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## CARE AND THE CRISIS OF THE PARADIGMS OF MODERNITY *Feminist Approaches to Subjectivity and Social Justice*

### Abstract

Covid-19 has challenged the self-concepts of neoliberal late capitalist societies, particularly the idea of the autonomous and self-sufficient individual who is “free, equal, and independent”, as well as the notions of development and growth. Social and political crises compel us to rethink the forms of associated living and the structures of modern democracies. This paper proposes feminist approaches to subjectivity and social justice, showing how these allow the development of the notion of a relational self and address today’s social challenges by proposing a justice that benefits all. The focus will be on the ethics of care, an important ethical and political paradigm. As recent publications attest, the concept-practice of care offers alternative strategies for reversing the direction of late modernity.

**Keywords:** Crisis of Modernity, Ethics of Care, Feminism, Social Justice, Subjectivity

### 1. *The crisis of the paradigms of modernity. The challenge of the concept-practice of care*

The theme of care has been lately the focus of several innovative academic contributions<sup>1</sup>. Since the publication of *In a Different Voice*<sup>2</sup>, Gilligan’s reflections have given rise to various interpretations aimed at deepening both the moral value of care and its implications on the political level. More recently, however, this term has emerged in political and everyday debate, among people who experience society from below. This has happened at the time of Covid-19, which triggered a crisis in the self-concepts of contemporary societies: autonomy, prosperity, and competition. This experience has challenged these supposed axioms of Western societies, concepts that are indemonstrable, taken for granted, and fundamental to communal and associated living. The pandemic has revealed something constitutive, kept hidden, or illusorily forgotten, namely our interdependence, but also something deconstructive: the economic, environmental, and social crisis caused by the limitless exploitation of human, environmental, and economic resources.

The term “care” has emerged in different and controversial ways. The proposals of *The Care Manifesto*<sup>3</sup> are interesting. Written during the pandemic by a number of authors

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1 See A. Del Re, *Cura e riproduzione sociale*, in C. Giorgi (ed.), *Welfare. Attualità e prospettive*, Carocci, Roma 2022, pp. 201-215.

2 C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice. Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1982.

3 The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto. The Politics of Interdependence*, Verso Books, London-New York 2020.

who came together in London under the name of the Care Collective, this essay puts care at the centre and links the political line with the experiences, practices, and alliances of everyday life. These are the experiences of flesh-and-blood subjects who inhabit the world, as Arendt would say, as unique and plural subjects embedded in a particular social context<sup>4</sup>. In this sense, care can be used as a key of resignification, semantic and material, for a relational and interdependent subject, who makes this interdependence the ontological status of herself/himself, others, and the environment. This web of relationships is kept alive through care.

This challenge is posed by the ethical-political paradigm known as the ethics of care. Through the concept-practice of care, this paradigm, which emerged from the sphere of psychological theories with Gilligan's work<sup>5</sup>, provides a different theoretical key within which to articulate, because of its moral and political value, the notion of subjectivity, the very constitution of the self, and forms of associated living, allowing us to rethink the nature of social justice and the claims surrounding it. An attempt will be made to show how the ideas of Tronto and Kittay are emblematic in some specific respects. The former allows us to rethink a notion of social justice through the very idea of participation and the phase of «caring-with»<sup>6</sup>. The latter focuses on the notion of dependence, emphasizing the role of care in achieving justice, and questioning the universality of the liberal conception of individuals as free, equal, and independent. Given the complexity and breadth of the topic, the present essay has a circumscribed scope: the focus here is on contemporary feminist approaches that, in their diversity, fit into the theoretical paradigm of the ethics of care. In this sense, I believe that the crisis of the paradigms of modernity is particularly relevant to the idea of the individual, which encompasses the forms of communal living emerging from contractualist theories rooted in individualism, and extends to their contemporary treatment in Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*<sup>7</sup>. In addition, the paper has to consider, from both moral and political perspectives, the developments that the modern idea of the individual – assumed to be neutral and universal, endowed with reason, autonomous, and self-sufficient – represents in neoliberal late capitalist societies.

The feminist point of view in general, and that of the ethics of care in particular, have had the merit, already in the last century, of challenging the neutrality hidden behind such theories, and of proposing a different point of view with direct implications for the way we think about subjectivity and our democracies<sup>8</sup>. Recently, there has been a great deal of interest in Italy, particularly from the Castelvecchi publishing house, in the

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4 H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1958.

5 C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice. Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, cit.

6 J.C. Tronto, *Caring Democracy. Markets, Equality, and Justice*, NYU Press, New York 2013, p. X; Ead., *Who Cares? How to Reshape a Democratic Politics*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca-New York 2015, p. 14.

7 J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard University Press, Harvard 1971. Here, it should also be specified that, as will be shown, these considerations pertain to certain elements of his theory.

8 See, for example, the innovative and recent perspective proposed in E. Stimilli, *Filosofia dei mezzi. Per una nuova politica dei corpi*, Neri Pozza, Vicenza 2023.

subject of care and its various developments, as evidenced, for example, by recent books by Botti and by Morrissey and Serughetti<sup>9</sup>. In 2023, Gilligan released a new book, *In a Human Voice*<sup>10</sup>, to mark the 40th anniversary of *In a Different Voice*<sup>11</sup>:

The voice of care ethics is a human voice and gendering of a human voice as “a feminine” is a problem. Hearing the different voice as a human voice meant clearing away a series of impediments that stood in the way of seeing that the gender binary – the construction of human capabilities as either masculine or feminine – is not only a distortion of reality, but a cornerstone of patriarchy<sup>12</sup>.

A new way of representing the human and morality itself emerged.

## 2. Rethinking subjectivity: Gilligan's feminist move

*In a Different Voice*<sup>13</sup> marks the beginning of the paradigm of the ethics of care, which continues to arouse great interest in various fields of knowledge. Its origins are not philosophical but psychological. It can clearly be said to be of feminist origin. It has cast suspicion on an established moral paradigm that does not seem to be a problem within the traditional framework<sup>14</sup>. «I began writing *In a Different Voice* in the early 1970s, at a time of resurgence in the Women's Movement», Gilligan states<sup>15</sup>. Exploring the «woman's place in man's life cycle»<sup>16</sup> and responding to Kohlberg's work<sup>17</sup>, she questions certain verdicts on moral development.

9 C. Botti, *Vulnerabili. Cura e convivenza dopo la pandemia*, Castelveccchi, Roma 2023; L.F. Morrissey, G. Serughetti, *Utopie della cura. La politica trasformativa delle pratiche di comunità*, Castelveccchi, Roma 2024; J.C. Tronto, *Who Cares? Come ripensare una politica democratica*, ed. by C. Botti, trans. by M. Barnaba, Castelveccchi, Roma 2023. See also E. Ferrarese, *La fragilità della cura degli altri. Adorno e il care*, trans. by G. Prada, Castelveccchi, Roma 2023.

10 C. Gilligan, *In a Human Voice*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2023.

11 Ead., *Preface*, in *In a Human Voice*, cit., p. V.

12 Ivi, p. VI.

13 Ead., *In a Different Voice. Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, cit. See L. Mortari, *Filosofia della cura*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2015 and S. Brotto, *Etica della cura. Una introduzione*, Orthotes, Napoli 2013.

14 See C. Botti, *Cura e differenza. Ripensare l'etica*, Led edizioni, Milano 2018.

15 C. Gilligan, *Letter to Readers*, in *In a Different Voice. Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, cit., p. IX.

16 Ead., *In a Different Voice. Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, cit., p. 23.

17 See for insights, among others, C. Botti, *Cura e differenza. Ripensare l'etica*, cit.; S. Laugier, *L'etica di Amy. La cura come cambio di paradigma in etica*, in «Iride», XXIV, 63, 2011, pp. 331-334. Gilligan works alongside the scholar Kohlberg, who investigates the moral development of adolescents through empirical psychological research aimed at capturing the various stages of cognitive development in young individuals. The reference model is that conceived by Piaget. Kohlberg's scale measures the moral development of children and adolescents across six stages. Initially, the scale is devised by presenting moral dilemmas to male subjects, and it is subsequently tested on female subjects as well. See C. Botti, *Cura e Differenza. Ripensare l'etica*, cit., p. 33. See C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice. Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, cit., pp. 9-10.

Kohlberg's theory emphasizes a sequence of moral development stages leading to a mature moral perspective characterized by autonomy and detachment, in line with Kantian principles. His methodology suggests that mature morality involves abstract and universal reasoning, which young girls and women do not appear to be capable of. However, Gilligan challenges this notion, arguing that traditional models fail to capture the full scope of human moral experience, particularly the one that emerges in the different voice. Through her research on female children and adolescents, then woman, she has identified a distinct moral voice centred on care and responsibility<sup>18</sup>. Gilligan's approach reveals two fundamentally different conceptions of morality: one based on autonomy and separateness, and the other rooted in empathy and relationship<sup>19</sup>.

In contrast to the so called ethics of justice<sup>20</sup>, which is based on an abstract appeal to rights, the ethics of care would be based on the capacity to empathize, to listen, to care for relationships and the contexts in which they take shape, and would be based on a different conception of the self: the self is not defined, as is traditionally the case, by separation, but by contact and relationship. This dual conception of morality suggests that a comprehensive understanding of moral development must include the capacity for empathetic and relational thinking, and challenges the notion that abstract, universal principles are the sole markers of mature moral judgement. Gilligan's vision has been accused of essentialism, but as this essay makes clear, her analysis, which begins by listening to a female voice, leads to a different way of depicting the human. In addition to several passages from *In a Different Voice*<sup>21</sup>, in *Joining the Resistance*<sup>22</sup>, she shows, more explicitly, how the virtues that emerge from the ethics of care, such as the attitude of listening or empathy, are not feminine virtues, but rather feminist virtues that resist the cleavages that patriarchy uses to perpetuate its power<sup>23</sup>.

It is precisely patriarchy that inhibits boys themselves, preventing them from expressing certain attitudes that are branded as non-rational from an early age. Girls, on the other hand, have cultivated the virtue of resistance. It is necessary to take advantage of this difference by operating a counter-narrative through those feminist virtues, that can counter injustice and silence in a democracy.

[...] a feminist ethic of care rests on a thick rather than thin understanding of democracy. A thin interpretation of democracy homogenizes differences in the name of equality, whereas thick democracy rests on the premise that different voices are integral to the vitality of a democratic society<sup>24</sup>.

18 See C. Botti, *Cura e differenza. Ripensare l'etica*, cit.

19 See B. Casalini, L. Cini (eds.), *Giustizia, uguaglianza e differenza. Una guida alla lettura della filosofia politica contemporanea*, University Press, Firenze 2012, pp. 163-189.

20 In fact, several scholars, such as Casalini, have pointed out in various works how in some passages of *In a Different Voice* Gilligan places the two ethics in dialogue in the development of a mature moral subject.

21 C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice. Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, cit.

22 Ead., *Joining the Resistance*, Polity Press, Malden 2011.

23 See C. Botti, *Feminine virtues or feminist virtues? The debate on care ethics revisited*, in «Etica & Politica», XVII, n. 2, 2015, pp. 107-151; Ead., *Cura e differenza. Ripensare l'etica*, cit.

24 C. Gilligan, *Joining the Resistance*, cit., p. 22.

This voice also becomes a means of struggle, calling for a form of resistance based on our humanity and not on ideology<sup>25</sup>. «If along the path we lose our way, we can remind ourselves to listen for voice, to pay attention to how things are gendered, and to remember that within ourselves we have the ability to spot a false story», Gilligan states<sup>26</sup>. A new history must be written. These insights come first from listening to women who combine reason with emotion, self with relationship, mind with body. At the end of his latest book, the thinker takes up this very concept, stating that the ethics of care, the different voice, is a human voice, «that the voice it differs from is a patriarchal voice [...]», and that where patriarchy is force and enforced, the human voice is a voice of resistance, and care ethics is an ethics of liberation»<sup>27</sup>.

Listening to women thus led me to make a distinction I have come to see as pivotal to understanding care ethics. Within a *patriarchal* framework, care is a feminine ethic. Within a *democratic* framework, care is a human ethic<sup>28</sup>.

It is the origin of the challenge inherent in the development of the ethics of care that thus allows us to question certain concepts or axioms on which modernity is based, first of all the idea of the individual and, on the political level, the dominant idea of development, so as to rethink the very notion of social justice.

Gilligan claims that «in an age of climate change, pandemics, and nuclear weapons, interdependence has become self-evident. [...] Vulnerability, once associated with women, is a characteristic of humans»<sup>29</sup>. The notion of vulnerability, which characterizes the human condition, is expressed by Botti as follows<sup>30</sup>. «Modern thought has [...] thematised» this condition, as well as human mortality, but as «conditions from which to try to escape»<sup>31</sup>. It is the paradigm of care that has a generative power, also from an imaginative and symbolic point of view. This paradigm emphasizes a relational subjectivity, vulnerable to oneself and to others, without proposing a new universal representation from above. For Botti, an innovative and original contribution of the paradigm, beyond the various arguments about the ethics of care, lies precisely in the original move of suspicion towards an established paradigm. Reflecting on the ethics of care in a way that is relevant to the times, she argues, requires a transformation of individual and collective mental scenarios, of the representation of the human and the non-human. The paradigm of care invites us to inhabit relationships and implies a rethinking of the collective dimension. Care also concerns the public and political spheres.

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25 Ivi, p. 43.

26 *Ibidem*.

27 C. Gilligan, *In a Human Voice*, cit., p. 110.

28 Ead., *Joining the Resistance*, cit., p. 22.

29 Ivi, pp. 42-43.

30 C. Botti, *Vulnerabili. Cura e convivenza dopo la pandemia*, cit.

31 Ivi, p. 17, my translation.

### 3. Care and participation. Social justice for all

In 2023 the publisher Castelveccchi issued the first Italian translation of Tronto's *Who Cares?*<sup>32</sup>, a text that provides fundamental theoretical points of departure for redefining the concept of social justice. Already in her earlier writings<sup>33</sup>, this thinker revolutionized the interpretation of the ethics of care. The paradigm has undergone several developments. This is the reason why we speak of a "second generation of the ethics of care", which – as Casalini notes<sup>34</sup> – «shifts the focus from care as a moral disposition, and thus a distinctive trait of individuals and their relationships, to care as a social practice that also requires institutional support and the assumption of collective responsibility». The perspective adopted in this essay combines the two dimensions, as other scholars have done. Indeed, the way in which the notion of subjectivity is articulated influences the conception of associated living.

As stated in the *Prefazione*<sup>35</sup> to the Italian translation, Tronto understands the political value of care and extends the analysis to include care work. This reflection is presented as different from modern individualist anthropology and the morality of rights and non-interference, but rather as centred on the capacity to identify and respond concretely to the needs of those who are in a relationship with us, even in non-chosen or unequal relationships: a moral capacity envisaged in relation to a humanity marked by relationality, vulnerability, and dependence.

Tronto has decoupled care from femininity, showing how in neoliberal late capitalist societies attitudes to care, as well as the giving of care, no longer concern only women, but also marginalized people. This essay will attempt to see how, through the concept-practice of care, Tronto's thought allows us to rethink our democracies. The focus is on the notion of caring-with, in an effort to redefine the ideas of participation and social justice.

Usually we think of the worlds of care and of politics as far apart. This is partly because we wrongly think that care is all about compassion and kindness, and that politics is all about one-upmanship. [...] This way of thinking has a long pedigree in political thought [...]. But there is another way to think about the link between care and politics. These two worlds are deeply intertwined, and even more so in a democracy. Only at the expense of

32 J.C. Tronto, *Who cares? Come ripensare una politica democratica*, cit.

33 See J.C. Tronto, *Moral boundaries. A Political Argument of an Ethics of Care*, Routledge, New York 1994; Ead., *Care as Political Concepts*, in H.J. Hirschmann, C. Di Stefano (eds.), *Revisioning the political: Feminist Reconstruction of Traditional Concepts in Western Political Theory*, Westview Press, Boulder 1996, pp. 139-142; Ead., *Caring democracy. Markets, Equality, and Justice*, cit.

34 B. Casalini, *L'etica della cura. Dal personale al globale*, in «B@belonline», 12, 2012, pp. 223-233. My translation. See Ead., *Il care tra lavoro affettivo e lavoro di riproduzione sociale*, in «La società degli individui», 46, 2013, pp. 44-61. See Ead., *Il femminismo e le sfide del neoliberalismo. Postfemminismo, sessismo, politiche della cura*, IF Press, Morolo 2018. See also S.L. Sevenhuijsen, *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care: Feminist Considerations on Justice, Morality and Politics*, Routledge, Londra 1998; M. Barnes, *Caring and Social Justice*, Red Globe Press, New York 2015.

35 C. Botti, *Prefazione*, in J.C. Tronto, *Who Cares? Come ripensare una politica democratica*, cit., p. 8.



our democracy do we underestimate their interdependence. And we need to rethink this relationship if democracy is to continue<sup>36</sup>.

As reiterated in *Utopie della cura*, Tronto and Fisher's definition of care is very useful: «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 [...]»<sup>37</sup>. Care is not just a moral concern or a character trait, but the concern of living, «active human beings engaged in the processes of everyday life. Care is both a practice and a disposition»<sup>38</sup>. During Covid-19, and in subsequent reflections, this notion has given rise to several contributions. *The Care Manifesto*<sup>39</sup> describes care as a personal and collective skill that enables the political, social, material, and emotional conditions for the majority of the planet's people and living creatures to thrive together with the planet itself.

With some simplification, the focus here is on the phases that describe care as an activity, which Tronto takes up in *Who Cares?*, but which she has already elaborated in her earlier works. The five phases – «caring about, caring for, caregiving, care-receiving, caring-with»<sup>40</sup> – are accompanied by moral capacities: attentive, responsible, competent, responsive. These capacities describe the «good citizen»<sup>41</sup>. Yet again, the reflections on subjectivity, on the moral qualities of the human being, and on the political dimension seems interconnected. The analysis is also closely linked to the question of needs, their identification and satisfaction. Once needs have been identified, Tronto says, it is essential «to take responsibility to make certain that these needs are met and then that the actual care-giving work be done». «Once care work is done, there will be a response from the person, thing, group, animal, plant, or environment that has been cared for»<sup>42</sup>. At this point, the care given needs to be evaluated in order to assess the effectiveness of the caring acts, and new needs will undoubtedly arise from the evaluation. So as to rethink democracy and its ethos, the last phase is fundamental: caring-with, a form of everyone's ability to participate in a practice of collective caring<sup>43</sup>. As Tronto states «this final phase of care requires that caring needs and the ways in which they are met need to be consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality, and freedom for all»<sup>44</sup>. If democracy is to be based on care rather than on market logic, it is necessary to examine how care is distributed in societies and to redistribute resources equitably. This process also rethinks the concept of equality, moving from the formal to the substantive.

36 J.C. Tronto, *Who Cares? How to Reshape a Democratic Politics*, cit., p. 1.

37 B. Fisher, J.C. Tronto, *Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring*, in E.K. Abel, M. Nelson (eds.), *Circles of Care*, Suny Press, New York 1990, p. 40.

38 *Ibidem*.

39 The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto. The Politics of Interdependence*, cit.

40 In particular, considering past works the fifth phase (caring with) was added in *Caring Democracy. Markets, Equality, and Justice*, cit., pp. 34-35.

41 J.C. Tronto, *Who Cares? How to Reshape a Democratic Politics*, cit., p. 7.

42 Ead., *Caring Democracy. Markets, Equality, and Justice*, cit., pp. 22-23.

43 C. Botti, *Prefazione*, in J.C. Tronto, *Who Cares? Come ripensare una politica democratica*, cit., p. 10.

44 J.C. Tronto, *Caring Democracy. Markets, Equality, and Justice*, cit., p. 23.

In neoliberal late capitalist societies, care undergoes processes of racialization and sexualization<sup>45</sup>. Care work, essential but often invisible, is underpaid and commoditized. Therefore, caring-with emerges as a democratic ideal<sup>46</sup>:

As politics comes closer to the bone, and as the stakes become clearer, citizens will be able to appreciate their interdependence even as they pursue their own interests. Rethinking democracy as a system to support people as they try to live more humane and caring lives is the next step in our ongoing democratic revolution. Let's begin. Now<sup>47</sup>.

Equality in care does not come from the perfection of an individual act, but from reciprocity in caring for oneself and others over time<sup>48</sup>. It is a process that involves everyone and allows us to overcome the dichotomy between those who take responsibility for social justice and those who simply benefit from it. Tronto thus reminds us that there is no autonomy without different and intertwined chains of care, which support the web between living beings, the environment, and institutions. Care enables the «maintenance of the living»<sup>49</sup>.

#### 4. *The rifts of contractualism*

The supposedly neutral and universal subject is characterized by several features such as autonomy and rationality. Excluded from the modern scenario are subjectivities that do not fit into standardized categories. Reflection from the margins reveals the contradictions of traditional thought and contractualist theory. By rethinking the subject as embodied and relational, it challenges abstract theories that do not take into account the concreteness of human life in its specificity and diversity. Feminist thought has made significant contributions by grounding abstract concepts in the reality of human experience. Scholars such as Held, Nussbaum, Kittay, Baier, Pulcini, and Laugier critique the traditional concept of justice, advocating for a re-examination of the relationship between care and justice<sup>50</sup>.

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45 See A. Simone, *Femminilizzare il lavoro o «badantizzare la società»? Paradossi e contraddizioni di un fenomeno complesso*, in A. Amendola, L. Bazzicalupo, F. Chicchi, A. Tucci (eds.), *Biopolitica, Bioeconomia e processi di soggettivazione*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2008, pp. 185-192; A. Del Re, M. Montanelli, *Lavoro di cura e riproduzione sociale. Un nuovo paradigma estetico-politico*, in M. De Palo, L. Marchetti, F. Sterpetti (eds.), *Quaderni di Villa Mirafiori*, vol. 1, Mimesis, Milano 2024, pp. 199-212.

46 J.C. Tronto, *Who Cares? How to Reshape a democratic Politics*, cit., p. 14.

47 Ivi, p. 40.

48 See C. Faraco, M.P. Paternò (eds.), *Cura e cittadinanza. Storia filosofia diritto*, Editoriale Scientifica, Napoli 2021.

49 L.F. Morrissey, G. Serughetti, *Utopie della cura. La politica trasformativa delle pratiche di comunità*, cit., p. 23, my transl. See G. Serughetti, *Democratizzare la cura/Curare la democrazia*, Nottetempo, Roma 2020.

50 See also M. Marras, *Contrattualismo femminista. La proposta normative di Jean Hampton*, Castelvecchi, Roma 2022. See also, in general, A. Sciarba, *La cura tra giustizia e diritti*, in «Diritto & Questioni pubbliche», 16, 2, pp. 393-413.



Kittay's work<sup>51</sup> is particularly significant in challenging modern concepts through the concept-practice of care, influencing care ethics and calling for a new assessment of traditional dichotomies and boundaries.

The idea that the founding obligations of a social order are derived from the voluntary association of equally situated and empowered individuals is explicit in social contract theory. Until the publication of John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, utilitarianism dominated political theory. Rawls revived social contract theory, providing a comprehensive systematic social and political theory and arguing that the principles of justice themselves rested on an implicit social contract. In so doing, Rawls created one of the most powerful and cogent theories of a liberal, democratic egalitarianism<sup>52</sup>.

Kittay engages in a critical dialogue with political philosophy, by challenging Rawlsian thought, in particular. Her perspective highlights the value of marginalized, atopic positions – those without a defined place – and reveals them as fundamentally strategic. By analysing individuals who experience atopicity within Rawlsian theory, Kittay articulates a critique and extension of the paradigm of justice. She criticizes the idea of a social contract between able-bodied, cooperative individuals that excludes the diversity of concrete human life, including people with disabilities. This thinker's insights are informed by her personal experience of disability and dependency, having cared for her daughter Sesha, who has severe physical and cognitive disabilities. Kittay's critical position extends beyond the liberal anthropological model, to include Disability Studies, which have traditionally tended to promote the autonomy of people with disabilities rather than the element of care and dependency. Central to her thought are dependency relationships<sup>53</sup>.

Without delving into the philosopher's comprehensive analysis, it is important to highlight some key issues in her reflection. Notably, her emphasis on dependency in relation to the human condition has profound implications for understanding subjectivity, welfare, and public policy<sup>54</sup>. The concept-practice of care challenges the individualistic notions that underpin modernity and contract theories. Kittay's arguments regarding both «dependents»<sup>55</sup> and «dependency workers»<sup>56</sup> have direct implications for rethinking social organization and justice. This scholar speaks of «innocent idealization»<sup>57</sup> referring to the Rawlsian description of individuals as «fully co-operating members of society»<sup>58</sup>.

51 E.F. Kittay, *Labor's Love: Essay on Women, Equality and Dependency*, Routledge, New York 1999.

52 Ivi, p. 75.

53 See B. Casalini, L. Cini (eds.), *Giustizia, uguaglianza e differenza. Una guida alla lettura della filosofia politica contemporanea*, cit.; B. Casalini, *L'etica della cura. Dal personale al globale*, cit. See also E.F. Kittay, R. Carlson (eds.), *Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken 2010.

54 See also E.F. Kittay, *A Feminist public ethic of care meets the new communitarian family policy*, in «Ethics», 111, n. 3, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2001, pp. 523-547.

55 Ead, *Labor's Love: Essay on Women, Equality and Dependency*, cit., p. 1.

56 Ivi, p. IX.

57 Ivi, p. 88.

58 *Ibidem*.

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Such a description would exclude a variety of the human being, and Kittay speaks of an «absence of dependency in the “Circumstances of Justice”»<sup>59</sup>. Her reflection on the concept of subjectivity takes place through the analysis of dependents and dependency workers, both of whom experience a form of vulnerability. The notion of a «transparent self»<sup>60</sup> reflects the dependency worker’s experience, highlighting the care-giving relationship that responds and give priority to the needs of the dependent. Kittay wants to propose with the idea of a transparent self:

[...] the perception of and response to another’s needs are neither blocked out nor refracted through our own needs. Of course, no self is ever truly transparent in this sense, but such transparency is a benchmark for the self-conception of the dependency worker qua dependency worker. It is a regulatory ideal for the dependency worker qua dependency worker. It is an altruistic ideal. But while altruism is often seen as morally supererogatory, this ideal is requisited of the labor I have called dependency work<sup>61</sup>.

The transparency of the self «is stark in contrast to the self of the liberal tradition of rights and utilities. The self of the liberal tradition is a rationally self-interested agency, rather than an agency in the service of the interests of another»<sup>62</sup>, Kittay says.

This reflection on different forms of dependency has significant implications for public policy and welfare systems. I will emphasize some key points. Kittay challenges the conventional welfare models that require women to conform to male workforce standards, advocating instead for policies that acknowledge the care responsibilities of women and the dependency of those they care for. This approach seeks to ensure time for nurturing relationships and meeting the specific needs that arise within these relationships. Her emphasis on the importance of care-giving relationships is exemplified by the role of «the doula»<sup>63</sup>, who supports mothers rather than directly caring for children, thereby enabling mothers to provide care themselves. The feminist perspective proposed by the scholar, rooted in her personal experience as a mother, extends to all dependency workers (not just mothers or women) and those they care for.

Kittay’s analysis focuses on dependency rather than interdependency, which she considers to be an inadequate concept for individuals requiring extensive care, such as the elderly or the sick, who are unable to reciprocate care. For her dependency should be included among the circumstances of original justice, and care, understood as the moral capacity to respond to vulnerability with care, should be included among the powers of the moral person. The thinker places human vulnerability, reciprocity, and equality at the centre, the last of these enhanced precisely by difference and by seeing individuals not as abstract and autonomous, but as embedded in a network of dependencies. Kittay

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59 Ivi, p. 84.

60 Ivi, p. 51.

61 Ivi, p. 52.

62 *Ibidem*.

63 Ivi, p. 140.

asserts: «we are all some mother's child»<sup>64</sup>. Once again, the starting point is the notion of subjectivity. Rethinking the constitution of the self through vulnerability and dependency. Only then will it be possible to opt for a real change of perspective and thus also for a truly inclusive and just social order.

### 5. Concluding remarks

The paradigm of care challenges several axioms of modernity, which are most evident in late modernity, when «carelessness reigns»<sup>65</sup>. This paradigm, which originated in the United States, offers strategies that can also be applied in European contexts, despite differences in welfare systems and forms of democracy compared to Europe. Thanks to the origin of the paradigm, care could be seen as a challenge to the *status quo* and as an instrument of social mobilization. Current mobilizations, such as those of *Ni una menos*, young environmentalists, and workers demanding better conditions for their often invisible care work, show the will to change course against the economic, political, social and climate crises<sup>66</sup>. The care revolution is also expressed through shared practices that put it at the centre and sustain the web of the live. To counter social inequalities, the main challenge is to strengthen public and universal welfare policies, giving space and voice to bottom-up initiatives<sup>67</sup>.

Fundamental is the strengthening of proximity democracy and public support for local care initiatives, with the creation of self-managed public spaces that promote alternative forms of welfare and a different idea of service. These grassroots experiments can promote the creation of spaces that, even when they are institutionalized, treasure the very way in which they were created. Since they arise from the needs of real people and from the shortcomings of public structures, they can lead the institutions themselves to question their own work, in what we might call a phase of care-receiving, to quote Tronto. It is necessary to start again by giving voice to people's needs, needs that, as Kittay notes, emerge in the relationship itself and escape the patriarchal attitude that would lead one to appeal to a need which is not really perceived, as many policies and unused public structures show. Such practices bring out the ethics of care in all its force: as the ability to repair situations by giving voice and attention to the need that arises precisely in the relationship. From this another way of conceiving participation itself seems to emerge: giving and listening to the

64 Ivi, p. 115.

65 The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto. The Politics of Interdependence*, cit., p. 4.

66 See N. Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism. How Our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet – and What We Can Do about it*, Verso Book, London-New York 2022. See also M. Fragnito, M. Tola (eds.), *Ecologie della cura. Prospettive transfemministe*, Orthotes, Napoli-Salerno 2021.

67 See, for example, the proposals offered by The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto. The Politics of Interdependence*, cit. and by L.F. Morrissey, G. Serughetti, *Utopie della cura. La politica trasformativa delle pratiche di comunità*, cit. See also P. Urban, L. Ward (eds.), *Care Ethics, Democratic Citizenship and the State*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2020.

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voice of each person. This is possible in a constant phase of caring-with, of collective care practised by interdependent subjects. Institutions must welcome and respond to the real needs of people that emerge from relationships themselves in order to promote social justice. This calls for a relaunch of public welfare based on solidarity, recognizing and responding to old and new needs<sup>68</sup>, and introducing policies and actions that put the concept-practice of care at the centre of society.

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68 C. Giorgi (ed.), *Welfare. Attualità e prospettive*, cit., p. 29. See C. Saraceno, *Introduzione. Pensare i bisogni e vedere le relazioni per argomentare la giustizia*, in M.C. Nussbaum, *Giustizia sociale e dignità umana*, il Mulino, Bologna 2002; C. Giorgi, *Salute per tutti. Storia della sanità in Italia dal dopoguerra a oggi*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2024, pp. 285-287.