

Careful Thinking Episode 3 Transcript

[00:15] **Martin Robb:** Hello and welcome to this episode of *Careful Thinking*, a new podcast exploring ideas about care. My name is Martin Robb and I'm the host of the podcast. *Careful Thinking* is inspired by a passionate belief that thinking critically about care can both deepen our understanding and improve the day-to-day practice of care. In each episode of the podcast, you'll hear either a thoughtful reflection on a key issue connected with care or an in depth conversation with a researcher, writer, or practitioner at the cutting edge of current thinking about care. For this episode, I'm really pleased to be joined by Nigel Rapport. Nigel is Emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology at St. Andrews University in Scotland, where he was the founding director of the Centre for Cosmopolitan Studies. Nigel is the author of numerous books and journal articles on a wide variety of topics ranging from communitarianism and cosmopolitanism to the writings of E.M. Forster and the art of Stanley Spencer. His most recent book is *Cosmopolitan Love and Individuality: Ethical Engagement beyond Culture*, which was published in 2018. I've known Nigel for a long time. We were postgraduate students together in Manchester in the early 1980s, and in fact, at one point we were flatmates. We were studying for PhDs in different subjects. Nigel was studying social anthropology while I was researching 20th century literature, and after Manchester, our careers went in very different directions. However, I followed Nigel's academic progress closely over the years, and just recently I've been intrigued to notice that our interests have started to converge and that Nigel has been writing about issues related to care and quoting some of the writers on care who have been important to me. I find Nigel's ideas about care intriguing and challenging, and I'm really pleased to have this opportunity to explore them with him. So, Nigel, welcome to the podcast.

[02:19] **Nigel Rapport:** Thanks very much, Martin. It's really nice to see you again and to engage in this way.

[02:25] **Martin Robb:** Yeah, really pleased that you're joining us today. So to start us off, Nigel, I'm interested in how, as an anthropologist, you came to be writing about issues related to care. So maybe you could tell us something about the trajectory of your career and what have been the main themes you've engaged with over time and how did they lead you to an interest in care.

[02:47] **Nigel Rapport:** Thank you, Martin. So as an anthropologist, my data is derived from my research. I engage in grounded theory. So things began for me in my first fieldwork when you and I knew each other, 1980 to 81. I was working in a small English village that I call Wanet in the north of England in the Yorkshire Dales. I became interested in individual worldviews in that small village and how people lived in worlds that I felt were their own worlds, rather than worlds necessarily of sharing with their close neighbours, even though their neighbours might have been people that they'd known all their lives. I was also interested in how there seemed to be a miscommunication between people when their worldviews were expressed in public. And I put this down to the ambiguities inherent in words and language. So, from this first field work, I derived a theory about the nature of social life being not something neat or systemic or solidly structured. Rather, it seemed to me that social life was a messy affair, even chaotic, of people talking past each other, of entropy and complexity, social life characterized by distortion and contradiction. There was

a real contrast, I felt, between the surface of social life, which might have seemed placid and communicative, and about symbolic agreement. And yet underlying this, I felt, were enormous differences based on individuality, individual creativity, individual consciousness, the randomness of individual development and change. So this became my initial main theoretical, analytical, and ethnographic focus, that the relationship between the individual and the social, the individual and the cultural, and wanting to maintain the nature and the reality of individuality, as against social structure or cultural homogeneity. From a focus on individual consciousness and identity, I developed an interest in human rights, the rights of the individual. Also what I called existential power, the power that each of us has as an individual human being to create and pursue and effect life projects of our own, over and against what might be described as structural power, this power of society to determine or influence us. This also then developed into an interest in liberalism and civil society, how individuality might be recognized and respected, and then cosmopolitanism as a global expression of liberal society and a freedom securing the individual might be synonymized by the word care for me. This then developed into what I described as a cosmopolitan anthropology of anyone. Broadly speaking, anthropology is a study of what it is to be human. I wanted to say that a cosmopolitan anthropology had three distinct components to it, ontological, moral, and aesthetic. Very briefly, the ontological aspect of a cosmopolitan anthropology is to find out what it is to be human, and to determine how we might know what it is to be human. The moral component of a cosmopolitan anthropology is to work out the best expression of human capacities and individual rights. How might this be socially accommodated? And thirdly, the aesthetic component of a cosmopolitan anthropology is how best to represent individual human beings that we meet in the field, the individual human beings on whom we do our research, how best to represent their nature, their being that does justice to their individuality. So this very briefly is how the main themes of my career as an anthropologist have developed from that first fieldwork in an English Yorkshire Dales village, moving outward to more theoretical pursuits.

[07:36] **Martin Robb:** Thanks, Nigel. And yeah, I remember you doing that initial fieldwork and coming back and telling us about it and having to anonymise it in your conversations back in Manchester. I want to come back to some other examples of your fieldwork later, but one thing I just wanted to pick up on right at the beginning, I mentioned in my introduction your books on Stanley Spencer and E.M. Forster, both of whose names recur throughout your writing. But you also make frequent use in your writing of the work of a range of creative writers and artists, Iris Murdoch, Philip Larkin and many others. And as someone from an arts and humanities background myself, it's one of the things I find most appealing about your work, but maybe surprising in the writings of an anthropologist. So I just wondered if you could say something about that practice. Is that deliberate drawing on the work of creative artists and how they've helped you to think about some of the key issues you've just elucidated?

[08:33] **Nigel Rapport:** Yes, thank you. I often think it's an accident how we end up in the particular disciplines that we do. I went to Cambridge to read archaeology and anthropology. I would have liked to have gone to Cambridge to read politics, but in those days you couldn't read politics as a first year student, only as a second year student. And I didn't have the confidence after my first year to switch because I'd come to feel at home in the department of social anthropology. But my love of politics, of political philosophy, of

moral philosophy, and also of English literature, which was another option at Cambridge that maybe I didn't have the confidence to pursue. These have always been with me. So E.M.Forster, Philip Larkin, Virginia Woolf, Stevie Smith, Stanley Spencer, Iris Murdoch, George Eliot, Felix Nussbaum, German painter. These have been people that I have been inspired by reading and in the case of Spencer and Nussbaum, seeing and being inspired, wanting me somehow - leading me to want somehow to engage, to express my admiration. What I admire in them often is the individuality of their artistry, confidence of their individuality. They appreciate individuality. They beautifully express individuality in their work, but also they offer an insightful, sophisticated and subtle analysis of the individual in society or the individual in culture. And this has been something that I felt that I could borrow from in my own work. In other words, I didn't see their projects as distinct from mine. Reading Virginia Woolf, admiring Stanley Spencer, being thoroughly absorbed in George Eliot or Iris Murdoch. I felt that these were commensurate projects to my own and that inspiration has really fired my own writing. How to copy their subtle analysis of complexity and contrariety in social life. So academic disciplines are an accident of history. And I don't see there being a big distinction, certainly in my work between the human science of anthropology and the human science of writing fine literature or the human science of moralizing, a la George Eliot or Iris Murdoch or John Stuart Mill.

[11:15] **Martin Robb:** That's really interesting, and I sympathise with that and empathize with that, Nigel, as somebody who, as I say, started off with English literature and somehow ended up in psychology and childhood studies and care ethics. So, as you say, these academic disciplines are conventions, aren't they? And they're ways of sort of putting us into boxes which we're always trying to break out of. I mean, you mentioned earlier the influence of moral philosophy and a perhaps more conventional influence on your work has been the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, whose name also crops up frequently in your writing, I've noticed. Now, for those of our listeners who are not familiar with Levinas perhaps, maybe you could give us some background about him, about his life and his key ideas and say something about why he's been particularly important for you in your work.

[12:04] **Nigel Rapport:** Yes, thank you. So I've mentioned the work of literature and I mentioned also the work of philosophy. I admire the way that philosophers speak with confident clarity about universalism, the universals of the human condition. And this is something that I think, mistakenly much anthropology has been wary of. It's gone down the cul de sac of relativism and culturalism. And I think this is a dire mistake because it negates the human and the universal. So my questions are, what is it to be human? How should individuality be ethically accommodated in society? What does a fulfilled life entail? And these are questions that I find beautifully dressed in the work of Iris Murdoch I've mentioned, but also John Stuart Mill, also Friedrich Nietzsche, also Ralph Waldo Emerson. And most recently, I've been drawn to the difficult and esoteric writings of Emmanuel Levinas. I've got a book coming out in the new year called '*I am Here*', *Abraham Said: Emmanuel Levinas and the Science of Anthropology*. A little about Emmanuel Levinas. He was a 20th century philosopher. He's no longer alive. He was a Lithuanian Jew. He was a Talmudic scholar as well as a philosopher. His academic life was lived in France. He was a student of Husserl and Heidegger. So the phenomenological side of philosophy. He escaped to France, but his family were slaughtered in the Holocaust. He himself served in the French army, but he was captured and sent to a labour camp for French officers. He wasn't put to

death in a death camp, even though he was Jewish, because he was a French officer. And one of the interesting observations he had in that labour camp was that the Nazis' guard dogs seemed to recognize the humanity of the prisoners alongside the humanness of the guards in a way that the German, that the Nazis did not. And he felt, how can it be that human beings can dehumanise, can categorize an otherness in such a way that it's no longer regarded as humans when you have an animal such as a dog, that for whom that common humanity is not obscured. And Levinas departed from Heidegger because of Heidegger's respect for the *Führerprinzip* and his respect for Nazism and for Hitler, as the omniscient embodiment of *Das Volk*. And Levinas set his task, his philosophical task, to imagine how a Holocaust could occur and how it could be avoided in the future. Antisemitism, Levinas theorised, was ultimately a negation of otherness. And this expression of otherness was widespread, ubiquitous, timeless. The Holocaust might have been the zenith of its expression, but it was a far wider problem that Levinas put down to the way that culture works. A culture is the creation of what Levinas called the order of the same. A culture classifies, categorises, includes and incorporates in such a way that it violates different being. It violates being in itself. Culture is a kind of category thinking that imprisons and denies individual identity. For Levinas, the world is intrinsically plural. It contains things between which there can be no comprehension and between which there is no commensuration, no reciprocity, no inter subjectivity, no possibility of knowledge. The world is intrinsically plural, and culture denies this, negates this, fails to see it, because it insists that the world is singular of one kind of things that can be known and incorporated within a system of symbolic classification. Levinas was a religious Jew as well as a philosopher, although he said that his writings, his Talmudic writings and his philosophical writings were distinct projects. But you can see definite overlaps. For example, Levinas says that there is no possible numinous experience or knowledge of God. This is one of the ways in which he thinks that reality is intrinsically plural. There is also no possible knowledge of death. And yet death is an intrinsic part of reality. So we have death, we have God. In a radical move, Levinas says that human otherness, the other individual human being with which we are faced, is as incomprehensible and as plurally other diverse, different as is death or God. We can no more claim to know the human other than we can claim to know death or God. There is a secrecy of subjectivity, as Levinas phrases it, that is intrinsic to our being and our - and our life and philosophy must begin from this secrecy of subjectivity and must begin from a respectful ignorance of what is other. In the same way that we can't claim to know death or claim to know God, we cannot claim to know the other. And any claim to the other is an infringement of that other life's intrinsic identity and right to be as itself. So not only must philosophy begin from ignorance and the secrecy of subjectivity, but society must begin. A moral society must begin from this secrecy and ignorance. Ethics must precede epistemology. Ethics must precede any claim to know. To avoid another Holocaust is to deny and escape from cultural myths that claim to know. To deny and escape from individual arrogance that claims to know or incorporate the world. Ego, according to our ego, according to Levinas, is what he calls a usurpatory consciousness. We try to usurp, we try to colonise the world in the same way that culture tries to colonise the world in terms of what it knows. Neither of these things are possible. Neither of these things are moral. And ignoring that leads to not only the violation of otherness, but possible death of otherness. One more thing about Levinas. What we can know is a kind of affective recognition of otherness. So famously, there are moments in the Old Testament where Abraham or Moses encounters God. This encounter is a sensing of a presence that cannot be understood. The

moral response of Abraham and Moses is to offer themselves to this presence without knowing what it is exactly that they're offering themselves to, but knowing that it has a right to their care. Abraham and Moses have a kind of affective or sensual response to the presence of God. In another radical move, Levinas says that our recognition and our engagement with human otherness must be of this kind of affective or sensual kind we do not know, but we can sense the concrete proximity of the other human being beside us. And we must recognize a duty of care, even unto self-sacrifice, to that otherness whose face we recognize but whose being we cannot know, but whose vulnerability and need and fragility we also sense. And therefore we have a duty of care that derives from this moment of affective, ignorant engagement.

[22:06] **Martin Robb:** Thanks. That's a really clear summary, Nigel. I've always been put off reading Levinas by his reputation for difficulty, but your very clear explanation of his key ideas have encouraged me to go back and have another go, because I've been very embedded in the work recently of Gabriel Marcel and to some extent phenomenology. And I can see both similarities, but also some really interesting differences in the way that, say, Marcel and Levinas deal with this issue of the knowledge of the other. Thank you for that. And I can see now how those Levinasian ideas have influenced your own thinking about the self and other in relation to care. We'll come back to that, bringing you down to earth, from philosophy to ethnography again. And you mentioned your Yorkshire Dales, your initial experience, and I know you've done ethnographic field work in other settings, a Newfoundland city and Israeli town, but I particularly want to ask you about the time you spent among healthcare professionals, among porters, in a Scottish hospital, as a kind of segue into talking about your ideas about care. So what was it about that setting that interested you, and what did you take away from that experience about the practice of care?

[23:24] **Nigel Rapport:** So this was an intense field work, in the same way that the Yorkshire Dales was an intense fieldwork. Initially, I was funded to do a study of Scottish nationalism or national identity, and my setting was going to be the hospital. And the question was, to what extent is a Scottish hospital, a hospital in Scotland, influenced by nationalism, which might seem to cut across a medical, a Hippocratic oath to deal medically with all humans on the basis of their humanity and their individuality alone, in which nationality, ethnicity, religiosity, gender, class status, all these social constructs are irrelevant. So again, unusually for this fieldwork, I had to get permission from hospital authorities to undertake the research. I couldn't just show up in an English village and get work as a labourer. I couldn't just show up in an Israeli development town and work as a new immigrant. I had to get the permission of the hospital authorities and I was passed down the line of hospital managers till I sat, till my application sat on the desk of what was called the hotel manager. The hotel manager dealt with catering staff and he also dealt with the orderlies or the porters. And he said to me, Nigel, I think what you should do is be a hospital porter, because that will get you access to all sites in the hospital. And the porters are an interesting bunch. So I became a hospital porter for a year in a large NHS teaching hospital in Scotland. And it was a real shock to the system for a number of reasons. The porters were 99% men, there were two women, and they had to conduct themselves as if they were honorary men. This was a very macho environment. The city I worked in was one of large scale unemployment. And as the hotel manager said to me, I called the city, Eastern Neuk. The hotel manager said to me, you

know, Nigel, the people in Eastern Neuk, they don't just have a chip on their shoulder about their identity or their status or their poverty. They don't just have a chip on their shoulder, they have a whole fish supper. Fish supper is a Scottish term for fish and chips. So he was warning me that the people I'd been meeting were wary about their status and their identity. And this proved true among the macho men that I was thrown in with 275 male porters whose work it was to ferry patients and visitors around the hospital plant. This was an enormous set of buildings, hundreds of yards of corridor, and the porters claimed that only they knew their way from a to b or a to z, in the same way that, say, London taxi drivers boast their knowledge of how to get from a to b. Porter said, only we connect the hospital, Nigel, and only we know how to get a patient on a bed or on a trolley or in a wheelchair from ward to ward or ward to operating theatre or ward to clinic. The hospital couldn't run without us. And this was part of the way in which I came to understand that the porters, who were at the very base of the hospital hierarchy, alongside the domestics, that is, the cleaners, who were 95% women. So the porters and the domestics formed something of a kind of unholy family of untouchables at the very base of the hospital hierarchy, stigmatized by all the other specialisms, the clerks, the nurses, the carpenters, the electricians, never mind the doctors and the consultants. So I became a porter. Eventually, I was accepted as a porter, not just as a professor. Having a few weeks for some reason away from the university, I became a porter. I mucked in with what the porters did. I did portering shifts day and night, and I finally became accepted, thought of as one of them. And my initial project of Scottish nationalism became more or less forgotten by me and also by them, because what was much more interesting was understanding the portering community, the portering subculture, and how they overcame the stigma and how they saw themselves as the most important people in the hospital, and how they saw themselves as leading lives of real men. What they meant by that was that they hadn't sold themselves to the institution or to the workplace. They kept a proportionality in their lives. Real men, they work. They work hard, but they also play hard. They have success with women. They have success on the football field. They have success drinking in the pubs. They have success fighting. So fighting and having a sex life and playing sport and getting enough money to live on and not kowtowing to authority. This is how a man lives and this is how the porter lived. This is how the porter saw himself as better than the doctors who sold their souls to the institution. And that became the - so I wrote this book on portering life. It starts with a nice quotation from Bertrand Russell, who said, imagine if Macbeth had been written from the point of view of the porters. They would know that Macbeth was really about those porters that come to be killed by Lady Macbeth. They would know that that was the crux of the play. It seemed to me that the porters in Eastern Neuk hospital had managed to establish themselves in such a way that they were the main characters.

[29:55] **Martin Robb:** Interesting. Thanks. And I can see the link with your interest in individuality and individualism as well. So can we move on to some of the key concepts that you developed around care, Nigel? And I'd like to start with the notion of the personal preserve which you developed in your 2018 article on the action and inaction of care, and which I see you've elaborated on in a more recent book chapter on the life projects of personal wellbeing. Now you begin the 2018 article with a story, the story of a woman named Patricia Gillespie and her elderly mother. I wondered if you could just share that story for our listeners and say what you think it illustrates about care sometimes requiring inaction rather than action.

[30:42] **Nigel Rapport:** Well, personal preserve is fundamental to this, to this idea. Before I get to Patricia Gillespie, who I only know through the writings of others, I'd like to start with some ideas of Iris Murdoch and her notion of a good society. A good society, according to Iris Murdoch, is one in which we refrain from exercising or visiting our desires on others. A good society for Iris Murdoch is one of restraint or reticence. As with Levinas, Murdoch is fearful of the way that our selfish consciousness and our cultural convention might lead us to an obscuring of the reality of the individual other, of individual difference. And Iris Murdoch goes so far as to say that she would define compassion as agnosticism. Iris Murdoch also writes a lot that I find very convincing about love. And love for Iris Murdoch is a kind of epiphanous moment in which we surprise ourselves by realising the reality of the individual other, the particularity of being that something other than ourselves is real. The personal preserve is an old liberal concept, and it entails ensuring a good society where all have the space to come into their own, where society doesn't determine what coming into one's own might entail. But it recognizes that each of us has the capacity to come into our own, to create our own life project and fulfil it, or fulfil them, instead of leading the lives that other people might want us to lead, or to be imposed upon by their version of our identity. So personal preserve is an idea that each of us has the capacity, and each of us should have the right to lead a life of our own determination, authorship, description, and fulfilment. The personal preserve is an attempt to imagine that kind of symbolic and physical and social space that is ours alone, even when we are immersed in the social, a social that is hard to escape from given the compressed nature of human society and human populations. The story of Patricia Gillespie, which I learned from an Australian anthropological friend of mine called Andrew Dawson. Patricia Gillespie is an Australian writer, and she wrote movingly about the death of her mother from cancer and how her mother's last days in a hospital or hospice were spent as if in a personal preserve. The hospital allowed her to determine what she was going to wear as she died. The hospital, as a caring institution allowed her to determine the mode of her death, which was deciding to stop eating. So the timing of her death, as well as what she wore when she died, and the hospital and her daughter respected her worldview, which was that the kind of clothing that she was going to wear was a kind of rocket ship in which she was going to travel straight into heaven. So this was a very beautiful aesthetic impression by Patricia Gillespie of the personal preserve in which her mother died, how it was authored by her mother, and how the hospital as a caring institution was able to affect that space necessary for her mother to die as an individual with dignity.

[35:04] **Martin Robb:** So it's by caring, by choosing not to care in a way, or not to impose care. And that's interesting. As you were talking, I was detecting all kinds of overlaps with some of the topics we talked about on previous episodes of the podcast to do with relational care. an interesting new development. And in the previous episode, talking about a sort of personalist approach to people with dementia. It's kind of allowing people to be an individual rather than the caring institution taking over. So another concept that's been central to your writings is cosmopolitan politesse, and obviously that arises out of your broader longstanding interest in cosmopolitan more generally. Now, since you've written a whole book about this topic, it's probably unfair to ask you to summarise what it means in a few words, but maybe you could have a go.

[35:59] **Nigel Rapport:** So this follows on nicely from the notion, from from - care recognizes a kind of balance between action and inaction, or care as a kind of respect for an otherness that is ultimately its own, an otherness that one by rights should not claim to know or to determine. So I ask myself the question, how does a good society, in the image of Iris Murdoch, society that balances restraint with engagement, how does a good society come to include, it doesn't wish to incorporate, but how does social inclusion work? How do you include, without category thinking, how do you include, without claiming, that everyone is in a cultural conventional category as male or Jewish or middle class or secular or British or middle-aged? These are cultural categories that are an imposition on the intrinsic individual nature of being. So how does one imagine a good society to include while avoiding category thinking? I said, well, maybe a good society can include by recognising members as individual human beings alone. And I called that intrinsic individual human being Anyone. So who is Anyone? Anyone is precisely anyone, a human being. And as a human being in possession of a secret subjectivity, as a human being in possession of that capacity to make worldviews, engage in a life trajectory of their own formulation, and fulfil a life project. So how to maintain this secrecy of subjectivity, not claiming to know, but at the same time to include? Cosmopolitan politesse is the name that I give to a kind of linguistic and behavioral code, a style of engagement that is polite and mannerly and inclusive, but doesn't claim to know anything other than here is anyone. So cosmopolitan politesse is a kind of balance. It attempts a kind of balance between inclusion and distance, recognition and reticence. It's an image of society as - whose ethos is proportionality. One tries to maintain a balance between recognition, acknowledgement, inclusion, but also distance, reticence, ignorance, giving people the space to go their own way, to be themselves, to express themselves as they will, to join as they will, to fulfil themselves according to their own lights, to relate insofar as they wish to and on their own terms. Cosmopolitan politesse was an attempt to imagine how there might be a civil society whose code, whose ethos, whose mode of engagement was polite but not intrusive, and whose basis was not, that one is engaging with a member of a category, middle class, Jewish, middle-aged, whatever, because none of those names and terms might rightfully know the other as they know themselves. So one wants to avoid engagement in terms of class, community status, ethnicity, religiosity, and go back to basics, that we are all human and we should avoid classifying the other according to accidental cultural constructs that are extraneous impositions.

[41:00] **Martin Robb:** Maybe I could just pick up on this idea of categorical thinking, Nigel, and what comes across to me from what you've said and from your writing is a certain hostility to identities or solidarities that are based around local belongings or attachments, whether a cultural, ethnic, or national level. And you see those identities as distorting individuality. Now, given the history of the last century, particularly in Europe, and you've mentioned Levinas's experience, that's perfectly understandable. But surely it's precisely a sense of cultural rootedness that gives life meaning for many people. And more than this, you could say that those local attachments are precisely what motivate love and care, rather than appeals to a kind of universal love for an anonymous Anyone? That's me playing devil's advocate, but I just wondered if you had any thoughts on that.

[41:52] **Nigel Rapport:** These are difficult and sensitive issues, Martin, and I stand against current trends towards identity politics precisely because of their essentialisation of collective identity. What's fundamental in my thinking is that relationality, community,

sociality, these must be voluntary. They must be achieved, not ascribed, on the basis of some imposition of an essential identity. Our public identities must be chosen. We pick up public identities and we put them down. We put on a certain kind of social clothing and we take it off. We wear different kinds of social clothings at some time in our lives. Our public identities can be multiple, developmental, contradictory, partial. Above all, they must be voluntary and something that we achieve rather than have ascribed to us as intrinsic, as essential, as inescapable, as foundational. The only thing that's foundational is our self, our selfhood, our sociology. Our sociality is something that, by rights, in a liberal democracy, must be something that we choose for ourselves. I wrote a book called *The Trouble with Community*, and intrinsic to that was the notion that community, as it tends to be bandied about in a world of multiculturalism, post-coloniality, and identity politics, community becomes a kind of prison. Community affiliation, belonging, membership becomes something imposed on individuals. One of the most frightening slogans of the multiculturalist movement is that culture is not an option. One is imprisoned in one's so-called birth culture, that of one's parents, family, community, as if culture was something fixed and static and shared that impresses itself on individual bodies and minds willy-nilly and irrevocably. As an anthropologist, I have to say this is absolutely wrong, and it's ethically pernicious. Culture is absolutely an option and must be recognized as such. In a liberal society, one is not trapped in an ethnic identity or a religious identity, whatever it might be, that one's so-called birth community, that of one's parents, that of one's neighbours, this does not impart itself, impart anything essential to the individual. We are essentially individual. We make and break our own habits. We create our worldviews and our life projects. No one should have the right to tell another their identity, their life course, their duty, their tradition, their intrinsic belonging. So to my mind, identity, public identity, relationality, community, these must be achieved, and they're likely to be multiple, changing, fleeting, contradictory. And my fearfulness of the discourse of community is that it seems intrinsically illiberal and anti-liberal because it somehow grants some essentialism, not to individuality, but to community belonging. So this is not to say that people do not have local attachments. It's not to say that people don't belong to communities, but it's to say that these should be deemed voluntary. Something one comes and goes from, something one enters and exits. So this notion of apostasy, when one leaves a religion, this is intrinsically illiberal, this is Stalinist, this is totalitarian, and it should have no place in the, in the way that a liberal society operates. But this is not to say that one doesn't have local familial communitarian attachments, but it's to say that these are not intrinsic to our individual being.

[46:55] **Martin Robb:** Can I quote you another possible criticism of cosmopolitanism? So the political theorist Andrew Dobson identifies what he sees as a possible weakness in cosmopolitanism, in that it's fundamentally an intellectual affair rather than an affair of the heart. And he identifies what he calls a motivational - possible motivational vacuum at the heart of cosmopolitanism, and he wants to thicken the ties that bind us to strangers. Now, I think he remains a cosmopolitanist, if you like. He's writing in favour of it. He identifies that possible weakness. And I came across that quote in a book on *The Capacity to Care* by my former colleague, the psychologist Wendy Hollway. And she links it to the criticism of the feminist care ethicist Joan Tronto, whom you also cite. I just wonder. I mean, maybe it's the same question again. Maybe we've already answered it, but can a cosmopolitan ethos really motivate care?

[47:57] **Nigel Rapport:** No, I think it's a different question, and it's a very important one, how to motivate care. And this is really what I wanted to try and answer, or at least engage with in that book that you mentioned at the beginning, *Cosmopolitan Love and Individuality: Ethical Engagement Beyond Culture*. I was struck by a phrase of Thomas Hardy's moments of vision. He says, we can experience moments of vision that can fundamentally change our sense of self. And I wanted to argue that there's a kind of love, I called it cosmopolitan love that might fit Thomas Hardy's notion of a moment of vision. By cosmopolitan love, I wanted to write about what I see as a human proclivity, capacity, and a human practice whereby we have epiphanous moments of vision when we see what is really in front of us. What is really in front of us is Anyone. So I wanted to argue that there's something called cosmopolitan love, which is a kind of epiphanous moment of vision when one sees what is really in front of one. What is really in front of one is Anyone, individual, human, other, in the way that we lead our lives now, that Anyone is likely to be a stranger. We live among strangers and are large scale, complex societies by and large. But we recognize that stranger as lovable. And what I mean by this is that one has an emotional reaction to an engagement with the individual, the individuality of life before us. By lovable, I don't mean something erotic. But one is somehow attracted to the individuality of being that one is witnessing and the pathos of that precious individual life. There is the look, the gesture, the smile, the enunciation, the way of inhabiting a body, the way of talking with peers, the way of moving down the street. One is struck by the fragility, the preciousness, the vulnerability and the finitude of the individual life before one. So I wanted to call this moment of recognition a loving one, because it is an emotional engagement. But it's also something that carries a note of desire with it. I find myself attracted to that stranger whose life I don't know and won't know and can't know. But there it is. I'm surprised by being taken out of my habitude into engaging with a strange other individual life. So cosmopolitan love is one initially of emotional engagement with anyone. This is followed by a rational acknowledgement of my emotional engagement. What it is, what is it, rationally, that I mean, that I'm emotionally attracted to? It's the individual life that is not mine, that is human, but not mine. I can rationally recognize and acknowledge that individual, other human life. Thirdly, I am desirous of that life fulfilling itself in its precious finitude. I want that life to be recognized not just by me but by others. I want that life to have its personal preserve. I want that life I care for the universal recognition and nurture of that individual human life that I've recognized before me. So these three moments of emotional engagement, rational acknowledgement and responsible, careful nurturing, that which I have emotionally engaged with and rationally acknowledged, these three moments are what I call the moments of a cosmopolitan love that I would want to see working as a kind of civic virtue, the possible ethical foundation of a liberal or civil society. The loving look that engages with, recognizes and acts responsibly towards anyone might possibly be universalised as the ethic of a working, caring, liberal society. We know the notion of *agape*, a Greek word for the loving commandment of the Old Testament, to love one's neighbour as one's self, a neighbour, in that Old Testament, commandment is to be understood as including stranger and even so called enemy. So loving one's neighbour as one's self, according to the Talmudic interpretation, is to be understood as loving anyone and everyone as oneself. So *agape* gives on to Christian notions of universal love, the brotherhood of man. I wanted to imagine cosmopolitan love as having, if you like, commensurate outcomes to *agape*, but being motivated by an effective engagement rather than a religious injunction. But this, this, this book is my

attempt to try and overcome the critique of cosmopolitan thinness. In a way, thinness is to be valued. Thinness is a kind of reticence or restraint, à la Iris Murdoch. But I recognise the critique that says that, that thin relations are not necessarily loyal relations. Well, loyalty, according to Kant, is not as important as justice. My attempt to work out a version of what I call cosmopolitan love was an attempt to imagine a relationality that is just but also motivated, that is universalising but also localized, and so overcame some of the criticisms of the cosmopolitan.

[54:50] **Martin Robb:** Thanks, Nigel. That was a beautiful answer, if you may allow me to use that word. And I want to write it down and quote it. So maybe I'll have to transcribe what you've just said, particularly the first part about emotional engagement I thought was lovely. A final question, you'll be pleased to hear, just I mentioned Joan Tronto, and you quote her on broadening this ethic of care to the public and indeed the political realm. And you mentioned the British National Health Service as kind of an example of the love for which you argue in your book as an example of caring institutionalism. Can an institution really love us? Can the nation state really care?

[55:31] **Nigel Rapport:** So this is an important question. And it's also important because any important liberal, contemporary liberal philosophers such as John Rawls, have insisted on what he calls a veil of ignorance, a kind of necessary indifference in liberal institutions towards this citizenry, such that partisan notions do not intrude. So can an institution be caring? I would want to say that the personal, epiphanous moment of loving recognition that I've just spoken about may possibly be routinised, made into a routine engagement such as cosmopolitan politesse, and therefore also institutionalised. It's not an easy transition, but I think it's a possible transition from the personal microsocial to the impersonal and macro social. It's at the very least a necessary experiment. So cosmopolitan love, I've argued, motivates a kind of cosmopolitan politesse, a code of engagement that I would also claim that societies and governments and institutions might also take on if they recognise their membership as comprising of anyone's individual human beings inhabiting worldviews and life projects of their own authorship, individual human beings entrained on life trajectories that are their own individual, secret personal possessions. I think this kind of ethos might be turned into social policy and social practice. It's certainly been the case since the days of John Stuart Mill, that one has imagined a form of liberal governance that is society wide, that recognises individuality and the freedom that should follow from that. I've argued that care, as it's practiced by the NHS, is a kind of loving engagement of dealing with strangers, the best of current scientific knowledge. And I'm very interested in how medical developments, the developments in medical science now enable it to be more and more personalized, so that one does not deal with the abstract or average human being. Medical science now enables us with advances in genomic technology, advances in how DNA works. Medical science is now at that point where it can imagine a kind of personalised pair whereby the - the health and sickness of each of us is also an individual possession. What is healthy for you, Martin, and the homeostasis of your embodiment is particular to you, is different to me. I think medical science is at that point of evolution whereby personalised care can now devolve to a level of individual embodiment, but be institutionalised nationally within something called the National Health Service. And this I take to be one example of how an institution might be caring, in this case a medical institution. But we've also spoken about how civil society might be institutionalized on the basis of a kind of polite

engagement that is both personalising in that it accepts anyone, and impersonal in that it doesn't claim to know anyone. These are major difficulties. But Levinas also tries to insist that that dyadic, microsocial encounter between ego and other must be the basis on which anything larger of an ethical nature must be based. One does not forget that concrete, sensual, affective, ignorant engagement between ego and other. And one tries to enshrine that, institutionalise it, routinise it, in all that one builds upon from that momentary encounter of an institutional kind. It's an ethical directive that one must try and put into practice, however difficult.

[01:00:05] **Martin Robb:** That answer kind of brings us nicely full circle and also an optimistic note for the political future on which to end. I said that was my final question. But as we finish, Nigel, you mentioned that you're working on a book about Levinas. What else are you doing? What are the issues that continue to engage you in your retirement?

[01:00:25] **Nigel Rapport:** Okay, so this is a - this is a paradox in my life. So I'm a - I'm a secular Jew. I went to a boarding school in Bristol that was famous for allowing in Jewish pupils from its origin in 1860s, and it allowed them in as a reward. At that time, Bristol had a Jewish MP, and he was responsible for guiding the statute through parliament that enabled Clifton College to be a freestanding public school as an institution. So as a reward to that Jewish MP, the first headmaster, whose surname was Percival, said, we will allow Jewish boys in, and they can be in Clifton as equal members and engage in their own religiosity. But we're going to keep them separate. We're going to lodge them separately so that they don't interfere with the residential life of the Christian school. By the time I got to Clifton College in 1969, at the age of twelve, Jewish boys were housed in something called Polack's house, named after a string of famous housemasters. When I got there, Ernest Polack, who was the first liberal thinker to introduce me to E.M.Forster. I mention this because each house in Clifton had its own version of the school uniform. We had our own. So the Polackians had their own tie, and on the rugby field we had our own best. The effect of this was that at any one time, people knew your ethnicity or your religiosity. They knew who the Jewish boys were. When I left Clifton for Cambridge, I promised myself that I would never again be identifiable publicly in a way that I didn't choose. It was a shame in a way, because I then steered clear of things in Cambridge, such as the Jewish society. However, a revelation to me was going to Israel in my year off between school and university to be a volunteer on a *kibbutz*. It was a revelation because of the normality of Jewish life in Israel and the publicness of Jewish life in Israel. The bus driver, the shopkeeper, the woman with her shopping bags, they were Jewish. It was incredible. This wasn't something to hide. This wasn't something to be fearful of. This wasn't something to worry about, antisemitism in its expression. And it gave me enormous pride to see what Israel had achieved since 1948 in the way of a modern, liberal, democratic, civil, inclusive society. I thought I would do my PhD on Israel. When I left Cambridge and considered the next stage of my career, I went to Manchester University because its famous founding professor, Max Gluckman, was a south African Jew who had funded many projects in Israel and really established the anthropology of Israel. However, when I got to Manchester, Gluckman had died and his successor was an Arabist who worked in Lebanon and Libya. This professor, head of department, he liked me, however, and he said to me, Nigel, if you want to do something with your academic life, if you want to make a significant contribution, if you want to have a life as an anthropologist, then don't do Israel. Come and work with me in the Mediterranean, in the Arab

Mediterranean. I didn't want to do this, but I didn't know what to do. As a neophyte PhD student, one couldn't afford to estrange the professor. I liked the professor. So we formed a compromise and I came to work on Britain for my PhD. But Israel remained, as it were, in the background. Let me cut to the chase. I'm working now on a book that I entitle *Exceptional Israel*. It's a celebration of Zionism. It's a project that speaks to my hurt geography. 'Hurt geography' is a phrase that I learned from the poet Carol Rumens. So Israel is my hurt geography, it's the source of most anxiety and stress in my life. Writing a book entitled *Exceptional Israel* is something I feel I need to do now, at the end, as it were, of an academic career. I'm coming to terms with my love, of respect, for pride, in respect for Israel and its tragic history of warring, for its existence, its acceptance and its legitimacy. Much has been written about Israel. A book I like very much is one by the American Harvard legal theorist Alan Dershowitz is called *The Case for Israel*. So my approach is to try and claim that there is a kind of moral attentiveness in Israeli society that makes it exceptional. I don't want to go on about this too long because we've spoken a long time, but moral attention is a concept that I derived from Iris Murdoch, and she in turn derived it from Simone Weil or Simone Weil, the French Jewish Catholic mystic philosopher. Moral attentiveness is an attempt to, in the Simone Weil's term, de-create, evacuate self or selfishness, such that one is in a position to see, attend to what is really around one. I'm going to try and make the argument that moral attentiveness is something that is epitomised by the reflexivity that Israeli society, from top to bottom, has had to practice from its very beginning or the beginning of the Zionist enterprise in 1882, when impoverished and oppressed Jews fled the Russian and the Habsburg empires and started buying land at extortionate prices in the Ottoman Empire, the Ottoman province of Syria. That moral attentiveness is something that has characterised Jews living in what is now called Israel, not only from the 1880s, but from the very time that the Romans attempted and successfully to expel Jews from the Holy Land in 146 AD, right through to the birth of the state in 1948 and through to the present. Having to consider how and why Israel might exist, should exist as a homeland of the Jews is something that enunciates what I think expresses, practiced is what I think Iris Murdoch means by moral tentativeness. So my present work, depressing as it is, increasingly depressing in the wake of the Hamas atrocities of October 7, 2023. Depressing as it is, this is a work that I am emotionally and intellectually fully engaged with and writing, writing away at.

[01:08:32] **Martin Robb:** Thanks, Nigel, and thank you for sharing that personal story, which I think illustrates the personal grounding of a lot of the ideas that you've talked about today. So I should say that we are recording this just a couple of months after the pogrom of October 7, the most terrible massacre of Jews since the Holocaust. So your work is very timely and I wish you all the best with it. So I want to thank you, Nigel, for a really fascinating conversation. It's been a great pleasure talking with you, catching up with you after all this time. You certainly challenged me to examine some of my own preconceptions, particularly about care, which has to be a good thing. So just a reminder to our listeners, if you want to follow up on any of the ideas we've covered in this episode, I'll put links to Nigel's publications and to some of the other texts we've been discussing in the show notes for the episode. So that's all we have time for on this episode of *Careful Thinking*. If you've enjoyed this episode, please consider subscribing wherever you get your podcasts. And if you want to give us feedback or suggest a guest or an issue for a future episode, please feel free to get in touch at carefulthinkingpodcast@gmail.com. See you next time.