

Compassionate Futures for Collective Well-Being

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Submitted: 10 September 2026 **Published:** 7 October 2026

Issue: This editorial is part of the issue “Compassionate Futures for Collective Well-Being” edited by Natalia Martini (KU Leuven) and Karin Hannes (KU Leuven), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i477>

Abstract

This introductory piece situates the contributions to the thematic issue “Compassionate Futures for Collective Well-Being” within contemporary debates on care and compassion. Against the neoliberal ideal of the autonomous, self-sufficient individual, the articles assembled here foreground vulnerability, interdependence, and mutual responsibility as constitutive features of social life and as foundations for imagining alternative futures. Across diverse geographical, institutional, and more-than-human contexts, the contributions examine how care and compassion are enacted through everyday practices, welfare institutions, educational initiatives, participatory research, grassroots networks, urban governance, and multispecies relations. Rather than presenting a celebratory account of compassion, the thematic issue highlights its ambivalent and contested character. Several contributions demonstrate how care can sustain life, foster inclusion, and enable collective agency, while others reveal how discourses of compassion may become entangled with surveillance, exclusion, paternalism, and governance. Together, the articles advance a rich conceptual vocabulary for understanding care and compassion as ethical commitments, political projects, institutional rationalities, and material practices through which social worlds are organized and reproduced. This introduction argues that these contributions collectively point toward the emergence of compassionism as a developing intellectual and political orientation. While not yet a fully stabilized paradigm, compassionism offers a relational alternative to dominant models grounded in competition, individualism, and instrumental rationality and invites an ethico-onto-epistemological reorientation of scholarship and social action. The thematic issue thus contributes to ongoing efforts to rethink the conditions of collective well-being and to explore the possibilities—and limits—of compassionate futures in an era marked by multiple social, ecological, and political crises.

Keywords

care research; compassionate futures; compassionism

Recent years have witnessed a growing mobilization of care ethics (Tronto, 1998) against the suffocating common sense of neoliberalism—a common sense that renders social life intelligible only through the language of self-interest, personal gain, and individual responsibility. Against this grammar, care scholars have insisted on something that neoliberal reason continually denies: that life is never self-sufficient (Tronto, 2017). The figure of the autonomous individual, tirelessly optimizing the self and accountable for both success and failure, obscures the dense webs of dependence through which existence is sustained. It also recasts inequality and exclusion as an individual shortcoming rather than a condition produced and maintained through social arrangements.

Care intervenes precisely at this point. Not as a moral supplement to an otherwise functioning system, but as a different way of apprehending the world and our place within it. It begins from the recognition that vulnerability is not an exception to human existence but one of its constitutive conditions; that dependence is not a deficit to be overcome but a fundamental feature of life itself. From this starting point emerge other possibilities for thinking and organizing collective existence—possibilities grounded in attentiveness, response-ability, and solidarity rather than accumulation and competition (Barukh Milstein, 2024; Chatzidakis et al., 2020). What comes into view is not a utopian horizon free of fragility, but a world willing to remain with it. A world built upon the acknowledgment that lives are always entangled with other lives—human and more-than-human—and that responsibility emerges from these entanglements rather than from abstract notions of individual choice.

Within such imaginaries, compassion and empathy cease to be private virtues and become sociopolitical principles for designing collective futures, carrying a potential for compassionism to become a paradigm shift. Over time, it might come with its own set of assumptions, values, concepts, and practices on how social reality is, should, or could be understood and acted upon. Rather than simply critiquing the neoliberal discourse for its focus on individual rather than collective flourishing, compassionism encourages researchers to actively replace the dominant mode of thinking driven by competition, detachment (from the world), and instrumental rationality with a relational perspective that transforms how we understand interdependence and mutual responsibility in knowledge production and societal change. To date, it may not live up to the standard of a fixed and fully stabilized paradigm shift (yet). However, its significance lies in the potential to catalyze an “ethico-onto-epistemological” turn, a being “of the world” (Barad, 2007) that connects scholarship as a knowledge-producing organism with the social, material, and natural world through a co-creative ethos. It is in this type of transdisciplinary engagement that the regenerative force of compassionism will be felt and acknowledged as a much-needed foundational shift that redesigns the functioning of our societal ecosystem with and as care.

Across diverse geographical and institutional settings, the articles gathered in this thematic issue explore what becomes possible when social life is approached through the recognition of vulnerability and mutual responsibility. Together, they trace the varied ways in which ethics of care materialize in practices that enable regeneration and contribute to collective well-being. At the same time, several contributions caution against an uncritical embrace of care, revealing how the language of compassion can be appropriated to reproduce existing hierarchies, exclusions, and forms of control. What emerges, therefore, is not a celebratory account of compassionate futures, but a more ambivalent and politically attentive exploration of their possibilities and limits.

In their article, Frisch and Di Virgilio (2026) map women-led grassroots care networks in San Martín, Greater Buenos Aires, that hold together the conditions of everyday survival where state-based welfare provision remains fragmented or absent. These networks function as forms of street-level bureaucracy, stitching together infrastructures of support in the spaces between state presence and state abandonment. Their analysis documents actually existing infrastructures of mutual responsibility while simultaneously exposing the gendered burdens and forms of extraction upon which such arrangements depend. In doing so, the authors challenge celebratory accounts of community care, arguing that compassionate futures require not only recognizing care but also confronting the material conditions through which it is made possible.

Read and Parfitt's (2026) piece questions some of the taken-for-granted societal capitalist bureaucratic narratives that tend to favor non-disabled bodies and devalue the embodiment of disability. Compassion is therefore reframed from the perspective of disabled people's embodied wisdom as essential knowledge for creating inclusive futures. The practical value of the authors' work lies in the novel "crippled compassion" framework they propose for the implementation of inclusive compassionate futures as an alternative to an ableist socio-cultural, economic, and political bureaucratization of life.

Mao et al. (2026) extend debates on compassionate futures beyond the domain of welfare provision. The authors document what they describe as a care turn within Chinese policing, tracing a shift from deterrence-oriented logics of *homo economicus* toward relational practices associated with *homo curans*: listening, mediation, explanation, and follow-up. At first glance, this may appear as evidence of care's transformative potential. Yet the article also reveals something more unsettling. Care does not arrive as an alternative to power. Rather, it becomes entangled with it as a form of governing rationality. The article raises a question that reverberates across the thematic issue: under what conditions does care support life, and under what conditions does it become a vehicle of governance?

This question sits at the center of Leresche's (2026) article. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among people in Switzerland who refuse social benefits, the author interrogates the underside of ostensibly compassionate welfare systems. The article demonstrates how discourses of compassion can obscure forms of conditionality, surveillance, and labor re-commodification, while simultaneously presenting welfare interventions as benevolent. Against these institutionalized forms of care, Leresche identifies alternative practices of mutual responsibility emerging within informal moral economies.

Malfunctioning institutional forms of care are also central to the argument advanced by Teles et al. (2026) in their mixed-methods study conducted in Portugal. The authors contend that social workers' diminished sense of well-being should not be understood as an individual problem. Rather, they frame it as an ethical misalignment between the aspiration to provide care that responds to people's unique and often complex life circumstances and the normative constraints imposed by institutions. These constraints are rooted in structural inequalities, resource scarcity, fragmented service systems, and limited professional recognition. To address this misalignment, the authors advocate for the development of compassionate institutional ecosystems that support professional resilience, strengthen recognition of social work, and encourage collective mobilization.

If Leresche's and Teles et al.'s contributions direct our attention toward the limits of institutional compassion, Fernández Cediél (2026) explores what might become possible when vulnerability is approached not as a

problem to be solved but as a condition from which collective transformation can begin. Reporting on a four-year arts-based and narrative research program embedded within a public school in Neiva, Huila, Colombia, the author examines educational practices developed with adolescents experiencing socioeconomic vulnerability and the enduring effects of armed conflict. In this account, compassion emerges not simply as an affective orientation but as a pedagogical and institutional practice capable of fostering collective agency.

In Standen and Harrod's (2026) contribution, the pedagogical condition from which transformation begins is investigated through a person-centered psychotherapeutic framework that supports early career researchers through intensive periods of fieldwork. Their proposed relational fieldwork pedagogy aims to create the conditions for safer and more equitable fieldwork experiences. The authors encourage institutional stakeholders to collectively develop university environments that nurture the emotional health of early career researchers by emphasizing the value of lived experiences, empathy, non-judgment, and authenticity in how to act upon challenging situations.

This notion of a collective responsibility is also put forward in Jacobs et al. (2026) in a participatory research event designed as a space for co-creation and a site of experimentation for developing creative responses to emerging crises and how to best involve a plurality of different voices herein. The lab was approached from a regenerative perspective, focusing mainly on the temporal, ethical, epistemic, and affective tensions identified in context. These insights were used to inform the concept attentive collaboration in living lab contexts to deal with both the complexity of the polycrisis as a research phenomenon and the complexity of absent voices in living labs due to circumstances such as political disruption and natural hazards.

The idea of careful and considerate ways of building and exchanging knowledge in the context of the current polycrisis is further endorsed in Hughes et al.'s (2026) article, in which they promote and emphasize the important role of multiple stakeholder dialogues. These dialogues are meant to help articulate the systemic pressures facing education and contemporary society in general. They serve as an invitation to revisit the current social template of implicit values rooted in status, power, financial reward, and wealth.

Picaroni-Sobrado (2026) reminds us that compassionate futures require more than reconfiguring social relations among humans; they also demand a rethinking of infrastructures, bodily practices, and material relations, including those surrounding sanitation and waste. Through the notion of com-*passion*—a practice of feeling-with—the article foregrounds multispecies interdependence and challenges anthropocentric understandings of care and compassion. The article invites readers to consider how everyday engagements with more-than-human worlds might become sites for cultivating alternative forms of coexistence and responsibility. De Ruyver et al. (2026) build on similar ideas: The One Welfare perspective the authors promote to reconceptualize urban animal governance recognizes the interdependence of humans, animals, and environments and foregrounds welfare and relationality across species. The article advances the concept of “multispecies cities” as part of a broader vision of compassionate urban futures grounded in care and coexistence between humans and animals.

While drawing on diverse literatures, philosophical traditions, and empirical contexts, the articles collectively contribute to the development of a conceptual vocabulary for studying care and compassion as social, political, and material forces. Across the thematic issue, compassion is conceptualized in multiple ways: as an

active, relational, and political praxis of being with others (Fernández Cediél, 2026, drawing on Nussbaum); as a “political emotion” shaping distinctions between those deemed deserving and undeserving of care (Leresche, 2026, drawing on Fassin); as com-passion (Picaroni-Sobrado, 2026, own formulation), a practice of feeling-with enacted through embodied and everyday relational encounters, and a co-existence with other-than-humans (De Ruyver et al., 2026, building on the concept One Welfare). Rather than converging on a single definition, these perspectives illuminate the conceptual richness of compassion and the multiple forms it can take in practice.

At the same time, the thematic issue offers a powerful vocabulary for examining the uneasy proximity between care and power. Leresche’s (2026) ecology of abandonment and Read and Parfitt’s (2026) bureaucracy of disability reveal how care and exclusion can be co-produced through the same welfare apparatuses. Meanwhile, Mao et al. (2026) advance the figure of homo curans not as a moral ideal but as a distinctive institutional rationality and mode of governance. Together, these conceptual contributions deepen our understanding of how care and compassion operate simultaneously as ethical commitments, political projects, governing technologies, and material-discursive practices through which social life is organized and sustained.

Acknowledgments

The first author acknowledges the support of the Research Foundation—Flanders (Junior Postdoctoral Fellowship; 674521_1277624N).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

No LLMs tools were used in preparation of this article.

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