

A broken system of care



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It allows societies to thrive."*

— Joan Tronto

CARING, FOR JUSTICE

Whoever you are and whatever you do, says Joan Tronto, chances are you're being cheated. No matter how pleased you are with life, you're almost certainly not getting what you deserve. What does Tronto think you're missing? Your fair share of the experience of care—giving it and getting it.

This may seem a small matter, something on which you can take a pass without much fuss. But Tronto, a professor in the Department of Political Science, thinks opting out of either end of the care equation creates a world of trouble.

Tronto has spent much of her career writing about care—and she's nowhere near finished. In her view, care isn't a sentimental concept. It's a political one. Neither does she see it as an optional or peripheral human enterprise. It's a mainstay of existence, a requirement of the unspoken pact that enables societies to thrive.

Tronto's definition of care might surprise you: "It's everything we do to continually maintain and repair the world," she says, "so we can live in it as well as possible." That world, as Tronto sees it, "includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment."

This explains why trying to duck out of the care pact is such a mistake. For starters, receiving care isn't an optional experience: it's something we do for ourselves every day, when we can. The rest of the time—at the beginning of life, at its end and at many points in between—the care we need is provided by others.

Once we look at care from the perspective of recipients, it becomes pretty clear that shrugging off the duty to help give care just isn't fair. Yet many people do just that. In this society, Tronto

points out, merely being male can get you a pass out of caring responsibilities. And many buy their way out by hiring proxy caregivers to tend to children, elders, and others who need care. The price of this purchase is far less than the service is actually worth. "If you were made to pay its true value," Tronto says, "you couldn't possibly afford it."

The clamor to avoid caregiving, and the refusal to pay caregivers well enough, destabilize the entire system. "It assures an unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities that hurts everyone," Tronto says. "It has a bad effect on people who have to care too much and on those who care too little."

How, exactly? For the "free-riders," Tronto explains, it means missing out on the joys of caregiving and quite possibly on a fully developed capacity for intimacy. For those who must pick up the caregiving slack, she says, it means unbearable strain.

And for those who need care from others—a group that may include your kids or parents and that most of us will join sooner or later—this disequilibrium poses palpable danger: When too few caregivers must do too much for too little pay, the work of care may be dispensed inattentively, perfunctorily, resentfully, and sometimes not at all.

"Everyone realizes now that the care system we have is broken," says Tronto. "It's made up of patchworks of daycare for children and nursing care for elderly people. The workers aren't paid enough and can't do their work well. It just doesn't function." Given the lowly status of care, the poor are more likely to end up as caregivers, increasing the distance between them and those who are able to pay for their services.

Why hasn't this shambles of a care system been fixed? Tronto answers without a pause: "Politics has always involved activities beyond the realm of care, of the household, of the family. All that is considered beneath politics, really. And in this society, care comes after almost everything else. It's a result of our preoccupation with economic life: we measure too much only in money."

All of this could change, she says. In the end, all that's necessary is sufficient public resolve and an emphatic public voice. But how does a society even begin to solve a problem so vast?

Tronto has some starting points in mind. "There are two things we need to think about," she says. "The first is time. On average, Americans employed full time work 50-plus hours per week. That's too much. So the first thing we have to do is organize time so all people would be free to do care work." Tronto figures a 20-hour work week would be about right.

"That would mean we'd have to spend more of our resources on caring and on paying care workers more." Tronto grants. "We wouldn't be able to buy as much stuff as we do now. But stuff is really a substitute for care. People buy stuff to show care, but it doesn't work."

But changing the American work schedule won't be enough. "If all we do is give people more time," Tronto says, "men will spend more time in leisure activities and women will do more care." What's needed, she says, is a change in how men and women think about care.

Policy change is daunting enough, but how do we adjust attitudes? "You begin by talking it," she says. "You call attention to the fact that men and women both have responsibilities for care."

And the government can help, Tronto says, citing Sweden's move to encourage shared caregiving through its parenting-leave regulations. "If the father doesn't take parenting time," she explains, "the mother doesn't get as much time as she otherwise would." Changes in law often prompt changes in how people think.

It's an ambitious vision, but not an outlandish one. "This is a reform that would benefit everyone," Tronto says. "Such changes happen very slowly. But they happen." ∞

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