

Why Care?

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Welcome. I'm Rebecca Spang, Director of the Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies at Indiana University. It's a great pleasure to welcome you to this, the fourteenth, in our series of annual workshops. And after more than a decade of such meetings, it is perhaps about time that we ask whether anybody really cares.

Why care? Who wouldn't prefer—especially on a beautiful spring day like this one, and at the end of an enormously stressful semester—to be care free? Why should we devote our time, attention, and energy to eighteenth-century cares, or to the era's caregivers and caretakers? Why, to pose the question in the vocabulary of our own moment, should we be “mindful” of care?

We came to this rubric because we thought it especially fertile in possibilities for conversation across common intellectual divisions. We can be empiricists about care—how many prisoners of war had shirts? how much money was raised to clothe them? how many orphans were left at foundling hospitals? (we can ask these questions)—and we can also be theorists and critics of care (noting the political uses of caring for enemy combatants, asking about how care was defined). Care can be a question for historians, but also for ethical philosophers, for social reformers, and even for literary critics. Care can be a mundane activity (weeding the garden, grooming the dog) or it can be a profound moral question. Caring can reveal (or produce) an emotional investment, but it can also result from social inequalities. Enslaved people, after all, provided a lot of the care that was given to fields, children, and livestock in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world; today, much of the work of care is low paid and low status.

So we know there is a politics of care, as well as a poetics. Several decades ago, we might have cited orphanages, soldiers' pensions, charitable giving, inoculation, Pinel “liberating the mad from their chains” etc. (the list is a long one) as evidence of growing humanitarianism and medical advancements in eighteenth-century Europe. Today, our narrative is more likely to be inflected with questions about control, governmentality, and discipline. Our job for the next three days, I think, is to re-consider both these narratives... and to be careful about the one we put in their place.