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Review: Some Concerns about Nel Noddings' "Caring"

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## REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

# Some Concerns About Nel Noddings' *Caring*

SARAH LUCIA HOAGLAND

*Nel Noddings argues that hers is not an ethics of agape. I want to argue, on the contrary, that it is, and that this is a problem. My central thesis is that the unidirectional nature of the analysis of one-caring reinforces oppressive institutions.*

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Nel Noddings' book, *Caring* (1984), has many fine points.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps most important is her shift of the source of ethical sentiment from rules to natural sentiment, in particular, caring. In many respects I agree with this focus. However if such a focus is going to serve us morally, it must have a way of assessing the values we reinforce through our interactions and a vision of how values can change.

My criticism stems from Nel Noddings' analysis of caring, an analysis which uses mothering as a model, and from implications which derive from this analysis, some of which the author clearly did not intend. My concern is two-fold. First, I object to the unidirectional description of caring. Second, I do not think mothering can be properly used as the model for an ethics of caring.

Nel Noddings argues that hers is not an ethics of agape. I want to argue, on the contrary, that it is, and that this is a problem. My central thesis is that the unidirectional nature of the analysis of one-caring reinforces oppressive institutions.

Let me begin with the reciprocity of the cared-for; it is not a mutual engrossment and motivational displacement, not even a receiving of the other's world to the extent of understanding it. Reciprocity amounts to acknowledgment of the other's caring (52, 65). Nel Noddings notes that the relationship can be heightened if the cared-for's acknowledgment includes involving the one-caring in the cared-for's projects. However, there is no need for children to turn and exhibit concern for the mother's projects.

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Now to the extent that the cared-for (child) cannot understand what the one-caring (mother) needs or wants, the conclusion I draw is that such a relationship is *ipso facto* a diminished caring relationship. Further the very purpose of parenting, as well as teaching and therapying which are also part of the model, is to wean the cared-for of dependency. Consequently an ethics of caring whose model is a dependency relationship that is ideally transitory provides at best for an incomplete analysis of caring.

What I question is the promotion of infant non-reciprocity-beyond-acknowledgment as a model for ethically relating to others. When I have no real expectation of an intimate, when I have certain standards of caring for myself which I do not apply to the other, for example, then I am not showing respect.

Further, non-reciprocity-beyond-acknowledgment undermines the possibility of instilling the value of one-caring in the cared-for. I am not convinced that a child, especially a male child, who receives one-caring from his mother will ever learn to be one-caring himself. Rather, as is more consistent with my observations, such children learn to expect more one-caring—unidirectional—from all females. In fact, that is what they look for in a wife. There is nothing to indicate that one-caring is capable of undermining what Marilyn Frye calls “the arrogant eye of masculine perception” (Frye 1983). In addition, in my observation, the treatment a female child receives which produces those predisposed to one-caring is not itself one-caring. It is not a warm concern for a girl’s projects, for example sports, but rather a curbing of her projects through socializing her into the feminine role.

Second, I question the sense of self that emerges from the analysis of one-caring. Nel Noddings argues that one-caring is not self-sacrificing because we are defined in relation, and also because she acknowledges that it is appropriate for the one-caring to care for herself (99).

While certainly Nel Noddings insists that we take care of ourselves, the moral basis for this is to become better ones-caring (105). Thus, we have an other-directed justification for self-concern that can encourage false information about what counts as health as well as what counts as moral good (Frye 1983, 70). Further, if my ethical self can emerge only through caring for others (14), if self is defined only in relation (99), and if ethics is built on caring which is always other-directed (99), then the only time I may focus on my own goals and have that be an ethical matter is as a cared-for—when it is important to someone else that I pursue my goals as a way of having their caring received.

In addition, insofar as I become able to care for myself only as I care for others and am cared for, then I get my ethical identity from always being other-directed (49). But this is not significantly different from the situation of exploitation as Marilyn Frye analyzes it (Frye 1983, 60).

Certainly relation is central to ethics. However, there must be two beings, at least, to relate. Moving away from oneself is one aspect of the dynamic of

caring, but it cannot be the only defining element. Otherwise relationship is not ontologically basic, the other is ontologically basic, and the self ceases to exist in its own ethical right. There is, as yet, no real relation.

One who cares must perceive herself not just as both separate and related, but as ethically both separate and related; otherwise she cannot acknowledge difference, for example that one is black and the other white in a racist society. And denying difference will lead to undermining the connection and perpetuating racism as well as sexism, ageism, heterosexism and many other aspects of our social structure (Lorde 1982 and 1984).

Third, as Nel Noddings describes it, withdrawal from a relationship involves a diminishment of the ethical ideal (114). I want to suggest there must be the possibility of withdrawal from a cared-for without a diminishment of the ethical ideal, for at times withdrawal is necessary to preserve my ideal. The mother who receives the incestuous father is demoralized, as Nel Noddings notes, her ideal diminished. However Nel Noddings argues that it is also diminished by withdrawing from him.

The idea seems to be that the man who rapes his daughters, for example, is otherwise a quite decent fellow. Aunt Phoebe who is smug in her hatred of blacks is otherwise a warm and generous person. However, these choices are not distinct from other choices such a person makes. I must be able to assess any relationship for abuse/oppression and withdraw if I find it to be so. I am not full of guilt; I feel none. I have grown, I have learned something. I understand my part in the relationship. I separate. I will not be there again. Far from diminishing my ethical self, I am enhancing it.

Withdrawal may also be the only way one can help another. One danger of caring is what Alcoholics Anonymous calls enablement: those close to alcoholics often enable an alcoholic's dependency. As Celinda Cantu explains, enablers become co-alcoholics, those who are as "dependent on the alcoholic as the alcoholic is on alcohol," for they "get a fix by taking care of and being needed by the drunk" (Swallow 1983, 85).

Fourth, I question the non-judgmentalism of the analysis of one-caring. Nel Noddings notes that we receive the other without evaluation or assessment as near as possible (34). In the first place, this simply is not true. Even not to judge is to judge. To pretend a stance of non-judgmentalism merely discourages awareness of one's environment and the values of the status quo—in therapy, often the value of blaming the victim.

Nel Noddings denies there is judgment in the initial impulse to care, and what she means by "judgment" is "assessment of right and wrong." Yet there is some form of assessment, for example, in a heterosexual woman's initial impulse of repulsion when confronted with a lesbian. While possibly non-reflective, it is not pre-conscious. If the feeling of caring is to be totally non-reflective, then it is not different from a sneeze. As Naomi Scheman writes, anything more complex than twinges and pangs exist in relation to our

social context (for example, capitalist patriarchy) and make sense in relation to it (Scheman 1983, 226ff).

Nel Noddings argues that hers is not an ethics of agape. Throughout this discussion, I have been suggesting, on the contrary, that it is. The reason she considers it not agape is that there is no command to love (28-29). However this is not my understanding of agape. The essence of agape lies in the direction of loving. In direct contrast to eros which is self-centered, agape is other-centered. The caring of agape always moves away from itself and extends itself unconditionally. Certainly Nel Noddings' analysis is that caring moves away from itself (16), and I would add that given there are no expectations of the cared-for beyond acknowledgement in relation to the one-caring, that my ethical self can emerge only through caring for others, that withdrawal constitutes a diminished ideal, and that there is allegedly no evaluation in receiving the other, one-caring also extends itself virtually unconditionally.

Perhaps the paradigm of unconditional loving lies in the stereotype of the mammy (Hooks 1981, 84-5). Motivational displacement is one consequence of enslavement, and by implication from Nel Noddings' analysis, the caring relationship is completed if the son of a slave master grows up under the one-caring of the mammy to be a master.

Further, the unidirectional ideal of mothering undermines reciprocal interaction beyond acknowledgment between mothers and daughters and so also encourages incompetency and ageism among us. Recipients of unconditional loving—children and husbands—combine in exploiting mothers, helping to create ageist response to older women:

The children learned an assumption of privilege from their father, and he in turn became one of the children—legitimately passive, irresponsible. . . . [M]y older daughters never witnessed an *exchange* of nurturance. In their view of how the world worked, mothers gave, and men/daughters received. . . . As the children grow up, they continue to relate to older women with the clear expectations of service. (Copper 1985, 57)

María Lugones writes of her failure to love her mother and suggests that until she became basically one-caring herself toward her mother, and thereby met her mother in care, meaning could not arise fully between them (Lugones 1987, 8).

To pursue the feminine (whose essence is agape and unconditional loving), to pursue this sense of female agency, is to pursue oppression. The masculine and the feminine are not significantly different in what they engender.

Nel Noddings' analysis of caring appeals to the feminine, to receptiveness. A truly radical ethics will challenge not only the masculine but also the feminine, for the feminine is born of a masculinist framework and so does not, at a deep level, represent any change. In general, I do not find the society of mothers preferable to the society of the fathers. In contrasting mothers and

amazons, Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig suggest, mythically, that there came a time when some would no longer ride with the amazons and instead stayed in the city and watched their abdomens grow, refusing other interests and calling themselves mothers (Wittig and Zeig 1979, 109-9).

In a sense I am charging the one-caring as Nel Noddings describes her with a lack of experience in the world (46), indeed with a withdrawal from the public domain (84). I am suggesting that hers is the focus of one who has limited her attention and will not leave the city. But my criticism is not a criticism from the masculine ethics Nel Noddings abandons because I am not appealing to principles here to solve the problems. Acting from principle can be acting from an equal or even greater lack of experience. It is a lesbian criticism: caring cannot be insular, and it cannot ignore the political reality, material conditions, and social structure of the world.

While I applaud Nel Noddings' focus on care and situations and away from rules and principles, as well as the care she exhibits in detailing her examples, I question her analysis of caring because it does not adequately challenge the proximate intimate, because it fears the proximate stranger, and because it ignores the distant stranger (47). An ethics which leaves starving people in a distant land outside the realm of moral consideration is inadequate, especially when, as Claudia Card notes in her review, we may well have had a hand in creating these conditions. And a stance that fears the proximate stranger means the caring is not capable of crossing barriers and so promoting change. In discussing the failure of love between white anglo women and women of color María Lugones writes:

I am particularly interested . . . in those cases in which White/Anglo women . . . ignore us, ostracize us, render us invisible, stereotype us, leave us completely alone, interpret us as crazy. All of this *while we are in their midst*. (Lugones 1987, 7)

If an ethics of caring is going to be morally successful in replacing an ethics located in principles and duty, then it must provide for the possibility of ethical behavior in relation to what is foreign, it must consider analyses of oppression, it must acknowledge a self that is both related and separate, and it must have a vision of, if not a program for, change. In my opinion, care stripped of these elements isn't a caring that benefits us. If we are to have a female-focused caring central to an ethical theory, a theory of value, I suggest it be the caring of amazons, a caring of those concerned with challenging the inequities resulting from the values of the fathers.

## NOTES

An earlier version was presented to the joint session of the Radical Philosophy Association and the Society for Women in Philosophy at the Central Division American Philosophical Association meetings in Cincinnati, April, 1988.

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all page references in the text refer to Noddings (1984).

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