

Maria Puig de la Bellacasa

Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds

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In the past few years, there has been a renewed interest by feminists in what have traditionally been known as "feminine" ethical concepts such as vulnerability, responsibility, and care. This has accompanied what some have called the "ethical turn." Although it has taken different shapes in different disciplines, the ethical turn refers at least in part to the increasingly central place of ethics in society—the institutionalization and normalization of ethics, from corporate ethics to Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)—in a way that reinforces rather than challenges established orders. That is, ethics is often spoken of and enacted at the expense of politics—it is used as a tool of depoliticization, replacing social and political justice, often by a focus on the individual and the private. But the ethical turn has also referred to a concern to lay out or reclaim more radical ethico-political projects, and to develop new ways of thinking about and understanding them. In this sense, the intensified focus on the ethical can go both ways.

Much of the renewed feminist concern with vulnerability, for instance, takes the second path, reinterpreting the concept. In her recent work, Judith Butler has separated vulnerability from passivity and rearticulated it in such a way that it is inherent to political action; one cannot be politically active without actually understanding one's vulnerability in the world—particularly one's collective material dependency on infrastructures (Butler 2016). Carolyn Dean separates political action from the autonomous, dignified male subject; instead, she insists that vulnerability and fragility need not be abject or unsightly, and power and powerlessness need not be incommensurable (Dean 2015). Both authors try to reinstitute a different, feminist-inspired political subject, one that is embodied and admits to its connectedness and interdependence with other living beings.

Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's new book, *Matters of Care*, goes down this second path: it reclaims and repurposes the concept of care. Indeed, one of the most compelling claims of this creative, dense, and powerful book is that care, as a practice of the everyday and uneventful, can in fact be

a radically transformative political project. Despite critiques of care as associated with essentialist notions of femininity, or as neoliberal strategy (as in care for the self by way of Big Pharma, or care for the environment by buying green products)—that is, despite the entanglements of care with hegemonic politics, ethics, and economies—Puig de la Bellacasa insists that care is too important to give up. Not unlike the ethics of care literature that transformed debates about justice in the 1980s by rethinking the relationships between justice and care, Puig de la Bellacasa works to transform the meaning of care into a revolutionary set of actions based on the continued maintenance and repair of our worlds, broadening the frame beyond the human, to the scale and temporality of the ecological. For this, she relies on Joan Tronto's idea of care as part of a life-sustaining web, and lays out her understanding in a triptych form, joining together an affective state, a form of practice (what she calls a "material vital doing"), and an ethico-political obligation. This review explores the reclaiming of care: how it works, the ideas it challenges, and to what ends. We also try to think with the book, as it invites its readers to do, taking its contributions into more empirical terrain, and raising related questions.

First, unlike the ethics of care literature, *Matters of Care* is not a normative ethical project—it calls itself a speculative one. What does this mean? Puig de la Bellacasa wants to avoid normative exhortations about care, because such appeals risk falling into the now well-known traps of moralism and essentialism—arguments that care MUST be a certain way lead down this path. An attention to the concrete nature of each situation precludes normative ideas about care, and how it should look, or be practiced; it avoids ready-made explanations or blueprints. Instead, then, for Puig de la Bellacasa, care is more of a provocation. It is speculative: open-ended, nonnormative, and situated. Indeed, with this approach, Puig de la Bellacasa joins a broader move toward speculative thinking, with the goal of imagining other possible worlds.—We can think of speculative fiction, like that of Margaret Atwood, who calls her novels "social science fiction" and works with elements of the present, to imagine things "that could really happen." For Atwood, these are dark worlds, and often serve as warnings; but others, including designers, have embraced the speculative to imagine other possible or brighter futures, again, starting with believable everyday situations.¹ Puig de la Bellacasa's work is more akin to the latter, insofar as it is grounded in the belief that things could be otherwise, that another (better) world is possible, and it wants to use the analytic of care in order to bring it into being. That is, the book deploys care as a form of political imagination to fuel hope and desire for transformative action. Like the speculative work just referenced, this is not a utopian project, as it is located in our current material worlds and works out from there. Similarly, the goal is not simply to speculate about how things could be different if we cared for a broader range of things, but to get involved in their "becomings." It is an affective mode that encourages intervention in what things *could* be. She suggests that we need to think about care in its situated, messy, impure states—we need to look at how it plays out in hands-on situations, and intervene and engage in order to generate care in these situations.

Yet how can we intervene if we do not have an idea of how the world could or should be? —How do we begin to imagine other worlds, without an underlying idea of what is wrong with this world? Here, Puig de la Bellacasa's speculative endeavor inevitably encounters the older project of critique; it engages with normative understandings of what "better" might look like, and how it might be practiced. In this sense, the second intervention of the book is to combine a

speculative, materialist approach with a more classical feminist commitment to attending to power relations and to inequality—to devalued agencies and exclusions. In this sense, the book is built on—and haunted by—a tension between critique and construction, the normative and the speculative. To be sure, there are no easy answers for how to be open and yet committed to transformative change, to be against critique and yet to be uneasy with current forms of representation, insisting instead on attention to neglected things. *Matters of Care* negotiates these tensions carefully, even as the tensions remain, perhaps, unresolvable.

To this end, in the first half of the book, Puig de la Bellacasa engages with Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway, reading them against each other (although ultimately demonstrating a closer kinship to Haraway) to transform “matters of concern” into “matters of care,” bringing attention to the liveliness of things while also reinstating aspects of critique that Latour had dispensed with. For Puig de la Bellacasa, to make concern into care is to enhance the affective dimensions of one’s engagement—to bring a sense of attachment to something—but it is also to invoke the history of care as part of a larger politics of race, gender, and labor. It is to think about the larger power dynamics of both lively things and who and what comes to matter. She argues that the views that focus on power relations get sidelined in Latour’s matters of concern. Instead, she takes a more well-worn (normative?) feminist perspective in arguing for attention to and care for neglected beings and things—to the oppressed, the excluded. Although we find this approach both necessary and compelling, there is nevertheless a continued tension in the book between taking an open-ended, nonnormative, imaginative approach and making an argument to care about neglected things. Puig de la Bellacasa calls for “a more radically democratic way of listening to neglected things” (58) to connect this version of care to its feminist predecessors, but she does not explain why we should see this as valuable. The point is that in the current, increasingly illiberal world, creating space for new political worlds is essential, yet so is a clear commitment to certain political goals, like equality and nondiscrimination. Otherwise, how do we know how to care about minorities like white supremacists, who feel neglected and marginalized, speak from “below,” and yet express their views through hate and exclusion? This is the realm of noninnocent care, indeed.

One way that Puig de la Bellacasa negotiates this tension between the critical and speculative is by shifting the terrain from the epistemological to the ontological. In other words, the third intervention that *Matters of Care* makes in order to rehabilitate care is to bring together two theoretical “turns”: the ethical and the ontological. For her, an epistemological approach implies that there is a real, or better way to care, that care should be based on more accurate knowledge. In trying to get away from moralist and essentialist ideas of care (which are about getting it right), she turns to the ontological, beginning with an understanding of the condition of life on earth as interdependent and relational. This ontology requires that we care about things because they are a part of us, we are connected to them—they can help us flourish and they can kill us. We cannot *not* care, since we are interdependent at base, part of the larger web of life. Again, Puig de la Bellacasa joins other feminists in turning to the ontological to reimagine the ethical; Butler does the same, in claiming that vulnerability is a fundamental ontological condition. We might ask, what about alternate ontologies? Why this one? How does this ontology incorporate history, and historical change?—Putting these questions aside for now, we appreciate that this approach informs and enables the other compelling rearticulations of care in the book.

We turn now to Puig de la Bellacasa's specific, concrete, or grounded interventions in the understanding of care, guided by this ontological approach. She pushes our understandings of care in two particular ways. First, she proposes touch as a way to further an embodied approach to care; and second, she expands the frame to include nonhumans. First, then, to touch. In a move that builds on Haraway's critique of detached vision in knowledge practices, Puig de la Bellacasa turns to touch as a preferred technology for care; indeed, this seems to be a methodology to understand the sources of meaning-production of nonhuman life. The haptic, she maintains, holds promise for her speculation because of its engaging nature and its connective capacity in literal as well as figural fashion: it is a physically reversible expression enabling a material and affective response—an ability to "be in touch with"—in settings of everyday living and practice. Touch enables us to eschew abstractions and detachments, and to turn away from the fixation on the event or the eventful usually associated with the visual. Instead, touch lets us immerse ourselves in the mundane. This is a major intervention in rethinking how care can be transformative without requiring the event, crisis, or revolution. Touch is the way to co-transform our thick present and the futures we want to co-create. It is not aimed at more accuracy in knowing a "real" world, but at more involvement and commitment to it.

Moreover, touch enables us to understand care in terms of interconnections that are not necessarily reciprocal; it fosters a move away from ethical relationships like the gift or the contract, which are based on theories of autonomous subjects with intentional actions. Instead, the practice of touch lets us to see that care can be asymmetrical, and that it may not be returned directly; caregivers will not necessarily be touched by the people they care for. In this sense, we must understand care—by way of touch—as enabling a form of circulation in a much broader world, activating a whole different set of relationalities.

Finally, touch allows for blurred boundaries between beings in a way that sight does not. Implicating us in shared webs of existence, touch produces feelings of togetherness as well as of vulnerability—it makes this ontological condition apparent like no other sense we have. Indeed, one of Puig de la Bellacasa's more counterintuitive points is that because of its unique phenomenology, touch also allows for a particular awareness of alterity—other senses may allow for the presumption of sameness, risking the erasure of power differences. Just as touch can create a sense of relationality, it can be used to emphasize boundaries; it can even incite disengagement. The contorting and jostling handshakes of some presidents emphasize a sense of boundary with their recipients, some going out of their way to prevent the touch from happening; and knowing that touch can lead to an itchy, irritating dermatitis, most humans desire a clear boundary between them and poison ivy. This opens the way to different forms of care, based on proximity instead of identification—or passivity instead of engagement.

But let's turn back to the second way the ontological approach is used to rethink care, centering nonhumans. *Matters of Care* insists on moving beyond both humanism and the human in its understandings of care. In particular, Puig de la Bellacasa turns to the permaculture movement and soil sciences to rethink care in posthuman contexts. What humans know about soil (and by

extension other ecological beings) has material implications for the soil and for the future of life on earth through our practices with it. Better ways of taking care of soil mean becoming entangled in webs that recognize its living and collective status, and attempting to understand its need to thrive for its own sake, rather than caring for it in utilitarian ways that fall within the logics of mastery and production. In this way, the meaning of care is expanded: caring can be a form of conscious neglect—soil can be left aside, uncultivated for or by humans.

To care in this ecological sense, Puig de la Bellacasa argues, we must think beyond economic understandings of time, which measure and care for everything in terms of production and expansion—always more, always faster—and instead pay conscious attention to our everyday lives outside the lens of linear progress. This includes attending to our relations with other species, in their own time—beings who may live for a day or for many human lifetimes. In other words, one of the key points of this section is an attention to different “timescapes”: to different temporalities of care. Care means the fostering of the endurance of objects through time, understanding different, entangled scales and timelines: geological, epochal, embodied, and practical. In this ethics, we can care for different kinds of histories at the same time, and find ways to keep them in the same frame: evolutionary, colonial, contemporary. As part of this, we need to recognize and value repetition and circularity, and realize that growth need not be exponential or infinite.

How might we take this logic further into the empirical? Here, we push on a tension between this genre of philosophy and its commitment to situatedness. We are fully persuaded that it is important to recognize different time scales—to care for different ways of being in the world. Yet what if we did not start with the more radical examples—like permacultures—but looked at the more mainstream environmental practices that find themselves in the middle of toxicity, grappling hands-on with the mess? That is, what if we take seriously the provocation issued by the speculative perspective, which is to begin with everyday situations that many of us encounter? This would entail a start in the time of capitalism. A deeper empirical engagement would show that many environmentalists (activists, academics, policy-makers) already think in terms of different kinds of futurity, going beyond the economic alone but engaging with it to imagine and project better futures. Take, for example, green infrastructures that are proposed to tackle problems of greenhouse gas emissions and extreme weather events like floods or heat waves by creating more urban trees, vegetation, and soil: these balance the improvement of ecosystem functioning and the promotion of ecosystem services with the development of a green economy (including the development of green bonds to fulfill the capital need to construct such infrastructures).- Similarly, practices of disaster recovery in coastal areas, where storm surges and floods hurt both human and nonhuman communities, already recognize and juggle different temporalities (for example, the economic and social incentive to rebuild and the ecological necessity to consider retreat), and yet such projects have occasionally found that differing time frames are incommensurable. The response has been to create “trade-offs” that require prioritizing one timescape over another: ecological or capitalist (for instance, should one develop an ecological corridor to ensure habitat over the long term, or create new housing stock to ensure economic development in the short term? Environmental projects are not as easily translated into measurable investments). It may be worth taking seriously these noninnocent forms of compromised care, and thinking with them about the limits and challenges of different care times.

Environmentalists speak from concrete experience—they have much to offer in this regard; but perhaps counterintuitively, their experience also pushes us on the speculative end. In particular, they would likely encourage a more speculative engagement with history, not to offer us a romanticized version of our pasts, but to prevent us from falling into the trap of the “shifting baseline syndrome”—where we take the degraded present as normal, and forget that the quality standards have been getting lower for generations. They might suggest we imagine a different past, and start there, rather than with the toxic grounds of our present.

Thinking about care in such empirical settings will be a crucial step in turning our political imaginations into political actions, taking up the insights Puig de la Bellacasa offers us and bringing them from the abstracted philosophical realm into that of situated practices. But as feminist philosophy, *Matters of Care* offers an enormously compelling rearticulation of care for our world: Puig de la Bellacasa's move to replace normative morality with care is an important gain to those of us who fight the reign of moralisms, yet who do not want to throw out the ethical baby with the bathwater. And it is refreshing to read about constraints and obligations as enabling, especially when set against the liberal sacralization of individual freedom. Finally, *Matters of Care* provides us with a theory of transformative change that is not anchored in violence and bloodshed, but in the everyday occurrences of caring with and for. This is a revolutionary book!

References

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Dean, Carolyn. 2015. Atrocity photographs, dignity, and human vulnerability. *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 6 (2): 239–64.

¹ We are thinking here of the work of Dunne and Raby, see <http://www.dunneandraby.co.uk/content/bydandr/36/0> (accessed October 24, 2017).