

# What is Care?<sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPT

Talk of care is now everywhere. In the midst of the world-wide Covid-19 pandemic, countries have been tragically reminded of just how vital robust care services are, whilst different forms of taking care—from mutual aid to social distancing and self-isolation—have become the new normal. All around the globe, from New York to London, Athens, and Delhi, people clap every week to demonstrate support for essential care workers.

At least on a rhetorical level, governments worldwide are responding. Even the least likely have rolled out major economic aid packages in the name of care for the nation (although recent analysis shows that these packages are organized mostly to the benefit of the wealthy). India's Hindu-nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi outdid his peers, introducing a welfare package called "PM Cares" as he continues to orchestrate the brutal clampdown on Kashmir and the de-legitimization of Muslim migrant workers.

Although we are hearing so much about care in these unsettling days, care-lessness continues to reign. We have been dramatically reminded of this recently in the UK's government's tragic lack of concern for and protection of elderly residents and staff in care homes. Reports suggest, for instance, that older patients, were released from hospitals back to care homes, without first being tested for Covid-19. This has resulted in the rapid spread of the virus in care homes and the death of well over ten thousand residents as well as many carers. Indeed, we live in a society where neoliberal capitalism, which has unlimited profits as its end goal, has consistently prioritised profit over people whilst relentlessly devaluing any form of care work and pathologizing vulnerability.

This kind of market logic led to the austerity policies that significantly reduced our ability to contain the current pandemic—leaving hospitals without even the personal protective equipment health workers need. In most countries the same billionaire class continues to call the shots whilst entire populations have been effectively abandoned. And what we have every reason to fear is that, in the end, existing leaders will refuse to reverse the evisceration of welfare infrastructures without significant pressure from below.

The Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically—and dreadfully—exposed all of this, highlighting not only the violence perpetrated by neoliberal markets, but also our enduring interdependence, while revealing, as well, that vulnerability and our need for care are part and parcel of the human condition. It has laid bare the horrors of neoliberalism and the profound falsehood of its ideal subject—the self-sufficient entrepreneurial individual. It has also begun a conversation about care.

The current calamity can therefore become a moment of profound rupture. Norms are crumbling, and neoliberalism's complicity in heightening this crisis is crystal clear. Moreover, it is now elementary that to tackle the virulently contagious nature of Covid-19, care and taking care must take priority. This moment thus provides us with a critical opportunity: an opportunity to imagine and create a different world—not just in the immediate future but also in the longer term. If the pandemic has taught us anything so far, it is that we are in urgent need of a politics that puts care front and centre of life.

But how should we understand a politics that prioritises care? What is care?

## Meanings of Care

This, to be sure, is no easy task. After all, care has been historically devalued not least due to its long association with the 'feminine.' Caretaking has been understood as women's work, linked to the domestic sphere and women's centrality in reproduction. In the past decades, neoliberal capitalism has drawn on this longer history of devaluation whilst reshaping and deepening it. The conception of familial space as a sphere of reproduction rather than production has made it easier for caring labour to be routinely and increasingly exploited by the market, whether in its continuing reliance on women's unpaid labour in the home, or through grotesquely underpaying care workers.

Some feminists have therefore called for the 'ungendering' of care and its radical revaluation. Political theorist Joan Tronto has famously written about the possibility of creating a caring democracy. She distinguishes between "caring for", "caring about" and "caring with."

"Caring for" includes the physical aspects of hands-on care, what parents do for their children, doctors do for their patients, or care workers do for toddlers, the elderly or the disabled. "Caring about" describes our more abstract emotional investment in and attachment to others, while, "caring with" is more politically oriented and describes how we express solidarity with others to help transform our world.

These are crucial and useful distinctions. But in the current moment we also need to think beyond them since they do not do justice to all that care encompasses. Nor do Tronto's distinctions take into account the contradictions inherent in care and care taking, since they fail to register adequately the conflicting emotions that are inevitably part of different forms of care. The challenges of care exist even in those often mythologized as the exemplar of care—such as mothering, whereby intense attachment and stifled resentment often co-exist in mothers' relationship toward their children.

Care, like all other human practices and emotions, always fluctuates, and is frequently at odds with other needs and affective states, such as the desire for personal gratification and recognition. Caring (whether for, about, or with) is also often entangled with expressions of guilt or shame over whether care is being done well or even adequately. Indeed, attending fully to the needs and vulnerabilities of any living thing, and thus confronting frailty, is often both challenging and exhausting.

## A Caring Politics

In order to craft a genuinely caring politics, we must therefore first acknowledge the complexities of care: that both our need for care and our practices of care can generate anxiety and ambivalence alongside relief and pleasure. Only once we acknowledge the challenges of our shared dependence as human beings—as well as our vulnerability and irreducible differences—can we fully value the resources necessary to promote the capabilities of everyone. A caring politics, one that recognises the intricacies of human interactions, is also better poised to enhance democratic processes on all levels of society. After all, working with and through ambivalence and contradictory emotions are key to building democratic communities.

Thus, the vision we need is one that advances a model of 'universal care', where care is understood as an enduring social capacity and practice involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of human and non-human life. Care is our individual and common ability to provide the political, social, material, and emotional conditions that allow for the vast majority of people and living creatures on this planet to thrive —along with the planet itself.

Universal care means that we are all jointly responsible for hands-on care work as well as the care work necessary for the maintenance of communities and the planet. It translates into reclaiming all forms of genuinely collective and communal life, adopting alternatives to capitalist markets, and reversing the marketisation of care and care infrastructures. It also means restoring and radically deepening our welfare states, both centrally and locally. And, finally, it means cultivating concern across borders and for distant strangers, whilst mobilising green new deals at the transnational level.

Achieving this vision of universal care is of course as daunting as it is pressing. But in this moment of rupture, we surely have a rare opportunity. We must begin by avowing the ubiquitous ambivalences at the heart of care and caregiving. Then we need to organize wherever we can to ensure that the legacy of Covid-19 is not intensified neoliberal authoritarianism but a new politics, where care—in all of its complexity—is the organising principle on each and every level of society.

The Care Collective:

*Lynne Segal and Catherine Rottenberg are part of the Care Collective, whose forthcoming The Care Manifesto is to be published as an e-book in July. The Care Collective (Andreas Chatzidakis, Jamie Hakim, Jo Littler, Catherine Rottenberg and Lynne Segal) was formed in 2017, originally as a London-based reading group aiming to understand and address the multiple crises of care. Each coming from a different discipline, we have been active both collectively and individually in diverse academic and political contexts.*

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