

Competing Conceptions of Caring and Teaching Ethics to Prospective Teachers

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In teaching ethical issues to prospective teachers, I have noticed that one can clearly raise individuals' ethical consciousnesses through traditional case study analyses such as those used by Kenneth Strike and Jonas Soltis in *The Ethics of Teaching*.¹ However, I have generally favored another approach: having teachers consider how several dimensions of ethical teaching are modeled well or badly by particular teachers in novels and films. Good novels and films, because of their fundamental opacity, allow students to make their own interpretations of what motivates characters to act as they do; they also permit students to disagree about what is the most desirable ethical stance a teacher should take in a particular situation. Some moral dimensions of teaching I have focused on include caring, fairness, respect for persons, and trustworthiness. I have used several novels and films: *The Small Room*, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *Stand and Deliver*, and *The Emperor's Club*. Admittedly, others might be even better.

My underlying assumptions in teaching ethics this way are the following: (1) whether they choose to or not, teachers will become moral models in their classrooms; (2) they will not only make critical decisions of the sort Strike and Soltis refer to in their case study analyses but will also act out their character and make intuitive sense of the situations they confront every day in the classroom; and (3) the way they treat their students, the kinds of relationships they develop with them, and the normative cultures they establish in their classrooms all significantly affect how their students develop into moral persons. Thus, I urge my students to reflect seriously on the following: (1) what their own moral values and ideals consist of, (2) how these moral values and ideals will be translated into their daily practices, and (3) how their practices and decision making will either honor or undermine their professed commitments.

In this essay, I will focus upon one of the most critical ethical dimensions in teaching — caring. However, since one can conceive of caring in different ways and because one cannot readily make caring into an ethical obligation, something that all teachers are expected to abide by, each teacher must develop his or her own ethical ideal of caring. In this regard, I offer my students three different models of caring to consider. I do not suggest one is superior to the others, only that all are provocative. The first two models are drawn from philosophical literature — Milton Mayeroff's 1971 conception of caring and Nel Noddings's view of caring. These models do not fully capture, in my view, Jaime Escalante's caring in *Stand and Deliver*, and thus, I believe his approach to caring yields a third, somewhat different model I call "professional caring." I shall examine all three models briefly and then suggest some further issues on caring that seem worthy of consideration.

This essay contrasts these three views of caring; it then suggests some potential issues to resolve as we think about teaching what caring might mean to those planning careers in teaching. This essay also encourages those philosophers of education teaching ethics to prospective teachers to consider offering competing conceptions of important ethical values and connecting these conceptions to provocative novels and films.

MILTON MAYEROFF'S CONCEPTION OF CARING

Mayeroff's conception suggests that caring is essentially a virtue, a trait of character; he argues that all forms of caring relationships must possess certain essential characteristics. Caring consists of a set of fundamental attitudes that a caring person must possess to be considered caring. For Mayeroff, the primary dimension of caring is one's intentionality; thus he writes: "To care for another person, in the most significant, sense, is to help him grow and actualize himself."² He goes on to say the following by way of explaining this view:

Consider, for example, a father caring for his child. He respects the child as existing in his own right and striving to grow...Caring is the antithesis of simply using the other person to satisfy one's own needs. The meaning of caring I want to suggest is not to be confused with such meanings as wishing well, liking, comforting and maintaining, or simply having an interest in what happens to another. Also, it is not an isolated feeling or a momentary relationship, nor is it simply wanting to care for some person. Caring, as helping another grow and actualize himself, is a process, a way of relating to someone that involves development. (*OC*, 1)

Thus, for Mayeroff, some of our legitimate, ordinary ways of talking about caring will not constitute true caring. Mayeroff includes many qualities in caring, such as devotion, trust, hope, humility, and courage, but I will focus here on three I regard as central; these are "being with" another, "being for" another, and "being there for" another.

For Mayeroff, to care for another requires empathy, the capacity to understand another person and to be with the other. Mayeroff explains what he means by being with the one cared for:

To care for another person, I must be able to understand him and his world as if I were inside it. I must be able to see, as it were, with his eyes what his world is like to him and how he sees himself. Instead of merely looking at him from outside, as if he were a specimen, I must be able to abide *with* him in his world, "going" into his world in order to sense from "inside" what life is like for him, what he is striving to be, and what he requires to grow...In being with the other, I do not lose myself. I retain my own identity and am aware of my own reactions to him and his world. Seeing his world as it appears to him does not mean having his reactions to it, and thus I am able to help him in his world...I do not have to be perplexed, for instance, to realize that he is perplexed, but because I "feel" his perplexity from the inside, I may be in a position to help him out of it. (*OC*, 41-2)

Thus, for Mayeroff, one cannot care for another without understanding the other's world from the inside; one must experience what it is like to see the world the way the one cared for sees it, without losing one's identity in the process.

A second essential feature of Mayeroff's view of caring is being there for the other. To be there for the other, in Mayeroff's view, is to be available and responsive to the other's needs, especially in time of difficulty; a person who is there for another

reprioritizes one's life to respond to the other's needs. This is analogous to a doctor being on call for a sick patient. Mayeroff explains:

I am on call for my appropriate others. This does not simply mean I am available in the sense of being open and receptive, but corresponds to the way the person "off duty" may be reached and called in when he is needed. The man who cares for his appropriate others aspires to be always available to them when they really need him: the caring parent can be called away from something else to return to his child; the caring doctor can be reached by his patient....Wherever I am, whatever I am doing, I am subject to being called on by my appropriate others. (*OC*, 61)

A student who is willing to make herself deeply vulnerable to a teacher may have a deep hope in that person's capacity to care for her, not just as a learner but as a person experiencing a critical difficulty in life. Teachers who care in Mayeroff's sense, will do everything possible to be there for such students, to be on call for them. Over the years, many prospective secondary teachers seem to believe, quite mistakenly I think, that being on call for one's students means being fully available for 120–180 students; however during a single school year, very few students, perhaps fewer than five, would likely approach their teacher with a deep personal crisis to confide in him or her. In such cases one's willingness to be there for one's student would be a test of one's capacity and inclination to be a caring teacher.

Mayeroff's third, and most difficult, requirement for caring is being for a student. This excludes the following: (a) dominating the other, (b) using the other to meet one's own deep psychological needs, and (c) possessing others or denying them the opportunities to grow and develop into their own persons. Being for others requires not making others dependent upon oneself or exploiting them for one's own purposes. Being for another does demand that one appreciates fully that the person one cares for exists in her own right, as a separate entity. Mayeroff states this point by distinguishing a caring relationship from a "parasitic relation."

Instead of trying to dominate and possess the other, I want it to grow in its own right, or as we sometimes say, "to be itself," and I feel the other's growth as bound up with my own sense of well-being. The worth I experience in the other is something over and above any value it may have for me because of its ability to satisfy my own needs. For a caring parent, the child is felt to have a worth of his own apart from his power to satisfy the parent's needs....In other words, I experience what I care for as having worth in its own right. (*OC*, 21)

One way in which some people speak of caring — namely that of "caring too much" and being "overly protective," would not count as caring for Mayeroff. He writes:

The father who "cares" too much and "overprotects" his child does not trust the child and whatever he may think he is doing, he is responding more to his own needs than to the needs of the child to grow. He does not see the child as having the need to be independent and to be responsible for himself. Morbid dependency by its very nature is incompatible with trust, for in such a situation any sign of independence on the part of the other is experienced as a threat. (*OC*, 21)

For Mayeroff, to help someone grow into being an independent person, one must allow her to make her own decisions in a way that is commensurate with her maturity. For a very young child, it may be necessary to make some decisions for the child, but one should do so with the aim of strengthening rather than weakening the child's decision-making powers. "If possible," Mayeroff writes, "I try to help him

realize that my decision was not an arbitrary exercise of authority, by explaining the reason for it and by actions which show that it was made out of concern for him” (*OC*, 46). As the child becomes an adult capable of making his or her own decisions, everything changes. Thus, in “being for” an adult, one encourages the other to make his or her own decisions:

When I care for an adult, on the other hand, I try to avoid making decisions for him. I help him make his own decisions by providing information, suggesting alternatives, and pointing out possible consequences, but all along I realize that they are his decisions to make and not my own. If I made his decisions for him, I would be condescending to him and treating him as a child; and by denying his needs to take responsibility for his own life, I would be denying him as a person. (*OC*, 46–7)

NODDINGS’S VIEW OF CARING

Now let us turn to the views of Noddings. In spite of important differences, Mayeroff and Noddings have some things in common. Both view caring as essentially an intrinsic — not instrumental — good, something that must exist for persons to develop appropriately as moral persons rather than simply academic learners. In this regard, both Noddings and Mayeroff view caring as something essential to human flourishing, something teachers *must exhibit* to be moral role models to students. Both require a fundamental responsiveness to the needs of the other — one that is nonmanipulative. Both also require a long-term commitment to the well being of the other if a caring relationship is to be established and sustained.

Although Noddings and Mayeroff focus upon “personal caring” for the student as a person and not merely as a learner, Noddings’s view of caring differs in some important ways from Mayeroff’s; in her first chapter of *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy*, she carefully delineates how her own approach differs from his. Hers is not a “virtues approach” to caring. She starts not with what the caring person must exhibit but with what the cared-for needs, both in caring encounters and in caring relationships. For Noddings, caring is not a set of essential attitudes or a character trait but “a desirable attribute of relations.” The question she would ask is not What is essential to be a caring person? but What is essential to establish and sustain a caring relationship? In explicating the phenomenology of a caring encounter between the one caring (A) and the one cared for (B), Noddings focuses on an essential quality she calls “engrossment” — a particular kind of receptive attention to the other in which one’s own motivations are displaced by those of the one cared for. She feels the emphasis on “receiving the other” is not well captured in Mayeroff’s notion of “being with,” which she likens to empathy, for empathy overemphasizes projecting oneself into the other as opposed to “feeling with” the other. In spite of other linguistic baggage usually accompanying the word “sympathy,” Noddings finds this term more appropriate than “empathy” to capture the “affective state of attention in caring.”³ Thus, the beginning of a caring encounter requires an open, receptive attention to the other. Noddings writes: “The carer A, receives what-is-there in B.”

The second feature essential to a caring encounter requires that A must respond to B in some way. This feature Noddings calls “motivational displacement.” She

writes: “A’s motive energy begins to flow towards B and his projects.” Then she gives an example from her own field of teaching — math:

Consider a typical example. Ms.A, a math teacher, stands beside student B as he struggles to solve an equation. Ms. A can almost feel the pencil in her own hand. She anticipates what B will write, and she pushes mentally toward the next step, making marks and erasures mentally. Her moves are directed by his. She may intervene occasionally but only to keep his plan alive; not to substitute her own. She introduces her own plan of attack only if his own plan fails entirely and he asks, “What should I do?”⁴

Noddings indicates that not all encounters are likely to be fully caring encounters. Sometimes the one caring may be distracted or preoccupied and incapable of giving the cared for the appropriate receptive attention needed; sometimes the one caring may resist the move to motivational displacement by thinking “I don’t have time for this” or “Why me?” or “I can’t handle this.” But Noddings also requires something of caring encounters that Mayeroff rejects: some level of *reciprocity* in caring. The cared-for must contribute something essential to the encounter for it to be a caring one. The cared for “responds,” Noddings writes “in a way that shows that A’s efforts at caring have been received. B’s consciousness is characterized by the recognition or realization of care.”⁵ For Noddings, caring relations evolve through a set of caring encounters, but these relations focus on the effects of caring on the cared-for, not merely on the intentions of the one caring. And parallel to Mayeroff’s version of “being there for” the other, Noddings writes of a fundamental basic constancy that characterizes caring relationships. Here she cites a passage from Martin Buber wherein every child longs for the world “to become present” to him or her through some kind of communion. This is Buber’s quote cited by Noddings:

The child lying with half-closed eyes, waiting with tense soul for its mother to speak to it — the mystery of its will is not directed towards enjoying (or dominating) a person, or towards doing something of its own accord; but towards experiencing communion in the face of the lonely night, which spreads beyond the window and threatens to invade.”⁶

“Caring over time,” Noddings writes, need not be — in fact, never is — an unbroken series of caring encounters, but it must be marked by a basic constancy. The adult must convey a message to the child: ‘I am here for you.’” Of course, Noddings notes that teachers serve, just as parents do, as models of caring and their message of “I am here for you” indicates “a willingness to listen, to help, to defend, and to guide” and remains the “foundation for the most vital human relationships.”⁷

PROFESSIONAL CARING

Despite some interesting differences, both Noddings and Mayeroff offer accounts of caring that focus on the relationship between teachers and students as persons caring for each other as persons. Neither views caring for the other person as being conditional upon, subordinate to, or instrumental for promoting student learning. However, many of my prospective secondary teachers do not see personal caring as being more important than what I am calling “professional caring,” that is, caring for the student as a learner. They do not resonate fully with Mayeroff’s or Noddings’s views emphasizing the central importance of “caring for the student as a person.” Many view their primary role as initiating students into a mastery of their subject. Thus, professional caring seems more important to them.

The movie *Stand and Deliver* readily captures their imagination. In it, math teacher Escalante embodies a model of caring and teaching that differs from that of either Noddings or Mayeroff, one that emphasizes professional caring. Escalante has joined a dispirited high school staff at Garfield High School in South Central Los Angeles — a high school where teachers have low expectations of their economically-impooverished educational charges, where gang-related behavior is widespread and a culture of disrespect permeates many classrooms.⁸ Escalante, however, not discouraged by this reality, believes that students “rise to the level of their teacher’s expectations.” Escalante cares passionately about math and his students’ academic potential, but he has one condition for caring: his students must commit themselves to taking his course seriously; if they do, and most seem willing to, although we do not know how unreal the movie may be here, he is willing to go to any length to help them succeed. But the difference with Mayeroff and Noddings is critical: Escalante’s caring, unlike that of Noddings and Mayeroff, is not unconditional; rather, it depends on his students showing him that they have committed themselves to being serious about math. Escalante is not willing to *care for* one of the gang members he calls “finger man,” a student who wants a “D” merely for showing up and counting the tiles in the ceiling. However, he does reach out to Angel, finger man’s gang member friend, giving him three math books so he will not have to be harassed by his anti-academic “homies” for carrying a book home or even having one in school. On more than one occasion Angel tests Escalante’s patience and his willingness to remain supportive — but each test comes with a stipulation — that Angel remain serious about math.

Escalante’s model of caring begins with the role-related obligation to act to insure that the students will succeed academically. That is what trustworthy teachers must care passionately about, according to Escalante. If students choose not to be serious in his class, counselors can help them find other classes. What complicates Escalante’s approach to caring is that once he has committed to his students’ educational welfare, he often is willing to take on their personal issues as well — but his focus remains helping them succeed in math. In one instance, he goes to Ana’s restaurant, as she is one of his brightest students and about to be pulled from school to work full-time. There he tries to persuade Ana’s father to change his mind, allow his daughter to stay in school, and pursue her dream of becoming a doctor. The father is offended by Escalante’s paternalistic hubris, but ultimately he allows Ana to return to class. In another instance, Angel, who has finally been kicked out of Escalante’s class, comes over to his house during Christmas with his ailing grandmother to show Escalante that his personal difficulties stem from more than gang-related problems. Escalante welcomes both Angel and his grandmother into his home. Later, Angel is allowed to return to Escalante’s class.

Escalante’s approach to caring resonates with many prospective teachers who wonder how they will be able to care for students who seem incapable of taking their classes seriously. Ironically, virtually none of Escalante’s students initially took math seriously; his charismatic teaching and indomitable faith in his students transformed those attitudes of disengagement into passionate commitment. Toward

the end of the movie, when his brilliant students have been demoralized by having been accused of cheating to pass their Advanced Placement calculus exams, he complains to his wife Faviola that the struggle to remain a caring teacher may not be worth the price he is paying; he tells her that he could be paid twice as much and offered “more respect” in industry. She contrasts the respect he would find in industry with what he has received from his calculus students. “*But they love you,*” she says. At the deepest level, caring has been fully reciprocated. Although it may have started primarily through what I have called “professional caring,” that is, caring for the student’s well being as a learner, it has been transformed into something deeply personal.

Caring for one’s students as learners is clearly not incompatible with caring for them as persons; nevertheless, in the Escalante model, one takes precedence over the other. The assumption is that some teachers do not have the time or energy to care for those students who do not care enough to try in school. Ironically, the paradox of personal caring as viewed through the lenses of both Noddings and Mayeroff is that often the students who most need caring relationships with teachers are students who may be the ones most difficult to care for.

OTHER ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Offering students several models of caring invites them to think seriously about caring as an ethical ideal. Here several additional issues seem to be worth further consideration: How critical is it to be psychologically healthy to be able to care for students experiencing personal difficulties? How does taking care of oneself enter into the capacity to care for others? What kinds of students will be the most difficult to care for? How does one see the line between influencing students and controlling or dominating them? How will the lack of student responsiveness to one’s efforts to care likely affect the one caring? How much and what kind of reciprocity might be necessary for one to continue to care? How might caring intentions fail to be sufficient in establishing caring relationships? Is a person who shows no interest in establishing caring relationships with students as persons not fit to be a teacher? If so, why; if not, why not? If Noddings is right in suggesting that every caring relationship is unique, what kinds of interpersonal insight and skill must one acquire to be effective in establishing and maintaining caring relationships?

These questions exemplify why I think the subject of caring is such a complex, rich, and valuable topic in the ethics of teaching. In my view, no ethicist of education can easily ignore this important subject matter without doing violence to the richness of teacher-student relationships. Having explored this topic for many years with many classes, I find the subject grows in its multifaceted complexity; it resonates with the ethical consciousness of most, if not all, prospective teachers. In conclusion, although the case study approach advocated by Strike and Soltis in teaching ethics to teachers has much utility, I believe two features of my own pedagogical strategy in teaching caring also have merit: that multiple conceptions of caring warrant consideration, and that novels and films provide a rich vehicle for exploring the topic in its experiential complexity.

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1. Kenneth Strike and Jonas F. Soltis, *The Ethics of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004). This has been the most widely used text in teaching ethical issues in teaching and is now in its fourth edition.
 2. Milton Mayeroff, *On Caring* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 1. This work will be cited as *OC* in the text for all subsequent references. It should be noted the Mayeroff's book was published before most of us became very sensitive to issues of "sexism" in language. All of his pronouns are masculine — a fact which offends some of my students. I have often used the feminine singular to balance Mayeroff's masculine references here.
 3. Nel Noddings, *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 12 and 14. Noddings's seminal introductory work on caring was: *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
 4. Noddings, *Starting at Home*, 17.
 5. *Ibid.*, 18.
 6. *Ibid.*, 26.
 7. *Ibid.*, 16.
 8. *Stand and Deliver*, directed by Ramón Menéndez (Burbank: Warner Brothers, 1988). Although the movie was supposed to be 90% truthful and 10% drama, one might note that Escalante's success was not nearly as instantaneous as the movie suggests, wherein "a group of poorly prepared, undisciplined young people who were initially struggling with fractions managed to move from basic math to calculus in only one year. The reality was far different. It took 10 years to bring Escalante's program to peak success. He didn't even teach his first calculus course until he had been at Garfield for several years. His basic math students from his early years were not the same students who later passed the A.P. calculus test." Jerry Jessness, "Stand and Deliver Revisited: The Untold Story Behind the Famous Rise — and Shameful Fall — of Jaime Escalante, America's Master Math Teacher," *Reason Magazine*, <http://www.reason.com/news/show28479.html>.