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WORK AS CARE, CARE AS WORK: THE CONTRIBUTION OF EVA FEDER KITTAI AND SIBYL A. SCHWARZENBACH TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF WORK'S VALUE

Abstract

In this paper I attempt to reveal a woman's intuition in understanding the value of labor (considered as satisfying one's bodily needs). My central idea is that it has much to do with the notion of care and that care ethics contributes to the comprehension of the concept of labor and every work in general.

The starting point is an overview of two different perspectives on labor: understanding work as care and care as work. The first approach is represented by Sibyl A. Schwarzenbach and her idea of "ethical reproduction" (or "reproductive labor") which aims to fulfil one's needs or to create relationships based on friendship. The second approach is that of Eva Feder Kittay who advocates the need and social and political convenience of considering care as work, with all its intrinsic characteristics.

Both feminist philosophers go beyond the liberal notion of work as ownership relation (Locke) and the neoliberal productive assumption of work as a domain of power and productive capacity. Strongly convinced of the existence of profound social interdependency, Feder Kittay and Schwarzenbach emphasize the importance of dealing with human fragility in and through work and of fostering friendly relations.

Our contemporary society is a "society of tiredness" and of burnout professionals (Byng-Chul) but still a precarious community (Standing), marked by the existence of those uncared for, whose present and future labor is uncertain. We need a balanced

view on work, a voice combining common sense and humanistic vision. A woman's voice, a *different voice* (Gilligan) can serve as a meaningful framework to create more true-to-life public policies regarding work and more adequate social patterns to approach this issue. Work understood as labor (Arendt) may consequently be rediscovered and given its proper value.

My aim here is not to give a detailed explanation of the ideas mentioned above but rather to introduce into public debate the consideration of care as an inherent mark of each work.

KEYWORDS

care, care ethics, work, labor, fragility, dependence, precariat

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

troska, etyka troski, praca, zatrudnienie, kruchość, zależność, prekariat

1. INTRODUCTION

A quick look at the way people live in contemporary society is sufficient to detect inequalities in opportunities, benefits, claims and disappointments regarding one's professional occupation. Many suffer from professional burnout due to work overdose. Others cannot find stable employment and move from one work to another in the hope of finding a permanent workplace. Obligated to work beyond the limits of their possibilities or to accept underpaid jobs, they fall into grief and despair. Much of this could be considered true for the deplorable situation of women in the labor market in many places around the world¹. Women are limited by gender biases and by social expectations to care for those who are somehow dependent: the sick, elder or disabled². Immersed in household duties, they often receive no economic gratification for their tasks. Although assumed to be citizens equal to others, they are sometimes deprived of basic political rights such as the right to have remunerated holidays, to participate in social activities, to obtain medical assurance, among others³. The question that arises is: does

¹ M.C. Nussbaum, *Kobiety i praca. Perspektywa zdolności*, A. Skucińska (transl.), „Znak” 2005, Vol. 4, pp. 75–103.

² E. Feder Kittay, *Equality, dignity and disability*, (in:) M.A. Lyons, F. Waldron (eds.), *Perspectives on equality. The Second Seamus Heaney Lectures*, Dublin 2005, pp. 93–119.

³ M.C. Nussbaum, Long-term care and social justice: A challenge to conventional ideas of the social contract, (in:) World Health Organization, *Ethical choices in long-term care: What does*

the phenomenon of lack of balance between an excess of work and its deficiency is the matter of justice?

My response to the question is the following: the contemporary issue of work is not only and foremost a matter of justice, i.e. of the equal distribution of goods (equal access to work and equal labor conditions), as it may appear from the situation described above, and as John Rawls, not without some reason, would state⁴. Such an argument derives from what could be categorized as a quantitative approach to work (how much work for how many people). In my opinion this is not a complete view of work. Moreover, it seems to foster a superficial vision of work, incapable of taking into account its inner significance. I would claim that we need to put more emphasis on the qualitative approach represented by care ethics and the feminist theory. Both these perspectives underline the importance of work as the source and the venue for personal relations which transcend the private sphere and reach the social and political spheres. Such a perspective illuminates a more humanistic vision of work, contradicting neoliberal practices directed at achieving and producing the maximum possible of material goods, thus demeaning the inner scope of work. Two voices from distinct cultural contexts and backgrounds seem to confirm this initial intuition.

The first one comes from the Korean philosopher, Byung-Chul Han. In the intriguing essay entitled *Society of tiredness*⁵, he argues that a major disease we suffer from in the 21st century is a sickness (depression, burn-out, stress, etc.) caused by the prevalence of *vita activa* – a kind of human activity directed to overcome one's professional possibilities, fostered by the inner pursuit of never-ending perfection. It has much to do with the idea of placing the value of work exclusively on what is visible, measurable and extrinsically evaluated. The author of the essay affirms that individuals tend to perceive the struggle to become more competitive as an obligation. Such an attitude follows the pattern of the disciplinary society (in Foucault's voice), designed to shape the contemporary habits of restriction and order. The individualized society in which all its members are focused on their outcomes can only be re-united in the experience of tiredness, understood as a biological phenomenon shared with animals. A community is built in opposition to work, or better said: a linking experience goes through a commonly shared sensation of being exhausted. The author of *Society of tiredness* conveys the idea of work as extremely individualist, without influence in bringing its members together.

justice require?, WHO Report 2002, pp. 31–65, http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/notes/ethical_choices.pdf (accessed 28.03.2022).

⁴ J. Rawls, *Teoria sprawiedliwości*, M. Panufnik et al. (transl.), Warszawa 2009.

⁵ H. Byung-Chul, *Spoleczeństwo zmęczenia*, M. Sutowski (transl.), „Krytyka Polityczna” 2017, Vol. 45, pp. 37–63.

The second illustration of the contemporary perspective on work is from the British sociologist and philosopher Gay Standing. In his book *Precariat*⁶, he portrays the phenomenon of the uprising of a social class bearing the name of his book's title. This new class in progress can be formed by different individuals: young professionals, women, elderly people, immigrants and almost everybody whose future workplace is uncertain or temporary. All that they have in common is the sensation of uneasiness and being cast away. The lack of perception of their own personal value combined with the lack of respect for their task, whatever form it takes, is the root of their personal dissatisfaction. In some way we too may feel uneasy when nobody cares about us and our work, or when we live our life (or work) in a climate of indifference. A social component of work appears here: work can be seen as the realm of personal and social interaction, as something that binds people together or makes them feel isolated, frustrated. Among many other interesting points in Standing's vision, he returns to the question of the social, political and economic undervaluation of women's tasks, mainly those performed at home or related to the care of others. This is surprisingly so despite the fact that this occupation answers everybody's bodily (human) needs, and as such should be universally acclaimed and cherished. As Standing points out, caring about the family and performing household activity has been traditionally assigned to women who generally shoulder the responsibility over such occupations. However, throughout history the concept of care as work has not appeared in economic statistics and social policy. In the 20th century it was not even considered as work, because it was not remunerated and belonged entirely to the private sphere⁷. Along with increased access to the marketplace, women became mainly breadwinners and could not devote time equally to care for children, house and sick elders and relatives⁸. Greater attention was given to the meaning of care because as women had to perform other tasks, the demands of care became more visible.

In this paper I attempt to briefly expose the contribution of feminist theory represented by Eva Feder Kittay and Sibyl A. Schwarzenbach in understanding the value of work. Hence, my aim is not to give a detailed explanation of the ideas promoted by these authors. Rather, I wish to highlight the notion of care, understood as an inherent mark of each work, and which, in some circumstances, can also be considered as work itself.

⁶ G. Standing, *Precariat. Nowa niebezpieczna klasa*, Warszawa 2018.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 141.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

2. ASSUMPTIONS

The vision presented herewith is supported by two general assumptions: first, related to the perspective from which I consider work in this paper; second, to some linguistic and descriptive notions I refer to, such as care, work and action. As I mentioned previously, there is a need for a more human (humanistic) perspective on work, i. e., a qualitative one. This requires some prior premises: (i) the assumption of work as a primarily human activity, (ii) the consideration of the notion of care as central in the performance of each labor, (iii) the acceptance of the crucial role of women's activity directed to meet some biological needs of the family members and other relatives, (iv) the recognition of the personal, social and political impact of care as directed to individuals who are present in all these spheres.

I approach the notion of care from the perspective of a recent contribution to this issue, namely care ethics. I thus understand care as an action ideally derived from the attitude of caring about someone, aiming to achieve the flourishing or wellbeing of the person cared for⁹. It also involves an emotional bond, although it cannot be reduced to that¹⁰. This short description takes into account the *fragility* of the person as a subject of care¹¹.

I use the term "active life" to refer to the usage of a form of *vita activa* – labor – as contemplated by Hannah Arendt in her work *Human condition*¹². According to Arendt, this type of human activity is directed at maintaining and conserving a biological level of life, satisfying a desire to eat, drink, rest, etc. Work perceived as an animal labor leaves no trace in the world, since its product is immediately consumed. Such work linked to inevitable human fragility, originally and traditionally not estimated as a "free" occupation but relegated to servants and women, may today be rediscovered and given its proper value. Here one difficulty arises. When I speak of care as work, it may seem that I am not precise enough, because the author of *Human condition* considers work as another type of human activity directed at providing an "artificial" world of things¹³.

Hence the difference between care and work seems obvious, since care produces "nothing"; while in John Locke's words, also evoked by Arendt, "the labor of our body and the work of our hands" are oriented towards production and ownership of what has been produced in that way¹⁴. However, I take a more

⁹ M. González, C. Iffland (eds.), *Care professions and globalization. Theoretical and practical perspectives*, New York 2014, pp. 2–3.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

¹² H. Arendt, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ J. Locke, *Dwa traktaty o rządzie*, Z. Rau (transl.), Warszawa 2015, pp. 270–271.

general (linguistic) appreciation of work as a noun which represents a person's employment or occupation¹⁵. It may be then more proper to speak about care as labor which is linked to the perception of trouble or difficulty¹⁶. As Arendt points out, "Locke's distinction between working hands and laboring body is somewhat reminiscent of the ancient Greek distinction between (...) the craftsman (...), and those who, like 'slaves and tame animals with their bodies minister to the necessities of life'"¹⁷. I thus refer to a broader concept of work in this paper.

The starting point is the general overview of two different perspectives on work: understanding work as care and care as work. The first approach is represented by Sibyl A. Schwarzenbach's idea of "ethical reproduction" (or, in other words, of "reproductive labor"), the aim of which is either to fulfil one's needs or to create a relationship based on friendship. The second one, in words of Eva Feder Kittay, advocates the need and social and political convenience of considering care as work, with all its intrinsic characteristics.

3. SCHWARZENBACH'S ETHICAL REPRODUCTION ACTIVITY (LABOR) AS CARE

The American philosopher and representative of the feminist theory, Sibyl A. Schwarzenbach, gives us an interesting insight into the issue of care in the contemporary state (*polis*), and its role in building relations among citizens. She dwells on what can be the binding element of the common public life instead of the liberal norms of regulating the market that proved to be insufficient to maintain social and political cohesion. In her essay *On civic friendship*¹⁸, developed with more extent in her further writing¹⁹, she argues that this element is the aristotelian notion of *philia* ('friendship'). *Philia* is present in all activities performed for the sake of the others. But how is care related to friendship? Care is one of the instances of friendship and also a principle essential to traditional women's work, largely unacknowledged²⁰. Although the notion of friendship constitutes the central theme of her reflection, I would put more emphasis on the subsidiary theme that the American philosopher considers, i. e., the reproductive activity of women. But first I will trace a more general context necessary for the comprehension of her ideas.

¹⁵ J.M. Hawkins, R. Allen (eds.) *The Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary*, New York 1991, p. 1665.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 799.

¹⁷ H. Arendt, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

¹⁸ S.A. Schwarzenbach, *On civic friendship*, "Ethics" 1996, Vol. 107, pp. 97–128.

¹⁹ *Eadem*, *On civic friendship. Including women in the state*, New York 2009.

²⁰ *Eadem*, *On civic friendship*... 1996, p. 99, 119.

A crucial point in Schwarzenbach's vision of work is the distinction between productive and nonproductive work (labor), with her insistence of the value of the latter, underestimated and underconsidered by the liberal philosophy. She is careful to envisage the benefits but also the limits of the society and of work based only on the distributive model of social justice and incomes as the main factor of wellbeing. The second distinction she makes is on the possibility of speaking about public or civic care, thus considering care as something important not only for the private domain, but significant for the public sphere as well. Civic care would work *via* the constitution and observation of public standards of civil behavior²¹. In this sense, she is conscious about the private (so to say) origins of many economic and political principles, with care for family members as its root. Thirdly, though she does not limit her consideration to the female *vita activa*, it is obvious that the womens' perspective counts as the important one. Finally, care for her, far beyond the emotional ties – which make possible its presence in the public sphere – is also “the intelligent and emotionally competent activity which not only perceives both the concrete and general good of person (or object), but which seeks to bring that good about”²². So what characteristics are appropriate to the activity of women performed largely at home? And, first of all, what is the traditional women's activity understood as reproductive?

Schwarzenbach enumerates them as follows: caring for others – infants and children, cooking their meals, feeding and playing²³. She insists that what they have in common is that they are rational – involving the notion of aim, intelligence. As such, she does not hesitate to call these activities ethical. Where there exists a choice of action and where reason is active, the ethical connotation persists. Hence, the author undermines the exclusively emotional connotation of care as described by Noddings, among others. Another characteristic she considers is that these activities are political, meaning they occur within the political community and have some relation with the polis. These distinctions lead to the affirmation that the traditional reproductive activity of women can be called ethical reproduction because the good action is its own end. This is what makes it differ from productive activity directed to some product²⁴. Mothers in fact enjoy providing for their children. These activities, according to Schwarzenbach, should not however be limited to mother – children relations, but should extend to relations within all the members of the political community, independently of their sex or gender status. The reason is that we all “need to receive repeated acts of unique attention and care”²⁵.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 122.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 120.

²³ *Ibidem*, pp. 102–103.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 104.

These aforementioned points lead to the last characteristic of reproductive, ethical labor. In Schwarzenbach's words it can be described as *praxis* or a moral action, following Aristotele's definition²⁶. This is an extremely interesting observation as it dignifies and elevates ordinary labor. It allows for the appreciation of work which seems meaningless to political and social life. Schwarzenbach manages to demonstrate that there exists (perhaps yet to be better exposed in the public sphere) a deep connection between activities performed in a household sphere and relations based on friendship maintained in the public sphere. Consequently, the typical disregard and the demeaning of women's activity can be transformed into due respect and consciousness of its capacity to bind individuals together.

4. FEDER KITTAY'S VISION OF CARE AS DEPENDENCY WORK

The importance of care not only in the private but also in the public sphere is a theme that has been widely promoted by the most prominent philosophers and advocates of care ethics like Carol Gilligan or Martha Nussbaum, among others. The contribution of care ethics to political philosophy seems today to be obvious and unquestioned. However, linking care with work, or better said, understanding care as work is a concept that can be especially attributed to the American feminist Eva Feder Kittay. She exposed this argument in her book *Love's labor*²⁷ in which she affirms that caring about dependents is work. Again, some general context is needed in order to present her vision on care.

Once again, as in the case of Schwarzenbach, Kittay centers her thoughts on the wide range of the typical female activity – that performed by mothers, sisters, wives, daughters – who have undertaken the burden of caring about those who are somehow dependent – ill, disabled, etc.²⁸. But we must be careful not to equate the pursuit of one's wellbeing or of the thriving of one's charge with domestic work²⁹. These aims could also be achieved in the private sphere – through nurseries, hospitals and towards charges that are not family members. Further, this kind of activity – caring as she explains, is a non-gendered term, even if traditionally mainly women were implicated in this kind of duties³⁰. In doing so, Kittay

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

²⁷ E. Feder Kittay, *Love's labor: Essays on women, equality and dependency*, New York, London 1999.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 30–31.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. ix.

somehow calls for a more equal distribution of care in society, without depending exclusively on women.

Kittay criticizes the vision of society as equals, mainly because the individuals that constitute the society are not equals. "We are in connections of care"³¹, she insists, which means that our dependence or interdependence is something corroborated in human life and everyday experience. The fact that Rawls fails to attend to the fact of human dependency³² is the reason why the author of *Love's labor* considers liberal and democratic elements configuring social and political life as incomplete. The liberal vision of society which is based on the protagonism of interdependent, rational, mature and self-sufficient individuals lacks the perception of women's experience and of the necessity to assist and to be assisted in some way. Furthermore, for Kittay, equality, or rather the equal distribution of care is only a means towards a just society. Equality is not the root of her theory which can be concisely described as the dependence theory of care.

When Kittay makes reference to caring about dependents, she uses the noun "work", emphasizing in this way the importance of considering care as work. By dependents she understands those who cannot live independent lives and are either temporarily or permanently dependent on others. In fact, her main idea which appears in many articles she has written on care ethics, is that "we are connected through our own vulnerability when dependent and when caring for dependents"³³.

I would like to offer two interpretations of that passage: firstly, that by performing work that is aimed to supply our basic needs we are somehow connected, and this work therefore reveals a hidden, interdependent face of each work. Secondly, that each work somehow constitutes a giving – receiving relation. This personal imprint goes far beyond the productive or, in this case, non-productive domain. In any ordinary labor – and Feder Kittay assumes that care is work – there is normally a need to rest, to change occupation so that others for some time could in turn take care of our wellbeing. Here there is another notion that Kittay introduces: a *doulia* concept. What does it mean?

The concept of *doulia* comes from the noun *doulia* meaning a woman who takes care of a pregnant woman until after she gives birth, so the mother can take care of her child. If a woman has to have enough strength and energy to devote to her newborn child, somebody must support her³⁴. Consequently, Kittay proposes a new arrangement for state policy which is a *doulia* understood as public ethics of care, that is, a social responsibility for the giver³⁵. Why is this so interesting?

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 76.

³³ E. Feder Kittay, *A feminist public ethic of care meets the new communitarian family policy*, "Ethics" 2001, Vol. 111, No. 3, p. 527.

³⁴ E. Feder Kittay, *Love's labor...*, pp. 106–107.

³⁵ E. Feder Kittay, *A feminist public...*, p. 107.

Kittay reveals herein the invisible labor that is hidden in the private sphere, often underestimated and devoid of full public rights – to rest, to participate fully in public life due to multiple tasks needed to be completed at home. In fact, women working at home and caring for their relatives, close family members, are socially stigmatized. It cannot be forgotten that we “are all some mother’s child”³⁶. Each of us has benefited from the care of another who has deemed us worthy of the investment of care: if another is worthy of my care, I too am worthy of care³⁷. This reciprocity of care and the consideration of labor in terms of reciprocity can be an interesting insight into the value and the concept of work today with its prevailing economic and individualistic character. Kittay certainly goes a step further in considering the benefits and burden of social cooperation. Since my point in this paper is merely to evoke her concept of care as work, I do not make reference to her further discussion on the enlarged concept of justice, the necessity to include care into the category of primary goods and among state welfare obligations.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper I tried to expose, though in a very limited realm, the highlights of the feminist theory which stresses the value of care not only in the private, but also in the public sphere. Both authors evoked – Schwarzenbach and Kittay – sustain that the notion of care allows to maintain a more accurate vision of human activity, which, although mainly performed by women, can be a reference point and a part of *vita activa* of the whole society. They are convinced that the productive value of work, though unquestionable, cannot be the only reference point. The consideration of care as work and work as care implies an interesting perspective that could help promote an interdependent characteristic of labor (and, in fact, of every human activity). Care could become one of the central elements capable of binding the society together and of overcoming the sensation of loneliness and indifference that results from viewing life in the *polis* exclusively in terms of economic efficiency.

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³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 68.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

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