

Age and Care Graz 2023

September 20, 2023:

17.30-19.00 Keynote 1: Joan Tronto

“Layers of Responsibility: Thinking Democratically About Caring for Elders”

Although we frequently hear that eldercare in modern societies is “in crisis,” some crises seem to have passed into the status of being permanently in crisis. Sadly, the crises that seem to matter the least are the long-term crises that involve the least powerful, and most vulnerable, people. They are the after-thoughts, and their situation of crisis becomes chronic. There is no simple solution. This burden of chronic crisis affects older adults, but also is gendered and racialized.

When some attention is paid to these crises, the proposed action is often an inadequate “quick fix.” Such “quick fixes” make it seem as if someone is taking responsibility, when in reality they only offer a thin response to mitigate the loudest complaints about the chronic crisis, as political scientists have long argued. Such forms of bad care are unjust because they fail to consider deeper levels of responsibility. For example, currently Germany is organizing to import care workers from Mexico and Brazil to cope with the demands for eldercare- what does such an action mean, globally, for conditions for justice and care?

The only real way to address chronic issues of lack of care for older people is to start from the needs and wishes and conditions of the older people themselves. We become more frail as we age, and, as Sara Ruddick noted, vulnerability invites either a response of care or aggression. How do we make sure that our response is the proper one? What would it mean to care for the old people in a way that maintains their senses of human dignity and avoids their fear of becoming a “burden” on others?

Such a re-envisioning of care requires that we rethink what it means to grow older, the ways in which care is still rooted in an outdated conception of family, etc. And we need to be able to think differently about our notions of responsibility for and to each other. If we cannot address the layers of responsibility that surround the chronic crises of health, older adults, social and economic inequality, then nothing more than bad-care quick fixes will ever occur to us.

Changing how we think starts with thinking differently about ourselves as democratic citizens.