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To cite this article: Roger Bergman (2004) Caring for the ethical ideal: Nel Noddings on moral education, *Journal of Moral Education*, 33:2, 149-162, DOI: [10.1080/0305724042000215203](https://doi.org/10.1080/0305724042000215203)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305724042000215203>



Published online: 22 Jan 2007.



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Caring for the ethical ideal: Nel Noddings on moral education

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Nel Noddings is arguably one of the premier philosophers of moral education in the English-speaking world today. Although she is outside the mainstream theory, research, and practice traditions of cognitive-developmentalism (the Kohlberg legacy) and of character education (which is in public ascendancy), her body of work is unrivalled for originality of insight, comprehensiveness and coherence. Whilst Carol Gilligan's *In a different voice* (1982) introduced the ethic of caring into academic and public discourse, it is Noddings 'who has done most to outline a specific feminist position on moral education' (McClellan, 1999, p. 104), and whose influence extends to educational practice. This essay explicates Noddings's vision in sufficient depth to make the foregoing claims credible. Thematic focus is given to her attention to the ethical self or ethical ideal. The paper also examines Noddings's perspective on character education and the need to incorporate a morality of evil into any serious educational philosophy or practice. It is less a critical appraisal of that vision and perspective than an invitation to others to more fully engage with Noddings's writings.¹

Introduction

As we build an ethic on caring and as we examine education under its guidance, we shall see that the greatest obligation of educators, inside and outside formal schooling, is to nurture the ethical ideals of those with whom they come in contact. (Noddings, 1984a, p. 49)

So says Nel Noddings in her first and seminal book, *Caring: a feminine approach to ethics and moral education*, published in 1984. This theme of caring for our children's and students' ethical ideals is fundamental to Noddings's perspective throughout the six books she has authored which discuss moral education and related topics. As she writes in a recent volume, one of two published in 2002, *Starting at home: caring and social policy*:

We put great emphasis on moral interdependence—our shared responsibility for the moral strength or weakness of each member of our society. In 'educating the [caring]

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response,' caring parents and teachers provide the conditions in which it is possible and attractive for children to respond as carers to others. We show them how to care. Children educated in this way gradually build an ethical ideal, a dependable caring self. A society composed of people capable of caring—people who habitually draw on a well-established ideal—will move toward social policies consonant with an ethic of care. (Noddings, 2002a, p. 223)

To understand what Noddings means by this theme, I entertain three basic questions: What is Noddings's vision of the moral life? How do moral obligation and motivation arise? How can education contribute to the moral life of students?

What is Noddings's vision of the moral life?

Noddings's probing analysis of the phenomenon of human caring is perhaps her single most significant contribution to our understanding of the moral life. She devotes three chapters to it in her first book, and recapitulates her basic themes in a chapter each in *The challenge to care in schools*, published in 1992, and *Starting at home*, published a decade later. One might say, however, that all of her work under consideration in this essay explicates the meaning of human caring, in parent-child and teacher-student relationships, in educational philosophy and practice and even in the broader area of social policy.

The original condition in the language of the mother

The need to be cared for is a human universal. We are born absolutely dependent on the caring of others. If our life is to be preserved, if we are to grow, if we are to arrive at some level of acceptability in our culture and community (Noddings, 1992, p. 45), we must be cared for constantly from the moment of our squalling debut in the world. This dependency is, for Noddings, the 'original condition' (2002a, p. 121), which I suspect she means us to hear as a corrective or complement to John Rawls's (1971) famously abstract and impersonal 'original position' behind a 'veil of ignorance'. As she writes in the Introduction to *Caring*:

One might say that ethics has been discussed largely in the language of the father: in principles and propositions, in terms such as justification, fairness, justice. The mother's voice has been silent. Human caring and the memory of caring and being cared for, which I shall argue form the foundation of ethical response, have not received attention except as outcomes of ethical behavior. (Noddings, 1984a, p. 1)

If we are lucky, we will have 'the memory of caring and being cared for' by at least one adult who has herself learned how to care by having been cared for. If we are lucky, someone will have been 'crazy about that kid!' in Urie Bronfenbrenner's phrase, which Noddings fondly quotes in three of her books (1984a, p. 61; 1995; p. 71; 2002a, p. 25). This kind of spontaneous caring for those we love, while in a very real way learned, Noddings calls 'natural caring'. The mother-child relationship, when the mother is a competent carer, is the key to understanding the moral lives and obligations not only of mothers but also of fathers and, fundamentally, of

every human being within every dimension of the human condition. To be cared for, to be the recipient of the complete and single-minded attention of another, simply because of our need for such attention, is to be initiated into and invested in the moral life. In this way, caring is not just one important or even essential element in the moral life, a complement to a commitment to justice, but indeed the very source of all moral striving and ideals.

I hasten to add, as Noddings herself would, that she is no gender essentialist (2002b, p. 103). She pleads agnosticism on the question of whether women are by nature more inclined to caring. She simply observes that throughout history and across cultures, women have been and are the primary care givers. Because caring has been associated with second-class citizenship that hardly means that caring should continue to be devalued as women seek equal partnership with men. Quite the opposite is actually the case. Authentic human liberation and social justice, Noddings argues, can only be achieved by caring people in caring communities.

Caring as engrossment and motivational displacement

But what does it mean to care for another person, whether a child, a spouse, a friend, a neighbour or colleague or a stranger? Noddings often quotes the French philosopher Simone Weil, who would have us be radically attentive to one another, and who asserts that a primary question should guide our relations with others, if those relations would be moral: ‘“What are you going through?”’ (Noddings, 1992, p. 15; 1995, p. 67; 2002a, p. 14; 2002b, p.17) Like a mother responding to the cry of her infant, we must receive the situation of the other as if it were our own. To do so requires emptying ourselves of attention to our own situation, at least for the moment, so as to make room to take in the existential condition of the other. For the moment, and whatever our situation, her need becomes our need. Noddings has her own vocabulary for this essential characteristic of the caring relationship. A caring attention, receptivity, sympathy or disposability leads to *engrossment*, the other’s situation taking over my consciousness, if only temporarily, which in turn leads to *motivational displacement*, as I join with the other in trying to respond to her needs. It is at this point that rationality, evaluation, judgement, something like Aristotle’s *phronesis*, enters the picture. Concerted thinking, both with and on behalf of the other, will often be necessary if the caring response is to be completed effectively.

Asymmetrical reciprocity as moral interdependence

But caring is not just a one-way proposition. For every moment of engrossment and motivational displacement on the part of the would-be carer, there must be a reciprocal reception of that care by the intended cared-for. Because the self is a relation, all acts of caring, however asymmetrical, are always characterized by both give and take. The mother offers her breast to the crying infant, who receives it, ceases crying and satisfies its hunger. The teacher suggests a new approach to a

math problem to a frustrated student, who receives, entertains and applies this new perspective or idea until the problem is solved. The need is met, the caring offered by the carer is completed in the cared-for, the caring relationship is established, maintained or enhanced.

In such seemingly simple and everyday acts of caring, much is at stake besides the immediate need being addressed. The carer's sense of herself as a caring person is at stake. The cared-for's sense of trust in the world as a safe and reliable place and of herself as a centre of value worthy to be cared for, is at stake. In this way the caring self, the ethical self, the ethical ideal, is made possible, established, maintained or enhanced. In the single act of giving and receiving care, the self of each person is confirmed. One's caring is worthy, one is worthy of care. This point is crucial to Noddings's entire argument: one learns not only *how* to care by being cared for, one learns that one *must* care if the self that has been confirmed by receiving care is to be sustained. Noddings insists that any single moment of care given and received is always asymmetrical, whatever form the relationship takes in other moments, and however much it is always reciprocal. Caring offered *needs* to be received. Indeed, 'acknowledgement of the contribution of recipients of care may be the very heart of the care theory. It recognizes moral interdependence' (Noddings, 2002b, p. 87–88). For this reason, 'learning to be cared for is the first step in moral education' (2002a, p. 24).

How do moral obligation and motivation arise?

But what happens when caring is not received or when the impulse to care does not arise spontaneously or is potentially thwarted by difficult circumstances or feelings? What happens when natural caring is not enough?

From natural to ethical caring

Although Noddings prefers Hume's focus on the moral sentiments to Kant's narrow focus on affectless duty, she does fully acknowledge the reality of moral obligation, what she calls the 'I must'. When natural caring is not enough, we must be able to summon up ethical caring. Noddings offers an alternative to Kant's categorical imperative: 'Always act so as to establish, maintain, or enhance caring relations' (1995, p. 188). But why would one do so when caring does not come naturally, spontaneously, or without resistance?

Why ... do we recognize an obligation to care? ... In the ethic of care we accept our obligation because we value the relatedness of natural caring ... When we care, we must employ reasoning to decide what to do and how best to do it ... But reason is not what motivates us. It is feeling with and for the other that motivates us in natural caring. In ethical caring, this feeling is subdued, and so it must be augmented by a feeling for our own ethical selves. (Noddings, 2002b, p. 14)

And to have selves adequate to the challenge of ethical caring, we must care for our

own and one another's ethical ideals. An education that would be moral must 'nurture the ethical ideals of those with whom ... [educators, inside and outside formal schooling] ... come in contact' (Noddings, 1984a, p.49). Before outlining and exemplifying Noddings's views on how education can be moral, we need to pay a little more attention to her notion of the relational self and the ethical ideal.

The ethical self: a relation under construction

'Selves are not born' (Noddings, 2002a, p. 98) but rather are under continual construction through encounters of all kinds, the effects these encounters produce and reflective evaluation of these effects. Noddings notes that 'some philosophers call these ratings second-order evaluations ... I think whether I should feel the way I do about various encounters. The self at previous moments becomes another object of encounter, affect, and evaluation. I approve of certain ways of being in the world and reject others' (2002a, p. 99). The measure of such second-order evaluations is the ideal that is the caring self, just as the measure of first-order evaluation of affects is the ideal of the caring response. The relation between affect and self, between first- and second-order evaluations, is incremental and as part to whole: 'As we try to educate the caring response in every subject that we teach and in a myriad of everyday activities, we contribute to the construction of an ethical ideal. At the core of this ideal is a habitual self that is caring' (Noddings, 2002a, p. 215). Noddings suggests that 'it might be useful to think of [this] self as a sort of *script* by which the organism directs and interprets its encounters' (2002a, p. 100; emphasis added). Elsewhere, she speaks of moral duty as arising 'from faithfulness to an ideal *picture* of ourselves' (1995, p. 187; emphasis added). But because the self is a relation and because we have many relationships, 'the organism is not the sole "author" of the script-like self: other selves contribute to its construction' (Noddings, 2002a, p. 100). In a very real sense, there is no one 'true self' apart from the ideal self that is always under construction through multiple authorship.

However, 'this does not cast us into relativism, because the ideal contains at its heart a component that is universal: Maintenance of the caring relation' (Noddings, 1984a, p. 85). But 'what if the cared-for turns rotten—must be judged evil—in light of the ethic of caring?' A caring person 'will not collaborate with evil wherever it occurs' (1984a, p. 111), even if the evil-doer is intimate to her. The one-caring must not abandon caring as an ideal and as the basis of their relationship when it has been abandoned in practice by the one cared-for. But 'does this mean that the one-caring does, after all, place principle above specific persons?' Noddings 'do[es] not think that conclusion is justified' (1984a, p. 111). For the 'commitment to receive the other, to preserve the possibility of caring, is unshakeable' (1984a, p. 111–112), precisely in regard to the specific person who has turned 'rotten'. One must continue to offer to care even when the care is refused. For such reasons, Noddings confesses that 'when we understand how enormously complex the relational self is, we tremble at the possibilities' (2002a, p. 142). Nevertheless, Noddings can affirm, in the familiar language of Walt Whitman:

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself;
I am large, I contain multitudes. (Quoted in 2002a, p. 113)

The goal is not the ‘true self’ as an autonomy to be discovered and maintained, nor a unified self without Whitman-like capaciousness, nor yet a merely consistent or coherent self, since that could mean stagnation. Noddings’s goal for education as for moral life would seem to be growth, as articulated in Dewey’s *Experience and education* (1938), but going beyond Dewey, a growth toward not only the ethical ideal of the habitually socially intelligent response, but toward a response that enhances the caring self.²

Having responded to the questions—What is Noddings’s vision of the moral life? And how do moral obligation and motivation arise?—we can now turn to our third and final question.

How can education contribute to the moral life of students?

I will focus on what Noddings has to say about moral education *per se* and not on how a caring orientation would remake *all* education so that it would be moral. In *Caring*, Noddings describes ‘three great means of nurturing the ethical ideal’ (1984a, p. 182): dialogue, practice and confirmation. In later books, she adds modelling as a fourth component (1992, p. 22; 1995, p. 190; 2002a, p. 287). I will give a brief description and example of each.

Modelling

Modelling is important to education generally and to many visions of moral education specifically, but it is ‘especially important’ to an education based on care. ‘We have to show in our own behavior what it means to care. Thus we do not merely tell [our students] to care and give them texts to read on the subject; we demonstrate our caring in our relations with them’ (Noddings, 1995, p. 190). Modelling in the moral domain may be especially powerful ‘because its very authenticity is morally significant’ (2002a, p. 287). As a negative example, Noddings observes that ‘professors of education and school administrators cannot be sarcastic and dictatorial with teachers in the hope that coercion will make them care for students’ Such inauthenticity is also morally significant: ‘the likely outcome is that teachers will then turn attention protectively to themselves rather than lovingly to their students’ (Noddings, 1992, p. 22). Ethical ideals will be diminished all around.

Dialogue

‘Dialogue is implied by the phenomenology of caring’ and in particular by the ‘criterion of engrossment’ (Noddings, 1995, p. 191). Dialogue allows us to receive

the other in a 'common search for understanding, empathy, or appreciation' and 'builds up a substantial knowledge of one another that serves to guide our [caring] responses' (Noddings, 1992, p. 23). The subject matter amenable to dialogue in school is vast. As one example, Noddings suggests that 'care theorists agree with Socrates that an education worthy of the name must help students to examine their own lives and explore the great questions human beings have always asked'. But Noddings 'would not declare that the unexamined life is not worth living, but would ... raise questions: *Is the unexamined life worth living? Should we decide this for others? How do we feel about our own?*' (Noddings, 1995, p. 191; emphasis in original). The modelling of an educator's ethical ideals might become the object of dialogue: 'Is a tough teacher necessarily caring? ... Is a permissive teacher caring?' (1995, p. 190). Dialogue, in other words, is *the* way to model the caring ideal in communication. As a stimulus to reflection, it is an especially powerful tool for promoting the building of students' ethical ideals. (Noddings, 2002a, p. 107)

Practice

In dialogue, the teacher models caring communication while the student practises it. But the practice of caring should extend beyond one's own classroom. 'All students', according to Noddings, 'should be involved in caring apprenticeships' (Noddings, 1984a, p. 188), with the school custodian, groundskeeper, or kitchen staff, or as classroom aides for younger children. Service opportunities should extend into the community, in 'hospitals, nursing homes, animal shelters, parks, [and] botanical gardens' (Noddings, 1984a, p. 187). Community service involves all 'three great means of nurturing the ethical ideal' outlined so far: 'Children need to *participate in caring* with adult *models* who show them how to care, *talk with them* about the difficulties and rewards of such work, and demonstrate in their own work that [*the ethical ideal of*] caring is important' (Noddings, 1995, p. 191; emphasis added).

Confirmation

Finally, 'what we reveal to a student about himself as an ethical and intellectual being has the power to nurture the ethical ideal or to destroy it ... When we attribute the best possible motive consonant with reality to the cared-for, we confirm him' (Noddings, 1984a, p. 193). And 'when we confirm someone, we identify a better self and encourage its development' but 'we do not posit a single ideal for everyone and then announce "high expectations for all" ... Rather we recognise something admirable, or at least acceptable, struggling to emerge in each person we encounter' (Noddings, 1995, p. 192). An extension of this idea is found in Noddings's approach to multicultural education. Students from different cultures should be encouraged to engage in dialogue and 'coexploration' that would lead to 'a recognition that the virtues we admire can be found in other ways of life, and that the evils we deplore can be found in ours as well as those of others' (Noddings, 1995, p. 193).

Summary

In the four great means of nurturing the ethical ideal—modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation—the best self of the educator seeks a caring relationship with the best self of the student. That means responding to one’s own sense of ‘I must’ by asking, ‘what are you going through?’ which requires receptivity and leads to engrossment, motivational displacement, and the most competent reasoning toward as adequate a response as possible. The educator recognizes the powerful role he or she plays as one of the most influential of the ‘authors’ of the script that is the student’s ethical self. Although all our selves are under continuing construction, a teacher may experience a satisfying completion when he sees his caring received with care, when he sees a student growing in care for others and her own ethical ideals. Such is the goal of moral education to which Nel Noddings directs us.

Noddings’s critique of character education³

But as Noddings herself acknowledges, it is not the theme of caring and the concomitant educational components of modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation, as she articulates them, that are in the ascendancy in education. Rather, ‘character education today dominates the field of practice in moral education’ (Noddings, 2002b, p. xiii). Others have sometimes characterized the ethics of caring as a variant of virtue ethics. Caring education, then, might be seen as a variant of character education—but not by Noddings, at least not without considerable qualification.

Convergence

Just as she describes caring as an ethics of relation as distinguished from an ethics of individual virtue, so does Noddings differentiate caring education from character education, despite the two having much in common (Noddings, 2002b, p. xiii). The convergence is in four broad areas. Firstly and most generally, both character and care proponents agree that moral education should be directed at producing better people and not just better principles or reasoning. Nonetheless, and secondly, both care and character educators do value moral reasoning, the former perhaps more so, although neither group believes moral principles themselves provide sufficient motivation for moral action. Thirdly, care theorists certainly respect the virtues, although they differ with character theorists on how they are best taught (Noddings, 2002b, p.1). Finally, Noddings observes that unlike moral philosophers since Kant who have tended ‘to restrict the moral domain to considerations of our duties and obligations to others’ but ‘like the ancient Greeks, character educators and care theorists are concerned with the broader question, “How shall we live?” For both camps, ‘the healthy development of oneself is thus included in a full discussion of moral life’ (Noddings, 2002b, pp. 1–2).

Divergence

The fundamental difference, on the other hand, is that care ethics, which Noddings distinguishes from virtue ethics in the Aristotelian tradition, is ‘relation-centered rather than agent-centered, and ... is more concerned with the caring relation than with caring as a virtue’ (Noddings, 2002b, p. 2). This general difference is played out in four more specific differences. Firstly, care educators, says Noddings, are ‘wary of trying to inculcate virtues directly’ but rather ‘are far more concerned to concentrate on establishing conditions [through modelling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation] that will call forth the best in students, that will make being good both possible and desirable’ (Noddings, 2002b, p. 2). Secondly, the curriculum of moral education for care educators is not defined by one or another list of free-floating virtues as it seems to be for some character educators, since for us, says Noddings, ‘virtues are defined situationally and relationally’ (Noddings, 2002b, p. 2). Again, the emphasis is on conditions and context. Thirdly, ‘care theorists put far greater emphasis on the “social” virtues [or moral sentiments] as described by David Hume.’ (Noddings, 2002b, p. 2). Thus included in Noddings’s own non-definitive list of virtues would be, for example, congeniality, emotional sensitivity and good manners. Finally, while both types of educators make extensive use of stories, teachers of care betray a sympathy for the cognitive-developmentalists in the Kohlberg tradition by utilizing narratives to problematize ethical decisions, as well as to arouse Humean sympathies, while character educators would be more likely to use stories that portray inspirational heroes, thereby hoping to inculcate those same virtues in their students (Noddings, 2002b, p. 2).⁴

Context and community

The basic problem with character education as direct inculcation, according to Noddings, is that it decontextualizes the virtues. It abstracts the virtues from the relationships and concerns of the students. It assumes that the virtues can be taught apart from caring relations between teachers and students.⁵ Noddings assumes, on the other hand, that good parents do indeed teach the virtues effectively, but only because they do so in context, when the virtue of the virtue, one might say, is existentially real at that moment, and when the virtues have been modelled and practised in dialogue and confirmation in an established caring relation. Caring is the foundation on which the virtues are built. That is as true in the classroom as it is in the home. But we do not care in order to teach the virtues; we become virtuous in order to care and while caring.

Noddings explores at least eight other weaknesses of character education (2002b, pp. 3–8). These critiques do not necessarily arise specifically from a care perspective nor are they unique to Noddings. For that reason and in the interest of space, I will pass over all but one. The critique that I will take up—that character education is overly and uncritically dependent on community—will set the context for the final section of this paper, on Noddings’s analysis of moral evil.

A major feature of character education, according to Noddings, is its dependence on a strong community with a consensus on core values. This raises several issues. For a school sponsored by a religious community, for example, this may be assumed. But what about a school where no such consensus exists? Whose values and which virtues are to be taught? Conversely, as Noddings observes, a strong community is not necessarily a good one. Noddings reminds us that ‘fascist and totalitarian states have been especially enthusiastic about character education’. Moralistic indoctrination is moral mis-education. ‘It is a major problem for character educators ... to show that their approach is not completely dictated by a particular tradition and that they can find a way to correct a tradition that has gone wrong’ (Noddings, 2002b, p. 5).

What is needed, claims Noddings, are ‘forms of community based on the primacy of the other ... in such communities the virtues to be prized will be relational rather than personal ... [.] trust, good cheer, equality, peace, and compatibility may be more important ... than ... courage, honesty, and industry’ (Noddings, 2002b, p. 67). She suggests that ‘communitarian liberalism’ or ‘liberal communitarianism’ may name the philosophical hybrid needed, in which both individual freedom and the common good are valued. Noddings, of course, believes that an education founded on care is more compatible with such a vision than is an education founded exclusively on character. Care education in this context turns out to be something of a hybrid itself, although it is not only that. As Noddings puts it, ‘like cognitivists, we [care educators] would subject all values to careful, critical scrutiny, and, like character educators, we would insist that the effects of our choices on our communities and the effects of our communities on our choices be taken into account’ (Noddings, 2002b, p. 23).

In her book *Women and evil* (1989), Noddings demonstrates how deeply a care educator may engage in scrutiny of established values and traditions. In the space remaining, I want to highlight some of this analysis, especially as it relates to moral education. The key is the idea of ‘the other’.

Noddings’s analysis of moral evil and its implications for education

Critiquing the tradition

A primary portion of *Women and evil* is devoted to a feminist deconstruction of traditional Western theodicy, the theology of evil, whose purpose has been to ‘justify the ways of God to men’ (Milton, 1935 edn., p. 9) Key ideas from that discussion are summarized in *Educating moral people* (Noddings, 2002b). Noddings believes that tradition misnames evil in four ways. Firstly: earth, body, woman and nature are devalued over against heaven, mind, man and spirit. Secondly: the infliction of suffering is legitimated. Thirdly: evil is projected onto the other as enemy. And lastly: the capacity for evil in our own shadow side is neglected (Noddings, 2002b, pp. 105–106). This critical analysis leads to a constructive agenda: evil must be redefined from a feminist, caring perspective (Noddings, 2002b, p. 106). What is

needed is a new morality of evil, and a concomitant moral education, that moves beyond traditional dualisms and male/female stereotypes. Three elements will be primary. Firstly, a morality of evil will include caring for one's own otherness or capacity for evil. Secondly, ethics will be recast as caring for 'the other'. And thirdly, as alluded to in the previous section, community will be redefined around the primacy of the other, as inclusive. The other—as me, as not-me, and as not-us—will be reclaimed, will be owned. Self-knowledge will provide the foundation for resistance to political manipulation that would demonize the enemy.

As Noddings contends, 'what we require ... is a morality of evil—a carefully thought out plan by which to manage the evil in ourselves, in others, and in whatever deities we posit' (Noddings, 1989, p. 1). Noddings's critique of Western theodicy might be summarized as follows: if God can be justified in the face of evil, then evil can be justified in the name of God. Better to abandon theodicy in favour of a morality of evil which promises not to justify evil but to acknowledge and thereby manage it. Better to posit a fallible God—'Jung [in his *Answer to job*] ... suggests that the Christian view of God as all-good needs to be revised to incorporate an evil side of the deity' (Noddings, 2002b, p. 115)—and embrace a tragic sense of life. Better to confirm our desire for good while acknowledging our capacity for evil than to worship an omnibenevolent God who nonetheless requires the punishment of sinners. Contrary to orthodox Christian doctrine, Noddings believes this may be an either/or proposition. If we acknowledge a dark side in God, we are better able to acknowledge a dark side in ourselves. And conversely, failure to posit a fallible God may blind us to our own capacity for evil.

Renaming evil

But how would Noddings rename evil? Most fundamentally, as 'a real presence ... Just as disease is real and not just the illusion or absence of health' (Noddings, 1989, p. 229). Furthermore, 'evil is neither entirely out-there nor entirely in-here; it is an interactive phenomenon that requires acceptance, understanding, and steady control rather than great attempts to overcome it once and for all' (Noddings, 1989, p. 210). More concretely, evil and moral evil are renamed in three ways. Firstly, as 'pain and the infliction of pain, [second, as] separation and the neglect of relation, and [third, as] helplessness and the mystification that sustains it' (Noddings, 1989, p. 103). These are precisely the conditions that the mother seeks to avoid or counter by caring for her child (Noddings, 1989, p. 116). Conversely, 'when one intentionally rejects the impulse to care and deliberately turns her back on the ethical, she is evil, and this evil cannot be redeemed'. Finally, 'there can be no greater evil ... than this: that the moral autonomy of the one-caring be so shattered that she acts against her own commitment to care' (Noddings, 1984a, p. 115). Although we may learn and grow from physical pain and the psychic pain of separation and helplessness, 'pain itself has no purpose' (Noddings, 1989, p. 122). 'Suffering is not *required* to bring out the best in us or teach us the meaning of its opposite' (Noddings, 1989, p. 130; emphasis in original). According to

Noddings's own declaration, the following is 'the most important proposition in this book [*Starting at home: caring and social policy*] ... : *pain should not be regarded as deserved*' (Noddings, 2002a, p. 147; emphasis in original). In and of itself, pain or suffering cannot be justified as 'retributive, therapeutic, pedagogical, or redemptive' (Noddings, 1989, p. 26).

Rethinking the Western canon

Let us take a quick look at what this analysis of moral evil implies for the teaching of the Western canon, specifically, *The Odyssey* of Homer. First, Noddings contends that 'a primary purpose of education should be to reduce pain, separation, and helplessness by encouraging people to explore the nature of evil and commit themselves to continue the search for understanding'. That means, among other things, combating 'mystification' (Noddings, 1989, p. 230). What does moral demystification look like when we turn to the great Greek epic? Take the traditional interpretation that Telemachus develops in manly virtue during his father's absence. But here is how Homer describes Telemachus's treatment of the slave women of the household 'whose only apparent crime [according to Noddings] was succumbing to the romantic overtures of the wooers' (Noddings, 1989, p. 232) of his mother Penelope:

With that word he tied the cable of a dark-prowed ship to a great pillar and flung it round the vaulted room, and fastened it aloft, that none might touch the ground with her feet. And even as when thrushes, long of wing, or doves fall into a net that is set in a thicket, as they seek to their roosting-place, and a loathly bed harbors them, even so the women held their heads all in a row, and about all their necks nooses were cast, that they might die by the most pitiful death. And they writhed with their feet for a small space, but for no long while. (Quoted in Noddings, 1989, p. 232)

Allow me to quote Noddings's response to this passage at some length.

What we should impress on students is not only the cruelty of Telemachus ... but the pattern of his development. He grows in direct opposition to all that is feminine and exhibits a large part of his manhood in his control of women. The women he murders are not even named, and they behave passively ... even in the face of death. When we treat material of this sort in the classroom, we should address the great themes of torture, cruelty, and misogyny in some depth. Students should not leave with the idea that people no longer do such dreadful things to one another. (Noddings, 1989, p. 232)

This analysis suggests four changes in curriculum and instruction if a morality of evil is to be taken seriously. Firstly, as her discussion of Homer suggests, there should be changes in curricular subjects, such as addressing the treatment of the nature of moral evil in literature and history. Secondly, the curriculum should be augmented to reflect the traditional concerns of women. Thirdly, instructional patterns should be reformed to include the four methods of caring education: modelling, practice, dialogue and confirmation. And fourthly, the patterns of schooling itself should be reorganized (Noddings, 1989, p. 236). Noddings recommends

that such reorganisation should emphasize continuity and centres of care and concern (Noddings, 1992).

Conclusion

We have come a long way from Noddings's innovative language of engrossment and motivational displacement. We have seen how she critiques character education from a caring perspective. We have arrived at the great themes of torture, cruelty, and misogyny. And we have been reminded, in language echoing Socrates, that moral education is fundamentally directed to self-knowledge, understood especially as care for the self's ethical ideals. Whether in the face of the most everyday slights and bruises in the school classroom, or in the face of great evils that haunt our world today, which intrude on our college seminars, the obligation of the moral educator is to heed his or her own sense of 'I must care' by nurturing the 'I must care' of the student. It is this vision that makes Nel Noddings a philosopher of moral education of the very first rank.

Notes

1. Although Noddings's primary and consistent concern has been moral education, she has also published on intuition in education (1984b), evil from a feminist perspective (1989), mathematics education (Davis, Maher & Noddings, 1990), education, narrative, and dialogue (Noddings & Witherell, 1991), education and religious belief (1993), and caring and social policy (2002a). The present essay focuses on her writings on moral education only.
2. See my 'John Dewey on educating the moral self', *Studies in philosophy and education* (Dordrecht Kluwer).
3. Noddings (2002b, p. 3) lists the following as representative of contemporary character education programmes: Lickona (1991), the Heartwood Institute (n.d.), Bennett (1993), the Character Education Partnership (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 1998, p. 1), and the Giraffe Heroes Program (Graham, 1999).
4. In my own experience at the college level, these two purposes for teaching narratives are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the lives of moral exemplars may pose existential and identity "problems" for the reflection of the rest of us.
5. I am aware that for some character educators, such as Thomas Lickona, author of *Educating for character* (1991), caring and community are important themes. The difference with Noddings in such cases is a matter of fundamental emphasis and orientation.

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