Careful Economics for an often Uncaring Discipline:

Fostering Caring Activities in a World of Asymmetries, Dependencies and Limited Autonomies

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Review of Maren A. Jochimsen (2003): Careful Economics. Integrating Caring Activities and Economic Science, Boston, Dordrecht and London: Kluwer Academic Press.

For to those of us on both sides of the Atlantic who have been following Maren Jochimsen's work in the last years, *Careful Economics. Integrating Caring Activities and Economic Science* comes as a special and long-awaited treat. It is a pleasure to see in such a lucid and well-articulated form some of the ideas Jochimsen started to develop in earlier publications, including in the pages of ***zfwu***. *Careful Economics* further develops some of the author's previous work on issues such as making visible economic activities previously ignored by economics (Jochimsen/Knobloch 1997), the interrelationship between the industrial economy, ecological processes, and maintenance economics, and on limited autonomy, asymmetry and dependence as central theoretical concepts exemplified by caring situations (Jochimsen 2001, Jochimsen 2003).

Because of both demographic (rapidly aging populations), social (the decline in the supply of family-provided caring services) and academic (the unmasking of the male-biased assumptions of mainstream economics by authors such as Ferber/Nelson 1993) reasons, the economic aspects of caring for family and kin have received growing attention in the last years. This attention has come from political scientists (Joan Tronto, Selma Sevenhuijsen), philosophers (Eva Kittay), sociologists (Susan Himmelweit) and, yes, economists (Julie Nelson, Nancy Folbre.) Yet a clear conceptualization of what constitutes caring activities has eluded us so far, giving ammunition to those who would argue the topic belongs in the realm of normative studies and not 'real' economics. Rather, the emphasis so far has been mostly on *locations* in the context of which caring activities take place (household work, civic realm, unpaid work, informal work, etc.) and on the various possible 'suppliers': the family, the market, the state.

Enter Maren Jochimsen's book, the first to offer a systematic analysis of what constitutes caring activities. Previous attempts at a definition have been too broad to put the finger on what really constitutes the essence of caring situations, and few tools were available to analyze these activities across locations and providers. Jochimsen focuses

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on the central defining characteristics of caring activities, common to them regardless of their location, of whether they are paid or unpaid, or of whether they are coordinated by the market or by other institutions.

Jochimsen presents caring for dependents as "the conceptual point of reference for theorizing care in economics" (17). Caring for dependents is but one part of a larger universe of caring interactions, but as its most extreme, 'core' case, has to be thoroughly analyzed before other types of caring interactions can be fully understood. The litmus test concerns activities responding to existential needs – activities essential for the care receiver's survival but that the care receiver cannot perform by him/herself, thus "leaving no choice but to rely on someone else for the performance of the vital service" (14). This definition, as we will discuss below, is essential to Jochimsen's argument that some economic activities are provided not because of the push of 'market forces', but because they need to be provided in an existential sense (Jochimsen's focus on existentially-essential caring activities builds upon Eva Kittay's concept of "dependency work" (Kittay 1999) although, as the author writes, she is "not happy with the term" (14, fn 10).).

The complex issue of motivation emerges as a central issue of the book. Although motivation is essential for the provision of good caring services, little has been done at either the theoretical or practical side to foster and nurture it. Policy-makers continue to free-ride on the motivation of dependency workers (what Jochimsen calls 'motivational dependency',keeping workers from leaving dependency work even when these are some of the worst paid positions and care providers often need to take additional jobs to 'subsidize' the caring work). Indeed, by overemphasizing intrinsic motivation one runs the risk of "sentimentalizing" (53) caring, or seeing it as something purely individual and without the need for support from state and society. As pointed by Jochimsen, what characterizes dependency services is not that they are complex and interesting, but that they "respond to an unavoidable dependence in terms of very survival" (67).

Yet even for existentially-needed care services, a caring motivation is essential for the quality of these services to be assured. How can this caring motivation be fostered? Crowding theory proponents (Bruno Frey and others) have argued that, in situations where intrinsic motivation is essential, external intervention (monetary incentives and rules and punishments) may 'crowd-out' intrinsic motivation. In discussing the "paradox of caring labor", Nancy Folbre (1995) has argued that "the only way to preserve the quality of caring is not to pay for it" (Folbre 1995: 87)). Jochimsen questions this conclusion and, instead, turns around the policy conclusions of crowding out theory by showing that, yes, external incentives may crowd out motivation, but rather "as the result of inadequate (little) pay and the stiffening of rules and regulations" (67), and not as the result of the pay per se. The policy implications are clear. At a more specific level, they concern discussions on how to keep qualified workers in the caring sphere. Continuing to ignore caring activities as 'simply a private matter' may actually come to cost societies dearly. Social policies based on this view actually 'free-ride' on caring activities – if these continue to be neglected, developed economies may end up overextending themselves, and becoming unable to provide basic services that, despite

their "invisibility," are essential for the functioning of society and, thus, "are a precondition for all other economic activities" (4).

Part II of the book focuses on how have various economic traditions conceptualized caring activities. Particularly interesting is Jochimsen's treatment of caring activities in Gary Becker's "New Family Economics" (Becker 1993). Jochimsen discusses a central problem in Becker's implicit view of caring activities: it only considers caring either between equally capable adults or parents caring for their own children, models unable to capture the reality of caring for existentially dependent people. In Becker's concept of caring between equally capable adults, symmetry and choice are taken for granted. Moreover, the assumption is that there is a cost-benefit analysis involved. The care giver 'receives' something in return for his caring, often immediate 'psychic income' or the expectation of future reciprocity. So the assumption is that, would that 'something' not be received, the caring services would not be provided. Similarly, the underlying assumption in Becker's concept of caring for children (seen as 'production goods') is that they will eventually provide a return for the caring labor endowed on them – certainly not a given concerning care for existentially dependent people.

What lies in this slender red volume is actually a fundamental critique of mainstream economics. Jochimsen's analysis carries within it a deep questioning of the very ways in which mainstream economics explains the supply of goods and services. The author seems to be saying: 'Some economic activities we enter into because we expect a return and some simply because the works *needs* to be done, because the existential needs of a person are at stake, and if I do not do it the work may never be done, putting a dependent person at risk.' Given the inability of "reciprocity" to capture the essence of caring for dependents, "the task is to conceptualize situations of human interaction in economics as gifts, as sustained one-way transfers – without assuming even an implicit or deferred exchange pattern" (39). Essential to the argument that some economic activities we enter into without expecting a return is the fact that there is something very special about these activities, and this is exactly what Jochimsen seeks to isolate through her search for a definition of caring activities. In questioning a view of the supply of services based on (real or expected) return, Jochimsen both taps upon and makes a contribution to the economic literature on grants, gifts and transfers best known through the works of Boulding, Malinowsky and Sahlins.

Jochimsen's argument calls into question some of the central assumptions of mainstream economic theory, such as autonomy, symmetry, independence, and the ability to 'leave or enter the market' at will. Nothing exemplifies more clearly the unrealistic nature of these expectations as the situation of those existentially dependent on others for their very survival, yet on occasion not even able to voice their needs, choose whether to enter or exit market relationships, or even acknowledge the services received. In questioning narrow explanations of the provision of services, Jochimsen provides a strong critique of what mainstream economics considers to be 'economic' and hints at a broader definition, a definition bringing economics closer to the reality of real life – with all its asymmetries, dependencies, and limited autonomies.

Throughout her argument, Jochimsen seems to keep hinting at the view that the care giver (dependency worker) really does not have much of a (perceived) choice as to whether or not to provide existentially-critical caring services. And this lack of choice

seems to have less to do with intrinsic or external motivations or with the 'interesting' nature of the job than with the very fact that the dependency work just *has* to be done because the care receiver may simply not survive without it. Yet sometimes it feels the author takes this connection for granted, or does not fully explain the causal connection between the need for these services and their actual provision. Jochimsen writes: "people most often feel the need to help in these situations" [emergency situations of existential need] (p. 86, fn 3). But may-be it would be worth to search for more complex explanations: sometimes caring services are simply *not* provided.

In societies with rapidly aging populations, how to provide quality care for growing numbers of dependent elderly is emerging as one of the greatest challenges of the twenty-first century. This compact and idea-packed book has provided much food for thought on these questions and an important starting point for serious theoretical research on the issue. Fortunately there is more to come – some the broader issues discussed in the book are being further developed through Jochimsen's work on what she and her co-authors Ulrike Knobloch and Stephan Kesting call *Lebensweltökonomie* (Jochimsen et. al. 2004), an area of research Jochimsen and Knobloch will continue to develop as series editors for a new book series on *Lebensweltökonomie* just inaugurated by the German publisher Kleine Verlag.

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