

The Ethics of Caring

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“An ethic of care—a needs- and response-based ethic—challenges many premises of traditional ethics in moral education.” (Noddings 2005)

In *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, Nel Noddings outlines how educators can use the concept of caring to develop an alternative approach to education that focuses more intently on the individual student, their moral responsibility, and their unique aptitudes. When I initially think of the word caring, I think of a feeling. It’s that fuzzy warmth that two lovers share in mutual embrace. It’s the release of endorphins as a mother nurtures her child. I never thought of ‘caring’ as a way to guide myself through the landscape of ethical decisions. To understand Nel Noddings educational philosophy, I feel that one must first understand her general philosophy surrounding ‘an ethic of care.’ To more deeply appreciate this new and controversial approach to ethics, one may look deeper into what Dr. Noddings means by ‘an ethic of care,’ relate this approach with traditional Judeo-Christian ethics, and realize the importance of educating for this new ethic.

Dr. Noddings starts by defining what exactly she means by ‘caring’. First of all, she distinguishes between the carer and the cared –for. She describes the ‘carer’ as one who is experiencing a state of ‘engrossment,’ and ‘motivational displacement’. Noddings defines engrossment as “an open, nonselective receptivity to the cared-for.” (Noddings 2005) Motivational displacement is “the sense that our motive energy is flowing towards others and their projects.” (Op. cit.)The definition of cared-for is much more brief. “The cared-for receives the caring and shows that it has been received.” (op. cit.) After the roles of caring are defined, we may now examine the central characteristic of the ethic of care; the caring relationship.

Put most concisely, a caring relationship has three features;

1. A cares for B - that is A's consciousness is characterized by attention and motivational displacement - and

2. A performs some act in accordance with (1), and
3. B recognizes that A cares for B. (Smith, 2004)

Noddings does a fine work of precisely defining what a caring relationship is. However, how does the notion of a caring relationship lead to a new framework of ethics?

Traditionally, ethical dilemmas may be solved by employing logic or reasoning, by living by a strict moral code. However, Noddings implores us to view ethical dilemmas in the context of caring as viewed from the woman. I understand this by trying to conceptualize how the mother makes decisions in regards to her child. In Noddings terms, she is in a continual state of engrossment and motivational displacement. It is through this motivational displacement, I believe, that the mother is able to understand the strains and pulls that the situation imposes on her child. After evaluating the situation from a perspective of care, she will take the action to do what is best for the child. These types of responses are characterized by Noddings as *natural caring*; "that relation in which we respond as one-caring out of love or natural inclination." (Noddings 1984, pg 5)

Stemming from the action of natural caring comes the ethic of caring;

"It is that condition toward which we long and strive, and it is our longing for caring- to be in that special relation- that provides the motivation for us to be moral. We want to be *moral* in order to remain in the caring relation and enhance the ideal of ourselves as one-caring." (op. cit.)

One might ask how this ethic of caring extends to objects and ideas? Noddings is able to extend the idea of a caring relation to these more abstract realms. In a sense, the engrossment, and motivational displacement of the carer may be directed towards an object or an idea. One may care deeply for their 1966 Corvette, lavish it with attention, (and wax), and hope that it remains their companion for the rest of their lives. Similarly, a mathematician may be deeply moved by the beauty of equations, divide their

utmost attention to them, and hope that their specific field of mathematics is more widely recognized and appreciated.

The concept of making moral decisions based on care is not a foreign concept. I believe this is the way that most women, (and some good men), naturally face everyday moral dilemmas. However, this sense of morality stands in contrast to most classical, male-centered, ethical systems.

The first, and most often encountered, ethical system is one that many Americans inherit from their cultures; the Judeo-Christian ethical system. Being raised in a Christian household, I held that every situation had a clear right and wrong. If one faced an ethical dilemma, all they needed to do was consult the Holy Bible and their answer would be found. In more precarious situations, prayer may be involved. However, an over-arching theme is that there was a clear right decision motivated by the will of God. However, the ethics of care are relational. That is, the 'right' decision is based on the context situation surrounding those involved in a caring relation. Consider the ethical hotbed of abortion. If a fourteen year old girl were to be raped and impregnated, the Judeo-Christian response would be for the girl to have the child in accordance to their beliefs in God's will. However, one motivated by the ethic of care would take the context of the child's situation in account, and realize that motherhood at fourteen may not be the ideal state for the girl. Hopefully, one can see the contrast between a relational ethical system and one based on absolutes.

After Noddings outlined the principles of the ethic of care in *Caring*, she devoted much of her attention to education. In *The Challenge to Care* she suggests many ways in which the school system may be improved by educators who operate through 'motivational displacement' in response to their students. But caring is not only a way in which teachers can contextualize educational decisions. Caring should be part of the curriculum. One might say the goal of the current educational system is to create competent, moral, citizens. Looking at this goal through the eyes of Noddings, one might say that the

goal of education is to create competent, *caring*, citizens. This shifts the role of the educator from teaching children what is 'right and wrong,' to teaching children how to care.

In synopsis, the ethic of care is an ethics based on decisions made as a result of a caring relationship. This new ethic is relational and stands in stark contrast to Judeo-Christian ethics. Finally, in light of *caring*, educators have a responsibility to teach their students how to form caring relationships in order for them to react in accordance with the ethic of care.

Whether you're an educator, a father, or a friend, next time you face a moral dilemma, put down the scale. Quit weighing the pros and cons of the situation. Look at how the situation is going to affect the ones you care for. You may be surprised. That 'warm fuzzy feeling' may your solution.

References

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