Why Care: Philosophical Defences[1*]

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This intervention is offered as philosophical support for "The Care Economy Statement" initiated by five distinguished Canadian researchers and activists.[3] They propose that equitably provided care be made a core national and provincial priority in Canadian economic and infrastructural initiatives and planning. Specifically, this includes child, long term, and pharmacare, but also all those structures essential to a caring society including education, housing, and comprehensive health service provision in general. The Statement is largely devoted to the urgency and realism of care from the point of view of political economy. It assumes that Canadians in general and political leaders in particular *ought* to care.

Here is a place where philosophers can make a contribution to this vital project, namely by providing arguments for why, from the standpoint of professional ethics, everyone should care about these matters. In the background of this undertaking is the observation of feminist scholars, spearheaded by Carol Gilligan in her seminal *In A Different Voice* that in our patriarchal societies the actual delivery of care, for instance, for the young and the aged, has fallen mainly to women.[4] If care is not to be thus personalized and confined,[5] then philosophical as well as political and economic arguments for making care a general social priority are called for. Perhaps a unique "ethics of care," as in the work of Nel Noddings[6] or Virginia Held,[7] is in order, but it is also possible to appeal to some traditional theories of philosophical ethics. In the rest of this contribution three of these are summarized.

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Why Care I: The Vulnerable

An approach focused on vulnerability is encapsulated in a time-honoured adage as recently expressed, for example, by Musa Ansumana Soko of the Civil Society Platform based in Sierra Leone with specific reference to responses to the COVID-19 epidemic: "A society is only as strong as its most vulnerable members."[8] Sometimes attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, but antecedently invoked by Thomas Jefferson and subsequently by people as diverse as Pope John II, Winston Churchill, Christian Bay, and even Hubert Humphrey, the adage is summarized by Humphrey in a way that well describes concerns of the Care Statement:

> [T]he moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped.[9]

This mandate clearly supports the Care Statement's prescriptions with respect to those most acutely and immediately vulnerable, the sick or disabled, addicts, the homeless, etc. This is the category that those who endorse the adage likely have in mind, but in the absence of strong social services and infrastructures everyone except, perhaps, for the very rich is also critically vulnerable.

The vulnerability principle implicates contested ethical theories. Putting it in terms of freedom and human rights and maintaining that "a society is as free as its underdogs are,"[10] Bay counterposes attending to the most vulnerable as a priority to the Utilitarian approach of Jeremy Bentham that favours maximation of the happiness of all a society's members (ascertained for him by adding all their individual pleasures and subtracting their pains). He notes that the vulnerability principle violates another Utilitarian tenet advanced by Bentham and summarized by John Stuart Mill, that "everybody [is to] count for one, nobody for more than one."[11] This specification certainly has appeal in its use by Bentham to counter the opinion that some people's happiness is more important than that of others by virtue of their birth or socioeconomic status, but it can also work against a primary-care-for-the-vulnerable standard since one constituency (the vulnerable) is

singled out from among the aggregate of an entire population for special treatment. Moreover, if the vulnerable and those who favour making them a priority are in a minority, then there is a democratic problem, since the preferences of a majority might be overridden.

Reactions to this objection that stay within the realm of abstract philosophy maintain that the needs of some, even if in a minority, ought, as a matter of morality, to guide public policy. As Bay puts it: “the extension of the more basic human rights to the last few individuals takes precedence over the extension of less basic rights to much larger numbers of individuals,” and his own favoured principle appeals to elementary needs as for sustenance, health, and security.[12] He thus appeals to a needs-based ethics, for example as explicated by Susan Clark Miller.[13] Alternatively, most theories of justice mandate equality at least of opportunity but in more vigourous forms of all benefits and burdens. John Rawls’ approach to justice allows inequalities as long as they improve “the expectations of the least advantaged members of society,” among whom are the most immediately vulnerable.[14] Or, remaining consistent with Utilitarianism, there is Mill’s modification that the “essentials of human well-being” are “vastly more important” than “the mere idea of promoting human pleasure or convenience.”[15]

So proponents of the care standard might appeal to a vulnerability principle on any of several interpretations. However, just making this appeal does not by itself meet objections to it in existing circumstances. For this purpose, one must descend from abstract philosophy to examine these circumstances. Indeed, this is true of any attempt to apply an ethical theory. For example, Rawls’ principle that inequalities must be to the advantage of the worst off can be used to defend trickle-down economics, such that the inequalities attendant on free market, competitive capitalism are supposed to be offset for the worst off by society-wide economic productivity. Philosophy alone cannot ascertain whether this is an accurate prediction. In my view this neoliberal claim can

be discarded given a dearth of evidence that trickle-down economics has worked to the advantage of any but the already well-off.

A much stronger case can be made that investment in care has "trickle-up" effects that benefit a society a whole. Affordable childcare frees people (mainly women) to hold (taxable) income-gaining employment. Adequate pharmacare is essential for preventing more costly health investments. Authors of the Care Statement challenge as false the assumption that "Care issues are not like the crucial sectors that require government support because they drive the economy," and they point out that instead:

> Health care and education alone, at 12.3% of GDP, contribute more to the economy than other major sectors, such as manufacturing, oil and gas, and mining. The care sector is also labour intensive and accounts for at least 21% of all paid labour.[16]

Their conclusion is substantiated by several studies, e.g., by Jérôme De Henau and Susan Himmelweit,[17] and we have seen how inadequate investment in health care and long-term care facilities has contributed to the spread of the COVID-19 virus. These and other examples indicate that over and above the moral claims that the most vulnerable have, meeting these claims is also to the benefit of society as a whole. The paramount question that Jean-Jacques Rousseau put of whether and how morality and self-interest can be simultaneously served is answered in the case of care.[18]

Why Care II: Trusteeship

A dimension of any ethical support for the Care Statement's exhortations is that people should regard themselves as trustees of the resources required for general social wellbeing, as opposed to their private owners or exclusive exploiters. Central to this perspective is the idea, argued for by C.B. Macpherson, that private property is not sacrosanct. In contrast to property thought of as a right "to exclude others from the use or benefit of something," "common property," which includes

the resources of concern to the Care Statement, “is the guarantee that people will not be thus excluded.”[19] Supporting this perspective, Macpherson observes that most things considered property are not the sole product of an individual’s efforts but result from histories of social labour. Support is also provided by another noted Canadian theorist, Charles Taylor, who, against an “atomistic” view of society, argues that “the community is not simply an aggregation of individuals” but is “constitutive of the individual.”[20]

These communal aspects of individuals make plausible the idea that they are trustees of resources vital for their communities as a whole. The further view that everyone *ought* to assume the role of trusteeship can be expressed in terms of a social contract. Thus a U.K.-based commission composed of activists, care practitioners, and some progressive politicians, describes as the leading principle of a “generational contract” that:

> … different generations provide support to each other across the different stages of their lives. Just as this contract underpins what we do as families, it is fundamental to society as a whole and to the role of government. From education for the young, to extra financial help for those bringing up children, to healthcare and a pension for the old, the generational contract has long defined what the welfare state does.[21]

Endorsement of this conclusion by philosophers is most extensively found in arguments that people have moral obligations to future generations. To this end some philosophers appeal to social contract theory itself, others to Utilitarianism. Support might also be drawn, I think, from Thomas Aquinas’s appeal to Natural Law or the universalist ethics of Immanuel Kant usually counterposed to Utilitarianism. Rather than engaging the large body of literature about these possible defences, an approach drawn from the social-philosophical position of Communitarianism will be summarized here.

Communitarians all start with the view that the communities where people live and work are constitutive of their values, aspirations and senses of themselves, and this premise is extended by some philosophers to the future, as to the past:

> [T]he constitutive community extends over several generations and into the future…. Just as many people think of the past as part of what constitutes their "selves," they do and should regard the future as parts of their "selves." These are the relations that form the transgenerational community, which is the source of our obligations to future generations.[22] – Avner De-Shalit

This perspective is meant to justify the idea of people having obligations to those in the future (as in protecting the environment), to the past (in redressing historical wrongs), and it obviously can be applied to those in the present as well. Regarding the future, a dramatic example of trusteeship can be seen in Aboriginal traditions, for example of the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk), who include in their Councils people charged with representing the wellbeing of the seventh generation hence: The perspective has implications for individuals:

> By acting for the future, the individual is given the chance to see himself as an element in a chain of generations held together by an intergenerational feeling of community, which combines obligations in the direction of the future with feelings of gratitude in the direction of the past.[23] – Dieter Birnbacher

And for societies as a whole:

> Intergenerational relationships, and the obligations and entitlements that go with them, are central to the moral fabric of a political society. A nation … in essence, is a transgenerational polity: a society in which the generations are bound together in relationships of obligation and entitlement.[24] – Jana Thompson

To put this perspective in terms of the question of why people ought to act as trustees for the provision of care, the claim is that people who recognize that they and those who stand in need of care are part of an intimately interconnected community will see themselves as being part of this community which requires their collaboration to protect and better it.

This raises the question of whether and how people will in fact assume this role. It is one thing to draw from the thesis that people are connected and that therefore they will recognize that they have obligations to each other, and another thing realistically to expect that they will take on the obligations. Birnbacher addresses what he calls this "motivation question" and gives some reasons for hope. One is that "giving meaning to one's life by embedding it in a transgenerational

context of solidarity" overcomes oppressive feelings of alienation accompanying atomistic attitudes and comportment. He also emphasizes the importance of education and the motivations that can be encouraged by laws and public policies mandating care.[25] The motivation question is also addressed in the work of some environmental philosophers and in particular by Vandana Shiva in her *Earth Democracy*.

Drawing on Buddhist sources, she echoes the future generation philosophers by basing her perspective on the premise that people are "connected to the world as a whole and, in fact, to the entire universe," and by "bonds of compassion and solidarity."[26] The task of educating people to this perspective is largely a cultural one, not just in formal education, but in any venue where people's values are affected (such as the arts), by the examples of ecological, conservationist and other social movements, and by drawing people into these movements. Promulgation of practices and institutions destructive of community and resistance to them have cultural, political, and economic dimensions, and successful undertakings of resistance in each of these, prominently and initially at local levels, has the potential to expand public support for an ethics of Earth Democracy.

Regarding politics, this means securing venues for citizen participation instead of exclusive reliance on (at best paternalistic and at worst corrupted) representatives.[27] In the realm of economics, it means campaigns in general against the enclosure of the commons that favour private property, including intellectual property, and an economy dedicated to economic growth. Shiva argues that "the economy, politics, and culture are not isolated from one another" but constitute "a synergistic process."[28] So popular gains in one domain can stimulate gains in the others.

This perspective is in accord with another view of Macpherson's pertinent to the motivation question. Shiva's contrast between a culture of "greed, inequality, and overconsumption" and one of "compassion, justice, and sustainability"[29] mirrors that of Macpherson's between "possessive individualism" and a culture of the equitable and cooperative provision of resources for everyone

to develop their truly human potentials.[30] Macpherson allows that in a society geared to consumerism and competition for profits or jobs, where resources are inequitably distributed, people will act in possessive-individualist ways, but he sees this not as essential to human nature but as prompted *in default* of realistic conditions for humanistic comportment:

> [I]t is only scarcity and the extractive market situations that have made people behave atomistically; and … in the measure that scarcity and extractive relations are removed people will cease to act atomistically.[31]

Why Care III: Virtuous Citizenship

In the best state, Aristotle maintains, a citizen "is one who is able and willing to be governed and to govern with a view to the life of virtue."[32] Citizenship for him is an active matter where citizens willingly support government (if it is in accord with the virtues) and actively engage in governance. Citizenship thus conceived stands in contrast to situations where citizens are indifferent or even hostile to governments. In 21st century terms it differs both from neoliberal and religious fundamentalist stances where people primarily wish be left alone, especially by the state, to pursue their personal interests. As to the virtues that bind citizens, Aristotle appeals to ones traditionally recognized in his time that included truthfulness, justice, and benevolence. The virtuous citizen is to be distinguished from one mainly seeking fame, fortune, or power and is the opposite of someone in the grips of *pleonexia,* that is, an insatiable desire for possessions.[33]

Aristotle does not provide a foundational argument for his theory of citizenship similar to ones given by Utilitarians or Social Contract theorists for their key theories. Rather he thinks that most in his society will endorse the virtues, and the question to address is not whether it is a morally good thing to act virtuously but to determine what, in particular circumstances, acting in virtuous ways requires. The Care Statement can be read as specifying paramount requirements. Aristotle also does not engage the "motivation question" except to maintain that a life of virtue is integral

to a life of happiness, where this means developing one's potentials to the fullest in a virtuous way.[34] As some virtue theorists argue, a life of virtue is a life of satisfying individual "flourishing" where, to paraphrase the Stoic theorist, Marcus Aurelius, virtue is its own reward.[35]

While the virtues for Aristotle serve public goods, he devotes little attention to discussing the nature of a public itself. For this one can turn to John Dewey, who (like Macpherson and several more recent philosophers, including Martha Nussbaum and Armatya Sen) acknowledges a debt to Aristotle's notion of happiness as the virtuous development of people's capacities. In his *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey describes a public as any constellation of people whose actions affect one another in an ongoing way and who confront problems that call for and can only be addressed collectively. This includes small groups but also ones as large as cities, provinces, or nations.[36]

Some of the problems publics confront are local and temporary but some are persisting and society-wide including attending to the vulnerable and providing adequate social and economic structures. An overriding challenge for Dewey is for people to become aware of themselves as members of a public who, whatever differing particular interests and values they may have, must cooperate in addressing such basic problems. Like Aristotle he sees robust public education as vital, as is virtuous leadership both by elected officials and in civil society. The task is facilitated because the problems people confront are real ones with evident and important effects on all their lives.

It will help to explicate this perspective by contrasting it with an approach to public goods in the currently popular tradition of Social Choice Theory. In this tradition people are seen as calculating the best way to further their individual, self-interested concerns. On this theory many recognize that some problems call for social cooperation; however, no one rational individual will

be motivated to engage in such cooperation, since he or she can profit from the endeavours of others without having to exert any effort, that is, by being a "free rider."

No doubt this is sometimes an impediment to collective action, but that it is overblown by the Rational Choice theorists is indicated by its dubious application to their favourite example, voting, where it is thought rational for an individual to profit from the continuing durability of democracy that people vote without personally voting. In addition to these theorists getting tangled up in the logic of this concern,[37] they suppose irrationality on the part of an enormous number of one's fellow citizens.[38]

For Dewey, the Social Choice orientation depends on seeing individuals as standing outside of democratic processes looking to see how they can profit from them instead of being participating members of a democratic community. From this latter standpoint:

> Wherever there is conjoint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who take part in it, and where the realization of the good is such as to effect an energetic desire and effort to sustain it in being just because it is a good shared by all, there is in so far a community. The clear consciousness of communal life … constitutes the idea of democracy.[39]

Adopting community-focused attitudes is not always or easily achieved for Dewey. The perception that the self-centred alternative is the natural condition is "derived from observation of a relatively small group of shrewd businessmen who regulated their enterprises by calculation and accounting…"[40] But this is not the only source of people's values. Inculcation of contrary, cooperative habits of social interaction can be nurtured in the very process of confronting common problems that have both social and personal consequences. One way to put this claim to the test would be to implement the recommendations of the Care Statement, the advantages of which should be apparent to anyone who has been young (and to any parent), who is or will be old, or who needs or might need education or medical care.

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Not only does each of these approaches to philosophical ethics demonstrate that some consideration be paid to the needs addressed in the Care Statement, but each also justifies meeting them as major social, political, and economic tasks. It is maintained by Mill and some other Utilitarians that vital needs are of "vast" proportions compared to ordinary "human pleasure or convenience." For those confronting acute care challenges (at some points in their lives virtually everybody) extraordinary exercise of caring trusteeship is called for. Because caring for the aged and the young, attending to public health, combatting poverty and homelessness, and caring for the disabled are persisting and society-wide problems that in one way or another affect everyone, addressing them should be seen by a society's citizens as a major priority.

At abstract levels and with respect to some applications there are conflicts among the philosophical orientations, but regarding the "Why Care" question as put forth in the Statement they supplement and reinforce one another. Gearing policies to care for the most vulnerable throws into relief one of the most pressing problems for a society's citizens collectively to address. The atomism and fixation on private property inimical to trusteeship, in addition to being an obstacle to assuming transgenerational and society-wide obligations, inhibits community-embedded citizenship and attending to the needs of the most vulnerable.

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Notes

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[2] Emeritus Professor of Philosophy and Political Science, University of Toronto. Formerly President of the Canadian Philosophical Association, Chair of the University of Toronto's Philosophy Department, and Interim Director of its Centre for Ethics.

[3] Initiated by Pat Armstrong, Marjorie Griffin Cohen, Laurell Ritchie, Leah F. Vosko and Armine Yalnizyan. The Care Economy Initiative Team, "The Care Economy Statement," The Care Economy, 2021, https://thecareeconomy.ca/.

[4] Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009 [1982]).

[5] Contrary to those who appeal to Gilligan's work to conclude that caring is an exclusively female concern, she makes it clear from the beginning of her book that the association of an ethics of care with sensitivities and activities of women "is not absolute, and the contrasts between male and female voices are presented here to highlight a distinction between two modes of thought and to focus a problem of interpretation rather than to represent a generalization about either sex." Gilligan, 2.

[6] Nel Noddings, *A Feminist Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[7] Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[8] "A Society is Only as Strong as its Most Vulnerable Members," Secretariat of the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS), CSPPS 2021, https://cspps.org/only-as-strong-as-most-vulnerable.

[9] Hubert Humphrey, from speech at dedication of Hubert H. Humphrey Building, Washington, D.C., 1 Nov. 1977, AZ Quotes, 2021, https://www.azquotes.com/author/7042-Hubert_H_Humphrey. 2021 [1976].

[10] Christian Bay, *The Structure of Freedom,* 2nd ed. (New York: Stanford University Press, 1965), 7.

[11] John Stuart Mill, "Utilitarianism," in *Utilitarianism, Liberty, and Representative Government* (New York: Dutton, 1951 [1863], 77).

[12] Bay, *Structure of Freedom*, 7.

[13] Sarah Clark Miller, *The Ethics of Need* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

[14] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1971), 71.

[15] Mill, "Utilitarianism," 80.

[16] Care Economy.

[17] Jérôme De Henau and Susan Himmelweit, "A Care-Led Recovery from Covid-19: Investing in High-Quality Care to Stimulate and Rebalance the Economy," *Feminist Economics* (01 March 2021): https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13545701.2020.1845390.

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[18] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "The Social Contract," in *The Social Contract and the Discourses (*London: Everyman's Library, 1973 [1762]), 181.

[19] C.B. Macpherson, ed., "Introductory essay," *The Meaning of Property* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 5.

[20] Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 27.

[21] The Intergenerational Commission, *A New Generational Contract: The Final Report of the Intergenerational Commission Resolution Foundation* (Resolution Foundation, 2018), 9.

[22] Avner De-Shalit, *Why Posterity Matters: Environmental policies and future generations* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 15-16.

[23] Dieter Birnbacher, "What Motivates Us to Care for the (Distant) Future," in *Intergenerational* Justice, eds. Axel Gosseries and Lukas H. Meyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 291.

[24] Jana Thompson, "Identity and Obligation in a Transgenerational Polity," in *Intergenerational* Justice, eds. Axel Gosseries and Lukas H. Meyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 25.

[25] Birnbacher "What Motivates Us," 291.

[26] Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Democracy, and Peace* (Berkeley: New Atlantis Books, 2015), 10.

[27] Shiva, *Earth Democracy*, chapter 2.

[28] Shiva, 3-5.

[29] Shiva, 10.

[30] C.B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012 [1973]).

[31] C.B. Macpherson, "Individualist Socialism? A Reply to Levine and MacIntyre," in *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 6(2) 1976: 199. For a discussion of other treatments of the "motivation question" by Macpherson see my *The Political Thought of C.B. Macpherson* (New York: Palgrave, 2019), 79-80.

[32] Aristotle, *Politics* (c.350BCE), 3.13.1283-4.

[33] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* (c350BCE) 5.1.1129.

[34] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* (c350BCE), 5.1.1098.

[35] Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (170-180 AD), 11.4.

[36] John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1927).

[37] Calculating that I can profit from others voting without voting myself but thinking that others are also rational calculators who will think the same way and thus abstain from voting, it becomes rational for me to vote after all. However, my equally rational co-citizens might reason in just the same way and decide also to vote; so again, it is rational for me not to, and so on in an endless loop. Hence, what was called a problem now becomes a paradox.

[38] In Canada voter turnout has been over 17 million people or between 60% and 70% of eligible voters in recent federal elections. While it may be tempting to think of many in such a large number as lacking sophisticated critical thinking skills (these pertain to the content of how people vote), it is a stretch to think of all of them as lacking the mundane reasoning ability, on a par with that involved in walking a dog or safely crossing a street, to see some connection, however slight, between voting and contributing to an election.

[39] Dewey, *The Public*, 149.

[40] Dewey, 158.