

# A road not taken? A brief history of care in economic thought

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In this paper, we trace and analyze the disparate and fragmented economic approaches to care. ‘Approaches’ may be endowing too much in the way of acknowledgment, as we believe that economists of all sorts – with the exception of feminist contributions – have either overlooked or failed to appreciate the centrality of care to human existence. As Julie Nelson (2016: 12) argues, “The place of care in the economy is everywhere.”

We believe that charting the history of care in economic thought is important as it serves at least two purposes: first, that prominent figures in a more political economy tradition at least acknowledged care as a feature of economic life. Second, with the emergence of what is now mainstream economics, care was (and is) marginalized in the conceptualization of human behavior.

Perhaps as a consequence of the mechanical modelling associated with mainstream economics (Nelson, 2016), at best, care is marginalized in economic thinking. This makes tracing a history of care in economic thought challenging. Nonetheless, it is possible to locate to varying degrees a recognition of the conditions of care in the works of Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and Thorstein Veblen. Thereafter, however, the trail becomes increasingly faint, reflecting, we venture the change in core and periphery elements in economics following the emergence and subsequent domination of thinking shaped by the utility maximizing atomistic individual.

Care is an ambiguous concept with at least five broad meanings for the noun “care” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Davis and McMaster, 2017). The literature on care frequently refers to the broad definition provided by Fisher and Tronto in 1990:

“On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as *a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible*. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex life-sustaining web” (Fisher and Tronto, 1990: 40; Tronto, 2013: 19, original emphasis).

In subsequent works, Tronto (2013, 2017) defends the breadth of the definition, arguing that it provides an overarching frame within which specific forms of care may be nested. In short, care is essential to the functioning of society and our being-in-the-world (Engster, 2005). Attentive interest, concern, as well as subsequent activities and actions following such attention are all manifestations of care and caring. For much of the literature, care is profoundly relational (Tronto, 2013). It has psychological (through emotional attachments and motivations), labor (through the functional delivery of care activities), and philosophical (through ethical considerations) properties (Engster, 2005; Tronto, 2013).

There is much discussion in the care literature that it presents a contrasting ethical orientation to Kantian deontology, and consequentialism and utilitarianism (for example, Engster, 2005; Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006; Tronto, 2013). Held (2006: 10) describes a care ethics as, “the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility.” Importantly, for Held, and in sharp contrast to deontology and consequentialism, an ethics of care, “values emotion rather than rejects it (*Ibid.*)”. Emotions, such as sympathy, empathy, responsiveness, and sensitivity are viewed as central to an authentic caring. This view aligns with Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments (TMS)* (Petit, forthcoming; Terjesen, 2011), and therefore invites analysis of care in economic thinking.

In our view, outlining a history of care in economic thought illuminates the possibility of a platform for the development of a coherent conceptualization of care in economics. We consider this a matter of some importance given that care theorists and some economists – primarily feminist economists – argue that a caring approach would yield a different configuration of economic institutions (Tronto, 2013; 2017). It also reveals the inherent problems for some types of economics to take care seriously (Davis and McMaster, 2017; Petit, forthcoming).

In section 2, we investigate care in pre-neoclassical economic thought; specifically, the approaches of Smith, Marx, and Veblen. We find that Smith attempted to study care most directly. Of the three, Smith furnished the most comprehensive examination of care as instinctive and as a learned other-regarding, virtuous behavior bound up with affection and sympathy. Smith, Marx, and Veblen provide an analysis of the conditions of care and caring, but disappointingly, given his humanist background, Marx’s work is arguably the least developed in this area. To the best of our knowledge, other prominent figures in the history of economics, such as Keynes, were not overly preoccupied with developing a conception of care, given its perceived lack of relevance to the focus of their work. This may have some bearing on the failure of non-mainstream economics, beyond feminist economics, to appreciate care.

In sections 3, 4, and 5, we turn to more recent economic contributions. In section 3, we outline mainstream treatments of care, especially focusing on the health economics literature, which arguably is the applied field most obviously associated with care and caring. In her contrastive analysis of the economic modelling of care, van Staveren (2005) observes that the standard approach treats care in different ways. Some models include “care” as a time allocation decision variable in the supply of labor, usually between paid labor, unpaid labor, as proxy for care, and leisure. Care is also modelled as a category of leisure. Such models endogenize care by assigning a price vector, such that care therefore assumes an opportunity cost. Thus, as with any other standard commodity, care is a declining function of price. Its responsiveness to price changes may then be modelled as a means of investigating gender labor market issues, such as wage-gaps.

In our view, the field of applied economics most closely associated with care is health economics. In Davis and McMaster (2015; 2017), we argue that standard health economics is no different from the rest of the mainstream in effectively marginalizing care. However, where care does feature in standard analyses, either explicitly or by implication, it is treated in two overlapping ways: as altruism and/or social capital. In effect, care is modelled as interdependent utility functions between at least two economic agents: it is an externality. Yet, the notion of a ‘caring externality’ is problematic in that the spillover is not on a third-party, as in the usual understanding of an externality, but to one of the parties to the caring exchange. If care providers gain utility when their care recipients gain utility, does their care for those individuals constitute something over and above the activities provided?

Section 4 examines Kenneth Boulding’s (1973) systems analysis. We find that Boulding’s work provides important foundations for the interrogation of care, but we argue that Boulding

fails to develop an explicit narrative on care. From here, section 5 considers arguments about the nature of care that are close to ours that were made earlier by feminist economists and social scientists, who have long objected to market-based representations of care, and who have also worked with a relational, socially embedded understanding of care. Those areas of standard economics that attempt to model care, such as health economics, reduce it to an argument in an interdependent utility function. In doing so, care has the moral equivalence of any commodity. This may render modelling easier in tracing utility maximizing individuals' choice sets but generates questionable ethical issues. Is care really equivalent to a commodity?

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