

Saggi

The Philosophy and Politics of Care: Between Vulnerability and Resilience

Filosofia e politica della cura: tra vulnerabilità e resilienza

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Abstract. Contemporary systemic crises and escalating global risks call for a renewed understanding of human existence beyond the assumptions of modern individualism. By foregrounding vulnerability as a shared condition, this paper argues that care constitutes a fundamental ethical and political response to collective precariousness. Situated at the intersection of vulnerability, global risk and political organization, care is conceptualized as a paradigm of political resilience capable of fostering responsibility, solidarity, and democratic coexistence.

Keywords: care, politics, vulnerability, resilience.

Riassunto. Le crisi sistemiche contemporanee e l'intensificarsi dei rischi globali impongono una riconsiderazione della condizione umana oltre i presupposti dell'individualismo moderno. Assumendo la vulnerabilità come condizione condivisa dell'esistenza, questo contributo interpreta la cura come risposta etica e politica alla precarietà collettiva. All'intersezione tra vulnerabilità, rischio globale e organizzazione politica, la cura emerge come paradigma di resilienza politica, in grado di promuovere responsabilità, solidarietà e convivenza democratica.

Parole chiave: cura, politica, vulnerabilità, resilienza.

1. The Concept of Care in Ancient and Modern Philosophical Thought

Within the context of evolutionary theory, the experience of care and relational interdependence seems to contradict the laws of natural selection, which are based on the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest. However, in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Darwin argues that selection, together with complex emotions and mental faculties, has driven the emergence of the social instincts of higher animals, and especially of human beings. These instincts have led human beings to develop a moral sense, conscience, and sympathy. The latter, in particular, is understood as the ability to emotionally share the mental states of others, initially limited to members of one's own group and gradually extending to all human beings and even lower animals.¹ This brings into focus all those behavioural traits that may point towards an altruistic human nature, thereby corroborating the hypothesis that Darwinian anthropology is grounded in the reversive effect of evolution.² Accordingly, natural selection, through social instincts, has fostered civilization, thus institutionalizing altruism and other counter-selective behaviours. Darwin has described the constitutive features of human nature, showing how the moral sense is not a transcendent given, but rather the result of a slow evolution of social instincts and the historical outcome of adaptive dynamics enabled by sociality.

Darwin offers an empirical grounding for several insights already anticipated by ancient philosophy at a speculative level: Plato recognizes the interdependence arising from human needs; Aristotle formulates the concept of the *zoon politikon*; Cicero introduces the idea that the natural inclination towards community constitutes the foundation of justice. From a political-philosophical perspective, such anthropological assumptions cannot by themselves justify normative claims. However, they outline the conditions for a realistic and functional social order, supporting the idea that politics and institutions oriented towards cooperation are coherent with human nature. Therefore, such principles should be embedded in institutional practices in order to foster stability and effectiveness.

Starting from this premise, a critical debate has recently gained momentum on the role that "caring for others" may play in the social and

¹ Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, Vol. 1, Chapter 3-4, 70-100.

² Tort, *Darwin e la filosofia*, 77-78. According to Tort, natural selection "is subjected to its own (eliminatory) law, resulting in the *tendential elimination of elimination*, through the advantage of social instincts and the associated faculties. Under its own law, natural selection gives rise – without any inconsistency in principle – to a different kind of evolution, whose selected advantage is no longer individual and biological, but rather essentially and fundamentally social" (our translation).

political sphere. The central question is whether care can function as a social mechanism of resilience capable of sustaining civilization and prioritizing it over selection,³ while reorienting collective practices in the face of contemporary uncertainty and emergencies, in pursuit of social benefit. As Singer points out, any society is indeed characterized by both a tendency to competition and a tendency to cooperation, since both are constitutive elements of human nature: it is the balance between these tendencies that can change and prove decisive.⁴

This may explain why, despite rarely having been at the centre of public and political debate, the concepts of altruistic relationships and care for others are rooted in ancient thought.

In a passage from Plato's *Republic*, Socrates explains to Glaucon that philosophers, who devote themselves to the highest form of knowledge – the contemplation of the Good – are fit to rule, being compelled to “care for and protect the other citizens.”⁵

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle clarifies that happiness is “a certain kind of living well and good action”,⁶ since “the activity in accord with virtue belongs to virtue.”⁷ He highlights the difference between virtue as a characteristic, which does not provide an opportunity to accomplish something good, and virtue as an activity, which necessarily leads to acting and acting well.⁸ Therefore, according to Aristotle, caring for the self means not only seeking the good, but also acting virtuously towards others, in pursuit of their good.

The concept of care gains significance also in some modern philosophical approaches, including Heidegger's. Heidegger considers the human subject a “Being-in-the-world”, whose being-there involves a relation to Being and to the clearing within which the entity exists, acts, and is open to possibilities. In this context, the term “*Dasein*” is used to describe the ontological constitution of human existence as a “potentiality-for-Being”, an entity that “as long as it is” is “a not-yet.” The concept of “*Dasein*” is closely intertwined with that of “*Sorge*” (or Care) conceptualized as solicitude for others and concerned engagement with the world in light of future possibilities. Care represents the structural totality of Being-in-the-world and coincides with temporality. In its circular structure, it appears as Being-ahead-of-itself, interpreted as projection into the future; as Being-already-in-the-world, insofar as *Dasein* finds itself thrown into a past that

³ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴ Singer, *A Darwinian Left*, 44.

⁵ Plato, *The Republic*, 7, 520a.

⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1(A), 7, 1098b, 19-20.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, I (A), 8, 1099a, 1-3.

it experiences affectively; and as Being-alongside, understood as fallenness and concerned engagement with entities within the world.⁹ Since the human being exists in the mode of care, “each one of us is what he pursues and cares for.”¹⁰ *Sorge* opens up a horizon for understanding care for the shared conditions of existence as an authentic possibility of *Dasein*. Such authenticity encompasses responsibility for the shared world and an active engagement with it. Heidegger argues that the fundamental structures of human existence are intrinsically equiprimordial, with *Mitsein* being the modality by virtue of which *Dasein* is always Being-with other, a constitutively shared existence, and therefore the foundation of an authentic political dimension that is originary rather than optional.

Arendt explicitly draws on Aristotle’s thought when she argues that human life can unfold only in a world shaped by the presence of others. She maintains that the human world itself would not exist without human activity, which brings it into being through the fabrication of things, tends to it through the cultivation of the land, and organizes it through the establishment of a political body. Within this world, different modalities of care may be identified. As Arendt observes, the first of these concerns the private realm of the household, which is the sphere where individual survival and the continuity of the species (the most pressing necessities of life) are taken care of. This occurs especially through labour, which explains why wealth, in ancient societies, was traditionally measured by the number of workers – slaves – one owned.¹¹ Ownership meant freedom from the necessities of life, and freedom to enter the common world, that public space in which human beings can interact with one another and preserve the memory of their actions through speech. An interpretive tension thus emerges. Care, in the material sense of nourishing, sustaining, and preserving life, belongs to the private sphere, thereby becoming politically invisible, since political action may be constrained by the demands of subsistence. However, while distinguishing necessity from freedom, Arendt acknowledges that the public sphere presupposes the private one. Care is excluded from politics, yet it also constitutes the very condition of

⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*; Bertuzzi, *La verità in Martin Heidegger*.

¹⁰ Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 49. According to Heidegger, existence is Being-in-the-world, or Being-there, which implies Being-with others. This co-existence means that, in relation to others, Being-there takes care of them, and this may occur in two ways: either depriving them of care or helping them to take care of themselves, thus distinguishing between inauthentic and authentic care. Inauthentic care deprives others of their care by directly providing them with what they need, and it is oriented more towards objects than human beings. By contrast, authentic care helps others to become capable of caring for themselves, enabling them to be free for their ownmost possibilities of Being.

¹¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50-51.

its possibility. As a result, it reveals an implicitly political dimension that challenges the rigid distinction between the public and private spheres.

Modern times are increasingly characterized by an atomistic outlook, shaped by a historical process through which the individual has come to assume a central role. This approach has produced a reversal of several perspectives, including the political dimension associated with Aristotle's thought, which focuses on the priority of the whole (the State) over its parts (individuals) and privileges the public sphere. The multiple contexts in which individualism has prompted a rethinking of social, moral, and political perspectives have also revealed that such "essence" of modernity conceals a number of degenerated aspects. These may be identified in both the erosion of "the relational and communicative fabric" and "the loss of the social bond, in short, the weakening of the community."¹²

Several modern political-philosophical theories propose a political condition resulting not from a natural process, but from an artificial configuration produced by a contract between individuals, isolated monads often marked by mutual tension. In particular, contractualist theories focus on the isolated individual, who is subject to intense passions and aggressive feelings that cause conflict and social instability.

Whether driven by desire for power, self-preservation, or competitiveness associated with the development of civil society and private interests, the outcome is the same: "in the individualist thought of early modernity, passions lead to various forms of relational conflict, in which 'the other' is portrayed as the enemy (Hobbes) or the rival (Smith), but also as the essential entity one must strategically engage with in order to pursue one's individual interests. This results in the emergence of the modern politician and the economic equilibrium of middle-class civil society, both of which imply the establishment of an exclusively pretextual social bond."¹³

Within classical liberal thought, the individual is conceived of as *homo oeconomicus*. Rather than being a fully rational agent capable of evaluating long-term self-interest, the *homo oeconomicus* is driven by a complex set of motivations, which can be summarized as the desire to accumulate wealth and material goods, and the desire to distinguish oneself from others and gain social recognition. This *homo oeconomicus* acts individually, without taking into account social and psychological interdependencies. As a result, the *homo oeconomicus* is oriented towards a "utility function or happiness that does not depend on wealth as such, nor on the quality of the relationships established with other human beings. This utility function rather depends directly on the quantity and quality

¹² Pulcini, *L'individuo senza passioni*, 9, our translation.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 12-13, our translation.

of goods and services consumed, and not on the social context in which consumption occurs.”¹⁴

On the other hand, Smith highlights a moral value that is connected with the ability to transform human passions. He points out that human beings are interested not only in being praised, but in being praiseworthy; they do not wish to be merely appreciated and loved, but to be worthy of appreciation and love. This marks a significant shift from Hobbes’s approach to self-esteem, according to which “[g]lory, or internal gloriation or triumph of the mind, is that passion which proceedeth from the imagination or conception of our own power, above the power of him that contendeth with us.”¹⁵ So interpreted, self-esteem results from success in a competition whose only purpose or meaning is the establishment of a hierarchy based on merit.¹⁶

By contrast, Smith argues that glory is the practice of virtue, a moral inclination that, despite its competitive and rivalrous nature, contributes to strengthening the social bond. He identifies prudence as the virtue par excellence, although it is peculiar to the economic agent. Prudence can limit excessive self-love through sympathy, the feeling that arises from observing a certain emotion in another individual.¹⁷ While prudence involves consideration for one’s happiness (encompassing health, luck, social rank, and reputation) and attention to personal interest, it also requires that such interest be pursued virtuously. This may happen if individuals take the feelings of others into account whenever they act. In this sense, prudence may be considered “justified self-care, since each individual has the same self-respect as others and is the most suitable to take care of themselves and their needs.” Yet, prudence can also be regarded as “appropriate care of one’s own interests, since it includes thinking about the other through the impartial spectator”, a figure created by imagination that judges one’s behaviour honestly and fairly.¹⁸

Alongside the *homo oeconomicus*, the *homo democraticus* has emerged. Outlined by Tocqueville, the *homo democraticus* remains insufficiently characterized by strong interpersonal ties. Democratic society is indeed described as a crowd of like and equal human beings that “revolve on themselves without repose, procuring the small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each of them, withdrawn and apart, is like a stranger to the destiny of all the others: his children and his particular

¹⁴ Becchetti, *Oltre l’homo oeconomicus*, 12, our translation.

¹⁵ Hobbes, *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*, Part 1, Ch. 9, § 1.

¹⁶ D’Andrea, “Dal riconoscimento al mercato.”

¹⁷ Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 12.

¹⁸ Viganò, “La prudenza come superamento dell’individualismo”, 43-52, our translation.

friends form the whole human species for him.”¹⁹ Therefore, the effect of massification produces a new type of individual who tends to replace conflict with apathy and indifference. This perspective is counterbalanced by an “immense tutelary” power that should ensure the enjoyment of goods and watch over the fate of human beings. However, Tocqueville suggests that the perverse effects of the democratic model and the disintegrating action of individualism may be limited by the awakening of other passions, expressed through democratic association. This is the way to satisfy the two passions that seize the modern human being: “the need to be led and the wish to remain free.”²⁰

The economic logic and the need for freedom have contributed to an individualistic perspective that has shaped the anthropology and social relationships of modernity, leading to a detachment from both classical thought and any practice that may be fully described as “care.” Nevertheless, experience has shown that, even in a perfect world “in which the dread of war is erased, nobody starves to death, and everybody has the necessary resources to live a decent life, there would still always be the need for care.”²¹ “No one is merely a *homo oeconomicus*, an agent of the market, nor simply a *homo politicus*, an abstract citizen, but also, and always, a subject who needs care to live and live well. It is the relationships of care, affection, and solidarity that nourish one’s sense of self-worth and belonging within a community.”²²

2. Care as Politics

Care is a practice governed by a logic of giving which, in its purest sense, does not belong to a culture shaped by exchange and utility. Giving presupposes freedom. Even though receiving a gift implicitly entails an obligation to reciprocate, the manner and timing of such reciprocation are not rigidly determined. Since this is a moral obligation, the value of a gift lies in the absence of guarantees for the donor, which requires profound trust in the other.²³

Derrida pushes this contrast to its limit. He emphasizes that a gift may be both an object and an act, rather than something that should be reciprocated, since it does not involve exchange and is not characterized by the circular movement of economic logic. A gift can be described as such only

¹⁹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2, Part 4, 663.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 664.

²¹ Mortari, *Filosofia della cura*, 14, our translation.

²² Serughetti, *Il vento conservatore*, 137-138, our translation.

²³ Godbout, *Lo spirito del dono*.

if it breaks the circularity of exchange, follows a non-economic logic, and challenges the principles of mutuality and symmetry. In its absolute form, the gift should not appear as a gift to either the donor or the recipient. It should be accompanied by a mode of forgetting that erases the memory of giving itself and, consequently, any possibility of recognition, consciousness, and intentionality.²⁴

Such a pure gift does not structurally fit within a logic of care that is grounded in relationship, recognition, responsibility, and symbolic reciprocity. Operating within ever-evolving relational structures, care differs from the logic of the gift as it does not aim at transcendence or absolute gratuity, but rather constitutes a practice based on interdependence. However, this evident tension retains a trace of Derrida's conception of the gift insofar as a practice of care includes an aspect that exceeds exchange, a surplus that recalls Heidegger's authentic care, which does not impose itself, but allows the other to be.

More generally, a logic of care implies a recognized and intentional relationship, be it either symmetrical (when the responsibility of care is mutually distributed in the relational dyad) or asymmetrical (when responsibility is consciously taken on by only one participant).²⁵ In the latter case, a specific issue arises that is associated with an increase in responsibility, with the cared-for relying, or being made to rely, on the one-caring. Consequently, the one-caring is at one end of the relationship, while the cared-for occupies a subordinate position at the other.²⁶ Each relationship also entails a form of power. In asymmetrical relationships, this "is a crucial element, since it is connected with one of the ends of the relationship; it is not a dynamic element that is redistributed based on the quality of the experiences lived by both",²⁷ remaining linked to the one-caring.

Relationships of care need to be concrete, immediately experienced in daily life. While this mostly occurs through direct interaction, some relationships may unfold more formally and indirectly, such as those between rulers and citizens. Regardless of their form, all these relationships may be part of a practice of care in which the logic of the gift is enacted, provided it is conscious and intentional.

Therefore, the concept of care is broad and multifaceted. It cannot be limited solely to healthcare practices, nor to the care of children, the elderly, and vulnerable subjects. Rather, it should be situated within a more general context: "[c]are is a species activity that includes everything that

²⁴ Derrida, *Donare il tempo*.

²⁵ Mortari, *La pratica dell'aver cura*, 47.

²⁶ Mortari, *Filosofia della cura*, 82.

²⁷ Mortari, *La pratica dell'aver cura*, 48, our translation.

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, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.”²⁸

This general dimension of care shows that it is a mistake to regard the sphere of assistance and that of politics as unrelated. Assistance should not be reduced to a matter of compassion and kindness, just as politics should not be understood merely as a matter of prestige and competition.

The world of care and that of politics are deeply interconnected, especially in a democratic setting. Rethinking their relationship and interdependence is fundamental to democracy. Saying that care is politics means thinking of politics with both a small “p” and a capital “P.” Small-p politics occurs in everyday life, which itself should be seen as political, since all care, every response to a need, involves power relationships. However, every caring act also is capital-p politics, since it is situated within a broader political context that reflects the values, laws, customs, and institutions of a given society.²⁹ This framework supports the argument developed in this paper that care should be understood not merely as an ethical disposition, but as a political paradigm capable of addressing vulnerability within contemporary society.

While Tronto’s suggestion is crucial for highlighting the political importance of care beyond the private sphere, more recent developments have also emphasized its institutional and systemic implications. In particular, Engster argues that care constitutes a normative foundation of political theory grounded in the satisfaction of essential needs and the maintenance of social interdependence.³⁰

Building on these approaches, care may be reconceptualized as a general principle for structuring collective responses to vulnerability, especially in contexts of global uncertainty and risk. In this sense, care transcends its ethical origins to become a paradigm of political organization capable of reconfiguring the relations between individuals, institutions, and shared conditions of vulnerability.

Regardless of how care is interpreted, all the values and human goods at play expose human beings to risk. “Caring about children, friends, loved ones”, and “caring about political citizenship and political action; caring, in general, about being able to act rather than simply to be” define the interests and relationships that place those who cherish them at the

²⁸ Fisher and Tronto, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring”, 40; Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 103.

²⁹ Tronto, *Who cares?*.

³⁰ Engster, “Care Ethics, Dependency, and Vulnerability.”

mercy of luck.³¹ These are vulnerable bonds, subject to the contingencies of reality, which may weaken or even destroy relational ties.

Risk may be considered the paradigm of the contemporary world, where facts and phenomena increasingly transform into emergencies, making it difficult to plan for the future.³² Such a society tends towards catastrophe, as the systemic and interconnected nature of modern crises – which elude any spatial and temporal constraint – threatens to turn the state of exception into the norm.³³ Accordingly, emergency “is no longer merely an exceptional break that interrupts the flow of normalcy: it is a complex mechanism that redefines power relationships, redistributes vulnerability, transforms rules and languages, and above all gives rise to new forms of political legitimacy grounded in the management of uncertainty. Therefore, governing emergency means governing time itself, the rhythm of decision-making, and the narrative of crises.”³⁴

Consequently, the key to interpreting present times lies in realising that while all goods are inherently precarious, relational goods are uniquely so, as they simultaneously enrich life and increase its vulnerability. Although this vulnerability is intrinsic to having a body that is subject to wounds and deterioration, it is amplified by circumstances that do not depend on natural needs, but are rather influenced by exceptional conditions often created and fostered by human intervention: food shortages, natural disasters, wars, nuclear threats, pandemics, and, in general, lack of security, which culminates in the experience of fear.³⁵

³¹ Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, xxix.

³² Preite, “Rischio. Futuro e paradossi della modernità”, 45.

³³ Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*.

³⁴ Preite, *Filosofia politica e governo delle emergenze*, 21, our translation.

³⁵ The contemporary debate on the concept of vulnerability distinguishes between different interconnected analytical levels. Firstly, a form of ontological or essential vulnerability may be identified, understood as a constitutive feature of the human condition and grounded in corporeality, relational dependence, and exposure to violence and loss. See Butler, *Precarious Life; Frames of War; Cavarero, Inclinations*. Secondly, a form of structural or socio-institutional vulnerability, resulting from social, economic, and legal organization, is expressed through systemic inequalities and the asymmetric distribution of risk and protection. This perspective is prominent within theories of the “responsive state” and the “vulnerable subject.” See Fineman, “The Vulnerable Subject”; Fineman, Spitz, *Law, Vulnerability, and the Responsive State*. A third form of vulnerability, which is relational and based on dependency, emerges within the ethics of care and highlights the centrality of relations of interdependence in the definition of justice and socio-political responsibility. See Engster, *The Heart of Justice; “Care Ethics, Dependency, and Vulnerability.”* Alongside these dimensions, a dynamic and contextual form of vulnerability is addressed in interdisciplinary literature. Manifesting itself in situations of risk and crisis, it results from the interaction between individual, social, and environmental factors. See Esposito, Turano, *Vulnerabilità, rischio e crisi*. All these perspectives converge in describing vulnerability not as an exception or a deviation from the norm, but as a universal

3. Care: Fear and Global Risk

The most ancient of the primordial passions, fear is experienced even by animals. However, it takes on a distinctive role in human beings, since they are the only beings capable of conceiving death. Biologically deficient, they can live in any natural environment only by creating a second nature, an artificial world that compensates for their biological limitations.³⁶

The feeling of fear gains crucial political-philosophical significance in early modernity, serving as the main drive for self-preservation. In Hobbes's thought, fear arises from the natural equality among human beings who, driven by selfish passions, attack each other and become a mutual threat. This is a fundamental fear, as life itself is at risk. The relationship between fear and reason thus becomes evident, as fear transforms into a reasonable passion that leads human beings to enter civil society and pursue peace.³⁷

The construction of the political artifice implies a double sacrifice. The first involves renouncing one's rights and passions (ultimately, renouncing one's freedom) in exchange for security. The second sacrifice consists in negating the social bond and embracing the immunitary logic, which constitutes the modern response to the danger of mutual destruction.³⁸

However, the fear characterizing the global age no longer follows this linear dynamic, as it fails to transform into a mobilizing response. This new kind of fear is caused by a radical change in the sources and nature of danger, which is increasingly uncertain and indeterminate. Such a character leads to the perception that "[w]here everything turns into a hazard, somehow nothing is dangerous anymore." Therefore, in a risk society, contrasting effects may be observed that range from fear escalating into hysteria to complete indifference.³⁹

Even taking into account the shift from the concept of danger to that of risk, contemporary global fear differs from (Hobbesian) modern

condition that is variably shaped and legally salient, thereby requiring distinct and context-sensitive instruments of protection.

³⁶ Gehlen, *Prospettive antropologiche*, 68-69.

³⁷ Pulcini, "Paura, legame sociale, ordine politico in Thomas Hobbes."

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 74. The immunitary paradigm is used to interpret the relationship between power and life. Rather than viewing power solely as subordinating and negating life, or as fostering and protecting it, the immunitary model encompasses both these negative and positive perspectives. Negation does not take the form of the violent subordination that power imposes on life, but rather is the "intrinsically antinomic mode by which life preserves itself through power" (Esposito, *Bios*, 46).

³⁹ Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, 37.

fear, since it is incapable of a productive metamorphosis, due to its being marked by a destructive and non-generative character.⁴⁰

Starting from the premise that communities and societies are constitutive dimensions of human experience, the need becomes evident (particularly in the global age) to reflect on possible barriers against the erosion of the social bond. It is crucial “to address the pathologies of individualism by recovering forms of alliance and solidarity” and “to resist dynamics of exclusion that emerge in the globalized society in multiple forms.”⁴¹

Any reflection on the possibility of building a community and on the obstacles to relating with the other highlights a core dilemma. It remains profoundly difficult to reconcile individual freedom, understood as an essential good resulting from the primacy of the modern subject, with the constraints of reality. This tension is particularly evident when seeking security guarantees in the face of escalating risks. Freedom thus collides with another constitutive aspect of the human condition: the need to continually confront events, actions, and decisions that do not depend on the individual. This reveals the *conditioned* nature of human existence⁴² and its ontological fragility and vulnerability. Only by containing human fragility and vulnerability is it possible to reclaim spaces of freedom that would otherwise be crushed by the weight of contingency.

In addressing vulnerability, Jonas proposes a kind of ethics of responsibility of human beings for human beings. This takes shape in a relationship that, “though unilateral in itself and in every single case, is yet, on principle, reversible and includes possible reciprocity. Generically, indeed, the reciprocity is always there, insofar as I, who am responsible for someone, am always, by living among men, also someone’s responsibility.”⁴³ This view follows from the fact that, by taking the human being as a point of reference, the precarious, vulnerable, and revocable character of the living being is emphasized. This makes it “a proper object of ‘caring’”, highlighting how “it shares with the agent subject the *humanum*, which has the first, if not the sole claim on him.”⁴⁴ Building on the premise that everyone has first-hand experience of parental care, Jonas shows that

⁴⁰ Fear is an immediate reaction to something that the subject perceives as a source of danger. While danger refers to uncontrollable events, risk concerns decision-making processes, choices whose consequences one attempts to assess. The distinction between the two concepts is not absolute, since a dangerous situation may be construed as a risk, and vice versa. For instance, seismic danger may become seismic risk if containment measures are adopted. By contrast, risks taken by decision-makers may be experienced as dangers by those who are not involved in the decision-making process (Longo, “Paura”).

⁴¹ Pulcini, *La cura del mondo*, 14, our translation.

⁴² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 25-26.

⁴³ Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 98.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

responsibility extends to all living beings that, in their constitutive indigence and fragility, can become objects of responsibility. Accordingly, the child's education, which enables them to enter the human world, is accompanied by "the transmission of the entire code of societal convictions and norms, through whose appropriation the individual becomes a member of the wider community. The private opens itself essentially to the public and includes it."⁴⁵ As a result, the development of the citizen emerges as an immanent aim of education and as part of parental responsibility, not merely because it is imposed by the state. Reciprocity is highlighted insofar as the state, in turn, assumes responsibility for the education of the young. Responsibility, understood as an asymmetric relationship, results directly from the emotional and ontological response to the vulnerability of the other, that is, from feelings of concern that give rise to a form of authentic obligation, which is subsequently translated into concrete norms.

The limitation of such an approach lies in its envisioning a potential community where the possible forms of solidarity are based solely on ethically responsible action, regardless of the individual's motivations. This is because the vulnerability of the global age, often resulting from human technical interventions, shows unprecedented features: "the nature of human action has *de facto* changed", to the point that "an object of an entirely new order – no less than the whole biosphere of the planet – has been added to what we must be responsible for."⁴⁶

A radical shift has occurred from traditional ethics, which presupposes an anthropocentric perspective and is concerned with individual behaviour, virtue needing to prove itself, and vice exposing itself. Within this framework, any relationship with "the nonhuman world, that is, the whole realm of *techne* (with the exception of medicine), was ethically neutral; in respect both of the object and the subject of such action."⁴⁷ By contrast, modern *techne* has introduced unprecedented actions, objects, and consequences that can no longer be subsumed under traditional ethics.

However, an anthropocentric ethical approach still persists, insofar as human fate, in its natural conditioning, continues to serve as the ultimate point of reference: the fundamental situation of interpersonal relationships remains unchanged, and all action originates from it. Yet, "the cumulative self-propagation of the technological change of the world constantly overtakes the conditions of its contributing acts and moves through none but unprecedented situations, for which the lessons of experience are

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

powerless.⁴⁸ The disappearance of “the containment of nearness and contemporaneity” opens onto a spatial and temporal extension that requires taking into account the global condition of human life and the distant future; ultimately, the survival of the species.⁴⁹

Consequently, a new concept of rights and obligations emerges, one unaccounted for in traditional ethics. It requires respect and duty to extend beyond human interests, thus overcoming the anthropocentric limits of earlier ethical frameworks. If such a perspective is embraced, not only human good, but also extrahuman good should be pursued. This entails a global expansion of the concept of care.

The specific features of the global age prompt a rethinking of not only ethical, but also social and political perspectives. It becomes crucial to understand whether contemporary dynamics can still support an idea of community and whether relationships can be formed that embody some form of care. In this regard, Esposito reflects on the idea of community by returning to the Latin root of the term. The word comes from *cum munus*, where *munus* refers to a gift understood as an obligation; a giving that binds the members of the social body, an internal norm arising from communal need. However, despite being necessary, the community remains unattained and unattainable, as seen in several political and philosophical perspectives, including Hobbes’s thought, which identifies shared fear as the force that unites naturally hostile individuals. This “defective” form of the community is intertwined with the concept of *immunis*, which designates exemption: it removes the *munus* from the community and preserves the identity of the subject. In modernity, a process of immunization has occurred, whereby, while *communitas* “binds individuals to something that pushes them beyond themselves”, *immunitas* “reconstructs their identity by protecting them from a risky contiguity with the other.”⁵⁰

The fear of *the other* is one of the main sources of risk of modernity, even though *the other* is no longer the rival or the enemy in a relationship that is conflictual but concrete. *The other* increasingly becomes a disturbing and threatening presence to be kept at a distance. It is someone who instils fear not because of similarity, but because they embody the very idea of difference, be it cultural, religious, or ethnic. In the global age, the concept of *the other* undergoes a radical transformation, as it is no longer defined by the in-group/out-group duality that long underpinned the idea of keeping the foreigner-enemy beyond the border in order to strengthen internal bonds. The very notion of the border has lost its significance,

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 7

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Esposito, *Communitas*, 47-50.

along with any guarantee of immunity. In the face of global contagion, the alternatives are either the negation of the community or the restoration of a logic of community that may encourage to interpret reality from a perspective beyond selfish individualism.

Esposito proposes reclaiming community through a reconfiguration of freedom that moves away from its modern, individualistic framing. During modernity, freedom undergoes a process of immunization that ties it to a subjectivist logic, in which the subject precedes the freedom they may attain, with freedom being seen as a good to be owned, conquered, and exercised. Yet, an analysis of the original meaning of the word shows that, in various languages, the roots of “freedom” appear in terms referring to community and communal growth.⁵¹ This suggests that the word “freedom” did not originally denote immunity, but described the idea of openness towards the community and the other.⁵²

If the original meaning of freedom were emphasized, the erosion of the social bond could be avoided, with the individual regaining awareness of the need to live with, for, and through the other.

In the face of increasingly global and unpredictable risks, a change of approach is crucial. This requires an inter-relational perspective that connects the individual with a community grounded in an unselfish, inclusive logic, as freedom regains its original ties to social and political responsibility. However, this kind of responsibility should not take the form of obligation, as Jonas suggests. Rather, it should be expressed as a concern for the other, ultimately embracing the concept of care, which,

in its etymological essence, unites the ideas of concern and solicitude. As a result, a new aspect of the concept of responsibility should be considered, one that emphasizes the active, concrete, and engaging commitment to caring. This approach prevents the ethics of responsibility from being reduced to an abstract ideal or a purely theoretical principle.⁵³

Caring thus means recognizing that individual existences are interconnected and that such interdependence calls for everyday practices that shape the concrete form that freedom takes.

The immunitary paradigm, as developed by Esposito, is grounded in a protective logic that seeks to preserve life through exclusion, neutraliza-

⁵¹ This is the case with *leuth* and *frya*. *Leuth* is the root from which the Greek word *eleutheria* and the Latin term *libertas* derive, while *frya* underlies the English *freedom* and the German *Freiheit*. These roots also appear in words such as *love* and *friend*, which evoke the ideas of community and communal growth.

⁵² Esposito, *Terms of the Political*, 47-56.

⁵³ Pulcini, *La cura del mondo*, 22, our translation.

tion, and the regulation of exposure. In the face of contemporary emergencies, this immunitary logic of separation and differentiation comes into conflict with the recognition that no one saves themselves alone.

Care introduces a different orientation. Rather than eliminating vulnerability or erecting defences against it, care acknowledges the constitutive and irreducible dimension of human life. In this sense, care may be understood as a post-immunitary paradigm, as it redefines protection not as separation, but as a relational and dynamic process.

Care does not merely stand in opposition to immunity. It reconfigures its meaning, transforming protection into a practice of collective and continuous commitment to addressing vulnerability. This shift becomes particularly relevant in contexts where vulnerability cannot be eliminated, but needs to be politically mediated and shared.

These perspectives increase the awareness that understanding freedom as a relational concept is increasingly necessary, with concern for the other constituting the condition for collective survival. Care is a political practice; trust is the invisible infrastructure that makes cooperation possible. Trust is realized each time “a subject makes a trusting choice towards another, and the recipient responds reliably, even when this comes at a cost.”⁵⁴

Freedom, responsibility, and trust are interpretive keys to dealing with contemporary emergencies. The latter are indeed “opportunities to question the forms of coexistence, redefine the boundaries of citizenship, and rethink politics as a practice of care for shared vulnerabilities. Only if vulnerability is considered a common foundation can emergency be transformed from a time of fear into a space of possibility, capable of paving the way for new frameworks of justice and freedom.”⁵⁵

This requires a framework in which resilience is understood not merely as the ability to withstand shocks, but as the capacity to reorganise living conditions in creative and generative ways. This would redefine the relationship between vulnerability and power, crisis and possibility, with resilience becoming a transformative attitude of existence. Practices of resilience, especially grassroots ones, “question the vertical logics of governance, creating spaces of autonomy, solidarity, and experimentation.”⁵⁶

Within the context of global risk – characterized by ecological crisis, technological interdependence, and systemic uncertainty – vulnerability takes on a new, pervasive character. As Jonas argues, the scope and irreversibility of contemporary threats call for a future-oriented ethics of responsibility.

⁵⁴ Mazzotta, “Fiducia. Opportunità e vincoli per il futuro”, 199, our translation.

⁵⁵ Preite, *Filosofia politica e governo delle emergenze*, 74, our translation.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

Introducing a relational and distributed model of responsibility, care emerges as a political response to global risk. Rather than addressing exposure through strategies of isolation, it relies on forms of collective organization and mutual support.

Within this framework, care is conceptualized as a paradigm of resilience, offering an alternative to both defensive models of political order and individualistic approaches.

A concrete shift from “freedom despite the other” to “freedom through the other” is fraught with difficulty, also due to the persistently unstable balance between defence and exposure, *immunitas* and *communitas*. Yet, amid contemporary crises, such a shift becomes necessary in order to navigate emergencies. Being free through the other is part of a relational process that needs to be supported and nurtured, with political care becoming an attempt to keep the relational space open without denying vulnerability. Where care fails, relationships break down. When relationships dissolve, freedom loses its meaning. This is too high a risk for a world that, exposed to continuous emergencies, is in constant need of care.

By situating care at the intersection of vulnerability, political organization, and global risk, this paper advances a framework that conceptualizes care as a paradigm of political resilience. Such a paradigm aims to reorganize vulnerability without neutralizing it, while rethinking freedom, responsibility, and coexistence beyond the logics of protection and exclusion.

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