

# Economics of Care and Meaningfulness for an International Transdisciplinary Chair

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**Abstract:** *The term ‘care’ was introduced into societal debates in the early 1980s with the writings of Carol Gilligan, Janet Finch and Dulcie Groves, and later Joan Tronto. The notion of care associates an individual and moral disposition (taking an interest in others) with an idea of activity (helping, taking care of others) mobilizing the individual, collective and institutional levels. Such behavior lies outside the paradigm of economics based on the logic of homo oeconomicus. In line with what anthropologists are telling us today, it goes beyond the pursuit of individual interest and calls on the logic of giving and the community dimension of the human being. The economy of care and meaning thus integrates two dimensions that conventional economics ignores. On the one hand, the idea of gift and gratuity, and on the other, the consideration of the common good. The economy of care and meaning, beyond its economic dimension, thus calls, in a transdisciplinary perspective, on other academic fields: sociology, anthropology and political science.*

**Keywords:** care, take care, helping, commons, care economy, economy of care and meaning.

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## 1. The origins and evolution of the CARE economy

It was with the publication of her book, ‘In a different voice’, in 1982,

that American psychologist Carol Gilligan introduced the term CARE into societal and political debates, thereby becoming the catalyst for debates on this issue<sup>1</sup>. For Carol Gilligan, care ‘is defined by a fundamental concern for the well-being of others, and centers moral development on attention to responsibility and the nature of human relationships’. Gilligan has highlighted the existence of a different moral voice, that is, a different way of resolving moral dilemmas, based not on the criteria of law and impartiality as in the ethics of justice, but on relational and contextual criteria.

In 1983, Janet Finch and Dulcie Groves<sup>2</sup> asserted that care constitutes: ‘a combination of feelings, affections and responsibilities accompanied by actions that provide for the needs or well-being of an individual in a face-to-face interaction’. And finally, in 1993, Joan Tronto defined care as ‘a generic activity that includes everything we do to maintain, perpetuate and repair our “world”, so that we can live in it as well as possible’.

This is the definition we wish to adopt, and the importance of transdisciplinarity in this context. For Joan Tronto, there are four moments in care, to which correspond four specific moral qualities: ‘attention (corresponding to caring about), responsibility (corresponding to taking care of), competence (corresponding to care to give), receptivity (corresponding to care receiving)’. Both Philippe Svandra and Agata Zielinski use this classification and add to it as follows: Caring about would be both recognizing the existence of a need and the need to respond to it (‘attention/concern for others’), then taking care of would be taking charge of this identified need by arranging to respond to it in interaction with others (care giving) and finally care receiving would correspond to the adequacy of the response to the beneficiary (‘the fact of taking care of someone or something’). Here we are at the heart of an interdisciplinary approach.

Transdisciplinarity, a term coined by Jean Piaget in 1970, must be mobilized in this case, not because it’s a new buzzword, but because it’s a necessity imposed by advances in our knowledge of the complexity of human phenomena. The notions of multi/pluridisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity are the result of a single movement aimed at linking different disciplines, and has appeared successively in the recent history of science and care practices. Here, I’d like to draw on the definition given by physicist Bassarab Nicolescu (1996): transdisciplinarity can be defined as that which is at once between disciplines, across different disciplines and beyond any discipline. Its purpose is ‘The understanding of the present world, one of whose imperatives is the unity of knowledge’.

This definition is echoed in the University’s Transdisciplinary Evolution project of the Centre International de Recherches et d’Etudes Transdisciplinaires

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<sup>1</sup> Noël-Huroux, Elisabeth. ‘Care: a professional concept with human limits?’ *Nursing Research*, vol. 122, no. 3, 2015, pp. 7–17.

<sup>2</sup> British sociologists, who in 1983 published a collective work entitled *A Labour of Love: Women, Work and Caring*.

(CIRET) in collaboration with UNESCO, which proposes a transdisciplinary method based on ‘three pillars’: addressing several levels of reality at once, adopting the logic of the inclusive third, and apprehending complexity.

To make the link with the notion of transdisciplinarity, we can observe the presence of two indispensable dimensions:

1. an individual, perceptive disposition (paying attention, being concerned about...), which would be the combination of cognitive mobilization and a disposition to be there for others, ‘being in a subjective state of feeling concerned by something’. So, it’s both an attitude and a moral disposition (care about, for). It would be a state.

2. an idea of activity, or even work, oriented towards the human needs necessary for the life of others (caring for, taking care of, helping and accompanying others), ‘providing a concrete response to the needs of others’. We speak of ‘collective’ care activity and work (take care).

The notion of care therefore covers different levels: individual, relational, collective and institutional. It can be understood in terms of relationships, actors, practices and systems. Care has both a private dimension (in the sense of private life) and a public dimension; it is both a desire and a responsibility, and takes the form of paid or unpaid practices, dispensed informally or formally, which leads us to approach it either from the angle of social ties, and in particular family ties, or in terms of institutional analysis, or even the sociology of professions, to take account of the professionalization of care tasks’.

It should also be noted that the terms Cure and Care have a common origin. Their assignment to separate registers was determined by the progress of therapeutic results, which in the twentieth century were based on scientific medicine founded on the basic sciences. In ‘A quel soin se fier?’, edited by Claire Marin and Frédéric Worms, it is recalled that Winnicott, in 1970, invented a dual notion to qualify the philosophy of the medical relationship: care-cure. Winnicott regretted that care had disappeared in favor of a cure, believing that our care systems were organized around technical solutions rather than relationships. The practice of cure always tends to make care disappear. For him, it’s a question of considering that cure professionals must also be able to weave care relationships.

## **2. In this way, they can be part of a meaningful process**

The thinking of 18th and 19th century classical economists such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo and John Stuart Mill are based on two central assumptions about human behavior: the assumption of rationality and the existence of selfish preferences.

Rationality implies that the individual evaluates and chooses actions that best satisfy his preferences. The egoism hypothesis reflects the fact that individuals’ preferences are amoral, in the sense that they do not care about the gains or behaviors of others as long as these have no impact on their level of well-being.

Modern economic science was thus formed by separating man's behavior in economic life from the moral approach, and by considering that man's motivations in his economic decisions are essentially hedonistic and utilitarian in nature. Market relationships are not generally governed by love of neighbor. Adam Smith, for example, advised us not to rely too much on the sympathy of the baker or the butcher to feed us, but rather on their best interests.

The freedom that is supposed to be linked to this concept of individualism is first and foremost individual freedom, and collective freedoms are designed to guarantee this. It is in this context that the individual, assumed to be rational and free in his choices, will try to maximize what is personally useful to him. This is the basis of the logic of *homo oeconomicus*.

But this founding anthropology is by no means universal. Pascal Descola, for example, shows how the relationship between human and non-human, living and non-living, varies according to whether we live in a totemistic, animistic, dualistic or universalist society. And so, we must remember that *homo oeconomicus* is a specifically Western construct that has barely existed for more than two centuries, and that its prodigious worldwide success should not obscure the fact that it is only a point of view limited in time and space.

Other worldviews are also worthy of consideration. Take, for example, the Ubuntu philosophy that inspires many people on the African continent. Its definition is: 'A person is only a person through other people.' As Desmond Tutu, Archbishop of Cape Town and Nobel Peace Prize winner, put it: 'My humanity is intertwined, inextricably linked with yours.' And he added: 'those who are ubuntu take care to walk in the world recognizing the infinite value of all those with whom they come into contact'<sup>3</sup>. It is this human interaction that gives meaning.

Indeed, this philosophy represents the exact opposite of the Cartesian *cogito* ('I think; therefore I am') and Western individualism. The individual cannot be thought of in isolation, independently of what surrounds him: human and non-human. And so, to reach the best of himself, he must be as concerned with the other as with himself. Note that this is not an ethical principle, like Kant's famous Golden Rule ('don't do to others what you wouldn't want done to you'), but an ontological principle relating to the very reality of what it is to be human as a member of a community associating other forms of living beings with human beings. As a result, such a philosophy tends to ruin the dominant economic theory insofar as, to the individualistic utilitarianism of *homo oeconomicus*.

The Economy of Care and Sense substitute interdependence between the members of a community, whose 'good life' is the foundation of its own 'good life'. It is therefore a philosophy that incorporates a transdisciplinary approach and is in line with the principles of care, in that it replaces the search for immediate utility with a focus on individual interest, with a search for the benefits that

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<sup>3</sup> Ngomane, Mungi, *Ubuntu: Je suis car tu es*, Paris, Harper Collins, 2022. Mungi Ngomane is Desmond Tutu's granddaughter. She is actively involved in promoting the Ubuntu philosophy.

will accrue to the human community, directly and indirectly involved in the activity of the company or organization.

The implicit anthropology on which economic theory is based thus tends to modify its epistemological status. At the outset, it was based on a supposedly universal model, as conceived by eighteenth-century philosophers: the individual seeks his or her own interests, and should be given the freedom to do so. Obstacles, such as customs barriers, which merely protect rents at the expense of greater collective efficiency, such as might result from individual initiative, should be removed. This paradigm, which today appears to have nothing to do with universal human behavior, is therefore an ideological principle that tends to perpetuate itself independently of its relationship to reality. As a result, developments in economic thought, insofar as they continue to be based on this initial predicate, have ceased to have a descriptive character, which is the object of science, and have taken on a prescriptive character. It is no longer a question of describing 'what is', but 'what must be', or should be.

Of course, many economists are well aware of the need to escape from this dominant worldview, as it has inspired both liberal and Marxist thought. The resulting deconstruction shows its limited character in relation to the scope of possible human behavior. Human relationships are not limited to material exchanges, and material exchanges themselves are not limited to acts of buying and selling on a market. They are part of a much broader vision of the relationships between human beings, their fellow creatures and the environment, living and non-living, in which they live. And the Western conception of these relationships, as it has managed to impose it through the liberal 'globalization' of recent decades, must be seen as one of the possible modalities of the relationship that human beings have with the world. This is what the Ubuntu philosophy shows, and what the philosophy of care takes up.

As a result, in the light of the economics of Care and Meaning, the dominant economic theory needs to be profoundly rethought with a view to integrating two dimensions that it seems to ignore: the gift and the treatment of the commons:

1. As Marcel Mauss's work on the potlatch shows, beyond self-interested exchanges from the individual, exchanges can take place within the framework of the logic of gift-giving and gift-exchange. In other words, a human society can be structured not by the economic logic of exchange based on immediate utilitarianism, but by the logic of human relationships based on the giving and exchange of gifts between members of the same community or between members of different communities. It is this dimension of social relations, which goes beyond classic economic logic, that needs to be taken into account to legitimize what is commonly referred to as the 'social and solidarity economy'. The SSE therefore lies beyond the scope of mainstream economic thinking, which has itself come to dominate our institutional and legal systems.

2. Mainstream economic thinking is based on an individualistic approach: the individual seeks to maximize the utility he or she can derive from the goods at his or her disposal, for example by investing them in a collective that will itself become a 'legal person', i.e. an entity that will conventionally be considered in the same way as a flesh-and-blood individual. It leaves aside entirely everything that lies beyond the individual good, or is not considered a value because it is taken for granted. Such as air, water or the beauty of landscapes. Faced with the scarcity of such goods, which everyone enjoys free of charge, solidarity is non-existent, with everyone walled in by their own interests. Yet this is a presupposition that is belied by certain behaviors. In the Japanese village community, for example, water from the river is distributed and directed in turn to the various rice fields, after debate between the members of the community, with a view to maximizing its potential use, even if this is to the detriment of the personal interests of individual rice growers. The same applies to the tontines organized by small Chinese traders. Solidarity, even when obliged, takes precedence over individual interest, and it's worth noting that such distribution takes place without any regulatory decision emanating from a higher authority. It's a behaviour that goes without saying, just as it goes without saying for the French farmer to defend his wheat field against any external 'aggression'. The SSE must therefore be seen in the context of the commons as defined by the Danish economist Elinor Ostrom, beyond the model of the homo oeconomicus deaf to anything beyond his immediate interest.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Economy of Care and Meaning expresses, in this spirit of going beyond classical economic theory, a philosophical approach based on solicitude, concern for the other or attention to the other, this other being a human being, a non-human living being or the planet as a whole. It was born in opposition to moral theories inherited from economic analysis, which are based on two central assumptions about human behaviour: the assumption of rationality and the existence of selfish preferences. As we have seen, these founding assumptions lie at the heart of the thinking of classical economists such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill and later Leon Walras, Stanley Jevons and Vilfredo Pareto, and have made it possible to construct the figure of Homo oeconomicus.

We know that this reductionist vision is being challenged, sometimes by the neoclassicals themselves, but above all by economists from the behavioral economics school or the experimental school. As the dictator's game and all its associated works show, under the pen of many behavioral economists, the figure of Homo oeconomicus has become more human, his egoism perhaps less stubborn, his preferences less intangible, his logic less implacable. Experimental results have shown that behavior observed in the laboratory does not correspond to the predictions of academic theory. Even so, the paradigm expressed by homo

oeconomicus has not been completely called into question.

It is through the economics of care that this paradigm is most strongly called into question. Care theory introduces the realm of the sensitive and the affected, and underlines the pre-eminent role of the person and identity. Care nurtures a real political project, which is destined to encounter other social sciences such as sociology, anthropology, political science and ethnology.

But the Care economy is above all action-oriented. As Aristotle and Descartes put it, this is the essential knot that ‘links cognition and passion to action’<sup>4</sup>. It’s an approach that leads to action. In this way, we are close to the work of Amatayakul Supakwadee<sup>5</sup>, who invites us to draw on René Descartes in that he takes the universality of the human condition as the foundation of his thought, while focusing on the rational use of human emotions as a means of achieving a good life – to use the term used in our general introduction. Paradoxically, as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the father of modern rationalism and mind-body dualism, in his last work, *Les Passions de l’âme* (1649), proposed an emotion – ‘generosity’ – as a means of achieving the greatest happiness one can know in a good life.

In line with our previous work, inspired by Aristotle and Descartes, and based on the work of Carol Gilligan, Joan Tronto and Donald Winnicott, we will use the following definition for our reflection: the care economy is a generic activity based on generosity and consideration for others, which gives meaning to actions designed to maintain, perpetuate and repair our world, so that we can live in it as well as possible. These actions, which refer to both Care and Cure, are an ideal field in which to mobilize a transdisciplinary approach.

### **Acknowledgment and conflicts of interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. Any errors or omissions are his own.

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<sup>4</sup> Noël-Hurax, Elisabeth, *op. cit.*, 2015, pp. 7–17.

<sup>5</sup> Amatayakul, Supakwadee. ‘Overcoming emotions, conquering destiny. Reflections on Descartes’ ethics’, *Diogenes*, vol. 237, no. 1, 2012, pp. 109–120.