



## ***Care in the Biopolitical Age: Towards a Philosophy of Care***

Boris Groys (2022). *Philosophy of Care*. London: Verso

A Summary Review by Jose Duke Bagulaya with support from Eric Feng

Art critic Boris Groys' new book *Philosophy of Care* reflects on the idea of care in the modern world. Through a reading of philosophical works by various thinkers ranging from G.W.F. Hegel and Nietzsche to Heidegger and A. Bogdanov, he traces the struggle between self-care and institutional care and the philosophical attempts to transcend this antinomy.

Groys begins by recognizing the pervasiveness of care work in our time. Human civilization has identified the protection of human life as a “supreme goal”, and states have made the care of their populations' health the core of a new *raison d'état*. Thus, Groys argues that “medicine has taken the place of religion, and the hospital has replaced the church.” “The body rather than the soul is the privileged object of institutionalised care.”<sup>1</sup>

Groys, of course, does not limit “care” to the confines of medical health care. On the contrary, he expands the notion of care through the conceptualization of the Self as consisting of the physical and **symbolic bodies**. Humans are corporeal beings who take care of their physical bodies by taking food, medicine, doing exercise, etc. But human care does not stop at the finite limits of the human corpus. Human beings produce extensions of the “material body” through “photographs, documents, videos...letters, emails, and other artefacts.”<sup>2</sup> These things extend the human body and create what Groys calls our “symbolic bodies”, which “allow us to inscribe our physical bodies to the system of care.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, to access the institutions of care, medical examination records are presented to doctors, evidence to insurers, personal records to hospitals. The protection of the physical body is “mediated” by the symbolic body.<sup>4</sup>

While human beings have the agency to care for their physical and symbolic bodies, they do not have complete knowledge or control of both. A person can take proper diet. She can feel hunger and pain that others have no means of feeling. Nonetheless, she would never have complete knowledge of her own body or her illness, much less perform a surgery on

---

<sup>1</sup> Boris Groys, *Philosophy of Care* (London: Verso, 2022) at 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid at 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



herself if she needs one. In the same way, a person can curate her own symbolic body on social media. She can choose what would appear in her books. But her symbolic body's revaluation is beyond anyone's control. As Groys puts it, "What was symbolically valuable yesterday can become devalued today and revalued tomorrow."<sup>5</sup>

The subject of self-care therefore is neither central nor decentred. It is, Groys argues, eccentric. The eccentric subject's knowledge of their physical and symbolic bodies depends on others' care work. Nonetheless, the subject is expected to make intelligent choices. It has to distribute care to both the physical and symbolic bodies. Society requires the eccentric subject to do so since only healthy bodies can contribute to the well-being of society. In this sense, self-care becomes primary and a form of hard work as the body becomes socialized, bureaucratized, and politicized.<sup>6</sup>

As its body becomes socialized, the eccentric subject of care participates in the medical, political, and administrative discussions concerning the body. It is assumed that the subject would be able to choose correctly which among the contending discourses on the body fits its needs. The philosophical tradition provides the subject with choices as it explores "different types of relationship between care and self-care— between dependence and autonomy."<sup>7</sup> It is in this context that Groys surveys the philosophical tradition through a reading of Plato, Hegel, Nietzsche, Kojève, Bataille, Caillois, Wagner, Heidegger, Marx via Arendt, and Bogdanov.

In this philosophical survey, Groys begins with what may be called a "physiological reading" of the Platonic dialogues. He explicates Socrates' claim that he is a mere "midwife" of the truth that is already present in the womb of each person.<sup>8</sup> This image of a person pregnant with the truth allows the Socratic/Platonic philosopher to avoid taking a position, which society forces him to take. In other words, what appears to be an eccentric position is, in fact, a cover for the Platonic ideal of a collective state ruled by the contemplative philosopher-king. Groys then reinterprets the Parable of the Cave, where human beings misperceive the shadows as truth. The vision of truth is achieved through a violence against the body. The person must be dragged out of the cave to see the glaring light, blinding him with the light of truth. This bodily violence then results in the philosopher's transformation from an object of care into a subject

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid at 5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid at 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid at 10.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid at 11.



of care and self-care, placing him in an eccentric position to his own body and to the social body as a whole.

The Platonic philosopher, of course, is not deterred by this violence. He is neither frightened nor terrorized. Nonetheless, he ends up liberating the soul from its bodily desires. For “truth shows itself when everything that is related to the body is removed and the soul becomes able to contemplate itself.”<sup>9</sup> This contemplation of truth through the de-valuation of the material body would link Plato to the Roman Catholic Church’s own “Platonic” vision of truth/God. The contemplation of the light of God, however, is a matter of choice in the Church’s tradition. To sin or not to sin is a question of freewill, that is to say, freedom.

The question of freedom allows Groys to leapfrog from Plato to G.W.F. Hegel, who is both the philosopher of human freedom and the state. Groys notes that Hegel envisions history as the revelation of “freedom as the essence of human subjectivity.”<sup>10</sup> Subjectivity, for Hegel, is what makes the Spirit different from nature. When self-consciousness begins to reflect on the nature of nature, reflection, which is a form of negation itself, transforms the animal into a Spirit. This subjective Spirit, then, develops and completes itself in a dialectical meeting with another self-consciousness, that is, in a form of struggle that accounts for the formation of states, which is but the objectification of the will of the Spirit. Thus, while the self-conscious subject gains freedom in its terrorizing struggle with the other, its substantial freedom can only be objectified in the state. Hence, the state becomes “objective”, the “image and actuality of reason.”<sup>11</sup> In this context, the “end of history” is proclaimed since the state as the embodiment of the rational implements “total protection, total care.”<sup>12</sup> As Groys writes, “The state protects the bodies of its citizens from self-inflicted death— from the destructive freedom that is the essence of their subjectivities.”<sup>13</sup>

The **biopolitical state’s total care**, however, isolates human beings from universal flows of vital energies. It “treats everybody as sick and distributes care according to the system of hierarchies and ranks that define the place of individual symbolic bodies.”<sup>14</sup> The post-

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid at 15.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid at 19.

<sup>11</sup> GWF Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 323.

<sup>12</sup> Groys, *supra* note 1 at 23.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid at 23-24.



historical state therefore reverses Plato's imprisoned soul in the body. This time it is "our health", "our vital energy that pushes us against the boundaries of our symbolic bodies" that negates the biopolitical state and its institution of care.<sup>15</sup> This dialectic brings Groys to Nietzsche.

"Weak and often ill", Nietzsche called for the "re-valuation of all values", particularly, Christian values which he considered to be the values of the weak, the slaves.<sup>16</sup> He replaced the contemplation of truth with the problem of health. In Groys reading, Nietzsche saw "the manifestation of health" in "aggression."<sup>17</sup> He rejected the resentment of the weak by embracing war and adventure. It is no wonder he dismissed the idol of the slaves, Jesus Christ, and gave birth to his own ideal of manly health, the *Übermensch*— the "überhealthy" and "the embodiment of the will to power."<sup>18</sup> Using the concept of the symbolic body, Groys reads Nietzsche's writings as an attempt to constitute a healthy symbolic body that negates his own physical weakness. In this sense, the *Übermensch*, which is constituted by texts, only appear to challenge the Hegelian post-historical state with his aggression and adventures. In fact, Nietzsche's symbolic self and the *Übermensch* would depend on the state's institutions of care for symbolic bodies—the university and the museum.

In the next three chapters, Groys surveys the thought of Kojève, Bataille, and Caillois, all students of the mighty thinker Hegel and the self-declared Anti-Christ, Nietzsche. It must be noted that Groys sees desire and the profane as a suturing thread in the works of these French thinkers as if they were reading the Germans through the lens of the Marquis de Sade. Kojève imagines history as the history of "desired Desires" and "Self-consciousness...[as] the function of the desire for recognition."<sup>19</sup> The master-slave dialectic, for Kojève, ends up in the recognition and satisfaction of the desires of the masters. In short, the slaves become care workers. To transcend this situation, the philosopher must become a revolutionary who resolves the contradiction between master and slave. In this new order, the Sage as a caretaker

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid at 24.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid at 25.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid at 33.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid at 36.



emerges and signals “the transcending of the opposition between care and self-care” through his renunciation of fame and embrace of anonymous care work.<sup>20</sup>

While the antinomy between human as machine and human as animal is present in both the works of Kojève and Bataille, it is the latter who denounces the repressive function of work in modern society and defends the desiring animal in human. “When man [sic] rejects work, he ceases to be a machine, and becomes an animal, a beast. Sovereignty equals animality.”<sup>21</sup> This Sovereign, which is anti-productive and a precursor of Deleuze and Guattari’s “body without organs”<sup>22</sup>, is then opposed by Bataille to utility just as the animal is positioned against the machine. Nonetheless, both Sovereign killer and the utilitarian are unhealthy. Work exhausts the man-machine, while killing may infect the animal. Indeed, infection, the cultural kind, is what characterizes modern society. The enlightenment and its scientific thinking, argues Caillois, did not abolish the sacred. On the contrary, the sacred, which is characterized by frenzy and adventure, has “infected” society through “deep dissatisfaction.”<sup>23</sup> The sacred has particularly infected the institution of war that threatens to lead humanity to total destruction.

For Groys, the works of Hegel, Nietzsche, Kojève, Bataille, and Caillois all express the individual’s attempt to “break all the institutional rules, to undermine all traditional convention” and create something new.<sup>24</sup> This **creativity** then gives expression to an anti-bourgeois ideology that celebrates irrational desires, vital forces, and the will to power. Thus, the creatives create “symbolic bodies that are designed for thousands of years.”<sup>25</sup> In creating these symbolic bodies, they compete for attention and participate in the society of the spectacle, where the main arbiter of value is the public, “the supreme caretaker.”<sup>26</sup> Here comes the new dilemma for creatives who compete for the affection of this public. A total surrender to the public, the people, in a word, the audience, raises the problem of decadence that Nietzsche underscored in his critique of his erstwhile idol, Wagner. If “Art is always made for the spectators”, then the

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid at 41.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid at 46.

<sup>22</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). The “body without organs” is the non-productive counterpart of the productive “desiring-machines.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid at 52.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid at 56.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid at 57.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid at 63.



decadent audience will “infect” the creative and encourage the production of an inferior form of art.<sup>27</sup> In this case, no artist, however great, would be capable of transcending the limits set by the supreme caretaker. This dialectic of self-care and institutional care continues to haunt contemporary society.

It is in the work of Heidegger that Groys finally finds a philosopher of care. For Heidegger, “man” is ontologically a being who makes an issue of his being. Thus, the “understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein”, or man, the being-in-the-world.<sup>28</sup> This notion of being-in-the-world abolishes the duality of subject and object, hence such being is inseparable from the world. This ontology entails being-alongside, which is concern because it is defined as being-in, which is itself care. Care therefore is not simply an attitude towards the self.<sup>29</sup> **Care is the being of Dasein.**

To clarify the position of Dasein as care, Groys shifts to Heidegger’s critique of technology. For instance, the objectification of the Rhine River in the production of electricity negates the Being of Dasein, the being-in-the-world. Here, “Dasein tries to control its world by technological means”, to become a “subject that dominates its world”, thereby transforming the world into its object.<sup>30</sup> In this case, the revelation of the essence in modern technology is a challenging-forth. The problem with this mode of revelation is this: since man is itself part of the world, he himself can be challenged-forth. In short, Dasein might also be objectified by the system in a way that “kills their world, their authentic being and turns them into raw material for the medical industry.”<sup>31</sup> For Heidegger, salvation lies in art since art is the work of truth. Nonetheless, this objectification has already infected modern man’s treatment of art, which is now considered a thing. Art, which reveals truth, when it is rooted in its world, becomes a thing when uprooted and brought to a museum. As Groys writes, “In the museum, one sees not the art works but their dead bodies— not the worlds that the artworks reveal but these works as material, earthly things that are taken care of by the art industry.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, the preservation of

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid at 67.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper, 2008) at 32.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid at 237.

<sup>30</sup> Groys, *supra* note 1 at 71.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid at 72.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid at 74.



the artwork is not merely its conservation in the museum, but also “the preservation of the way of life that became unconcealed in this artwork.”<sup>33</sup>

Using Heideggerian lenses, Groys now offers his most original reading of care through an analogy between artwork and the human body of Dasein (man). It may be recalled here that in the “Origin of the Work of Art” Heidegger argued that art reproduces the general essence of the things it represents. Hence, in the peasant woman’s shoes in Van Gogh’s painting “vibrates the silent call of the earth.” The equipment is “protected in the world of the peasant woman.”<sup>34</sup> However, a thing or equipment’s connection to the world is severed once it is brought to the museum to be taken care of. Here, the equipment is defunctionalized and placed in front of the spectator. Just like the artwork, the human body is also useful like an equipment. Modern biopolitical states take care of their citizens to make them useful. Hence, the transformation of Dasein into a thing becomes a general rule in society rather than an exception. Dasein becomes an object of care in the institutions of the state. In this context, Groys observes an “obvious parallel between the hospital and the museum.”<sup>35</sup> “Both have a goal of care and protection: of human bodies or things.” The protection of art in a museum, adds Groys, is comparable to the care of human bodies in the hospitals. Indeed, “we know what awaits us after the end of our working days— not paradise but rather the hospital/museum.”<sup>36</sup>

In the last two chapters of the book, Groys provides a trenchant critique of the narcissism that plagues contemporary society and explores the possibility of synthesizing the dialectic between self-care and care. He leaves Heidegger for Marx via Heidegger’s student, Hannah Arendt. Reading Marx through the lens of Arendt, he notes that Marx reversed labour’s connotations of unproductiveness as opposed to productive work. The notion of “labour power”, which is inherent in human beings and is commodified in capitalist society, is the power that produces commodity and surplus value. It abolishes the distinction between work and labour, because all things are the result of living labour. And since in capitalist society, labour can only be done through exchange, labour can only be in the form of socialized labour, the product of “socialized man.”<sup>37</sup> This socialization leads to a loss of privacy and results in the further

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”, *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Groys, *supra* note 1 at 78.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid at 83.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid at 87.



abolition of the divide between private and public. Thus, under the modern system of care, “all bodies are intimate and political at the same time. Here, the intimate and the political, the physical and the symbolic, become identical.”<sup>38</sup>

Groys then critiques the most obvious symptom of this fusion of the identities of the physical and the symbolic: the pervasive narcissism he sees in social media where people indulge in relentless self-design. “Social networks like Facebook or Instagram offer to the global population an opportunity to post their most intimate photos, videos, and texts and make them accessible to everyone...”<sup>39</sup> More and more people now satisfy their desires in social media, making their desires publicly accessible and transforming their physical bodies into symbolic ones. This lust for self-design transforms society into an exhibition space where individuals appear like artists and their bodies as art. These new artists not only take care of their image but also appeal to the spectators’ recognition and appreciation. In the end, there is nothing liberating nor revolutionary about this self-presentation; it only affirms the existing symbolic order.

Is there a way out of this opposition between self-care and care? In the book’s last chapter titled “Revolutionary Care”, Groys reads the life and work of the medical doctor, avantgarde theorist, philosopher, and Bolshevik, Alexander Bogdanov. This might be a surprising turn for the reader since Bogdanov does not belong to the canon of philosophers that the academic institutions of care usually present to their patients. Nonetheless, Groys has somewhat prepared his reader for this transition. The discussion of Marx via Arendt was a signpost for this rather unexpected climax.

Bogdanov thought about the revolutionary process through the concepts of egression and degression. Egression refers to those forms of social organization that are centralized and authoritarian, which he believed could be utilized to break traditional orders. One of these is the Bolshevik-wing of the Russian Social Democratic Party. In contrast, degression refers to the skeletal covering of the social order, which stabilizes it and protects it from disintegrating. Groys, then, contends that these notions of egression and degression “can be understood as the conflict between self-care and care.”<sup>40</sup> The degressive or skeletal system is “a system of

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid at 88.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid at 97.



protection, of care.”<sup>41</sup> To access the care services, it may require one to get insurance or join a work unit. The system of care thus dictates what patients may do to benefit from the care system. Despite the constraints, the patient may start an egressive movement to transform the system. For Groys, such move signals the dominance of self-care over care. Once dismissed by Lenin as a pigtail of Mach, Bogdanov’s life was itself a resolution of the dialectic between the self-care and institutional care by his participation in revolutionary practice and death in one of his care experiments in blood transfusion for a young patient. It was as though Turgenev’s immortal character, Bazarov, came to life and made his death more symbolic.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, there could not be a more symbolic synthesis of self-care and care than the end of Bogdanov’s life.

Groys’ book invites us to raise some questions about the relationship between our physical and symbolic bodies and the dialectic between care and self-care.

1. In the book’s philosophical survey, Groys discussed Hegel’s notion of “*freedom as the essence of human subjectivity*” and the Platonic claim that “*truth shows itself when everything that is related to the body is removed and the soul becomes able to contemplate itself.*” Here, the ability to contemplate our soul is a way to obtain freedom for the self. **In this caring for the self, what are the contemporary ways in modern life that allow one to transcend the bounded physical state?**
2. The book argues that “*photographs, documents, videos...letters, emails, and other artifacts*” extend the human body and create what Groys calls our “*symbolic bodies*” as an extension of the “*material body*”. **What would it mean to care for the symbolic bodies?**
3. In highly competitive merit-based societies, there might be tension between the care for the physical and symbolic bodies. **How does one calibrate the relative well-being of the physical and symbolic bodies?**
4. **Can you think of some contemporary examples of the tension between institutionalized care and self-care in your context?** While Groys implicitly locates care in the state, Hegel theorized the constitution of an international realm through state recognition. **Does care also exist beyond the state? What are the forms or**

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> See Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). The nihilist Bazarov gets infected with typhus in his scientific studies.



**manifestations of internationalized care? How do international institutions of care fit with the sovereign states' institutionalized care? Is it possible for self-care to exist in the international sphere?**

5. Based on Bogdanov's theory, Groys argues that a revolutionary self-care is a collective decision (in the form of an egressive political party) not to support the existing order and requires the use of an external, eccentric position to break the degressive system. **What are the possibilities as well as contradictions of revolutionary self-care that seeks to foster a kind of counter modernity through "creativity" and "aggression"?**