.

Concerning urban space, the principles of walkable neighbourhoods, mixed-use zoning, and accessible public spaces are well established in urban planning. Their implementation has been blocked primarily by political obstacles, particularly

the interests of automobile and real estate industries, rather than by technical impossibility. A politics of care would prioritise these reforms as matters of legitimacy. The spatial organisation of communities directly affects the possibility of encounter, the development of familiarity among neighbours, and the cultivation of local solidarity.

Cultivating the emotional capacities that make care possible must become a public concern. Scheler's analysis suggests that sympathy is not merely a natural endowment but something that can be developed or stunted by social conditions [3]. A society aiming at emotional legitimacy would attend to the formation of its members' capacities for fellow-feeling, not merely their capacities for rational deliberation or economic productivity. This points toward educational reform: the cultivation of relational capacities alongside the transmission of knowledge and skills. Social and emotional learning programmes, service learning that brings students into contact with diverse communities, and civic education that emphasises responsibilities alongside rights all have roles to play. More broadly, a politics of care would ask, at every point of policy design, what effects proposed measures have on citizens' capacities for relationship and solidarity [13].

The society of care is the only substantively legitimate society in the context of happiness and the good life as the overarching goals of human existence. This insight, long recognised in communitarian and virtue-theoretic traditions, deserves a central place in our thinking about political legitimacy. The epidemic of psychological suffering in liberal democracies is a legitimacy problem that requires rethinking what we expect from political order and what political order owes to those who live under it. A political philosophy adequate to our time must attend to the emotional dimension of political order that procedural, recognitional, and minimally realist accounts systematically neglect. The groundwork for such a politics has been laid; the constructive task now awaits sustained development.

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