

# Posthuman Security and Care in the Anthropocene

Written by Cameron Harrington

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CAMERON HARRINGTON, OCT 10 2017

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Traditional and critical ideas about security have been largely anthropocentric. Whether the focus has been on the strategic manoeuvrings of states acting in relation to balances of power, or on the performative effects of security discourses, all security has been human security. To speak of security absent the human subject has been considered irrational or worse, uninteresting. Recently though, this perspective has been shifting, thanks in large part to a growing alertness to the diverse forms of life that produce and are affected by conditions of (in)security. In an ironic twist, this nascent posthuman sensibility is deeply connected to the realization that we have entered into a monumental period of global environmental change enacted by humans. The Anthropocene – the Age of (hu)Man – has garnered enormous amounts of attention across the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Beyond encapsulating the environmental catastrophe that is unfolding before us, a central motif of Anthropocene thinking, as it has been translated from geological stratigraphy, is the collapse of the divide between the social and the natural. As the human population explodes and we settle into a new world that may be four degrees warmer by century's end, we are obliged to accept not simply the status of humans as geological agents, but as entangled agents.

This reimagining explodes the western, Cartesian belief in dualism, whereby minds and bodies are separated along with the spiritual and the material, humans and nature: the inside/outside divides that have been so central to security studies (Walker 1993). This dualism is justified principally via a belief in radically separated reason, which allows for humans to appear different, outside and above an inferiorised and manipulable nature (Plumwood 2002). The effects of this dualism are to present humans as rational, acting, agents fulfilling their desires in a passive, intentional, global environment. The poverty of these 'Cartesian coordinates' has been highlighted for decades in security studies. These critiques have been presented primarily in terms of the breakdown of the Westphalian system and the exploration of alternative political identities beyond the state – such as nations, races, classes, movements, religions, cultures, or gender (Walker 1993). The Anthropocene further breaks down the divide not simply in terms of political identity but by emphasising the ways that non-human species, technologies, and natures interact with global security (Harrington 2016). The Human Age compels us to question prevailing forms of anthropocentrism and confront the power of other-than-human things in the world.

Readers may wonder what, if anything, can be done? As the recent 'Planet Politics Manifesto' laments, 'Trying to write from within IR, we find ourselves prisoners in our own vocation. We are speechless, or even worse, cannot find words to represent the world and those within it.' (Burke, Fishel, Mitchell, Dalby, and Levine 2016, 502) If everything changes in the Anthropocene – the objects of study, the variety of harms, the nature of responsibility – what is left? Is security obsolete or powerless in the face of Earth system changes? Should we move to something else – perhaps resilience, or quantum politics, or some form of risk theory? Can posthuman security perspectives really transcend the IR 'prison' or will they simply replicate its Holocene-bred, anthropocentric logics within an expanded circle of concern? This article argues against either the abandonment of security or its reduction to its solely negative or positive forms. Instead, it prompts us to cultivate new (and activate very old) forms of care-based security. The new

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world of the Anthropocene and the posthuman sensibilities that arise from it offer us simultaneous and conflicting impulses. Given the reality that the Earth at once offers a safe haven for existence and poses formidable challenges for life and the capacities for collective human action, security politics might return to the ultimate horizon – the impulse to care.[1]

## Security and Care

The Anthropocene is indeed a crisis, both in material terms and, far less importantly, for the study of security. Grasping the idea of the Earth as both a unified system and as something with multiple states of being with imperceptible, shifting, and seeping thresholds is a terrifyingly difficult process (Clark 2016, 139). It offers us little hope that life within it will be any better for most humans and our non-human kin. Yet, to reduce the future to apocalyptic visions of flooded cities, charred farmlands and waves of migrants battling for access to ever-dwindling resources in the developed world is a mythical replay of Hobbesian-inspired security forms that should have long ago been abandoned. The Anthropocene should likewise not be reduced to some innate benevolence of a whole system that is designed either by chance or design to protect humans. Given the violent and dynamic tendencies of the planet, there is a need to challenge the feminised image of Gaia, so prevalent in Anthropocene discourse, which portrays the Earth system as a bountiful goddess or a nurturing mother, able to provide for all life, including humans, so long as we protect and sustain her natural state. As Latour reminds us, the Earth system (Gaia) is both nurturing and destructive. She is not indifferent because she is so clearly affected by human behaviour. But She has aims that directly produce human insecurity and civilizational collapse. She is simultaneously ‘...too fragile to play the calming role of old nature, too unconcerned by our destiny to be a Mother, too unable to be propitiated by deals and sacrifices to be a Goddess.’ (Latour 2011)

If we are to focus on cultivating a different form of security, one that is post-human, post-natural, and that does not rely upon Holocene-bred logics, where might we turn? Can we end up avoiding all that and still call it *security*? While I am aware of the difficulty of answering that question here, I argue that security will likely remain a necessary component of adjusting to the Anthropocene. Despite this, we are forced to reconsider the traditional obsession with tragedy (which is everywhere in Anthropocene discourse) and instead focus on care. The notion of care attunes us to the shifting contours of life and death in the Anthropocene. A security that is caring and careful preserves the concept’s historical coherence. It also emphasises the relational practices that underpin the survival and flourishing of life in addition to embracing and accepting the finality of earthly existence in the Anthropocene. Finally, supporting multi-perspective forms of care action helps amend traditional security ethics like autonomy, non-interference and reciprocity.

It may seem counterintuitive, but security has always been concerned with the concept of care. Indeed, if we refer back to Heidegger, it is care that motivates human being-in-the-world (what he refers to as *Dasein*) in the first place. It is care that makes existence visible (Heidegger 1978). Likewise, the concept of security is at a fundamental level about the human relationship to care. John T. Hamilton expertly explains in his book *Security: Politics, Humanity and the Philology of Care* that our concern for security is ultimately a concern to be without concern (2013, 10). We have struggled to reconcile this from the earliest beginning of the security concept, which was formed via Roman fables of the character *Cura*, the personification of care and concern. From *Cura* comes the etymological root of security, *securitas*, which translates into modern English as the state of being removed from care; the state of being care-free. Hamilton explains,

The word is transparent enough, featuring three distinct components: the prefix *sē-* (apart, aside, away from); the noun *cura* (care, concern, attention, worry); and the suffix *-tas* (denoting a condition or state of being). *Securitas*, therefore, denotes a condition of being separated from care, a state wherein concerns and worries have been put off to the side. Man will be literally secure when he is removed from *Cura*’s governance, when his unified being is split apart, back into its discrete elements (2013, 5).

This reading tells us that the desire for security – understood as certitude and trust – is seemingly universal and timeless. We all seek to reduce uncertainty and the risk of personal harm it brings. *Securitas* is an ideal state where there is no risk and care is no longer needed; where we can exist in serene tranquility, without worry and with the

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knowledge that no harm is coming. Yet, the flip side of the security-care relationship points to an inherent contradiction.

...*Securitas* can just as well refer to 'indifference' (the lack of interest) or 'negligence' (the lack of concern for a person or object). By removing *cura* as commitment or concentrated effort, by ignoring the loved one or neglecting one's work, the elimination of care denotes 'heedlessness,' implying that one is no longer driven by the concerns that are believed to define and guide human existence, moral behavior, or practical action. Free from these kinds of concern, we are secure in the sense of being inattentive or indifferent, foolhardy or delinquent. In this case, the privation of devoted attention threatens to leave us deprived (Hamilton 2013, 11).

From its earliest beginnings care has played a central role in security and the desire to eradicate care continues to drive our security decisions. Yet Hamilton also makes clear that the contours of security have always been contested. He weaves in a variety of sources, from ancient Greek poetry to Roman stoicism, from Hobbes to Schmitt and Heidegger, to underline the 'vast network of mythical, linguistic, and cultural valences and traditions that have motivated the term's usage across histories' (Hamilton 2013, 276). Given the unique ability of the Anthropocene to dissolve the promise of security, more care, not less, is needed in the posthuman, postnatural Anthropocene.

## The Origins of Care

Part of the modern invocation to care derives from the well-established feminist paradigm of care ethics. At its core, care ethics is about concrete, particular, relationships. Humans should pursue moral action based upon their empathic consideration of the other they exist in relation to. This perspective deemphasises the traditional view that ethics should be derived from the rational invocation of universal duties, responsibilities, or principles. It also rejects attempts to impose Newtonian laws upon social relations. In place of this it asks us to consider the unique value of relationships and ongoing, shifting patterns of interactions and responses. This means being cognizant of the needs, wants, and desires of the 'world,' defined as one's self, loved ones, near and distant others, society, and the planet (Engster 2004, 117). Occupying a moral position requires that we adopt 'actions and attitudes of care, in addition to or even more importantly than those of respect, non-interference, and tit-for-tat reciprocity...' (Collins 2015, 5). Care then becomes an approach to life that recognises the needs of others, attempts to respond to/provide for those needs, and establishes relationships of trust that transcend the boundaries of justice. This centres the social and the unequal power relationships that define life in the Anthropocene – moving beyond critique to advocate 'new forms of relationships, institutions, and actions that enhance mutuality and well-being' (Lawson 2007, 9). It also recognises how different historical and institutional relationships produce the need *for care*. Such a perspective can be transposed onto human-non-human relationships as well. In the context of the Anthropocene this includes how human decisions over time have created the conditions for unnatural disasters like arctic ice melt, drought, famine, flooding, mass extinction, etc. Depending on the particular need, care may also mean *retreat* from action.

The ethics of care is perhaps the most significant ethical theory to emerge from feminist analyses. How it translates into the world of security – so often filled with danger, harm, and violence – is an evolving, still unsettled question. Feminist security studies is a diverse and well-institutionalised sub-field, but the idea of care remains relatively under-developed as a security concept. When it has been examined, most notably over the past two decades by scholars like Sara Ruddick (1989), Fiona Robinson (1999, 2011), Virginia Held (2006), Kimberly Hutchings (1999; 2000; Hutchings and Frazer 2014) and Karin Fierke (2014; 2016) care ethics and security have coalesced around the connections between the universal and the particular. They argue against security logics that emphasise the ontological primacy of *homo economicus*: the concept of man as an independent, value-maximising and self-reliant subject. Such thinking obscures the particular social reality around the world, especially the experiences felt by women, who are more likely to 'define themselves in and through their relations with children and other family members— including those who are elderly or chronically ill—or with friends or members of their communities' (Robinson 2011, 90). More directly it helps maintain a deeply unjust and violent international society that views militarism as an inevitable byproduct of human nature rather than a masculinised ideology produced through social practice.

These care authors explore the contours of contemporary security issues like the concept of just war, humanitarian

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intervention, peacekeeping, and human security. Though each offers a unique position, a unifying thread has been a fixation on the practices rather than the principles that contribute to violence. Most crucially they emphasise the persistence of everyday material insecurities (Robinson 2016). Instead of strictly focusing on the spectacular moments of conflict and violence that accompany the breakdowns in social order, a feminist ethics of security also looks to 'marginalised sites' (Stern 2006, 182-183). Rather than the Schmittian inspired version of securitization that is enacted via the transition to a state of exception, care acknowledges the relentless insecurities of the unexceptional. The invocation of care also provides an alternative to the atomistic theories of ethical virtue that emphasise righteous, masculine qualities of honour, courage, intelligence, and detachment.

## Toward a Security of Care

Can care, something we are told is ephemeral and localised, be considered an adequate response to Anthropocene threats that are planet-wide and occur along geological timescales? Can it truthfully be expected to transform human actions that are relentlessly critiqued as rapacious and self-interested? Will it stop the seemingly inevitable 'climate wars' (Dyer 2009; Parenti 2012)? What if it is used to legitimate neoliberal forms of 'humanitarianism' which are so often accompanied by sovereign and/or biopolitical violence on vulnerable populations (Piotukh 2015)? And just what can an ethos of care do to subvert or transform the power-laden carbon lock-ins found in technological, organizational, social and institutional systems (Unruh 2002)?

If held to such standards, the answer is, of course, to concede that care itself is inadequate. It will not on its own prevent the earth from warming, hinder the damaging powers of market processes, or overcome the deep divisions that separate humans from each other and from the wider webs of life in which we are all enmeshed. Yet part of the issue with answering the above charges is that the questions themselves are remnants of a past age, whereby security is a (human) good to be achieved through action. Care helps repurpose the pursuit of security in the Anthropocene – allowing for diverse ethical responses fixated on complex human and nonhuman relations – without simultaneously offering promise, emancipation, or a fixation on the tragic. Our Holocene-bred logics that champion reductive forms of safety and security are barriers to Anthropocene-era struggles which require a level of intellectual openness that expand and push the boundaries of comfort for most security scholars.

By activating multiple traditions of care, found often in subaltern discourses/practices, we can recode and reclaim security away from its fatalistic determinism that dooms the world to apocalyptic conflicts over dwindling resources. Even if such a future comes to pass, the injunction to care is not diminished. Care allows us to cross the scalar and temporal zones that are impenetrable to conventional security studies, transcend the human-nature binaries that restrict who or what is worthy of ethical consideration, and make visible the immanent forms of relationality that bind us with our non-human companions. Given the character of Earth system changes care is appropriate because it demands nothing in return – no search for justice and reciprocity in a world that is often indifferent or openly hostile to us. If we are to take the Anthropocene seriously we need to grow accustomed to, in fact, embrace, loss and failure. It subverts the security problematique – the search for stasis, control, and predictability. A caring response obliges us to act in a spirit of empathy; to engage in gift-giving, to extend hospitality and kinship to human and non-human strangers; and to feel gratitude in the midst of ongoing, seemingly perpetual, social and ecological crises. This pushes us toward an affirmative sensibility that does not avoid pain, but helps us transcend,

The resignation and passivity that ensue from being hurt, lost, and dispossessed. One has to become ethical, as opposed to applying moral rules and protocols as a form of self-protection. An adequate ethical relation is capable of sustaining the subject in his or her quest for more inter-relations with others, i.e., more 'Life', motion, change and transformation. (Braidotti 2011, 289)

The appeal for care is of course open-ended and should not be considered definitive, even less a blueprint for action. All of these components depend upon the radical rethinking of subjectivity in security – from our ideas about the self-contained human as a security actor to the detached versions of nature that characterise so much security literature.

## Care Sensibility in the Anthropocene

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This final section will briefly touch on the ways that care can be enacted as a security sensibility in the Anthropocene. Principally, it helps us acknowledge new forms of risk, uncertainty, and failure. It also allows us to focus on the micropolitics of the self and community in relation to a widened circle of others without seeking justice or reciprocity.

It is now common to see suggestions that risk has become the dominant logic of security (Zedner 2009; O'Malley 2004). Olaf Corry explains that rather than defending against and deterring identifiable foes and criminals our security practices are designed around prevention, probabilities, possible future scenarios and managing diffuse risks (2012, 36). The new geological interval tells us to acknowledge and expect monumental changes, not just in terms of a warming climate, but also rising seas, a growing intensity of storm activities, increasing periods of extreme drought, and a mass extinction event not seen in 56 million years (Kolbert 2014). These changes are too severe and unpredictable to properly mitigate risk or assuage fears about the known and unknown impacts. Partially as a result there exists now a new primacy of risk as an operating principle as well as a suite of diverse characteristics we might call risk practices. Technology is partially responsible but so must we also focus on the shifting role of seemingly non-security actors, like the insurance industry, who are at the forefront of responding to global environmental change. Given the complexity and unpredictability of the Earth system risk comprises a key avenue where the Anthropocene and security meet.

In many ways a security of care allows us to embrace the diverse ways that risk and uncertainty intersect in the Anthropocene. To adopt a perspective of care would be to accept the fact that what the world will look like in fifty or a hundred or a thousand years is largely unknown yet these varying temporal scales are worthy of our attention. Though we cannot be certain in specific terms, we know that our climatic future will not resemble our past, and thus our expectations of security must also change, away from preparing for immediate, identifiable, and predicted 'foes' and towards a broader security ecology that understands that Anthropocene risk is inevitable and inherently relational. The speed and scale of global change in the Anthropocene is almost imponderable or unimaginable and demands care rather than fear or hope.

Extending care and promoting empathic relations in our security practices into security requires an awareness of entanglement and relationality. Widening the circle of security to encompass not just humans and states, but also the generations unborn, non-humans, and ecosystems, is the necessary first step that allows us to advance multi-sited forms of care. I say multi-sited because it would be ineffectual and contrary to its spirit to restrict care to state-based policies or to advocate for a retreat to inward-focused forms of self-care. Both of these have no chance, on their own, to secure the planet. In fact, the restriction of viable security actions to a single level would be unaligned with the distribution of the Anthropocene's security effects. The Anthropocene incorporates intertwined drivers, each with dispersed and unequal effects that cannot be easily separated.

Take for instance the growing use of nitrogen to fertilise food crops. The flows of biogeochemicals like nitrogen and phosphorous are used as one of the control variables that make up their planetary boundaries framework (Steffen et al. 2015). These identified thresholds are used to show the capacity of the Earth system to persist in a Holocene-like state. Crossing the planet's 'safe operating spaces' impacts the resilience of the system, leading eventually to global-level transitions. Nitrogen cycling has quite likely never been a topic that has interested security scholars. The growing availability of nitrogen, though, has been a major reason for the dramatic increase in food security for some countries and simultaneously posed increasing threats to human and ecosystem health. The world is at once too nitrogen-rich and nitrogen-poor. Embracing a caring sensibility in this instance would entail acknowledging nitrogen and other biogeochemical flows as Anthropocene security issues not by virtue of their potential to undermine global peace or community safety, but because they enact what Audra Mitchell terms 'worldly notions of harm', distributed across time, space, and worlds of being (Mitchell 2014). Certainly these flows affect the daily well-being of individuals (mostly in obtuse ways), but they also point to something more complex and ultimately unsettling; namely that security exists not as the liminal moment that divides safety from danger for a defined moral (human) community, but as a series of banal planetary functions made up of complex human and non-human assemblages.

The same experience can be applied to other markers of the Anthropocene – including the functioning of the oceans, climate change, or biosphere integrity. These are increasingly accepted as legitimate security concerns yet they are experienced narrowly, as glimpses that accord to dominant anthropocentric and instrumental abstractions. Using a

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sensibility of care, we might reverse this and give recognition to the complex, strange, and entangled natural entities rather than ignoring them or viewing them as adversaries, allies, or potential recipients of reciprocal forms of justice.

This can be pursued in a number of different ways. Conventionally it means amplifying by whatever means available the injunction to care for the vibrant and diverse security of earthly life that exists in relation to our own daily choices. According to William Connolly (2013, 131), the idea is to fold amplified versions of care into 'operational patterns of desire, faith, will, identity, and self-interest, rather than to rise to a disinterested level entirely above the mundane worlds of desire, instrumentality, and politics.' These patterns, which are already so prevalent in security thinking could be amended through cultivating micro-political interventions that can occur across individual and local scales to, for example, reflect on how food practices affect the efficiency of food systems and intersect with diverse forms of harm across lifeworlds. This could emphasise building the resilience of local food production by accepting lower yields in areas with high nitrogen pollution, while simultaneously increasing nitrogen use in sustainable ways in areas that are deprived (Biermann et al 2016).

Finally, sensibilities of care also attune us to indigenous ontologies that have long emphasised the entangled needs of humans and non-humans within interdependent communities. For millennia indigenous thinkers have constructed and passed down through generations, interpretations of sentient environments that are enacted by the complex and lively relationships between people and non-human presences, including the climate, ancestors, water, and spirits.<sup>[2]</sup> Take for instance the Tlatokan Atlahuak Declaration, from the Indigenous Peoples Parallel Forum of the Fourth World Water Forum in 2006, which claimed that, 'We have been placed upon this earth, each in our own traditional sacred land and territory to care for all of creation and water ... our traditional knowledge, laws and forms of life teach us to be responsible and caring for this sacred gift that connects all life' (Third World Water Forum, quoted in Powys Whyte and Cuomo 2016). In these cases responsibility is not solely the domain of humans, but felt by other worlds of being too. Water is not inert but holds its own forcefulness. Deborah McGregor, an Anishinaabe scholar and activist explains:

Water has a role and a responsibility to fulfill, just as people do. We do not have the right to interfere with water's duties to the rest of Creation. Indigenous knowledge tells us that water is the blood of Mother Earth and that water itself is considered a living entity with just as much right to live as we have. (McGregor 2009, 37–38, quoted in Powys Whyte and Cuomo 2016, 8.)

On its face the Anthropocene is a simple, almost intuitive idea. Since our earliest days, humans have altered local environments (Barnosky 2008). Yet, the Anthropocene is different. Of course it is monstrous in terms of its material consequences. On this alone, our understandings of security are challenged. Additionally, the Anthropocene concept compels us to acknowledge how security interacts with diverse lifeworlds that exist within, above, below, and around humans, acting in ways both pacific and threatening. Responding to this entails significant alterations to our security logics. This article argued that a care sensibility, one that is immeasurably old and yet fluid enough to adapt to our new world, can help us respond to the seemingly inescapable limits of planetary security despite the absence of any promise of reciprocity.

## Notes

[1] To whom or what we extend care is open-ended and might include life, non-life, and technology.

[2] It is important not to homogenise distinct indigenous voices and traditions and to acknowledge the diversity of thought present in indigenous literatures. Indigenous philosophy emphasises the importance of place in knowledge production and avoid essentialist conceptions of pan-Indigenous philosophy (Sundberg 2014)

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