

The machine of caring: A book review of *Philosophy of Care*

By Boris Groys, London, New York: Verso Books. 2022. pp. 112. \$22.95 AUD. ISBN: 9781839764929

Matthew Tieu PhD, Research Fellow 

College of Nursing and Health Sciences, Flinders University, Bedford Park, Australia
Email: matthew.tieu@flinders.edu.au

In *Philosophy of Care*, Groys takes the reader on a meandering, historical, metaphorical and allegorical journey along which they are reacquainted with a variety of well-known, and introduced to some not so well-known, philosophers and thinkers. The ideas explored will resonate with anyone who has had pause to reflect on how we as a society provide care, which nowadays takes place across a variety of private and public settings, in increasingly sophisticated yet fragmented ways, and amidst ongoing and emerging social, political and technological complexities. The multitude of tensions and challenges that arise from this serve as a touchstone for Groys to invite the reader to consider what has and will become of care, and what really matters in care. Such considerations may have limited practical utility for professional care providers, but it should remind them that behind the myriad systems, procedures and protocols of care they are familiar with resides a person, while also acknowledging the challenges they face in providing care that is genuinely person-centred. On the other hand, there is much that researchers and policy makers can glean from such considerations, and it begins with understanding that how we provide care, and to whom we provide it, is ultimately our responsibility. It should be mentioned, however, that such a message may be lost on those more accustomed to clear and explicit formalisations of ideas and arguments (and for that reason, perhaps even lost on this reviewer). The book is not written for a general audience but for an esoteric philosophical audience favourably disposed to the ornate and at times obscure language deployed by its author. Nevertheless, the subject matter will be of interest to nursing philosophers, health sociologists, medical ethicists and anyone else interested in the ethics of emerging digital health technologies, a topic of great importance.

Care at its most fundamental level (e.g., ensuring adequate nutrition, hydration, hygiene and safety) is an innate and private practice essential to the survival of all species. In recent human history it has expanded from the confines of the private sphere into the public sphere where it has become formalised, institutionalised and increasingly mediated through information and technological systems. The pace of this typically exceeds the pace at which we are able to adapt our care practices accordingly and deliberate on the

utility or merit of such technologies and the potential problems posed. Care thus becomes increasingly delivered through systems that have been created with relatively little foresight. *Philosophy of Care* is a critique of such technologies and systems, which Groys refers to as the 'machine of caring' (a phrase, i.e., introduced early in the book but not elaborated on until much later). According to Groys, this machine of caring is assumed to make us healthy when it actually makes us sick, and this can be traced back to the origins of western thought.

In Chapter 1, Groys describes the Socratic tradition of inquiry and understanding as having an alienating effect in that it directs our attention away from our subjective experiences and away from the very desires that motivate such inquiry. The need for continuous intellectual and physical emancipation arises from its enduring legacy. Drawing from Hegel in Chapter 2, and Nietzsche in Chapter 3, Groys describes freedom as consisting in human subjective experience whose ultimate expression is in revolt or revolution against oppressive norms, traditions and legacies. Borrowing from Kojève in Chapter 4, Groys argues that a philosopher should be guided not by truth or rationality but by the service of society as a 'working ruler', a 'universal caretaker' and a 'sage' who is 'a permanently working machine of discourse and care' (p. 41). The philosopher as a sage can help to unify personal and impersonal desires, and likewise self-care and the machine of caring, shifting our understanding of health from mere functionality (including the function of consumerist society) to the fulfilment of personal desires.

It is not until Chapter 5 that the central thesis of the book begins to emerge, which is premised on the idea that there exists a tension or a dialectic between public care and self-care. Surrendering ourselves to work, consumerism, impersonal desires and the machine of caring makes us unhealthy, but so too does surrendering ourselves to our animal nature and personal desires, which leads to 'excess and hazardous self-destruction' (p. 48). Thus, we are caught up between 'aggressive self-assertion and institutional care' (p. 49), but paradoxically, such a dialectic must be maintained, for if we lose the institutional structures that mediate how we provide care we risk self-destruction (Chapter 6). As a response to this, Groys invites us to

take a meta-position, observing the spectacle, the competition and the dialectic, and to 'formulate a critical position towards the spectacle' while also knowing that we part of it (Chapter 7). Culture and the arts provide a guiding metaphor. A decadent public affects the construction of public health much in the same way that a decadent audience affects the creator, leading to decadent art. A great creator cannot transcend the society of art anymore than a great health provider can transcend public health or the machine of caring (Chapter 8). In Chapter 9, Groys points out (borrowing from Heidegger) that the angst of death and abandonment into the universe implies a deep and fundamental care for oneself (*Dasein*), yet 'modern Dasein is imprisoned and controlled by technology' (p. 72) and thus we cannot merely care for ourselves but must also care for it.

Considerations of art and humanism in Chapter 10 bring out the contrast between the values underpinning the machine of caring and care as a humanistic endeavour. Just as we care for works of art as creative expressions of people in history, we also care for humans as creative expressions of nature. But what of those works that nobody cares to see, which is the kind of predicament that befalls those no longer able to work (such as the old). Here Groys raises a pertinent question—'if the system of care values the living body of the patient more than its economic use, what can be said about the value of care work?' (p. 83). In Chapter 11, drawing from Arendt's distinction between private and public realms, Groys highlights the fact that care work was traditionally a private pursuit concerned with biological necessity and thus linked to the labour performed by slaves and subordinates in the service of masters of households whose public work on the contrary was productive and intrinsically valuable. The publicly fuelled machine of caring that represents the transformation of the private enterprise of care into public and productive work means that we are now in the business of caring for economic benefit

rather than for our own benefit. This also has the effect of making that which has been private (i.e., our bodies and our care practices) now public, from which themes of depersonalisation and dehumanisation emerge—'My own body does not any longer belong to me' (p. 88). Indeed, what we now know about ourselves is in large part based on how we represent ourselves through increasingly detailed personal records alongside big and small datasets that incorporate genetic, biological, psychological, behavioural and social information. Information about ourselves is no longer the exclusive domain of our own minds or even our personal social circles. It is out there in the public as part of the machine of caring whose knowledge about us and our care needs will ultimately eclipse that of our own and those of the medical experts whom we had traditionally and faithfully deferred to. As a consequence, care is no longer directed at our actual physical bodies but at our 'symbolic bodies'. In an increasingly technocratic and infocratic world, the question of who or what we are caring for is continuously raised and necessitates an appropriate response, lest care becomes 'Sisyphian work'.

Chapter 12, the final chapter, is a call to arms for us to recapture care from the machinery of care and to transform it into something that genuinely serves our interests. Here Groys recounts Aleksandr Bogdanov's story of the scientist Fride in *Immortality Day*, a man cursed by an eternal yearning for innovation yet confronted with the utter banality of immortality. Fride realised that suicide of the most painful means imaginable (self-immolation) was the only form of salvation from what eventually became a life of subsistence rather than a life well lived. The story of Fride (and indeed Bogdanov's own personal story) serves as a parable reminding us that care is about enabling one to live one's life rather than merely sustaining one's life (including economic life). *Philosophy of Care* reminds us of the challenge to maintain some degree of agency over the care systems we create.