

Review: The Ethics of Care and Education: A New Paradigm, Its Critics, and Its Educational Significance

Reviewed Work(s): Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education, 1984 by Nel Noddings

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# Book Reviews

## *The Ethics of Care and Education: A New Paradigm, its Critics, and its Educational Significance*

A review of: Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education*, 1984.

Reviewed by:

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### ABSTRACT

In the last few years the Ethics of Care has received increasing and often controversial attention. Using Nel Noddings' *Caring* as the primary text, I intend to summarize the book's central tenets and survey the major criticisms of an Ethics of Care, which I classify into two groups—the claim that the Ethics of Care is: (a) a Domain Ethic; or (b) a Dangerous Ethic. I will then consider issues and problems of educational application. I will close with some observations on the present status of the Ethics of Care and its significance for education.

In 1982, Harvard University Press published a modest sized monograph (less than 200 pages) entitled *In A Different Voice*. In its pages Carol Gilligan described what she discovered when she listened closely to what women had to say about personal problems, such as abortion decisions. One striking discovery Gilligan chronicled was that of recurrent divergences in the ways that male and female subjects discussed moral issues and decisions. While many men talked fluently about questions of rights and justice, the women were more often preoccupied with questions of responsibilities and care. We now realize that Gilligan's book was like an indicator light for the visible tip of a huge iceberg representing what is variably called the Ethics of Care, Female Ethics, or Feminine Ethics.

Carol Gilligan was not the first nor only person to write about women's moral experience and the ways in which its major features or preoccupations differed from the dominant ethical talk of rights and justice. But Gilligan's eloquent exposition and her effective use of examples taken directly from interviews set off a strong chord of recognition for many women and for a still undetermined number of men. Women resonated with what Gilligan and her subjects had to

say about women's own moral thinking, feelings, and concerns. Women resonated with the emphasis on care, nurturance, human connections, and responsibility. Many women said that here at last was a morality they could recognize as their own.

Although it seemed clear that this submerged Ethics of Care was a powerful reality for many women, possibly for most of us, we still had only rough soundings, or sketches, of what this reality was. A philosophical delineation, precise analyses, definitions of key terms were still missing. Then in 1984 the University of California Press published *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, by Nel Noddings. Here we have set forth for us, in bold outline and in analytic detail, a sustained philosophic account of an Ethics of Care. With the publication of *Caring*, the growing contention that care-based morality constituted a new ethical paradigm became a full-fledged, well-developed claim.

## THE ETHICS OF CARE

Noddings makes it clear that she is setting forth a new paradigm that requires a radical reconstruction in standard ethical thought, beginning with how we define "ethics" itself:

It sounds all very nice, says my male colleague, but can you claim to be doing "ethics?" After all, ethics is the study of justified action . . . Ah, yes. But, after "after all," I am a woman, and I was not party to that definition. Shall we say then that I am talking about 'how to meet the other morally?' Is this part of ethics? Is ethics part of this? (p. 95)<sup>1</sup>

In addition to this redefinition of ethics itself, there are a number of other distinctive features essential to understanding an Ethics of Care. Using Noddings as our primary text, let us look at some key features in Noddings' account that are also roughly representative of what is intimated, if not explicitly stated, by other Ethics of Care advocates.<sup>2</sup>

### Relational Ontology

The first claim that resounds throughout discussions of female ethics is that relation is ontologically basic. The nature of being for us humans is to be in relation. This is a given; it is how every one of us survived infancy. As one woman philosopher has observed, we are not mushrooms.<sup>3</sup> We humans do not spring up like mushrooms out of the ground; we are born in relation and we grow in relation.

For Noddings this is the starting point: "Relation will be taken as ontologically basic" (p. 3) as well as the point to which she returns again and again: "I am not naturally alone. I am naturally in a rela-

tion from which I derive nourishment and guidance . . . . My very individuality is defined in a set of relations. This is my basic reality” (p. 51).

The Ethics of Care then moves directly from a relational ontology to a relational ethic. Our being-in-relation, this interdependence, is not only natural, it is also deemed morally desirable. We do not become ethically mature by achieving “independence” but rather by participating responsibly in caring relations. Just as relation is ontologically basic, the caring relation is viewed as “ethically basic,” as well as a moral achievement.

In her own extensive analysis of the caring relation, Noddings uses a dyadic schema in which the care-giver is named the “one-caring” and the recipient is the “cared-for.” According to Noddings both parties must contribute to this relation if caring is to be complete.

### Attention as Engrossment

Another prominent feature that recurs throughout women’s ethics is the high regard for certain forms of attention-giving. Noddings’ own term for this concept is “engrossment,” and she claims it is a necessary condition for caring: “At bottom all caring involves engrossment. The engrossment need not be intense nor need it be pervasive in the life of the one-caring, but it must occur” (p. 17). “Engrossment” is, in brief, “feeling with” another person.

There is a crucial and important distinction here between engrossment or “feeling with” and the more analytic task of imagining what I would feel in someone else’s situation. It is not a question of my feelings at all. My entire attention is taken up with what the other person is feeling.

I do not “put myself in the other’s shoes,” so to speak, by analyzing his reality as objective data and then asking, “How would I feel in such a situation?” On the contrary, I set aside my temptation to analyze and to plan. I do not project; I receive the other into myself, and I see and feel with the other. I become a duality . . . . The seeing and feeling are mine, but only partly and temporarily mine, as on loan to me (p. 30).

Noddings then goes on to describe an experience in which she finds herself unexpectedly moved to engrossment:

It is as though his eyes and mine have combined to look at the scene he describes. I know that I would have behaved differently in the situation, but this is in itself a matter of indifference. I feel what he says he felt. I have been invaded by this other (p. 31).

This form of engrossment, or “feeling with,” when one temporarily suspends the preoccupations of self so that another person can fill the field of attention, is perhaps best recognized by our experi-

ences of its absence. We find ourselves saying or silently thinking: “You’re not really paying attention to me!” or “This person isn’t really listening to what I’m saying.”

In fact such experiences are sufficiently common that we could conclude engrossment is a fine art rarely achieved by ordinary people. But the ethical point is rather that it demands a serious effort and discipline. Part of what is entailed in this discipline of giving our concentrated attention to the present other is a concomitant respect for the singular character of each person and situation. Any summary of women’s ethics must, therefore, note the favored status of concrete particulars.

### **Primacy of the Particular**

What Ethics of Care advocates have in common here is an explicit methodological commitment that favors judgments based on detailed, in-situation perceptions. Priority is given to one’s sense of the total concrete particularity of an immediately present set of circumstances. And there is a sense of loss, distortion, or danger associated with moving to a more general level of rules, principles, or ethical universals. Also in some cases there is the belief that any particular situational whole forms a unique gestalt that cannot be generalized without ethical distortion.

One of Noddings’ major objections to the search for justification is that it misdirects our ethical attention and energy:

As one-caring, I am not seeking justification for my action; I am not standing alone before some tribunal. What I seek is completion in the other—the sense of being cared-for and, I hope, the renewed commitment of the cared-for to turn about and act as one-caring in the circles and chains within which he is defined. Thus, I am not justified but somehow fulfilled and completed in my own life and in the lives of those I have thus influenced (p. 95).

But it’s not simply the misdirection of ethical energy that is at issue here. There is also a worry about the misuse of principles: “. . . too often, principles function to separate us from each other. We may become dangerously self-righteous when we perceive ourselves as holding a precious principle not held by the other. The other may then be devalued and treated ‘differently’” (p. 5). And finally there is a fundamental skepticism about whether the notion of universalizability can have any valid meaningful application; when “so much depends on the subjective experience of those involved in ethical encounters, conditions are rarely ‘sufficiently similar’ for me to declare that you must do what I must do” (p. 5).

### **Responsibility Includes “Motivational Displacement”**

We now come to a feature whose precise characterization is difficult or elusive. I think there is no question that something akin to Nel

Noddings' concept of "motivational displacement" is central to an Ethics of Care. But her characterization may not be equivalent or even acceptable to other versions. Nevertheless, Noddings gives us the specifications for perceiving and understanding the powerful motivational shift that occurs for many of us when we take responsibility for a caring relationship.

In Noddings' analysis, caring engrossment is only half of the story for what happens when one cares. The other half, the other necessary requirement for the one-caring, is what she terms "motivational displacement":

When I care, when I receive the other in the way we have been discussing, there is more than feeling; there is also a motivational shift. My motive energy flows toward the other and perhaps, although not necessarily, toward his ends. I do not relinquish myself; I cannot excuse myself for what I do. But I allow my motive energy to be shared; I put it at the service of the other (p. 33).

In her analysis Noddings identifies two levels of response for the one-caring: first a natural, spontaneous shift and second an ethical commitment. She seems to treat the first as a natural correlate of engrossment; so that when I begin to feel another person's "reality as possibility . . . I feel also, that I must act accordingly; that is I am impelled to act as though in my own behalf, but in behalf of the other" (p. 16).

Noddings then goes on to say that "this feeling that I must act may or may not be sustained. I must make a commitment to act" (p. 16). It is this commitment and its renewal that are essential to an ongoing caring relation. Furthermore, for Noddings, this sharing of my "motive energy" is a requirement for full caring. It may not always result in my taking action, but this would be only "if I believe that anything I might do would tend to work against the best interests of the cared-for" (p. 81). In any case, caring "requires me to respond to the initial impulse with an act of commitment: I commit myself either to overt action on behalf of the cared-for . . . or I commit myself to thinking about what I might do" (p. 81). Before we conclude that this is an overly strenuous ethic, we should remember that one thing I might do is to find someone else to help the cared-for, or even simply direct them to the appropriate source of aid.

### A Primary Ethic

The strongest proponents for an Ethics of Care make a number of primacy claims. They claim that caring comes first in importance, first in time, and first in the construction of human morality. Our survival as humans depends upon our being cared-for and ultimately it is in caring relationships that we achieve our highest moral ideals. Human relationships constitute the necessary ground of our being, while friendship, social community, parenting, and mutual love provide some of our most rewarding and desirable goods.

In fact, caring relationships are so basic and so elementary to our experience that we too easily forget their role and importance. As Annette Baier has observed, other ethical systems that fail to recognize and acknowledge the indispensable role of these caring activities and relationships are, in a sense, ethics of “bad faith”—insofar as they deny their own ground and the necessary origins for any moral practices (Baier 1985, pp. 56–57).<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, once we acknowledge the relational ground of morality, some standard ethical puzzles lose their force. For example, Noddings explicitly rejects the standard contractualist account of moral motivation as the “desire to be able to justify one’s actions to others on grounds they could not reasonably reject” (Williams 1985, p. 75). In place of this rationalist view, Noddings identifies two sources, one primitive and one ethical: (1) our natural sympathy, which arises out of experiences and memories of caring and being cared for; and (2) a concern for oneself as one-caring, i.e., a commitment to the ethical ideal, or vision, of our “best self” (p. 80).

On Noddings’ account the problem of how to explain “altruism” and “moral motivation” must be recast. One can still ask, “Why be in human relationships?” But the reformulation has lost the power of perplexity.

As I read Noddings, she certainly does not exclude the consideration of other ethical principles and concerns, including those of contractualists, utilitarians, existentialists, etc. The key point, and the one that makes caring primary, is that the first and last question to be asked in a moral situation should be: How can caring relationships best be sustained or created in this particular case? All other considerations must ultimately be tested and weighed at the tribunal of what constitutes caring in the immediately present relationship.

In sum, the Ethics of Care as Primary Ethics calls for a radical paradigm shift in which moral agents redirect attention and energy away from concerns about right judgments and their ethical justification in order to focus instead on how we can best meet each other as ones-caring and how we can create and enhance caring relationships.

Now that we have a sense of the major tenets in an Ethics of Care, it is time to consider, first, some recent critical responses to this ethics and, second, some of the educational implications and questions that follow both from the ethics itself and also from the criticisms.

## TWO CRITICISMS

In order to provide a brief representative characterization of the recent critical responses to an Ethics of Care, I have divided critics into two major groups: (1) those who hold that an Ethics of Care is

a Domain Ethic; and (2) those who hold that an Ethics of Care is a Dangerous Ethic. We shall first consider the Domain Ethic position.

### A Domain Ethics

A sympathetic skeptic might grant most of what has been said so far about an Ethics of Care, but then go on to note that even if caring is perhaps an essential foundation for human moral practice, comes first as a necessary prerequisite for moral development, and must continue to play a crucial role in our close relationships, there are nevertheless vast arenas of human experience that do not fit this model and are not amenable to such structures of interaction. What about the areas of national and international politics, economics, business, large impersonal institutions, the world of law, the military, etc.?

The central notion in a Domain Ethics is that we need different moral procedures and priorities for different contexts, or domains. A Domain Ethics would expect that the best moral approach to education would not be the best for economics or for the law or for international politics, but rather that each of these domains, or moral territories, would need its own ethical theory. Thus a Domain Ethics approach to the Ethics of Care would, in a sense, be one that “puts it in its place.” But this place may be great or small, central or peripheral, and it may be perceived as significant or trivial.

Nel Noddings unabashedly ties her exposition of the Ethics of Care to the mother-child relation as one of the central paradigmatic cases for understanding what is entailed in the actions, experiences, and deliberations of caring and being cared for. Other relationships that are characterized by physical proximity and some degree of nurturance are also taken as of central importance—such as between teacher and student, between friends, colleagues, spouses, etc. Thus one might characterize this ethics as one that belongs to the domain of “special relations.”

Historically the domain associated with women’s territory and responsibilities, such as the family and “special relations,” were often considered peripheral, insubstantial, or, perhaps worst of all, “uninteresting” for ethical theory. And even today certain responses to an Ethics of Care do not merely relegate it to a peripheral place but also dismiss moral preoccupations with caring as no more than personal problems for women’s ego development.<sup>5</sup> But, given the context of present-day discussion and debate, such cavalier dismissals of care-based moralities seem to be not so much Domain Ethics as Dominance Ethics, whose advocates still believe that their own position determines the boundaries for the universe of moral discourse.

A more representative and generous version of a Domain Ethics is the one found in the work of Virginia Held. Her book *Rights and*

*Goods* (1984) provides a detailed, systematic account of what I am calling a “Domain” approach.

In some of her work since the publication of *Rights and Goods*, Virginia Held applies her approach directly to an examination of the mother-child relation, or more precisely to the relation between child and “mothering person” (male or female). In a recent conference presentation, Held reiterated her stance as a Domain Ethics advocate: “I doubt that we should take any one relation as paradigmatic for all the others . . . I am inclined at this point to think that we will continue to need conceptions of different types of relations for different domains . . . .” But then she proceeded to argue that:

to think of relations between mothers and children as paradigmatic may be an important stage to go through in reconstructing a view of human relationships . . . since the image of rational economic man in contractual relations is absolutely pervasive in this society, and expanding every time one looks around . . . . (Held 1986)

Held’s comments illustrate the most sympathetic version of a domains response to the paradigmatic claims of an Ethics of Care. Held acknowledges the timely importance of a care-oriented position and she gives serious attention to its implications for the reconstruction of all moral domains.

But Held and Noddings would disagree on whether or not an Ethics of Care is a “stage to go through,” rather than a stance to take. Noddings’ position seems to require a radical questioning of the whole structure of the Domains themselves, rather than an acceptance of the prevailing political, social, or economic structures as necessary givens. What she would do instead is to use an Ethics of Care as a critical tool for rethinking and restructuring these arrangements. Noddings articulates this point when she discusses her own refusal to think like a utilitarian:

I suggest that we make an error when we think of the moral good in terms of acts that produce the greatest good for the greatest number, even among human beings. Such thinking may be as close to the ethical as we can come in the contemporary political arena, but this seems to count against our political machinery rather than for utilitarian thinking in social life (p. 154).

If the applicability of an Ethics of Care appears to be severely limited within the prevailing political, legal, social, or economic conditions, this may be an indictment of the prevailing structures that support these conditions. Noddings’ position implies that we should question these structures and presumably try to widen the range of viable caring by altering such limiting conditions.

I say “presumably” because Noddings has not yet told us how to proceed to alter the prevailing structures that are antithetical to caring. Furthermore, some critics, both sympathetic and unsympathetic, suggest that an Ethics of Care may itself constitute one

obstacle in the way of making the requisite changes, that it may, in fact, be a Dangerous Ethic for those who practice it, particularly if they are women (or other subordinate social groups).

### A Dangerous Ethics

The central sources for what I am calling the Dangerous Ethics criticisms are found in recent feminist writings, in particular those writings that focus on the question of an ethics for feminist political movements.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to those who relegate caring to the sidelines of a “special relation,” these critics give full recognition to the widespread appeal of care-based moralities; and they acknowledge the force of an ethical vision that sustains well-established forms of practice.

The defining tenet of this position is the observation that, in one way or another, the practice of such a morality may require either servility or supererogation. Given this common belief that an ethics of care can be dangerous for its practitioners, there are at least two variations that we should distinguish from each other. Some critics consider an Ethics of Care *contingently* dangerous while others find it *necessarily*, or essentially, dangerous.

As I read them, a number of contemporary feminists would argue for contingent dangers, while a few would maintain that at least some aspects of an Ethics of Care make it a necessarily Dangerous Ethics. The contingent version need not be without sympathy for an Ethics of Care as such. The ethics is found dangerous because in its presentation there is a lack of attention paid to the conditions that exploit caring and to the systematic deforming of women’s caring.<sup>7</sup>

An example of the basic difficulty arises in the very presentation of an Ethics of Care as primarily a women’s or “feminine” ethic, this phenomenon of the gendered division of moral labor that Noddings portrays and describes so vividly.

For many feminists, the power, accuracy, and richness of Noddings’ descriptions are a valuable contribution for understanding the enormous work, the complex skills, and the value of what goes into the labors of caring and the ways in which women constantly reconstitute the social fabric of human life. But what feminists object to is a lack of critical consciousness or a kind of naivete about the costs and consequences for the women who must do these caring labors.

One danger here is that unless we consider what is actually happening, in our present economic, social, and political contexts, to those who do these caring labors, we fail to talk seriously about the costs of women’s caring labors. It is easy, then, to perpetuate inequality and subordination by default or by not challenging the facile inference that caring is naturally “feminine” work. For example, Noddings’ well-meant use of the feminine pronoun “she” for

the one-caring and the masculine pronoun “he” for the cared-for is all too accurate as a description of the status quo, but it becomes unfortunate, misleading, and “dangerous,” if it encourages us to infer that such a gendered division is desirable, natural, or acceptable.

If we, as gendered “men” and “women,” especially women and girls, are to ever have real choices about our own ethics and moral directions, then we need to have the sort of “critical consciousness” that comes from making explicit what we have learned and internalized as the meanings for “good girl,” “good boy,” “good woman,” “good man,” “good mother,” etc. Once these are made explicit, they become directly available to us for our inspection.

But it is also imperative that we, as educators, distinguish between our assessment of the accuracy of given accounts of caring and our assessment of their ethical and educational desirability, the grounds upon which one would consciously adopt them for oneself, insist on them for one’s children, teach them to one’s students. These are some of the issues that an Ethics of Care raises for teachers and other educators.

Once educators recognize an Ethics of Care, the hard questions of educational application must also be asked. As a teacher and parent herself, Nel Noddings suggests a number of educational changes and presents us with some clear challenges. She also leaves us with unanswered questions and puzzling dilemmas. Let us turn now to this meeting between education and the Ethics of Care.

## THE ETHICS OF CARE IN EDUCATION

In addition to her use of educational examples throughout *Caring*, Noddings devotes her final chapter completely to educational questions and applications. Here she makes her position unequivocally clear: not only is the Ethics of Care the primary human ethic, it should also be the primary educational aim:

The primary aim of every educational institution and of every educational effort must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring. Parents, police, social workers, teachers, preachers, neighbors, coaches, older siblings, must all embrace this primary aim (p. 172).

Noddings hastens to add that “educational institutions may still differ in their secondary aims.” The school should not “abdicate its essential responsibility to train the intellect.” But the forms that intellectual training takes should not “put the ethical ideal at risk,” for to do so would mean that we had “confused our priorities dangerously” — putting primary what should be secondary.

This leaves open two interpretations of what is meant by “primary aim” within formal schooling: (1) a constraints interpretation, and (2) a central focus interpretation. On (1) the ethical requirements of

caring relations would function for the most part as a constraint or limitation on the range of behaviors, tasks, interactions, etc., that are used in going about the specific educational projects such as the teaching and learning of traditional academic subject matter. On (2) the “maintenance and enhancement of caring” would be the central or foremost focus, something to be kept consciously before us as always more important than anything else. Noddings seems to leave room for both interpretations at different points in her discussion.

Perhaps Noddings would say that we must at least take caring as the central focus until the conditions and priorities for an Ethics of Care are sufficiently established so that the constraints can operate almost automatically.

In a recent article Noddings (1986) further clarifies the ways in which an Ethics of Care can be an integral part of academic teaching. She gives an example in which the teacher starts with an academic difficulty, but then notices, by practicing engrossment, that if she simply proceeds on course then what is happening will violate caring for several students. At this point the constraint becomes a central focus while the teacher considers what can be done for these students.

Here is Noddings’ account of a math teacher reflecting on whether to give retests to several students who have failed a test. The teacher considers and rejects the idea of merely giving them some extra remediation, by saying, “No, that won’t do. The bad grade on this test is itself a handicap. It makes them feel scared and hopeless. They need time to learn more and a chance to improve their position. I’ll have to give retests” (1986, p. 500). When the teacher focuses directly on the maintenance of caring, the answer to her methodological question becomes clear.

Further on in the same example Noddings’ teacher takes up the question of whether a retest is fair to the other students who passed the first test. Her reply makes the paradigm shift particularly evident: “I’m not sure fairness is the right criterion here. This isn’t a *contest*. Why should there be winners and losers? Those who pass the first time don’t lose anything—they don’t have to prepare for a retest” (1986, p. 500). She thus illustrates how a “contest” view of education can be more effectively challenged from a base within the concept of a caring community.

In chapter eight of *Caring*, Noddings gives a series of brief suggestive sketches of ways in which schools and teaching might “be redesigned so that caring has a chance.” For example, having smaller schools is one often underrated change that Noddings recommends. A suggested administrative change would be to have teaching faculty take turns at administration. Noddings characterizes this as a “cycles” approach. For example, “Career teachers might teach for three years and then spend a year in administrative work or study” (p. 199).

Noddings does not insist on the superiority of any particular

changes. She claims they are only suggestions, meant to be “illustrative” of the possibilities for “fresh thinking” on how we might establish “a caring community within the school.” And she refuses to argue about the finer details of these proposals. Nevertheless her own experience as a classroom teacher is evident in her sympathetic sketches of how such changes might affect teachers and students so as to promote a more caring community within the schools.

When we turn to substantive curriculum change Noddings’ major recommendation is to have “caring apprenticeships” for *all* students; these apprenticeships “should have equal status with the other tasks encountered in education” (p. 188). Here Noddings places the students’ acquisition of caring skills and propensities on an equal footing with other academic aims, as one primary aim but not as the only one. But she is also well aware of the fact that in moral education we have no clear separation between the explicit curriculum and the hidden (or latent) curriculum. Noddings puts the point succinctly when she says: “A teacher cannot ‘talk’ this ethic. She must live it” (p. 179).

Caring apprenticeships are, therefore, simply one form of practice that occurs within a caring community, where through “dialogue, modeling, the provision of practice, and the attribution of best motive, the one-caring as teacher nurtures the ethical ideal” (p. 179).

This is no piecemeal added-frills approach that Noddings is advocating, but rather a thorough, pervasive transformation of the way teaching is practiced and subjects are taught. One might well say: “How could anyone ask for more than this?” But we have not yet confronted the Dangerous Ethics critics.

Recall that the critics who worried about the dangers attendant upon the Ethics for Care noticed that the feminine nature of this ethics could be a mixed blessing when it locked women into positions of servility or sainthood as the sole bearers of caring responsibilities. And, secondly, when political change or reform is needed, an Ethics of Care seems to be, at best, unclear or hesitant, and at worst an obstacle for its adherents.

Do these dangers pose any problems for Noddings’ approach to education? Let’s start with the identification of caring as “feminine.” Noddings is certainly right in her insistence that “all of humanity can participate in the feminine as I am describing it” (p. 172). But is she overly sanguine about the ease with which education may alter the gendered nature of morality, which she herself so accurately describes?

When Noddings associates caring with the “feminine,” she highlights the way in which our moral propensities often reflect gendered virtues—perhaps especially with our public ways of behaving as gendered beings. Now to the extent that our moral propensities are highly gendered, to this extent we may have self-imposed gender constraints operating on us where ideally we should, instead, be following our own freely and thoughtfully chosen ethical convictions.

Thus one thing that follows from acknowledging the tie between caring and the “feminine” is that so long as gender identity is of central importance, those who have acquired certain standard gender conventions may not be free to choose caring if they conceive of themselves as “masculine” or free to choose not to care if they conceive of themselves as “feminine.” Thus the insistence that *all* students learn caring is jeopardized so long as the students themselves perceive such acquisition as a violation of their gender identity. Noddings judiciously sidesteps this whole issue of gender constraints even though her own analysis provides an able explication of the prevailing norms.

If caring is as genderized as Noddings herself indicates, then this phenomenon would seem to call for what Jane Roland Martin (1981, 1985) has termed a “gender-sensitive” approach to education, where one recognizes the likelihood of crucial gender differences, watches for these, notices their effects, and adapts educational practice accordingly.<sup>8</sup> Although the first step of recognizing a crucial gender difference is central to Noddings’ thesis of a “feminine” ethic, she either ignores or discounts the serious implications for education that Martin notes, namely that the same education will have a vastly different impact, depending upon one’s gender.

At present in our society, many girls and young women are directed and helped to consider the “cared-for”—his need and wants, the meaning of his actions. So that gradually through encouragement, assistance, and insistence, women come to engage in this engrossment and motivational displacement on their own. Thus they learn “caring” in Noddings’ sense.

It would be misleading, as well as mistaken, to assume that men and boys do not learn caring at all in our society. But there are at least two significant gender differences. First of all, conventional “masculine” caring seems most often to take the form Noddings calls “indirect” caring, such as the ways we “care for people indirectly through maintenance of the environment” (p. 187). These indirect forms of caring are certainly valuable and worthwhile, but they are not equivalent practices in Noddings’ sense.

In the second place, many boys will have acquired early on a sense that their major role as a male is to pursue their own projects successfully, which is, on Noddings’ analysis, one appropriate way for the cared-for to “receive” caring and thus complete the relation. But attention to the maintenance and enhancement of relationships is, then, at best a secondary, if not “feminine,” responsibility.

But again we must be careful that we do not confuse sex with gender. For most purposes we can think of two biological sexes, male and female. But gender is plural; there are numerous versions of what it means to be a “woman” or a “man.” And in our contemporary society students could have access to a wide range of gender meanings, including nurturant men and single-minded women who successfully pursue their own projects. But it may require a conscious,

explicit “gender-sensitive” educational effort to make these gender options available to most students; and without such efforts, Noddings’ Ethics of Care may well remain no more than a “feminine” ethic.

In the closing pages of *Caring*, right after her suggestions for the changes that could establish better support structures for a community of caring within schools, Noddings asks this poignant question: “Why is it likely that the kind of thinking I am engaged in will lead nowhere?” (p. 199) She observes then that this is not due to a failure of practicality or economics, both of which should realistically be on her side. She also recognizes the issue of *power*; but she mentions it only in passing and treats it as if it were primarily an individualistic matter of those who have “succeeded in the traditional masculine structure” not wanting to give up their “hard-won power” (p. 200).

Noddings then comes close to resignation about this unchanging power structure when she observes, as if it were a necessary unalterable fact (perhaps also desirable) that: “Women, by our very nature, are unlikely to seek domination in education; our circles will be circles of support and not of power” (p. 200).

Then, with only one more page to go, Noddings moves on to another topic and seems to leave us precisely where the Dangerous position would predict—with no recourse but to go on caring as best we can under a set of antithetical conditions while the larger structures remain beyond our power to change so long as we adhere to this morally admirable *and* politically powerless Ethics of Care.

It is here that those of us whose work, responsibilities, and morality fits an Ethics of Care must face what Marilyn Frye has aptly termed the “fatal combination of responsibility and powerlessness: we are held responsible and we hold ourselves responsible for good outcomes for . . . children in almost every respect though we have in almost no case power adequate to that project” (Frye 1983, p. 9).

If as educators we believe in our work and truly do care for our students, we are lured by three dubious but appealing temptations that avoid facing Frye’s fatal combination. We can try (1) denial, (2) romanticizing, or (3) resignation. The third may be the most realistic but it is also the least invigorating, the hardest on morale, and one that appears ironically to give up on morality. Both (1) and (2) are not only dishonest, they also fail to confront what’s really happening, including the ways in which the conditions for effective caring are themselves undermined.

On my reading of Noddings, her ethical position would seem to advocate unrelenting persistence and insistence when it comes to conditions for caring. Rather than the three temptations, Noddings would, I think, advocate withdrawal of consent and outright disobedience if caring is threatened, and, finally, under more extreme conditions, whatever is necessary to defend and protect those for whom one cares.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile Noddings insists that “it is time for the voice of the mother to be heard in education.” And she reiterates her invitation for men and women “to join in a dialectical conversation,” a conversation that Noddings’ own work has significantly furthered.

## EPILOGUE

My major intention in this article was aptly described by Marilyn Frye when she wrote at the end of *The Politics of Reality*: “My primary goal here has not been to state and prove some rigid thesis, but simply to *say* something clearly enough, intelligibly enough, so that it can be understood and thought about” (1983, p. 173).

My preference for clarity over theses, in this matter, is due to my conviction that definitive judgments on an Ethics of Care are premature. I believe that the systematic exposition of an Ethics of Care, its implications and its range of applications, although well begun, is still in a fledgling stage. In the first place, almost all the discussions of contemporary versions have been available in the public domain for less than a decade, while the opportunity for development and elaboration through public exchanges, and critiques, has occurred mostly within the past five years.<sup>10</sup>

In the second place, discussions of an Ethics of Care within the last decade have been focused primarily on the gender connection, on the ways in which caring is associated with women or with the feminine. But when I take the perspective of an educational theorist, it seems to me that while the gender connection is of tremendous importance, the Ethics of Care also may represent native ground for numerous teachers and educators, regardless of sex. A still largely unexplored question is that of the extent to which an Ethics of Care does reveal certain “deep structures” for educational practitioners. And if it does, what interesting similarities and divergences might there be between an educational version and a feminine version of this ethics?

In the third place, I believe we must be more careful to distinguish between our assessment of the accuracy of descriptive accounts of the tacit structures and inferable directives for caring, compared with our assessment of their ethical desirability.

The failure to maintain this distinction leads, I think, to the extremes of both oversimplified advocacy and oversimplified rejection. Both advocates and opponents of an Ethics of Care seem at times to base their ethical assessment directly on their belief in its descriptive accuracy. The logic seems to be that if we do have an accurate account of women’s own morality here, then by implication the evaluative assessment follows without question from this fact. In one case, if it is women’s morality, then it’s good (life-affirming, nurturant, peaceful, nonviolent, generous, helpful, etc.). In the other case, if it is traditionally women’s, then it’s bad (oppressive,

exploitive, servile, imposed by men, sexist, etc.). In neither case does one slow down enough to separate descriptive power from ethical value.

On the level of phenomenological description and systematic exposition, I believe Noddings' work, as well as Gilligan's, Ruddick's, and others, provides rich, perceptive, and much needed articulations of our moral experience and care-based traditions. The power of these accounts is borne out by the widespread recognition, attention, and affirmation the Ethics of Care has received. Nevertheless, there is also considerable room for further descriptive efforts, as for example in the educational realm we already noted.

When it comes to questions of ethical assessment, I think there is enormous work yet to be done. This includes not only the questions of moral desirability within particular situations or domains, but also the problems of choosing metalevel criteria for ethical assessment and reconstructive efforts.<sup>11</sup>

In education, the curriculum should, I believe, definitely include the Ethics of Care within the canon of recognized ethical paradigms. To have explicit and systematic formulations of this ethics available for study and inspection provides a much needed resource for students' own "critical consciousness" as well as the grounds for making better informed choices about their own morality. It is a separate and further question to ask whether educators should consciously adopt caring as the ideal educational ethic.

## NOTES

1. All page references that are otherwise undesignated refer to Noddings (1984).

2. The most widely discussed proponents of what I am calling "The Ethics of Care" are Carol Gilligan (1982), Nel Noddings (1984), and Sara Ruddick (1980, 1983, and 1984). There are important differences among them; for example, Sara Ruddick seems more sensitive to the influence the social political culture has on the expression of a nurturant ethics and on the ways in which it can go wrong. But I think it is fair to say that these writers all share the features I have distilled as central to the ethics of care. There is now a voluminous body of literature on the topic of women's morality; and much of it is concerned with the ethics of care under discussion in this paper. I cannot begin to give an exhaustive, nor indeed even a very representative, listing of the works on this topic. However, I will here indicate those writers whose contribution to the critical analysis of the Ethics of Care I have in mind when I later turn to an assessment of the ethics: Virginia Held (1984, 1986), Jean Grimshaw (1986), Barbara Houston (1985, 1986), Claudia Card (1985), Marilyn Frye (1983), Sara Hoagland (1986), and two of Hoagland's unpublished papers (see References), Jeffner Allen (1986), Joan Ringelheim (1985), Judy Auerbach *et al.* (1985), and Larry Blum *et al.* (1976).

3. Many standard moral theories seem to presuppose what Selya Ben-Habib has called "the mushroom view of the origin of man," a view she finds clearly expressed in Hobbes, namely that men sprang from the ground like mushrooms, fully formed, rational, autonomous, independent, and self-interested creatures.

For her intriguing comments on this view see her paper given to the Stony Brook Conference on Women and Moral Theory, Long Island, Spring 1984, now published in Kittay and Meyers (1987).

4. Annette Baier (1984, 1986) elaborates on this point in the course of developing her own ideas for a women's ethic that focuses more on the issues of appropriate trust and distrust than on those of nurturance; but she also insists that relatedness is basic to an authentic human ethic.

5. Lawrence Kohlberg (1983, pp. 22–27 and p. 141) has argued this view. See also Gertrude Nunner-Winkler (1984, p. 358). John Broughton (1983) also adopts this interpretation of Gilligan's account of the "different" morality.

6. Those who hold the Dangerous Ethics view include Allen, Blum *et al.*, Card, Daly, Frye, Hoagland, Houston, and Ringelheim. It seems to me that Card, Allen, Houston, and Ringelheim hold the view that the Ethics of Care is contingently dangerous. Sara Hoagland, in her paper entitled "Vulnerability and Power," makes a strong case for claiming that the "virtue" of vulnerability, frequently associated with women's nurturant ethic, is *necessarily* dangerous.

7. For a series of interesting cases that illustrate the exploitation and deforming of women's caring, see Blum *et al.* (1976).

8. As far as I know Martin first introduced the idea of a "gender-sensitive" education in her 1981 Presidential Address to the Philosophy of Education Society. For her more recent thinking see Martin (1985, esp. pp. 25–26 and pp. 193–196). For an elaboration on a gender-sensitive approach to physical education, see Diller and Houston (1983); and for a further discussion on the potential problems of "overgenderization," see Diller (1984).

9. For Noddings' remarkably honest wrestling with the issues of violence and the need to protect those for whom we care, see especially pp. 108–120. Noddings summarizes her position when she says "she will neither initiate violence nor leave her inner circle unprotected." (1984, p. 111).

10. Compare this timespan with the ethics of Plato and Aristotle, which have been discussed for more than two thousand years; or with the more recent Kantian and Utilitarian ethical systems, which both exceed a hundred years.

11. I have addressed some pieces of these questions elsewhere; see, for example, Houston and Diller, "Trusting Ourselves To Care" (1987).

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