

Thinking about Caring: Culture, Methods, History

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Thinking about caring, a somewhat jarring phrase, poses a cultural and methodological conundrum for we post-moderns. Many equate our time with Giambattista Vico's "age of irony," the decaying civilization in which hypocrisy eclipses sincerity.¹ In a much-derided, but nevertheless symptomatic opinion piece in the *New York Times* entitled "How to Live Without Irony," Princeton scholar Christy Wampole chided the inauthenticity of her millennial-hipster generation and of our culture more broadly. "I find it difficult to give sincere gifts," she wrote. "Instead, I often give what in the past would have been accepted only at a White Elephant gift exchange: a kitschy painting from a thrift store, a coffee mug with flashy images of 'Texas, the Lone Star State,' plastic Mexican wrestler figures. Good for a chuckle in the moment, but worth little in the long term. Something about the responsibility of choosing a personal, meaningful gift for a friend feels too intimate, too momentous. I somehow cannot bear the thought of a friend disliking a gift I'd chosen with sincerity."² Mirroring this psychological and social dynamic, advertisements are often ironic in character, openly mocking their own format and message as a technique to garner support and curtail criticism by cynical consumers. Many aspects of our culture carefully hide multiple forms of care: caring for others, caring what others think, caring about ourselves, our ideals, and our authenticity.

Scholars are perhaps most guilty in this regard. We take part in a professional culture in which it is seen as unscientific to "care" about the people and subjects that we study (although clearly, this is often why we study them). What is more, our training as humanists in the paradigm of critical theory guides us to dismantle self-evident categories that Marx and Engels called "traditional ideas," decoding their structures and rhetoric in order to reveal them as forms of power and oppression.³ The legacies of Marx, the Frankfurt School, and Michel Foucault loom large in shaping our scholarly mandate to adopt critical perspectives on notions such as "freedom" and "care." This is rightfully so. When slave owner P. J. Laborie wrote of caring for slaves in eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue, the rhetoric of care was devoid of ethical or humane meaning.⁴ In his thoroughly racist essay, caring for slaves' wellbeing was not in the name of humanity or natural right, but in the name of preserving the slave holder's investments and maximizing profits. As citizens and scholars, we must certainly recognize the sinister nature of Laborie's mode of care.

As much as critical theory is essential to deconstructing and bringing clarity to such examples, it can also obfuscate and hamper certain areas of historical inquiry. Care is a perfect case study. In addition to the methodological challenges of studying care in the past—distinguishing what care meant, whether those who used its rhetoric did so sincerely, discerning who expressed it, how, and toward what/whom—our deeply-ingrained critical and ironic stance has trouble believing that people of the past actually cared when they said that they did. This skepticism is particularly pervasive when we approach individuals and groups that possessed power such as kings, the state, or members of the nobility. At best, care is often reduced to "paternalism" (by which those in power unilaterally determined "what was best" for their dependents or inferiors, never

¹ Giambattista Vico, *The New Science* (1725).

² Christy Wampole, "How to Live Without Irony," *New York Times*, November 17, 2012.

³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London, 1848).

⁴ P.J. Laborie, *The Coffee Planter of Saint Domingo* (London, 1798).

bothering to consult with those for whom they “cared”). At worst, we dismiss the rhetoric of care as a kind of propaganda that cloaked affirmations of power in a veil of moral legitimacy.

These perspectives of course hold legitimacy. Erica Charters’s paper presented at the Workshop shows such tendencies on the part of the British state and my own research shows similar phenomena in France. It is clear that a propagandistic and morally self-aggrandizing tone animated the rhetoric of care in Louis XIV’s decree establishing the Invalides on November 24, 1670. Likewise, noble military officers sought to bolster their moral and social reputations by publishing humanitarian cartels that they signed before battles. These cartels protected the wounded, health workers, and prisoners of war and demonstrated the honor, *sensibilité*, and humanity of enemy officers who agreed to them. Promulgating a public image as caring monarchs and aristocrats—as members of the *noblesse du coeur* (“nobility of the heart”)—was an important element of self-fashioning in the eighteenth-century era of *sensibilité*. Yet, this is not the only dimension of care that must be considered in these examples. Caring had a dual function in the Invalides and the humanitarian cartels. On the one hand, both institutions provided real physical care for military men, be they retired or on active duty. This dimension should not be underestimated. On the other hand, when published and publicized, this care also represented a tool for creating moral, social, and political capital. Critical theoretical perspectives are most helpful in leading scholars to detect the power dynamics and stakes of this second mode of care that embodies what Sade sardonically labeled the vice of virtue.⁵

Some forms of care reinforced traditional social and political hierarchy in long eighteenth-century France. However, it is reductive and anachronistic to superimpose our ironic tendencies onto the past and to imagine that sincere forms and rhetorics of care were absent from the culture and personal lives of the bourgeois and noble writers who provide the vast majority of our primary sources. On-the-ground accounts in published martial treatises as well as memoirs and correspondence in the French military archives (the corpus with which I work), convey modes of care that had little or nothing to do with self-promotion or the paternalist model. Rather, they relate what appear to be a genuine sentiment of emotional caring and a sincere desire to improve the physical and psychological conditions of military life.

A methodological question follows from the above assertion. How can one detect a type of care that is not paternalistic? Conversation—as opposed to single-handed opining or dictating—may be one key indicator. Officers across the armed forces took it upon themselves to open lines of communication between themselves, subaltern officers, and soldiers in order to glean information about the experiences, grievances, and desires of those with whom they served. Cavalry officer Louis Drummond, comte de Melfort (1722-1788) related such an effort in a memoir to war minister Choiseul (1719-1785), circa 1762.⁶ His narrative recounts a conversation that he initiated in his dragoon unit about Choiseul’s reforms, his men’s experiences, and the reasons that so many men refused to reenlist. Rather than accept the status quo and ponder his soldiers’ lives from afar in the officers’ quarters, Melfort embraced an empirical, empathetic spirit and reached out to his troops. He avoided making paternalist decisions on their behalf, based on his own assumptions. Instead, he came to his men with a sense of curiosity about why no one was reenlisting and hoped there was sufficient trust between them that the men would answer honestly.

Melfort relayed his efforts in rich detail, which aids our analysis. After arranging the men in a

⁵ This theme is already evident in the first of Sade’s works published in his lifetime, *Justine ou les malheurs de la vertu* (Holland, 1791).

⁶ GR 1M 1709, *Observations sur les différents détails relatifs à la nouvelle formation* [ca. 1762-70]).

layered semi-circle and announcing to the troops that he had proof of the king's good will and of the war minister's attentions, he invited anyone in the regiment to step forward to form an inner circle of discussants. Not one man stepped forward. Melfort then singled out several sergeants, engineers (*fourriers*), brigadiers, and other officers asking if they wanted to reenlist. None did. At that point, Melfort dismissed the officers in order to speak directly with the dragoons. He exhorted them to trust him and to tell him how they felt about their service and superior officers. They responded laconically that their officers were good to them and that they could not complain about them. Then silence.

Melfort knew that these men did not trust him and were afraid to speak their minds. In order to show that they could truly have confidence in him, Melfort showed them a tactical memoir that he had sent to Choiseul, the contents of which demonstrated that he was sincerely interested in their wellbeing. Their suspicions and doubts then seemed to dissipate and one by one, Melfort's men began to speak openly with their commander. Many wanted to discuss specific points of Choiseul's recent reforms. Older soldiers feared they would not get the full salary that they were due. They had been told upon enlisting that they would receive it after sixteen or twenty-four years of service, but they felt sure that they would not touch their payoff until after thirty years of service. Another dragoon spoke up and divulged that many men never received their due leave and were basically being kept in the service by force. He also revealed that a number of men were never paid after their first term of enlistment. If they were paid properly, the dragoons told him, "it would prove to us that the King doesn't demand that we serve him for nothing."

This statement resonated with a great number of Melfort's men, so much so that he reported all of them started to speak at once. Their conversation went in many directions and Melfort probed further to gain a deeper understanding of these individuals, their mentalities, and the realities of their lives. Ultimately, he conveyed, despite his best efforts to guarantee a change in the dragoons' circumstances, the abundance of proof to the contrary easily conquered his strongest reassurances. In their eyes and in his own, "the calamity of circumstances did not permit taking care of their needs. I have seen regiments that were almost naked and although the minister's orders indicated that all the regiments that I inspected were to be given new clothing, it is no less prevalent to find those who have been wearing the same tattered clothing for one year and who have been deeply afflicted and humiliated by this. I can even say on this subject that I saw soldiers and dragoons refuse to take leave of the army because they would have been too embarrassed to appear in their hometowns looking like beggars [*gueux*]. These were their own words, which greatly affected me and which I cannot forget."

Melfort's efforts to learn about his men, his willingness to listen to them and converse with them at length, and to take in their individual experiences exemplifies a type of "caring curiosity" that departed from the framework of paternalism. It came from a desire for military effectiveness, but also respect for his men as warriors and human beings and a genuine concern for their lives and wellbeing in and outside of the military. As the hesitant, doubtful, and surprised reactions of his men illustrate, Melfort and like-minded officers were pioneers in reaching out towards their troops and taking their experiences into account. Melfort's genuine care is crystallized in his vocabulary, which at once evinces his grasp of the emotions of his men ("deeply afflicted" "humiliated" "embarrassed") and communicates his strong empathetic response ("greatly affected me" "I cannot forget").

Melfort reiterated his genuine caring stance several times in this episode and convincing the dragoons of his sincerity was a catalyst to several important results. It fostered conversation that gave insight into why men did not want to reenlist. At the same time, it created a sense of com-

mon purpose and community. Familiarity, intimacy, communication, and caring were modes of relating that could bring military men together across regional and class divides. These relationships could not only build increased trust through the ranks and encourage *esprit de corps*, but could form the basis for greater justice in the military system and for ways of war that were reflective of the secular socio-moral values of *l'âge des lumières*.

Melfort's conversation with his men represents a single instance of a broader phenomenon that I investigated in my paper presented at the Workshop, in previous articles, and in my forthcoming book.⁷ Maréchal Maurice de Saxe (1696-1750) reframed analyses of the military enterprise to focus on community and care—especially for the common soldier—which he implemented on campaign. More specifically, he brought military thought to focus on what he called *le coeur humain*, which was an amalgamation of human emotions, visceral reactions, opinions, and reflexes.⁸ His ideas were reflective of the burgeoning holistic conception of the human organism in which physiological, passional, and moral life were interwoven.⁹ *Médecins-philosophes* such as Théophile de Bordeu (1722-1776) or Antoine Le Camus (1722-1772) and hygienists like Jean Colombier (1736-1789) focused on the military body as a “sensible body” rather than what we recognize as a Foucauldian “docile body.”¹⁰ Their work along with that of other military medical personnel offered a road map to caring for the soldierly frame and, united with the optimism and moral imperative associated with *humanité*, gave impetus to make progress in disease control and treatment, surgical procedures, the hospital system, and practices of hygiene.¹¹

The broad objectives of military hygiene fostered the development of *régimes de vivre* that would care for the individual soldier's physical and emotional being. This led to groundbreaking contemplations with regard to emotional reactions to war and military life that constituted an initial movement to establish what we now call military psychology.¹² In the 1760s, these ideas coalesced into a humanitarian and human rights campaign that emerged from and targeted the armed forces. Military reformers and the intellectual community galvanized surrounding the condemnation of capital and corporal punishment for soldiers guilty of desertion and petty crimes. The military became the instigator and beneficiary of one of the first victories of the human rights movement.¹³ Notions of care in this framework must be contrasted with the type of care advanced by a slave owner like Laborie.

⁷ Christy Pichichero, “Le Soldat Sensible: Military Psychology and Social Egalitarianism in the Enlightenment French Army.” *French Historical Studies*, Volume 31, Number 4 (Fall 2008), 553-580; “Moralizing War: Military Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century France.” *France and Its Spaces of War: Experience, Memory, Image*, ed. by Daniel Brewer, Patricia Lorcin. Palgrave Macmillan (September 2009). My forthcoming book is tentatively entitled *The Military Enlightenment War and Culture in the French Diaspora from Louis XIV to Napoleon* (Cornell University Press, summer 2017).

⁸ Maurice de Saxe, *Mes Réveries* (Amsterdam and Leipzig, 1757).

⁹ Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) and Elizabeth A. Williams, *The Physical and the Moral: Anthropology, Physiology, and the Philosophical Medicine in France, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1994).

¹⁰ See Théophile Bordeu, *Recherches sur l'histoire de la médecine* (1764); Jean Colombier, *Code de Médecine Militaire pour le service de terre* (Paris, 1772) and *Préceptes sur la santé des gens de guerre, ou Hygiène militaire* (Paris: Lacombe, 1775); Antoine Le Camus, *La Médecine de l'esprit* (Paris, 1769). See also Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

¹¹ For a general presentation of medical culture and advances during this period in France, see Laurence Brockliss and Colin Jones, *The Medical World of Early Modern France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

¹² Christy Pichichero, “Le Soldat Sensible,” 561-569.

¹³ Jean Chagniot, *Paris et l'armée au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Economica, 1985), 618-628.

For Melfort and like-minded military men in eighteenth-century France, caring was at once an ethical, professional, civil, and life-and-death issue. To adopt an overly cynical analytical stance is to miss the moral values and practical objectives of these officers as well as the historical significance of their thoughts and actions in the culture of war of the *longue durée*. Their ideas and actions within the armed forces formed the foundation for the Geneva Conventions and humanitarian law of war, for the culture of the “band of brothers” and “Napoleonic friendship,” and the rising consciousness of the cost of war on the soldier’s body, mind, and heart.¹⁴

We must continue to develop tools of analysis for examining care and be equally open to the possibility of its sincerity and humanitarianism as to its hypocrisy and self-servingness. We must also remind ourselves that these modes of care are not mutually exclusive antipodes, but rather often occurred simultaneously. The case study of care in the French armed forces during the long eighteenth century and the fruitful discussions of care in the 2015 Workshop make one thing clear: it is worthwhile to take care when studying care!

¹⁴ Brian Joseph Martin, *Napoleonic Friendship: Military Fraternity, Intimacy and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century France* (Lebanon, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2011).