

The background to this morning's long read

Published: May 31, 2026, 6:22 am

I think that an explanation [for today's long essay, of some 5,000 words](#), might be useful.

It was very hot yesterday morning, so hot that Jacqueline and I did not feel like going birdwatching in the morning. We did, instead, set off to sit in the garden of the Poets' House Hotel in Ely, to drink coffee.

And then the conversation began.

Jacqueline wanted to discuss the role of the Fabians in Labour history. A long time ago, I was a member. I knew enough to start that conversation.

Then she brought up the Rockefeller Foundation and its impact on medicine and education in the first decade of the 20th century, a topic she has studied extensively. We began to explore that and its consequences, a theme we had discussed before.

Then we drew parallels, and I brought in a discussion of Adolphe Quetelet, a Belgian statistician working in the 1830s and 1840s, and his introduction of the concept of “the normal person” as a consequence of his work establishing averages in human physique and behaviour.

At this point, we had found a rich vein to discuss and let the conversation roam, noting and recording it as we went so that we knew the direction in which we had travelled in our discussion around the normal person, the continuing prevalence of this concept in current political debate, and notable thinkers who challenged the concept, including Nietzsche and Aristotle, the latter being a particular favourite philosopher of both of us.

From there, it was just a step to consider how a politics of care might be very different from the stereotypical politics of the assumed “normal person”, which is common to all neoliberal political parties at present, including both Reform and Restore.

What we realised was that we had found the defining difference between those neoliberal politics of slightly varying hues and the politics of care. All neoliberals,

including those on the far-right, assume, paternalistically, that there is a “normal person” whose needs they must satisfy. The politics of care is fundamentally different. It presumes that the role of politics and of the state is to assist a person to fulfil their own purpose, which need not be normal at all, and around which diversity is permitted.

It was as if a canyon had opened, a rift had been discovered, or even a new paradigm had been noted. I confessed to some excitement as a consequence.

Despite that, we went to Welney and birdwatched during the early afternoon, with the highlight being a garganey, which is always a treat.

On my return, I did, however, get to work. The notes and recordings were all poured into ChatGPT to try to give them some useful structure, but that was not very helpful, as it risked losing the richness of the conversation we had enjoyed. So, I set out to craft an essay and, by 9 pm, the one I published this morning was complete.

Jacqueline then edited soon after dawn this morning, as she is an earlier riser than me.

Is this the last word on the subject? I am sure it is not. This is too powerful an idea not to return to sometime, and if this became part of a book, it would undoubtedly need to be revisited. But I now think I have a useful philosophical foundation for the idea behind the politics of care about which I’ve been talking for so long.

My question, then, is a simple one. Do you agree? Is this useful? What does it miss? What does it add? Please let me know, but please also note that we are out visiting friends for much of today, and moderation will be slow. For that, I can only apologise, but after a day in which I did considerably more writing than I expected, I think I, and we, deserve a day off.

*PS. This was not my most productive day of writing. The last chapter of *The Joy of Tax*, which is more than 9,000 words, was written and edited in a day.*