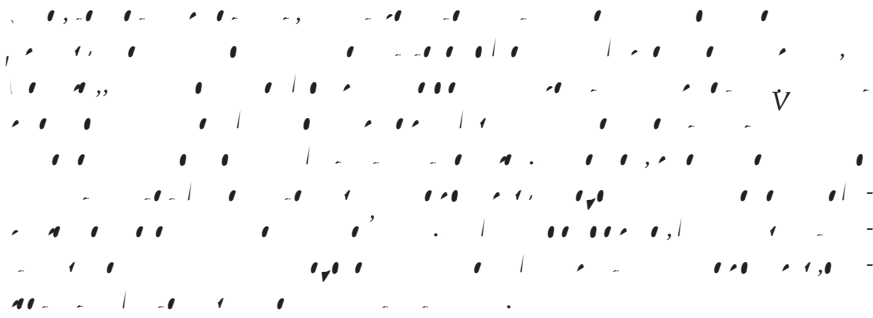


Care Is a Relationship

Anne-Marie Slaughter



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 *Daedalus*.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 *experience* 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 relationship 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 as 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 *homo socius*, a construction that reflects whole human beings, who yearn for connection and who “become who we are in relationship to others.”⁶

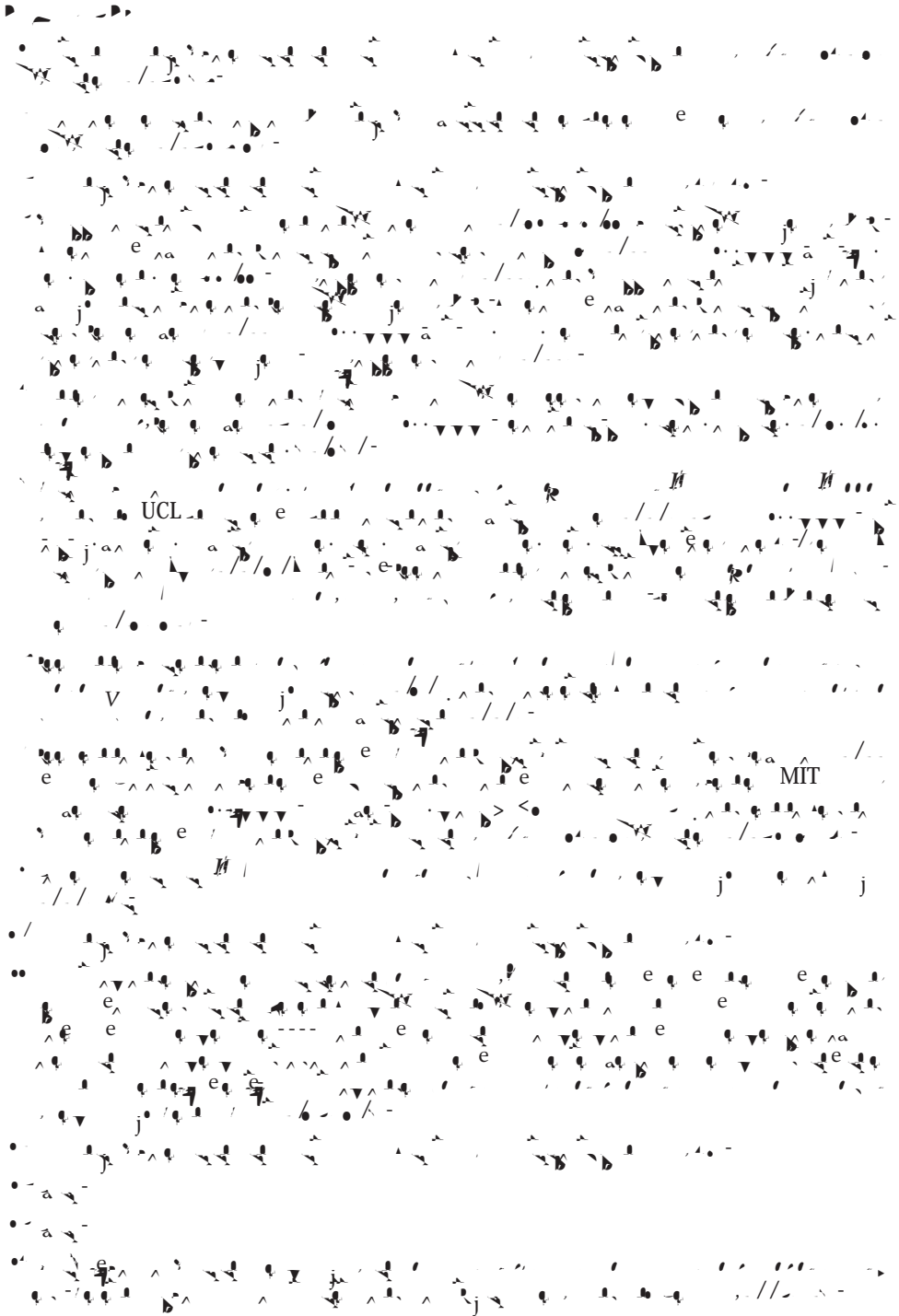
How to value that connection? Here we run into the danger of commodification; care has traditionally been described as a “labor of love” that must be beyond any price.⁷ Yet we know that connections have huge value. What else do platforms like Facebook or LinkedIn enable? The phenomenon of a “network 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 cr

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 / • , separate from and connected to others, “social animals” that are nevertheless intentional, boundedly rational, and individuated.¹⁹



• - - - - -
• e - - - - -
• e - - - - -
• e - - - - -
• e - - - - -
• a - - - - -