

## Caring and the Eighteenth Century

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In a talk given to doctors and nurses in 1970, the English psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott reflected on the meaning of “cure.” “At a most superficial level,” Winnicott insisted, “the word ‘cure’ points to a common denominator in religious and medical practice. I believe cure at its roots means care. About 1700 it started to degenerate into a name for medical treatment, as in watercure. Another century gave it the added implication of successful outcome; the patient is restored to health, the disease is destroyed, the evil point is exorcized.” For Winnicott, as the use of “degenerate” indicates, this transition was not all for the good. “Cure,” he continued, “in the sense of remedy, of successful eradication of disease and its cause, tends today to overlay cure as care. Medical practitioners are all the time engaged in a battle to prevent the two meanings of the word from losing touch with each other.”<sup>1</sup>

I’m interested in Winnicott here because his linkage of care and cure is both etymologically dubious and pragmatically telling. According to the OED, “care” and “cure” do not have common roots. “Care” descends from Old German while “cure” descends from French with roots lying in Latin.<sup>2</sup> But if Winnicott’s etymology is inaccurate, his philological instincts are important: throughout their history—and especially after 1700—care and cure have nestled together in both religious and medical senses and the question of whether or not caring means curing has had wide-ranging effects. These effects could be seen throughout the papers and discussions that constituted “The Eighteenth-Century: Who Cares?” Indeed, it would not, I think, be unreasonable to say that the question of the relationship between care and cure, whether there was care without cure, whether cure (in the social sense at least) was justified, whether there is a way to tell the history of care that was not purifying, lay at the heart of the workshop. I cannot, of course, recapture the richness of either the papers or discussion here—but that is what this volume is for. Instead, let me indicate a few of the different ways that the workshop did, and did not, take up the challenges of care and the eighteenth century.

### I

In her introduction to the workshop (and to this volume), Rebecca Spang raised two fundamental challenges for the participants.<sup>3</sup> The first was to move beyond both Whiggish and social control approaches to the history of care; the second, to reconsider our notions of the relationship between care and power by recognizing that much, perhaps most, care in the eighteenth-century was care from below, performed by servants and slaves, wives and children, the poor and the dependent. What would a history of care look like that was not dependent on either heroic or demonic narratives from above?

There was little of the Whiggish in the discussion; modified forms of social control were harder to escape however. To be sure, there were defenders of writers (especially Goethe and Rousseau) viewed as signs of an eighteenth-century breakthrough in the history of human con-

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<sup>1</sup> D.W. Winnicott, *Home is Where We Start From: Essays by a Psychoanalyst* (New York, 1986), 112-113.

<sup>2</sup> See “cure, v.1”. OED Online. June 2016. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/46006?rskey=Yw1ZXz&result=7> (accessed July 04, 2016), and “care, v.”. OED Online. June 2016. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/27902?rskey=j1y85U&result=4> (accessed July 04, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> See Rebecca L. Spang, “Why Care?” in this volume.

sciousness. Whether the reference was to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Rousseau's *Emile*, or Austen's *Mansfield Park*, participants saw the possibilities in the century's imagining of an ever increasing capacity for empathy. Much like Adam Phillips and Barbara Taylor in their *On Kindness*, the workshop saw in the literature and philosophy of the long eighteenth century a demand for care that went beyond the act of normalizing through cure.<sup>4</sup> Still, when considering the history of the period, participants had more difficulty in breaking with the narratives of care as control or dominance. This difficulty took many forms—in discussions of military medical care, the sensibility of British JP's both at home and abroad, in the organization of foundling hospitals, or the problematics of efforts to convert Native Americans to Christianity. Here—despite the presence of eighteenth-century sensibility and humanitarianism—cure as normalization took center stage.

There was, as the workshop papers made clear, an uneven development in the eighteenth-century between imagination and social practice. This gap was hardly distinctive to the eighteenth century, to be sure, and on a first pass this unevenness appears as the simple distinction between literature and philosophy on the one hand and history on the other. But I think that we need to resist accepting the universal nature of the problem or the seeming clarity of the difference between imagination and historical practice. Instead, the narratives on offer turned on the assertion of value and values in reconstructing the eighteenth century, problems that were rooted in the self-definitions of eighteenth-century actors towards enlightenment and humanity but that could not be resolved through empirical claims or by recourse to objective standards. As a result, debate in the workshop focused on the importance—or lack thereof—of subjective intention as opposed to objective result. One of the most intense and recurring conversations concerned the accusation of “complicity.”

Some participants, taking advantage of the perspective offered by time, emphasized the extent to which seemingly humanitarian or progressive projects led to new forms of domination and control. In this sense, the charge of complicity simply replicated the older problem of unintended consequences—here the problem was whether or not this did an injustice to the actors by holding them to account for a completed process that they experienced as an open and contingent movement of events (the French Revolution was our most notable of this). But more fundamentally, the charge of complicity assumed that figures in the eighteenth century were either not aware of what they created or should have in some sense been ashamed of it. In this latter sense, the perspective of the critic or historian was rooted not in their superior knowledge of outcomes but in a claim to superior values. Speaking of “complicity” implicitly allows scholars to rewrite the meaning of actions (are they emancipatory or oppressive?) in accord with their own, present, commitments. To what extent is it possible or justified to speak of an historical actor's “complicity” was debated throughout the workshop, I think, because it brought to the fore the difficulty of engaging the past in such a way that you can hold your own values without diminishing the values of those you study. How, in other words, can we have past actors talk back to us in such a way that historicizes us as much as we historicize them?

At this question, though, the workshop ran up against its limits. Rebecca Spang's desire that we approach care, “from below” as it were, was problematic because the papers were not written to do that. Indeed, the most powerful disruption of our debates over the changing meanings of care in the eighteenth century came not from a scholar but from Mary Collier, eighteenth-century poet and laborer. Collier's riposte to Stephen Duck elaborated the burdens that eighteenth-century poor women carried from laboring both in the fields and in the home. As she elaborated

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<sup>4</sup> Adam Phillips and Barbara Taylor, *On Kindness* (New York, 2009).

it, the women of the laboring poor had no respite from care, and care for them led not to power but to more and more care.

Collier stood as a pivot point for the issues of caring in the eighteenth century not because she provided some sort of privileged perspective but because she reminded us that care could be a demand as well as an assertion and that it was both practice and state of mind. Much like Goethe's fictional *Wilhelm Meister* or *Faust*, Collier reminded us of the other meaning of care—of worry and burden. From this perspective, care becomes a primary site for understanding the dilemma that Foucault christened the *Government of Self and Others*.<sup>5</sup> For Foucault, of course, care of the self was part of a larger system of governance (although not necessarily dominance). But from Collier to Goethe backwards to Defoe and onward to the Foundling Hospital, the French Revolution and the British empire, the papers and our discussions constantly came up against the limits of governance and the entrance of care as worry that entered at that limit. There was no need to reach for Heideggerian ontological fantasy to recognize the presence of anxiety—*anxiety took hold in a long eighteenth century where care (both as cure and not as cure) was separated from religious consolation and disrupted by commercial capitalism as it threw the burdens of caring for self and others onto selves enmeshed in systems of risk and calculation that they could not control. Care in the eighteenth century was increasingly secular—but whether it would lead to carefulness or cure or simple worry was never clear. It is a dilemma we have not yet escaped.*

## II

This eighteenth-century dilemma took another ongoing form in the workshop: how to care for, and about, the eighteenth-century in the contemporary Anglo-American academy (I will not attempt to speak beyond that). This question pressed upon the participants because, like many other humanistic studies, eighteenth-century studies is under attack for financial and ideological reasons. Indeed those financial and ideological reasons are intertwined—as the emphasis on higher education as a private good defined as workforce training has marginalized fields whose products are not easily commodified. Declining enrollments, ever increasing reliance on precarious teaching labor, a struggling publishing industry, and unsympathetic administrators all define a terrain in which the study of the eighteenth century demands more care while it provokes more worry. But these external pressures can only be understood in relation to an internal question: how best can scholars of the eighteenth century defend and articulate the value of their subject and their teaching to a skeptical world? This goal does not seem hopeless: after all there remains a terrific interest in the eighteenth century in popular culture as movies, plays (*Hamilton*, anyone?), and novels constantly remind us. Moreover, there is little sign that interest in the works of the eighteenth century does not persist.

One answer may lie in achieving what the workshop did not: moving beyond the Whig and control narrative structures we have inherited. As the workshop made clear, the eighteenth century lies at heart of a series of dilemmas (of care, of cosmopolitanism, of capitalism, of war and empire) that continue to structure our world. The contemporary world remains marked by it (in both positive and negative ways). But it is not our world and needs to be approached as both provocation and as fundamentally other. I began with one English psychoanalyst (Donald Winnicott) and I want to finish with another, one of Winnicott's intellectual children. In his "Making

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<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1982-1983*, edited by Frédéric Gros, translated by Graham Burchell (New York, 2010).

it Old,” Adam Phillips noted that an “informative object is not necessarily an evocative object.”<sup>6</sup> For Phillips, the evocative object does not obliterate the difference between past and present (that is what trauma is for). Instead, it brings an aliveness to our relationship to it; just as it provokes us to think anew about other things in our present. Today, perhaps, the best way to care about and for the eighteenth century is not to turn it into a moment in a larger story but to turn it from an informative into to an evocative object. It is a task the old narratives have ill-equipped us to complete. That is my care and my worry.

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<sup>6</sup> Adam Phillips, *Equals* (New York, 2002), 146.