



MIND & LIFE
EUROPE

2023 MLE Banner Theme “Caring for Life”

What is the right time to begin something? Which people should one listen to? What is the most important thing for one to do?

– Leo Tolstoy, paraphrased from “The Three Questions”

It should not be surprising at this point that one of the main characteristics of spontaneous compassion, which is not a characteristic of volitional action based on habitual patterns, is that it follows no rules.

– F. Varela, *Ethical Know-How: Action, Wisdom, and Cognition*, SUP, 1999

In a world that is inherently precarious and inclined toward bewildering complexity, what does it mean to care for life and to know what ‘the most important thing’ is at any given moment? How do we understand the multiple valences of care (i.e. care as a form of attention, care as an expression of sentience, care as a *praxis* for the here and now, care as an ethical imperative, care as a mode of moral reasoning, care as a form of relatedness...)? How can the work we do at MLE – rooted as it is in the enactive perspective – help us to both critically reflect on caring and apprehend it as something not separate from our very mode of being in the world? Can caring also be a deliberate practice? What might it look like in the mind and life of a scientist, a philosopher, a contemplative? Is there a care that can be as robust and radical as the other groundbreaking intellectual traditions to which we are indebted?

There are as many shades to the meaning of care as there are individuals; and as many explorations of care as there are intellectual traditions that hold it at their center. From the Greco-Roman tradition of the “care of the soul” and the philosopher as physician-healer, to the more contemporary “ethics of care” that emerged in the 1980s alongside certain strains of Feminist thought, the notion of care has permeated multiple aspects of Western thought, sometimes in ways subtle and unseen. In many of the other great wisdom traditions, such as Buddhism, Sufism, Taoism, and Confucianism, caring has long been considered the lifeblood of serious study and practice, whether in the form of *maitrī* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), *ahimsa* (non-violence), *i'thar* (altruism), *rén* (benevolence), or *shàn* (kindness). Caring arises from the acknowledgement in these traditions of the interdependence of all living beings, and of all phenomena for that matter.



MIND & LIFE
EUROPE

In the 20th century, care has also become intimately linked with the development of theories of subjectivity (Foucault, Patočka...) and with the particulars of the life of the individual. It has offered an alternative to the traditionally deontological and utilitarian brands of ethics and has much in common with the phenomenological (Merleau-Ponty, Levinas...) and enactive traditions (Varela, De Jaegher...). In its most profound expression, caring can be understood as constitutive of our very being—as a metaphysical foundation of being alive. As responsive beings in an intersubjective field, we *are* caring in the most fundamental sense, whether or not we cultivate a deliberate attitude in that direction.

At the same time, the moment we evoke care, we enter a very practical space of ethical considerations. Caring is also, and perhaps above all, a form of embodied know-how, often acquired implicitly in the practices and professions that place care at their center (cf. F. Varela, *Ethical Know-How: Action, Wisdom, and Cognition*, SUP, 1999). We need only think of the nurse, the gardener, the artist, the therapist, the bodyworker, or the monastic to get a glimpse of how caring can manifest through the pre-reflective vehicle of the body. As “styles of situated moral reasoning” (Selma Sevenhuijsen), care has a way of reminding us that we are always, already embedded in social contexts, just as we are embedded in the larger planetary context. It invites us to consider subjectivities beyond what we know to be our own and challenges us to consider the other life forms on this planet as having their own form of subjectivity, requiring our care and tending for our mutual survival. Caring brings us closer to the granularity of life, while simultaneously enlarging us beyond the immediate pale of self-interest.

In 2023, we will explore care in its many guises, not the least of which will be the ecological guise – *Gaia* – of which we humans are a part. In evoking caring, we will also consider the barriers to caring in a world that seems committed as ever to self-interest, polarization, and capitalistic exploitation. How does care manifest in a world that is perilously ‘standing at the edge’? What does it look like to care for *all* of life, in all its myriad and bewildering manifestations?