

Education and the Ethic of Care

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Abstract

This paper explores the possibility of locating formal education in the ethic of care framework. Ethic of care is a context driven approach that aims at meeting the other as a whole person. The paper uses the work of Nel Noddings as the basis to develop the argument about caring.

'teaching is a messy business because it deals with the fascinating complexity of human relationships...'

Michael Katz (1999) in his paper '*Teaching About Caring and Fairness*' elucidates using literature as one of the possible ways to bring the discussion of ethics to the classroom. He analyses a book '*The Small Room*' (1961) by Mary Sarton as an exemplar of his approach to teaching. The analysis highlights the conflict that a young Professor faces between care and justice. This Professor is forced to deal with a case of plagiarism, by one of her students', who was extremely bright and promising. She resolves the conflict by choosing to meet the student with care instead of allowing the law to take its due course. She protects her by avoiding her trial, by the student court that was set up by the college to deal with matters related to rules violation. The substantive punishment for plagiarism was expulsion and the Professor felt that the student needed guidance instead of expulsion from college. Expulsion is too severe a punishment for a student like her and will taint her for life. As the book proceeds, the Professor realises that her role as a teacher is much more complex than she had ever anticipated.

Michael S. Kartz's(1999) paper emphasises the need to situate the 'Ethic of Care' in the context of formal education. Through the present paper, I wish to forward an argument that 'care' should form an integral part of the teaching-learning process. This argument does not refute the significance of justice. However, the main proponents of this approach argue that reason based on abstraction of principles from real life situation may not always augur well with context specific problems. A principle cannot be applied to any situation based on the assumption that it is similar to another condition on which the principle was applicable. Ethic of care is a more context driven approach that is based on meeting the other as a whole person. In the present paper, I will begin by briefly discussing the basic ideas under the 'Ethic of Care' and then highlight its significance in the context of formal education. I have used the work of Nel Noddings as the basis to develop my main argument about *caring*. She is a feminist philosopher who has contributed in the area of Philosophy of Education and the Ethic of Care. Some of her prominent works include *Caring: A feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984), *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* (1992), *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy* (2002) among many other. Her work gives more significance to the experience and the memory of being cared for as the basis to care for other. Even though she does not refute justice based approach to ethics however, she argues that care based on 'relatedness, responsiveness and receptivity' is a more basic and favourable approach to ethics.

ETHIC OF CARE

To understand the work Nel Noddings (1994, 1999, 2002) it is essential to distinguish between what she calls as natural care and ethical care. She suggests that morality is as an 'active virtue'¹ that requires two feelings. One of the feelings is a natural feeling that flows without any effort. This can be the feeling that a mother has for her child. The second feeling emanates from our memories of moments in our life when we were cared for. It is this memory of been cared for that propels us to care for others. Thus, the natural caring sentiment becomes the basis of the second ethical feeling of 'I must'. Ethical caring is somewhat similar to Kant's argument that being ethical is a duty for the sake of duty and not out of love. But here, ethical caring is not superior to natural caring because the ethic of care emphasizes maintaining a caring attitude and that in turn, is dependent on natural caring. (Noddings, 1984)

The relationship between 'the one caring' and the 'cared for' is more basic for care than the individual. To establish caring relation the 'one caring' must exhibit 'engrossment' and 'motivational displacement' and the 'cared for' must respond (Noddings, 1984). Engrossment here refers to a deep understanding of what the other person wants. It goes beyond empathy since engrossment becomes a prerequisite for any kind of action that the one caring will take for the one who is cared for. Motivational displacement takes the engrossment to the next level. It enables the person to act in accordance with the needs of the other. Both these remain incomplete till the cared for recognizes this act and responds to the other. It is this response that completes caring.

The virtue described by the ethical ideal of the 'one caring' is constructed in the relationship with the one who is 'cared for'. It is based on the concept of reaching out and responding to the needs of others. The initial impulse to care is spontaneous and natural. Each one of us has an 'I must' feeling as an initial response. But we do not often respond to the 'I must' because either we feel we are incapable of doing anything or we remove ourselves from the set of agents who can actually do something, within a given context/ situation. Caring requires that the person responds to the initial impulse with an act of commitment. This act may be overt or the one caring may also abstain from acting if it is in the best interest of the one cared for. The most important test of caring is through the study of the intentions of the one caring. It also depends on whether the one caring has in any way assisted the cared for in accomplishing his/her task. (Noddings, 1984)

The impulse to act on behalf of the other is an innate quality that lies dormant within us. The tendency to act on this quality is dependent on the gradual development of caring relations. The basis of morality is the natural desire to remain related. In ethical caring, we accept the natural desire to act on behalf of the other. It keeps us engrossed in the other. There are instances where we may reject our impulse but this happens only in situations of imbalance or where we consciously choose to undermine the ethical ideal (Noddings, 1984)

Why should we choose to be moral? The reason why we choose to care is because of the genuine moral sentiment that associated with the evaluation of caring relations as good, as better than, other forms of relatedness. The person responds to the context

¹ David Hume

with care hoping that his/her response will enhance their ethical ideal. This value arises as a product of the memory of being cared for and the person's reflection on the goodness of these concrete caring experiences (Noddings, 1984).

Noddings (1984) uses the term ethical ideal to signify the ideal of ourselves as caring. This ethical ideal is formed when a person reflects on the way he/she is in the situation of a genuine caring relationship. One reflects on not just experiences when one cared for others but also on their own need to be received and understood. A person is close to the ethical ideal when he/she does what the 'I must' is indicating them to do. Ethic of care places this ethical ideal above other principles. Nel Noddings (1984) argues that moral principles are based on the assumption that they are universal. This condition of universality is based on the premise of sameness i.e. a principle can apply to two situations if they are similar. However, in abstracting similarity, we tend to ignore those conditions that make a given condition different and give rise to moral questions. While principles are important in themselves, they do not serve a purpose of guiding context specific action. Instead, they serve as guides for abstract moral reasoning.

Nel Noddings (1984) also states that according significance to context specific information does not cast the ethic of care as a relativist theory, rather, the maintenance of caring relations is a universal component of the theory. The ethic of care limits its obligation to care. It is delimited by relations. Thus, it may not apply in the absence of the possibility of the establishment of relationships. It can be applicable to only those conditions where there is a potential to accomplish the obligation. Thus, the obligation rests on the existence of relationship and the dynamic potential for growth in relations, including the chances of reciprocity. This second criterion serves to arrange the obligation in an order of priority depending on the potential of response from the one cared for.

EDUCATION

The proponents of ethic of care argue that moral education is not only the imperative of family or religious organisation. Rather, the school and the community also have a role to play in it. The basis of moral education according to the care approach will aim, 'to preserve and enhance caring'. This aim is intertwined with all other aims of education. Noddings (1984) questions the dichotomy between home and school in matters related to morality and intellectual development respectively. This kind of segregation does not help in the development of the whole person. The end of every educational endeavour should be to develop caring relations. All means to this end should be judged on this criterion.

'To receive and to be received, to care and be cared for: these are the basic realities of human beings and its basic aim.' Since the basis of care is relatedness, therefore this approach argues that it is better to be with others in times of trouble than remain lonely. They argue that the aim of life is not happiness that is achieved by seeking pleasure or avoiding pain. Rather the aim of life is to care and be cared for. One should be able to receive the other fully and to remain engrossed in the other. Even if this engrossment leads to pain, deprivation and trouble, it will also have elements of joy, wonder and tenderness.

This emphasis on maintenance of caring relationships does not mean that this approach ignores intellectual development. But Nel Noddings (1984) states that if any

aim inhibits the development of the ethical ideal then it should not be pursued. There are some thinkers like A.S Neill (1960) who gave significance to what students want to read instead of what teacher wants to teach. . Nel Noddings (1984) also gives significance to the interests of the learner but also emphasises that the teacher can teach what she thinks is important. She must keep in mind the student's attitude towards the topic/subject and should adjust her teaching strategy according to it. The student should get more importance in class than the subject.

There is both commitment and choice in the ethic of care. The commitment is towards the cared for and towards our own selves. We also have the choice to respond to our impulses that can either enhance or diminish the ethical ideal.

Teaching as a profession entails frequent encounter with the other. Ethic of care does not see teaching as a role rather it is seen as a special relation. Here, the relationship is seen as based on care. The maintenance of this relation is the primary responsibility of a teacher and every other function is secondary to it. Nel Noddings (1984) derives the 'I-thou' relationship from Martin Buber and states that the teacher receives the student as 'Thou', a subject and not as an object. She cites an example to emphasise this. She says that when a teacher asks a question in class, the purpose should not be to test what the student knows but to seek his/her involvement in class.

She also states that the teacher has an upper hand in selecting the material and topic for projects. The teacher works closely with the student and tries to see the subject from their perspective. Taking the ethic of care to the classroom does not mean that the teacher will talk about it but it will reflect in the manner he/she will relate with their students: whether he/she chooses to act according to set rules and principles or he/she cares more about the students. The teacher takes into accounts the feelings and needs of the student. The teacher demonstrates to the student how to act as the one who cares, thus preparing them to act later in life.

The 'cared for' also has an important role to play in the maintenance of caring relations. If the student is responsive the teacher is encouraged to care and respond to the needs of the student. The caring is complete only when the cared for responds to it. Several thinkers feel that given the numbers, time and purpose it may be very difficult to realise this ideal. But Noddings (1984) argued that it is not the time interval that matters but the nature of encounter that matters. She also contends that even though it may be impossible for schools to care directly but they can be structured in a way that supports persons who care.

Noddings discusses three means of nurturing the ethical ideal. They are – dialogue, practice and confirmation.

DIALOGUE

According to Noddings (1984) dialogue in the school would mean that everything that interests students should be brought to the classroom. It can be related to God, killing, sex, loving etc. She also states that at present, values are not discussed in schools leaving them for home and religious organisations. The school is an important site where these issues should be taken up and discussed critically. In fact, schools must discuss things that are closer to life including happiness and grief. The dialogue should include both thinking and feeling. This should lead us to move from our

feelings emanating from our deeply held values towards understanding the feelings of others.

Noddings (1984) extends the dialogue to teaching of subject matter as well. She argues that teachers should also listen to his/her students and respond to them. The teacher should allow them to initiate the discussion. The student may approach the subject matter as 'Thou' and then respond. She states that the purpose of dialogue is to come in contact with ideas and understand the other. It also entails engaging parents in dialogue.

PRACTICE

Schools must provide opportunities for shared efforts. These efforts could be in school garden, office, maintaining clean environment or can be outside school where students can work with some agencies. The purpose of this is development of skills but these are skills for caring and not for vocational purposes. Work as conceptualised by Noddings (1984) does not equate work for money. She suggests that the association between remuneration and dignity weakens the community based on care. Therefore, every person should be engaged in some form of work so that hierarchies get dissolved. She also states that sometimes students should be forced to take up some task for which they do not have natural aptitude and talent. Like maths wizard should engage in mechanical work or students weak in maths should teach young children basic ideas of numbers. The rationale for practice is to enable people to share their success and failures. It should also help people in understanding what others are doing. It helps in developing respect for those who perform those tasks regularly.

The approach argues for cooperative learning and emphasises that students learn better in groups than individually. She also argues that the entire curriculum should be revisited to make it more experiential and engaging. It should help the learner to locate himself in the world instead of detaching him.

CONFIRMATION

Ethic of care suggests that we attribute the best possible motive to the cared for even if he is found engaging in any task that goes against the rules. By attribution we confirm the person and show him the possibility of attaining it. It is an act by way of which we embrace the person. An example of this is when a teacher finds a student cheating she says that 'I know you want to do well in exams' or 'I know you are keen to help your friend' instead of admonishing him/her. Noddings (1984) states that the ethical ideal is present even in a young child. The purpose of education is to enhance it. The young child should be treated gently and lovingly so that he develops caring attitude towards others.

The major challenge in confirming others comes in case of evaluation. The teacher is torn between reporting according to established standards and caring attitude towards student. To resolve the conflict the teacher can look for alternate mechanisms to enhance learning.

Confirmation works in tandem with dialogue and practice. To confirm a child the teacher should talk to him/her and should also engage him/her in some form of practice. Confirmation does not suggest that the teacher praises the student for what he/she has not done but it means that the teacher acknowledges what the student has

done and appreciates their feelings. Out of several motives that can be conferred to the students' action the teacher chooses the best possible motive.

It is not just the student who needs confirmation but the teacher also needs it from the larger world. This is where Noddings (1984) brings the role of the larger community. She states that the teachers' efforts should also be acknowledged and recognised. This acts like a response to her caring attitude. Noddings (1984) also suggests that teaching profession should be 'deprofessionalised'. By this she means that the boundaries between teacher, parents and larger community should be reduced so that the teacher can don the role of the one caring. The teacher should know the subject matter well but he/she must also recognise that maintenance of relationship is very essential.

Dialogue, practice and confirmation are three means that Noddings (1984) thinks takes us closer to realising the ethical ideal. I can conclude by going back to the opening lines of the paper that indicate that teaching is a very complex process. The relationship between teacher as one caring and the student as cared for is special. This relation forms the basis of development and maintenance of caring attitude among the students. The purpose of this paper is to argue for including the feminine voice in the process of curriculum development and pedagogy. This voice emphasises care and relatedness as the basis of development in place of segregation.

REFLECTIONS:

In light of the discussion that followed the presentation of this paper I think that there are several possibilities that can be further explored. My reflection on the discussion suggests that the idea of ethical care can be extended on the lines of Kant's categorical imperative instead of conceptualising it as a virtue. There is also a need to relook at the relationship between 'I must' and 'I want'. In the case of natural care, there is no difference between 'I must' and 'I want' but in case of ethical caring there can be a conflict between 'I must' and 'I want' (Noddings, 1984). Ethical ideal plays a significant role in resolving the conflict between 'I must' and 'I want'. A further study can inquire into the factors that contribute in the development of this ethical ideal in a person. Ethic of Care can also study the relationship between the State and its citizens in the context of a Welfare State. However, this thought needs further deliberation and reflection.

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