

Care Is a Relationship

Anne-Marie Slaughter

Care, defined as caregiving, should be understood as a relationship rather than an activity: a relationship of nurture and development that imbues a set of actions, or “services,” with a positive impact on the person or being that is cared for. Valuing care as part of a new moral political economy will thus require figuring out how to value relationships apart from goods and services. Moreover, care is a relationship that is grounded more in identity than reciprocity: an expansion of the self to embrace the interests of others as one’s own. From this perspective, mutuality and solidarity are just as natural an expression of the human condition as reciprocity, proceeding from identity rather than individuation.

Alison Gopnik succinctly captures the problem with care: it is “overlooked and undervalued.”¹ She explores a number of reasons why, elegantly outlining various ways that care simply does not fit with the universalizing principles of Western liberal philosophy or with the assumptions of reciprocity built into the Western concept of the social contract. That lack of fit is a problem for Margaret Levi and Zachary Ugolnik’s conception of a new moral political economy, as they identify the benefits that human beings derive from reciprocity and cooperation as one of the two core assumptions underlying the project and this issue of *Dædalus*.²

Care, as Gopnik lays out, is not usually based on reciprocity. Cultural expectations that parents will care for their children, and children will then care for their parents in their parents’ old age, make sense from an economic and social point of view, but the individual child who is cared for by their parents has no reason to honor the bargain by providing care in their parents’ hour of need. Nor will the provision of care by parents for grandparents bind the grandchildren to do the same for the parents.

More fundamentally, reciprocity does not capture the actual *feelings* that most people who choose to care for others experience. Gopnik argues that the care motivates the feelings instead of the feelings motivating the care, drawing on neurobiology findings that the activity of caring for another triggers biochemicals that in turn flood humans with feelings of love, tenderness, and bonding. This is an extraordinary and important claim, although I would suggest that the studies from neuroscience and evolutionary biology are simply too early to support such bold statements of causation.

Still, focusing on the emotion, the feeling, or perhaps simply the state of being that motivates care is essential. It challenges our entire understanding of what care actually *is*, which in turn opens up new realms of possibility for thinking about what a new moral political economy that fully valued care could look like.

Gopnik never actually defines care. She repeatedly grounds it in “close personal relationships;” as she writes, “love and care go together.” Similarly, she refers to “the close attachments that underpin so much care.”³ Here the *actions* of care – actions can include feeding, dressing, bathing, toileting, driving, teaching, disciplining, comforting, guiding, and a host of others – are separate from but motivated by the *emotion* of care. Yet our language merges the two. To “care for” someone means both to feel love or affection for and to take a set of actions with regard to another person, animal, or plant.

For economic purposes, however, care comprises only the actions, without the emotion. In an economy that measures “goods and services,” many of those actions are services that take relatively little education or training to perform: services that a robot could provide, and in some cases, particularly in countries like Japan and France, already do. The wages paid for these services underline their presumed mechanical nature. A home health care aide or a childcare worker in the United States typically makes between \$9–\$10 an hour in states where minimum wage is lowest, to \$15–\$17 an hour in states where minimum wage is highest. The average dog walker in the United States makes roughly \$14 per hour.⁴

Suppose, however, as Hilary Cottam and I have argued, that we define care not as a service but a *relationship*.⁵ Rather than Gopnik’s concept of a set of actions motivated by a relationship, it is the relationship itself that distinguishes “care” from a set of automatable services. A relationship is a sustained connection between two people; a caring relationship is a loving, affectionate, or at least respectful and considerate connection. That connection, in turn, satisfies a deep and inescapable human need, just as food or water does. So much of social science and policy is based on the abstraction of *homo economicus*, which captures only the self-interested, acquisitive, individual goal-setting side of human nature. A better point of departure is *sapiens integra*, a construction that reflects whole human beings, who yearn for connection and who “become who we are in relationship to others.”⁶

How to value that connection? Here we run into the danger of commodification; care has traditionally been described as a “labor of love” that must be beyond any price.⁷ Yet we know that connections have huge value. What else do platforms like Facebook or LinkedIn enable? The phenomenon of a “network effect,” in which a good or service gains additional value as it gains more users, captures the value of breadth of connection. The value of care, on the other hand, replaces breadth with depth: the valence, duration, and strength of connection. Teaching, mentoring, guiding, therapy, ministry, and a host of other human relation-

ships now fall into the economic category of services, yet they are all relationships whose value to the people within them depends on the quality of the relationship.

These relationships must be sufficiently nourishing to generate human flourishing.⁸ They lie at the core of what philanthropist and education policy analyst James Merisotis prescribes as a future of “human work”: work that “blends human traits such as compassion, empathy, and ethics with our developed human capabilities such as critical analysis, interpersonal communication, and creativity.”⁹ The creation and measurement of value in our economy will be increasingly rooted in the quality and depth of relationships that computers can only simulate.

If the essence of care is a relationship, an emotional connection between two people, a further question arises: what motivates that relationship? One of the important points Gopnik makes is that care is *not* a relationship motivated by reciprocity, that all-important exchange that, as she notes, underpins the concepts of the social contract and the market as enablers of human well-being. Reciprocity assumes a measure of equality, so much so that contract law prohibits contracts made between adults and minors, or finds that contracts made as the result of undue influence, duress, or unequal bargaining power are unconscionable and hence unenforceable.

By contrast, Gopnik describes the relationship of care as “intrinsically asymmetrical.”¹⁰ The person being cared for is dependent on the carer, so much so that good care requires the carer to create as much space as possible for autonomy: to encourage an infant, elder, or anyone who is permanently or temporarily disabled to “do it themselves.”¹¹ That dependence underpins a relationship closer to identity than reciprocity. Gopnik again: “a parent or a child or a partner, or even a good friend, is a person whose self has been expanded to prioritize the values and interests of another.”¹²

Gopnik describes a byproduct of caring as an “expansion of the self.”¹³ That is exactly the way many biological mothers would describe a relationship of care that begins with pregnancy. For some period of weeks or months – roughly nine months if the pregnancy is carried to term – a woman’s selfhood is umbilically linked to the identity of her baby, an identity that carries through early infancy and can certainly include biological and nonbiological parents, grandparents, siblings, and others. Indeed, with a first child, women become mothers and men become fathers (in our current gender usage), a shift of identity that is surely as or more profound than shifts in professional identity (for example, from law student to lawyer, or associate to partner). At the other end of life, becoming a caregiver for your own parent inverts the relationship between parent and child, another shift in identity that begins to prepare us for the life passage of losing a parent and thus no longer being a child in at least someone’s eyes.

Conceptualizing care as a relationship of at least partial identity between the carer and cared for opens the door to a completely different logic of collective ac-

tion. Gopnik talks of the “expansion of the self,” but then describes a “person whose self has been expanded to prioritize the values and interests of another.”¹⁴ Yet if the relationship between the “person” and “another” is truly one of *identity*, then how can we even conceptualize the possibility of competing values and interests, except to the extent that we all recognize that a single self has competing values and interests? There is no *other* in this formulation. The person is acting in their own self-interest because they have internalized another’s interests as their own.

Biology offers an answer to this seeming contradiction. As physicist and ecologist Fritjof Capra describes it, the semipermeable membranes between cells are “not boundaries of separation but boundaries of identity.”¹⁵ They keep the cell distinct as an identifiable part of the whole but simultaneously connect it to the other cells, connections that it requires to survive and flourish. Just so, my identity as a family member – mother, wife, sister, daughter – means that I am both distinctly myself, with my own goals and interests, *and simultaneously* part of a larger entity that defines me and determines a different set of goals and interests that unite me with others.

This is surely a description of a “community of fate,” a concept developed by Margaret Levi and John Ahlquist that captures the solidarity of labor unions as something more than mutually beneficial reciprocal exchange.¹⁶ Levi and Ugolnik understand this point; they note that although the concept of “community” in “community of fate” has “traditionally suggested boundaries; there are those who are in and those who are out,” it is “also a concept that captures solidarity, mutuality, and interdependence.”¹⁷

Yet now we return to the tension that Gopnik identifies with care: both solidarity and mutuality rest on a set of emotions that are not necessary for reciprocity. Imagine a spectrum that runs from reciprocity to interdependence, thus:

Reciprocity... Mutuality... Solidarity... (Asymmetrical) Interdependence

If we start with the logic of equal exchange, then each position on the spectrum, moving from left to right, might be distinguished by the declining equality of the material exchange that is nevertheless compensated for by an emotional benefit. Thus, an exchange based on mutual interest does not have to be precisely reciprocal, because of the sense of shared destiny (compare with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny”).¹⁸ An exchange based on solidarity is often likely to benefit others more than oneself, which is precisely why the feeling of solidarity is invoked. All of these are levels of interdependence; as Gopnik points out, any form of deeply asymmetrical interdependence would be at the far-right end of this spectrum.

Now consider a spectrum from reciprocity to identity.

Reciprocity... Mutuality... Solidarity... Identity

The variable that is changing here is not relative equality of exchange but rather the degree of separation between the entities doing the exchanging. We move from reciprocity (distinct beings with different goals and interests that can be exchanged), to mutuality (overlapping identity and shared interests), to solidarity (a sensation or emotion of unity), to complete identity, and hence an identity of interests that makes the idea of “exchange” tautological.

The articulation of a moral political economy based on degrees of identity and separation is far beyond the scope of this comment. It would require a different and far more pluralistic understanding of identity, one that could be very useful in an age of essentialist reductions to one political or social identity. We would start from the presumption that human beings are *simultaneously* separate from and connected to others, “social animals” that are nevertheless intentional, boundedly rational, and individuated.¹⁹ We can also imagine ourselves as distinct – individuated? – parts of a larger whole, parts that are defined by our relationship to other parts as we together make up the whole.

Gopnik’s exploration of caregiving is both analytically and practically rich. She provides the basis for a fascinating set of policy proposals, including marriage-like rituals that would help individuals construct their own families based on commitments of care. A policy agenda, as she puts it, “to let love flourish.”²⁰ It is a tantalizing frame that can underpin both conservative and liberal political agendas.

On the material side, a host of questions remain. If Gopnik’s claim that “the very act of care itself engenders the relationships of attachment and love that underpin further care” proves to be right, then how do we insist that humans rather than robots perform those acts?²¹ Alternatively, as I propose, we must find ways for government and private economists to measure the value not only of goods and services, but also of relationships, both positive and negative. An entire research agenda awaits.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Alison Gopnik, “Caregiving in Philosophy, Biology & Political Economy,” *Dædalus* 152 (1) (Winter 2023): 67.
- ² Margaret Levi and Zachary Ugolnik, “Mobilizing in the Interest of Others,” *Dædalus* 152 (1) (Winter 2023): 7–18.
- ³ Gopnik, “Caregiving in Philosophy, Biology & Political Economy,” 58–59.
- ⁴ “Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2021: 39-9011 Childcare Workers,” U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, last modified March 31, 2022, <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes399011.htm> (accessed May 8, 2022); and “Occupational Outlook Handbook: Animal Care and Service Workers,” U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, last modified September 8, 2022, <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/personal-care-and-service/animal-care-and-service-workers.htm> (accessed May 8, 2022).
- ⁵ Anne-Marie Slaughter and Hilary Cottam, “We Need a New Economic Category,” *The Atlantic*, September 23, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/09/new-economy-caregiving/620160>.
- ⁶ Hilary Cottam, *Welfare 5.0: Why We Need a Social Revolution and How to Make it Happen* (London: UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose, 2020), 24, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/public-purpose/sites/public-purpose/files/iipp_welfare-state-5.0-report_hilary-cottam_wp-2020-10_final.pdf. See also Anne-Marie Slaughter, *Renewal: From Crisis to Transformation in Our Lives, Work, and Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2021), 128.
- ⁷ See Anne Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World Is Still the Least Valued* (New York: Picador, 2010); and Madeleine Bunting, *Labours of Love: The Crisis of Care* (London: Granta Publications, 2020).
- ⁸ See Jenna Bednar, “Governance for Human Social Flourishing,” filmed February 2022 for the Dalai Lama Center for Ethics and Transformative Values (Center MIT), YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1zZmVpsYM4Y>; and Jenna Bednar, “Governance for Human Social Flourishing,” *Dædalus* 152 (1) (Winter 2023): 31–45.
- ⁹ James Merisotis, *Human Work in the Age of Smart Machines* (New York: RosettaBooks, 2020), xi.
- ¹⁰ Gopnik, “Caregiving in Philosophy, Biology & Political Economy,” 59.
- ¹¹ Atul Gawande captures this idea in *Being Mortal*, quoting one of the founders of the concept of assisted living, Keren Brown Wilson: “We want autonomy for ourselves and safety for those we love. . . . Many of the things that we want for those we care about are things that we would adamantly oppose for ourselves because they would infringe upon our sense of self.” Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014), 106.
- ¹² Gopnik, “Caregiving in Philosophy, Biology & Political Economy,” 59.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Fritjof Capra, “Living Networks,” in *Network Logic: Who Governs in an Interconnected World?* ed. Helen McCarthy, Paul Miller, and Paul Skidmore (London: Demos, 2004), 26.

¹⁶ John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi, *In the Interests of Others: Organizations and Social Activism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Levi and Ugolnik, "Mobilizing in the Interest of Others," 10.

¹⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," August 16, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, 2, http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf.

¹⁹ Levi and Ugolnik, "Mobilizing in the Interest of Others," 9.

²⁰ Gopnik, "Caregiving in Philosophy, Biology & Political Economy," 64.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 61.