

“HOLDING HANDS AT MIDNIGHT”: THE PARADOX OF CARING LABOR

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ABSTRACT

This paper puts recent feminist theorizing about “care” within an economic context by developing the concept of caring labor and exploring possible reasons for its undervaluation. It describes the relevance of tensions between neoclassical and institutionalist thought, as well as between pro-market and anti-market views. The final section explores the implications for feminist public policy.

KEYWORDS

Caring, labor, family, policy, altruism, reciprocity

The man who only lives for making money,
Lives a life that isn't necessarily sunny.
Likewise the man who works for fame.
There's no guarantee that time won't erase his name.
The fact is, the only work that really brings enjoyment
Is the kind that comes from girl-and-boyment.
Fall in love, you won't regret it.
That's the best work of all if you can get it.
Holding hands at midnight, 'neath the starry sky,
Nice work if you can get it,
And you can get it if you try . . .

*(Nice Work If You Can Get It, by George and Ira Gershwin,
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Despite its name, this famous jazz standard isn't really about work at all, at least not as economists define it. It never refers to dish-washing or diaper-changing, the kinds of tasks that most of us would happily pay others to do for us. Rather, it suggests that a particular motive for work – love – is intrinsically superior to the desire for money or fame. Like many

songs Ira and George Gershwin wrote during the Great Depression, it defends personal values against the dictates of the marketplace.¹

Holding hands at midnight is nice work because it is caring work. But it seldom pays well, depending on whose hands one is holding. This poses something of paradox for economists. If caring is its own reward, it need not command an economic return. But if caring labor receives no economic return at all, will it persist? If the economic costs of caring go up, will the supply of it decline? These are questions that economists have historically been reluctant to address. They are, however, quite relevant to three public policy issues with which feminist economists, in particular, are concerned: pay equity, the valuation of non-market work and greater public support for parents.

In this paper, I define "caring labor," discuss several different reasons why it may be undervalued, and explore the possibility that the expansion of competitive markets will eventually reduce its supply. The first section develops a definition and a taxonomy that stresses the importance of the motives underlying the supply of labor. The second section shows that both neoclassical and institutionalist economic theories help explain why caring is economically disadvantageous. It also questions whether the appropriate response is simply to stop caring. The third section discusses some of the more important implications for feminist public policy.

I. THE CONCEPT OF CARING LABOR

Feminist theorists are increasingly fond of the term "care," but have yet to systematically explore its economic implications.² Joan Tronto writes, "Caring seems to involve taking the concerns and needs of the other as a basis for action."³ The very concept threatens the underpinnings of neoclassical economic theory: rational economic man maximizes a utility function that does not include any consideration of other people's welfare, especially those outside his immediate family.⁴ But caring implies reciprocity, altruism and responsibility.

A. A definition

Caring labor is a colloquial term that carries many different connotations. It is sometimes used to refer to specific activities (such as child care or elder care), or end-results (such as feeling cared for). Virtually any form of labor can be described as "caring" in the sense that it results in activities that help meet the needs of others. It could be defined quite broadly, since virtually all economic activities are rooted in the provisioning of human existence.⁵ Also, people "care" about many things other than people: animals, vegetables, their environment, their principles, and so on.

But the real challenge of the phrase lies in its emotional connotations, as

a type of labor distinct from that which most economists analyze in terms of measurable output per hour. Because I want to pursue the feminist emphasis on caring as concern for others, and want to ask what determines its supply, I will focus on motivations, and use the term caring labor to denote a caring motive: *labor undertaken out of affection or a sense of responsibility for other people, with no expectation of immediate pecuniary reward.*⁶

The caring motive is particularly crucial to meeting the needs of children, elderly, the sick and other dependents, but is by no means restricted to these tasks. Also, there is a distinction between motives and effects: a person may undertake a certain task out of love or caring for another person. That does not necessarily mean that the other person feels "cared for." In fact, the attentions may actually be unwelcome. Alternatively, a person may feel no real affection or emotion, yet still succeed in providing care. For instance, a well-trained but ill-humored nurse may provide better medical care than a loving parent; a dispassionate but skillful psychiatrist may assuage feelings of despair better than a loving spouse.

But even if caring labor does not always provide the best care, we expect a general correlation between the two, especially when part of the task is to make someone feel cared for, rather than simply to change the bedpan or apply a theory. Within the general category of emotional needs there is at least one that cannot be adequately met by labor supplied only for money. Love cannot be bought.

Sometimes, the motive for engaging in a certain activity affects the quality of the service being provided. Consider Richard Titmuss's classic research on the blood donations for transfusions.⁷ In an era when the quality of blood was difficult to monitor, he found that countries that relied on voluntary donations of blood, like Great Britain, fared much better than those, like the United States, which paid donors. People who gave blood for money were more likely to lie about their medical history and less likely to offer uninfected blood.

Defining caring labor as "undertaken out of affection or a sense of responsibility for others, with no expectation of immediate pecuniary reward" excludes labor that is offered *only* in response to wages. However, it does not exclude all labor in wage employment, because some people don't work for money alone. Nor does the definition exclude any particular category of tasks, because one could engage in an activity that does not involve any direct care of people (like cleaning up toxic waste) that is nevertheless motivated by a desire to help others.

B. Comparison to related concepts

Caring labor is associated with tasks that women often specialize in, such as mothering. But the concept diverges from many related terms in the feminist economist's vocabulary, such as "family labor," "unpaid labor,"

“reproductive labor,” “sex-affective production,” or “social reproduction,” which emphasize the location or type of work in a “separate sphere.” Precisely because it focuses on motives, caring labor can apply to both men and women, the market and the family, production and reproduction.

Often, concepts of caring have been embedded in the treatment of related concepts. Karl Marx, like the other classical political economists, stressed the distinction between production for use and production for exchange. Production for use implies circumstances in which the producer has control over his or her own means of production, and is motivated by direct need for the product. This does not necessarily involve caring labor. For instance, raising food for one’s own consumption, or providing the services necessary to reproduce one’s own labor power are requirements of subsistence. No love or affection or sense of responsibility whatsoever need be involved. Still, Marxists have often assumed that production for use is more likely than production for exchange to be motivated by caring.

The neoclassical tradition, which takes utility maximization as its starting point, can flexibly accommodate an infinite number of distinctive motives for labor. But it does not offer an adequate conceptualization of caring labor, because it takes utility functions as exogenously given, and ignores the issue of how they are socially constructed. Neoclassical economists tend to lump all non-pecuniary preferences together, and interpret all motivations in terms of preferences. Most would interpret caring as a manifestation of exogenously given, probably biologically determined altruism.⁸

C. A typology of caring motives

But altruism is only one of three possible motives for caring labor, which also include long-run reciprocity and the fulfillment of obligation or responsibility. The phrase “no expectation of immediate pecuniary reward” does not imply absence of self-interest. Caring labor may be elicited by long-run expectations of reciprocity of either tangible or emotional services.

Reciprocity is a much looser form of exchange than that which normally takes place in markets, and tends to be based on implicit, rather than explicit contracts, enforced by norms of cooperation. Sometimes these are quite specific in nature: You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours. Often, though, they are quite general: You care for me, and I’ll care for you. Both affection and a sense of responsibility foster reciprocity, though it may tend to break down if the probability of payback declines.

Such reliability can be interpreted in terms of a prisoners’ dilemma, a situation where two parties are better off if they cooperate (or care), but

both fear the other will fail to cooperate (or care). Social norms can help prevent a coordination (or caring) failure. The perceived probability of success will affect the supply of cooperation and/or caring. It is embarrassing and painful to care for someone if they don’t care for you.

A second type of caring labor is entirely unrelated to coordination problems, based on interdependent preferences that take an altruistic form. That is, one gets pleasure from other people’s well-being; making other people happy makes one happy. This is caring in the most emotional sense of the word, the type of caring that often characterizes couples and kin, but is by no means restricted to families. Altruism does not imply selflessness: the degree of altruism may vary considerably, depending on the relative weights assigned to other people’s preferences, relative to one’s own.⁹ And altruism may be partially endogenous; the preference itself may be extinguished by punishment.¹⁰

Virginia Held offers an example of this motivation in her description of the intention and goal of mothering: “to give of one’s care without obtaining a return of a self-interested kind. The emotional satisfaction of a mothering person is a satisfaction in the well-being and happiness of another human being...”¹¹ Genevieve Vaughan generalizes this motivation with her writings on the “gift economy.”¹²

A third type of caring labor is based, not on preferences per se, but on a moral category of obligation or responsibility. A mother does not always get up in the middle of the night to tend to a crying child out of altruism or affection; sometimes she gets up simply because she takes it to be her responsibility.¹³ One could, of course, describe fulfillment of an obligation as a preference, or a meta-preference, but doing so trivializes the importance of obligation as a moral category.¹⁴ Economists are fond of an old Latin saying: *de gustibus non est disputandum*, “there’s no arguing about tastes.” There’s plenty of arguing about obligations, because they are often enforced by political and legal means.

Which comes first, the preference or the principle? It is difficult to say, and all three caring motives described here are not only interrelated but also difficult to distinguish empirically. Reciprocity rests to some degree on moral categories of obligation. Preferences are shaped by a socialization process that features both norms and obligations. One could certainly construe a degree of altruistic behavior as an obligation, as Tronto and others do when they describe the need for “an ethic of care.”¹⁵ Still, norms, preferences, and values are distinct. Norms are patterns of behavior characteristic of a certain culture; preferences are the desires of a particular individual; values are grounded in claims of universality that transcend any particular culture or individual.

Reciprocity is an anthropological concept with a calculating but social orientation. The books don’t necessarily balance for every individual, as in voluntary market exchange. Altruistic preferences are a psychological

concept, especially when treated as partially endogenous. Obligation is a philosophical concept that turns on right and wrong. It is based on values, rather than norms or preferences. The triad offers three related escape routes from the individualist, selfish, and essentially amoral reasoning of rational economic man.

This categorization of distinct, but related, motives for caring labor diverges from both Marxian and neoclassical economic theory in its interdisciplinary emphasis on norms, preferences and values. As the following discussion will show, the social construction and contestation of these has important implications for the supply of caring labor.

II. THE VALUE OF CARING LABOR

Many feminist scholars suggest that women are penalized by specialization in work that involves the care of other people.¹⁶ Although she couches her analysis of care in moral and philosophical terms, Joan Tronto cites women's concentration in low-paying jobs that require the care of other people as evidence that "care is devalued and the people who do caring work are devalued."¹⁷ Perhaps she means that people should care more about care.

Economists are less interested in the ethical than in the counterfactual dimension – to argue that a type of labor is devalued or undervalued means that it is valued less than it would be under a better set of institutional arrangements. Both neoclassical and institutionalist economic theory offer some arguments along these lines, and the argument one accepts has important implications for the remedy one proposes.

A. Undervaluation in a neoclassical framework

Within an orthodox neoclassical framework that takes utility functions as exogenously given and assumes perfect markets, the notion of "undervaluation" of labor does not make much sense. It is helpful to review some of the specific ways this framework has been used to counter feminist arguments. But it is also important to recognize that a less orthodox application of neoclassical reasoning – one that does not assume perfect markets – offers some very plausible insights into undervaluation.

A utility-maximizing individual who decides to forgo some possible income by engaging in labor that offers no pecuniary return must, by definition, enjoy compensation in the form of greater utility. Their actions reveal their preferences; they cannot, by definition, be any worse off in utility terms than an individual earning higher pay. Jacob Mincer and Solomon Polachek implicitly use this reasoning when they suggest that women choose to specialize in less well-paying jobs, because this is more consistent with their family responsibilities.¹⁸ Similarly, Gary

Becker suggests that women earn less than men because they devote more effort to housework.¹⁹

By stressing the impact of supply-side factors on the sexual wage differential, neoclassical economists downplay the role of demand-side factors, such as direct discrimination against women in the labor market. They also imply that observed differences in income are entirely voluntary. Victor Fuchs argues that women derive more utility from children than men do, and are therefore more likely to assume responsibility for them. Although we cannot make interpersonal utility comparisons, we are left with the comforting thought that mothers must, after all, be just as happy as the fathers who fail to contribute to their children's support or care, even if they are living in poverty.²⁰

The conviction that the sexual division of labor has no unfortunate consequences for women is a common feature of orthodox neoclassical theory, characteristic even of some feminist practitioners like Shoshana Grossbard-Schechtman.²¹ However, this welfare-neutrality is challenged when the assumptions of orthodox theory are not met in the real world. Interference with markets and/or market imperfections, phenomena perfectly consistent with neoclassical theory, can lead to the undervaluation of certain types of work.

A good example is the "crowding" hypothesis formalized by Barbara Bergmann.²² By this account, the collusive behavior of men leads to the exclusion of women from well-paid, highly skilled occupations. This crowds them into less well-paying jobs, and, by increasing the supply of their labor to these jobs, lowers the wage below that which would exist in competitive equilibrium. Women's work in general is undervalued.²³

In this scenario, a demand-side problem (collective action leading to discrimination) creates a supply-side problem (crowding) that has nothing to do with a caring penalty *per se*. What may appear to be a case of caring labor (women explaining that they like low-paying jobs, even though they pay less) is actually a *post hoc* rationalization, because women actually have little choice. If this is the case, forms of caring labor performed by men are not penalized, and the remedy for undervaluation is simple: eliminate the male collusion that leads to overcrowding. As the supply of labor to predominantly women's jobs shifts back to the left, wages in those jobs should rise. We are left, however, without any explanation of why women are so often crowded into forms of work, such as child care, teaching and nursing, that we often associate with caring labor.

Another approach to undervaluation consistent with the neoclassical framework builds on the theory of externalities. Consider first the possibility that workers who provide caring labor enjoy positive externalities, or receive "psychic income" from providing it. This would be consistent with both the altruistic and the obligation motives described

above, and would increase the supply of labor to certain jobs, thus lowering their market wage. It leads to the same result as occupational crowding, but in this case, caring workers lower the wage for non-caring workers.

Lester Thurow develops a useful analysis of psychic income, although he does not apply it to caring labor, or to gender differences in wages.²⁴ He argues quite persuasively that such externalities lead to market failure and inefficient allocation of resources (contrary to the traditional compensating differentials argument). Higher psychic income does not necessarily compensate for lower money wages, because of the lack of tradability between the two. But Thurow's conclusion offers only weak support for the notion that caring labor is undervalued, since psychic income is likely to make up at least part of the difference.

Another kind of externality-based argument focuses on third-party effects. For instance, I have argued that children are public goods, and that caring labor devoted to their nurturance benefits taxpayers as a whole.²⁵ Sociologist James Coleman makes a similar point, though he arrives at very different policy conclusions (see later discussion).²⁶ Similar reasoning could be applied to situations in which services that entail the care of other people are purchased by a third party. Children in day care centers or schools do not hire their own teachers.²⁷ Patients in hospitals or nursing homes do not hire their own nurses. Workers are hired for their ability to meet the needs of clients, not for their feelings toward them. Workers with a predisposition for caring labor may provide important positive externalities, especially for dependents who appreciate, but cannot necessarily assess, the value of the emotional caring they receive.

Why wouldn't employers, competing with one another to attract clients, try to internalize these externalities? They are beset by information problems. Apart from the fact that clients themselves may not know what is good for them, no one may be sure. Many parents who utilize day care centers worry about the high turnover rate of day care workers, which is likely to interfere with emotional bonding and truly caring labor. But it is difficult to say exactly how important such caring labor actually is to children's long-run development.

In his important work on the dependence of quality on price, Joseph Stiglitz argues that work that is difficult to monitor generally commands a higher-than-normal wage.²⁸ The difficulty of monitoring would seem particularly great in service jobs that involve looking after dependents such as children, the sick and the elderly, jobs for which we would like to hire caring workers. Yet these jobs are generally considered poorly paid. At first glance, this circumstance might seem to exemplify a reversal of Stiglitz's logic, a case where employers actually hope to get higher quality work by paying less.

Upon closer consideration, however, it simply calls for more careful

specification of Stiglitz's argument, which applies only to situations in which work effort has a discernible impact on product or service quality, even though the work itself is difficult to monitor. In many personal service jobs, both work effort and product/service quality are difficult to monitor, especially when they are being paid for by a third party. If consumers cannot discern the benefits of genuinely caring labor, they cannot pressure employers to hire genuinely caring workers.

Neoclassical approaches to the value of caring run the gamut: caring may be an innate predisposition that penalizes caring labor only in pecuniary terms. From a more feminist perspective, caring may be devalued simply because women perform it. Or, caring may be underpaid because of externality and information problems. All these arguments are interesting, and invite empirical research. An alternative non-neoclassical approach, however, focuses on what might be termed a "pre-market" problem.

B. Institutional approaches to undervaluation

Institutionalist economics treats norms, preferences and values as partially endogenous, and asks how they evolve. It also takes collective action seriously, asking how people may come to identify with, and pursue common interests within, social groups.²⁹ This approach, which encompasses the work of many non-economists as well as economists, offers an alternative to the neoclassical emphasis on self-interested individualism and contractual exchange. It also provides a distinctive explanation for the undervaluation of caring labor: Norms, preferences and values have been socially constructed in ways that work against the interests of women as caretakers.

Barbara Bergmann applies an institutionalist approach to gender inequality when she describes the development of a sexual caste system based on the enforcement of gendered norms of behavior.³⁰ She emphasizes that social norms imposed on women interfere with what might otherwise be rational decisions. In "The Economic Consequences of Being of Housewife," for instance, she offers a multitude of reasons why specialization in non-market work is economically risky. Bergmann challenges the anachronistic norm that assigns women this task.³¹

Some feminists working outside the discipline of economics focus on what economists term preferences, without necessarily calling them that. Consider Nancy Chodorow's formulation of object-relations theory: women's specialization in parenting means that young girls, unlike young boys, are constantly in contact with an adult of the same gender. They may develop a less bounded, less oppositional sense of self, and be more concerned with other people's welfare.³²

Even if such preferences are not inscribed in child-rearing practices,

they may be forged by the sexual division of labor itself. The performance of certain kinds of work may weaken the operation of self-interest. So Ann Ferguson implies in her discussion of sex/affective labor, the process of meeting other people's needs.

The sex/affective labour that women do for wages and in the family has a distinctive character. By and large it involves mediating and nurturance skills that encourage women to identify with the interests of children, husbands or lovers, clients, patients and customers, thus making it difficult for women to take an oppositional stance of the sort necessary to acknowledge one's involvement in an exploitative exchange of labour.³³

Note that Ferguson does not argue that women are completely altruistic, or that they "naturally" have more interdependent preferences. Rather, she suggests that engaging in the tasks of caring for others elicits caring labor; with sufficient practice men might develop such preferences.

Sociologists Paula England and Barbara Kilbourne also emphasize the possibility that women may have a less "separative" self, though they are less interested in the causes than the consequences. In their critique of neoclassical bargaining models, they suggest that women's greater commitments to children and family relationships weaken their individual bargaining power.³⁴ Similarly, both Torunn Bragstad and Kristen Dale argue that women internalize a norm of caring that results in a very inequitable division of household labor.³⁵

The implications of such norms and preferences are by no means limited to the household sphere, as Paula England shows in her empirical analysis of compensable factors in job evaluation for pay equity. Predominantly female jobs are underpaid partly because many of the skills required for these jobs are poorly valued. In her analysis of the relationship between the pay rates and types of skill required by detailed occupations, England finds a net negative return to nurturance. By contrast, the exercise of authority has a very positive impact on occupational pay.³⁶

An orthodox neoclassical economist would, of course, retort that workers may enjoy nurturing more than they enjoy exerting authority, and the relative pay represents a compensating differential.³⁷ One might immediately note that men seem to love exerting authority. But apart from this objection, why are women so much more likely than men to manifest the costly nurturing preference? While Becker and other neoclassicists resort to socio-biological arguments, the institutionalist argument is that nurturing preferences are essentially imposed on women.

An emphasis on the unfortunate outcome of a particular set of preferences presumes, of course, some criteria other than utility (or

happiness) by which the outcome can be judged. Amartya Sen explicitly provides such a framework with his argument that utility maximization is not an appropriate goal for social welfare. He emphasizes values, rather than norms or preferences: individuals should have equal opportunities to develop their human capacities.³⁸ He argues that women have not only been denied such opportunities, but, in many cases, even denied awareness of their own oppression.³⁹

Joan Tronto pushes the connection between caring and oppression even further in an observation that she makes almost in passing: A propensity to care may actually be created by conditions of subordination. Robbing individuals of opportunities to effectively pursue their own self-interest may encourage them to live "through others," using caring as a substitute for more selfish gratification. Tronto cites evidence that members of minority groups, as well as women, put more value on caring and sharing than on the pursuit of individual self-interest.⁴⁰

In sum, institutionalist explanations share a common emphasis on a social construction of caring that penalizes women. But they offer many different and conflicting accounts of the underlying process. A feminine norm of care may be a kind of trick imposed by men who use it to extract extra care for themselves. Or, norms of care may be socially necessary, but imposed primarily on women as a means of lowering costs to men. Caring preferences may be an almost incidental result of the social organization of child-rearing or the larger sexual division of labor. Or they may actually be a byproduct of subordination, in which case an end to subordination would bring an end to caring labor.

Obviously, these contending explanations have very different implications. The feminist project has always recognized the importance of consciousness-raising – challenging sexist norms, preferences, and values. But what exactly should take their place? The answer depends, in part, on what feminists decide about the value of care.

C. Equality or difference?

Neither economics nor any other social theory provides any basis for choosing among norms, preferences, or values on the basis of which ones are right, or proper, or optimal. The disorienting lack of any scientific compass probably helps explain why economists have avoided the territory. But feminists have necessarily faced this dilemma from the very outset. Should we recreate ourselves in a more masculine image? Or should we seek, instead, to eliminate the economic penalty imposed on distinctively feminine norms, values, and preferences?

An econometric metaphor may be useful. Imagine a multiple regression model in which the dependent variable is economic welfare, and the independent variables include, in addition to every standard set of

structural and human capital variables, three vectors that measure the extent of femininity in norms, preferences, and values. Some of the variables are structural, some are individual, and all are unobservable. The hypothesis developed above is that there is a negative rate of return to femininity, and the dilemma, restated, is: should those who want to increase their economic welfare try to decrease their femininity, or try to modify the rate of return?

In feminist vocabulary, these questions have been packaged as the "equality vs. difference" debate, shorthand for the issue of prioritizing equality with men vs. revaluing the ways that women are different from men. In this debate, most feminist economists have favored equality. "Caring" has traditionally been seen as a feminine quality that handicaps women in economic competition, especially by economists like Barbara Bergmann, who are basically optimistic about the impact of capitalist development on women.⁴¹

The reasoning is straightforward: as long as women accept caring labor as their God-given responsibility, or think that it is "unfeminine" to demand higher pay, they will be economically penalized. Therefore, women must be willing to enter traditionally male occupations and compete more aggressively with men in order to improve their position. As Myra Strober puts it, women should not romanticize their "difference" from men, because this "glorifies existing stereotypes of female behavior."⁴²

It follows that women should be suspicious of caring. Romance can be misleading, an ideological construction that is used to trap women into unrewarding commitments. As Barbara Bergmann pointed out in a comment on a previous version of this paper, the Gershwin lyrics quoted above represent the dangers of sexual infatuation that can trick women into commitments as wives and mothers. They do indeed represent a risky form of sentimentalism. But why is the risk so high?

Partly because of the structure of an economy that rewards individuals far more generously and reliably for the pursuit of their own self-interest than for the genuine care of others. The connection between anti-caring and pro-market views is not incidental. It is suggested by the econometric metaphor: changing the rate of return on masculinity implies tampering with a market process. It also requires a collective effort likely to suffer from considerable free-rider problems and very high transaction costs. What that means, in ordinary language, is that it would be a very big hassle. Changing one's individual level of femininity or caring might be a bit easier (depending partly on one's personal propensities) because it does not require collective action (though it may be facilitated by the support that collective consciousness-raising can provide).

The moral legitimacy of markets derives from the claim that the individual pursuit of self-interest benefits everyone. Therefore, there is

no need to worry about the supply of caring labor. By contrast, an emphasis on rewarding caring has somewhat anti-market implications, simply because the market does not elicit caring. Ulrike Knobloch and Maren Jochimsen explain that "A whole economy organized according to the principles of housekeeping would be a caring economy. In such a caring economy, the satisfaction of the existing material and non-material basic needs would take priority over the production of new material goods."⁴³ This is not a market economy.

However difficult such a socialist feminist economy might be to achieve, some feminists would see it as preferable to capitulation to the "masculinist" principles of self-seeking competition.⁴⁴ Indeed, some argue that a market economy cannot exist without the support of a caring economy that coordinates the process of social reproduction.⁴⁵ The issue cannot be reduced to the simplistic terms of capitalism vs. socialism, or markets vs. central planning, because it impinges directly on a more practical issue: the relative roles of the market, the family and the state in modern economies.

The strategy that feminists choose depends largely on the approach taken to the undervaluation of care. Interestingly, the most important differences do not coincide with the boundary between neoclassical and institutionalist thought. Those who adopt either (a) the conventional neoclassical presumption that undervaluation is not a problem or (b) the institutionalist view that caring norms and preferences are simply a means of subordinating women or a result of their subordination (that is, they fulfill no real function), will favor a reduction in women's caring behavior. These feminists will have little reason to worry about the need to regulate or limit markets.

On the other hand, feminists who adopt either (c) the neoclassical view that caring provides important externalities or (d) the institutionalist view that caring labor is a necessary task that has been unfairly and disproportionately assigned to women, will fear a reduction in women's caring behavior. Such a reduction will have adverse consequences for the economy as a whole unless it is counterbalanced by an increase in men's caring labor. These feminists will worry about the inadequacies of markets, and will propose both limits and alternatives to them.

III. PUBLIC POLICIES AND CARING LABOR

If you don't literally "value" caring labor, its supply may decline. But if you start running out, you can't buy more at the corner store. Public policy could play an important role in addressing this paradoxical problem, but is constrained by the nature of caring labor itself. Passing a law stipulating that everyone must engage in a certain amount of unpaid work or child care would not necessarily increase the supply of genuinely caring labor.

On the other hand, providing positive rewards, such as public remuneration for caring labor, could have the effect of reinforcing the existing sexual division of labor.

Feminist economists, all too familiar with trade-offs, should explore the costs and risks of such policies in more detail. But we should also recognize that debates over public policy often hinge on underlying values that, in the long run, influence both norms and preferences. How do we, ourselves, value caring labor? How important do we think it is to the full realization of human capacities?

The debate over pay equity is often described as a debate over the appropriate role of markets vs. administrative methods of setting wages. But those who are most enthusiastic about markets are those who believe that the supply and the value of female skills like nurturance are either exogenously given or relatively unimportant. If women are paid less for nurturing jobs, they should simply look for jobs that pay more. Most advocates of pay equity quarrel less with the direct effects of the market than with the social and cultural devalorization of skills like nurturance.

A more complicated dynamic has emerged in discussions of the measurement of unpaid household work, long an issue among feminists.⁴⁶ A recent bill introduced in Congress, the Unremunerated Work Act of 1993, would require the Bureau of Labor Statistics to conduct time-use surveys to measure the unwaged labor of women and men, both in their homes and in their communities, and to include these measures in U.S. national statistics, including the gross domestic product (GNP). Many, but not all feminist economists support the bill. Some critics, like Barbara Bergmann, argue that "anything that romanticizes housework and childcare is bad for women"; these are forms of work that should be "industrialized" because they can be performed more efficiently outside the home.⁴⁷

Ironically, other critics of the Unremunerated Work Act make exactly the opposite argument, that analyzing "labors of love" in quantitative terms is demeaning. As Ellen O'Brien puts it, "Imputing a value to housework and adding it to the GNP necessarily privileges a particular conception of the relation between paid and unpaid work (or market and non-market consumption); namely, that which describes them as perfectly substitutable."⁴⁸ The reduction of caring labor to some common denominator with market labor threatens to impose a masculine perspective that privileges efficiency over affection, quantity over quality.

The same Catch-22 has discouraged feminists from demanding more public support for parental labor. Those who want to encourage women to be more ambitious in the marketplace fear that more support for working parents, such as paid parental leave or family allowances, would encourage women to stay home with the kids and lose seniority. The

only pro-family policy that they enthusiastically support is the expansion of paid child care.

On the other hand, many feminists who believe that non-market caring labor has intrinsic value fear that this value would actually be undermined by putting a value on it. As Julie Nelson puts it, "if support for parenting is considered 'payment' for children it implies that children are commodities; if it is considered 'compensation' for children it implies that children are burdens."⁴⁹ In other words, the only way to preserve the true value of this work is not to pay for it — another example of the paradox of caring labor.

Pro-market feminism looks with disfavor on comparable worth, counting housework, and public support for parental labor. This disfavor reflects not only the masculine tradition of liberal individualism, but also a certain confidence that women will not and cannot become too individualistic, or too "selfish" for their own good. Whatever the penalty, they will continue to express those aspects of their human nature that we associate with caring. Reading Bergmann, one gets the impression that women may be so prone to caring that they need to be prodded to be a bit more selfish.⁵⁰

The opposite of pro-market feminism, with roots in the socialist as well as liberal traditions, is not necessarily anti-market, but defends the importance of non-market institutions that regulate and constrain market behavior. Hence a greater tendency to support comparable worth, counting housework, and support for parental labor. This support emerges less from concern about the short-run efficiency of markets than worry about their long-run impact on norms, preferences, and values.

This approach requires more systematic discussion of the ways that caring labor *should* be valued. Many possibilities lie between the two stark alternatives of letting the market value it, and refusing to put any monetary value on it at all. In pressing for more support for parental labor, for instance, feminists could reject the notion that it should be paid for on the basis of the "value" of its product.⁵¹ Nor should parents be paid more for children who are more "difficult" than others. But they should be entitled to some minimum level of decent support for a form of non-market caring labor that benefits society as a whole.⁵²

Similarly, in estimating the value of non-market work in the home, economists could carefully stipulate that any estimate of its market value can provide only a "lower bound" of its real value. Studies of comparable worth could challenge both workers and employers to reconsider the value of certain kinds of skills and better appreciate their positive impact on the quality of goods and services. And the reminder that markets do not automatically value care should serve as an impetus to find other ways to encourage and reward it.

Feminism has played an important role in challenging the patriarchal

family, helping establish new rights for women and children and demanding a new definition of family commitments that goes beyond traditional, hierarchical, and necessarily heterosexual models. How ironic it would be if progress on this front were neutralized by an individualism so extreme that it renders the best of family values obsolete. An economy based purely on the pursuit of self-interest doesn't leave much room for love, baby.

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NOTES

- ¹ Another well-known Gershwin classic is "I Can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby." The economics of "Who Cares?" is even more explicit: "Let a million firms go under, I am not concerned with stocks and bonds that I've been burned with," and "Who cares what banks fail in Yonkers?/Long as you've got a kiss that conquers."
- ² See, among others, Sara Ruddick (1980); Carol Gilligan (1982); Kari Waerness (1984); Nel Noddings (1984); Tronto (1987, 1994); Marjorie L. DeVault (1991).
- ³ Tronto (1993: 105).
- ⁴ For a sophisticated theoretical treatment of this issue, see Becker (1981b); for a textbook summary, see Robert H. Frank (1991).
- ⁵ Nelson (1993).
- ⁶ In technical terms, I mean to say that in the short run, the supply of caring labor is fixed and insensitive to price. Graphically, it can be represented by a vertical supply curve.
- ⁷ Titmuss (1970).
- ⁸ Although Becker has recently written a great deal on endogenous preferences, these are analyzed in an individualistic framework that largely ignores both the social construction of preferences and forms of collective action to enforce these. On this subject, see Nancy Folbre (1993).
- ⁹ For a relatively non-technical discussion of altruism, see Chapter 7 of Frank (1991).
- ¹⁰ For an interesting treatment of endogenous preferences, see Jon Elster (1983).
- ¹¹ Held (1990: 298).
- ¹² Vaughan (1990).

- ¹³ Nelson (1992a).
- ¹⁴ Sen (1987).
- ¹⁵ Noddings (1984) actually argues the opposite, that "natural" feelings of care are the basis for the development of ethical principles.
- ¹⁶ See, for instance, Ferguson (1989) and Folbre (1994a).
- ¹⁷ Tronto (1993: 114).
- ¹⁸ Mincer and Polachek (1974); Polachek (1981). See also the telling critique by England (1984).
- ¹⁹ Becker (1981a: 56). Becker tends to emphasize the greater productivity of women in household and non-market work, rather than their greater preferences for performing it.
- ²⁰ Fuchs (1988).
- ²¹ Grossbard-Schechtman (1993).
- ²² Bergmann (1986); Michele Pujol (1992) argues that Barbara Bodichon sketched the "crowding" argument in the late nineteenth century.
- ²³ Though Bergmann formally applied this only to the analysis of market wages it can easily be extended to an analysis of women's non-market work in the home.
- ²⁴ Thurow (1978, 1980-1).
- ²⁵ Folbre (1994a, 1994b).
- ²⁶ Coleman (1993).
- ²⁷ Diana Strassmann (1993) develops a more detailed critique of the limits of a choice-theoretic approach to the welfare of children.
- ²⁸ Stiglitz (1987).
- ²⁹ For a more complete discussion, see Chapter 1 of Folbre (1994a) and Folbre (1994b).
- ³⁰ Bergmann (1986).
- ³¹ Bergmann (1981).
- ³² Chodorow (1978).
- ³³ Ferguson (1989: 97).
- ³⁴ England and Barbara Kilbourne (1990).
- ³⁵ Bragstad (1989); Dale (1994).
- ³⁶ England (1992: 164).
- ³⁷ England herself rebuts the compensating differential argument (1992: 69-72).
- ³⁸ Sen (1984).
- ³⁹ Sen (1990).
- ⁴⁰ Tronto (1987: 647, 650).
- ⁴¹ See Chapter 1, "The Break-Up of the Sex-Role Caste System," in Barbara Bergmann's classic, *The Economic Emergence of Women* (1986).
- ⁴² Strober cited in "Male, Female Leadership Styles Hot Subject of Controversy," by Barbara Presley Noble, *Springfield Union*, August 18, 1993, p. 35.
- ⁴³ Knobloch and Jochimsen (1993).
- ⁴⁴ Matthaei (1994).
- ⁴⁵ Folbre (1994a); see also Beer (1993).
- ⁴⁶ See Waring (1988) and Folbre (1991).
- ⁴⁷ Cited in "Male, Female Leadership Styles Hot Subject of Controversy," by Barbara Presley Noble, *Springfield Union*, August 18, 1993, p. 35.
- ⁴⁸ O'Brien (1993: 16).
- ⁴⁹ Julie Nelson, personal communication.
- ⁵⁰ In her response to an early draft of this paper that included this statement, Bergmann replied "You have got me right: I do believe there can be too much unpaid caring labor."
- ⁵¹ This has actually been proposed by sociologist James Coleman (1993).
- ⁵² See my "Children as Public Goods" (1994b).

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