

When Should We Transgress?

Nel Noddings
Stanford University

Ronald Glass has given us an interesting and challenging essay. It is challenging in the best sense; that is, it challenges us to consider how we might go about transforming the world into one more nearly characterized by equity and freedom. For that he deserves our thanks.

In my response, I want to address three main points: First, I think he has been a bit too hard on existing alternatives in current moral education, but I will soften this observation by recognizing how hard it is to do justice to an array of alternatives in such a short essay. My second and third points are more important, and they are related. How dirty must hands be before we say, "That's *too* dirty!" and how should we politicize our classrooms?

I will begin with the easiest, and here I have to defend care ethics against, first, a misunderstanding, and second, what appears on the surface at least, to be a contradiction. First, the misunderstanding: It is right to say that Carol Gilligan has retained a stage theory, but I have not and, indeed, I have even wondered why Gilligan made that move. It is a mistake to suppose that all forms of care theory accept stage theory. We simply do not. On the possible contradiction: Glass suggests, without saying it straight out, that care ethics "presume moral certainty." This is just not true. I do not know any other ethical approach more accepting of uncertainty and ambiguity than care ethics. I have even written about pathologies of care and, although I would like to get rid of these at the theoretical level, I do not see how we can do this without vitiating the concept of care. Later in his essay, he says that care ethics does not have a "developed apparatus for arriving at decisions required by the dilemmas of governing." This is more nearly right but, as I have argued recently, it may actually be a strength of care theory.¹ It provides some guidance, primarily for the continuous construction of the individual's ethical ideal and a society's moral response, but it cannot tell us exactly what to do. It sends us back into the world to seek address and response from those we encounter. This seems to be compatible with what Glass wants to do.

Character education presents us with both pedagogical and ethical problems. As Glass rightly points out, it is easy to slide into self-righteousness when one supposes that she or he knows what is good and can claim a good character. Many critics have expressed concern, too, about the simplistic thinking that appears so often in character education: identify the virtues, teach them directly, and then reward virtuous behavior and punish behavior that is not virtuous. I doubt, however, that people so educated are the very worst this world has ever seen, and I would hesitate to accuse them all of waging "holy war against the illiterate and poor." This is a little too harsh, and it fails to discriminate among the various advocates of character education and their conservative supporters. (Consider here Diane Ravitch's support for dialogue with gays.) I too object to much of character education and, in

particular, I have raised objections to several points in the work of Tom Lickona. In fairness, however, I think Lickona might endorse the statement by Paulo Freire with which Glass closed his essay. He might raise a question about the meaning of “progressive pedagogical practice” and reject entirely Glass’s answer to his question, but he would accept most of the virtues listed with enthusiasm. (Well, maybe not “a disposition to welcome change.”) Anyway, we should remember that tolerance is not a one way affair; it should be extended in several directions, and we might do better to cooperate (at least to some degree) with character educators than to imitate what is perhaps their greatest fault — to set up an Other as the great Satan.

Glass has urged us to consider that it is impossible to avoid dirty hands in political life or, more generally, in passionate pursuit of justice as one sees it. My question is, How dirty is too dirty? Closely connected to this is the question of *when* we are justified in transgressing. Obviously, transgression is not always a morally good choice. There are many examples of politically radical movements that have committed the sin Glass attributes to conservatives — assuming they are right and that harm to some human beings can be justified in the name of a great cause.

I certainly agree that political/social activists cannot escape dirty hands entirely — they are not teflon-coated representatives of the good. One hopes, however, that each of us — pursuing a goal we think is good — will regret the collection of dirt and keep it to a minimum. I also have grave doubts about the remedy suggested by Michael Walzer to remove the guilt felt by conscientious leaders who have dirtied their hands in promoting the public good. I do not think confession and punishment will “restore their good character.” Why punish if the acts are justifiable enough to move a leader from the tragic to the heroic? On the other side, why try to remove guilt if it is deserved? The long religious tradition that promises absolution after confession, penitence, and punishment has caused great mischief. No group or system, itself unhurt, should be allowed to grant us absolution for harm we have done to others. I would rather teach that every act that hurts another is a permanent blemish on the self — that nothing can remove it. Restitution, as nearly as this is possible, may relieve it, but some guilt remains, hurting a little less, even after appropriate restitution. If we believe this and care about our moral selves, we will think twice before causing harm to others. We will always ask, Is there another way?

The central theme of Glass’s essay is transgression and the practice of freedom. It leaves unanswered the question of how we should politicize our classrooms. Again, I agree with Glass that we should. What does this involve? The quotation from bell hooks with which he started his essay does not help much. If we raise political consciousness by telling students how badly they have been treated, we are likely to produce cynicism rather than commitment, alienation instead of hopeful cooperation. This is the flip-side of the undesirable outcome often produced by character education — a self-righteous docility with respect to authority. Education for freedom should reject both of these extremes.

Because I know him, I know that Glass’s life is a shining example of liberatory education. I wish he had given us lots of examples taken from both classroom and community life. The *language* of liberation is simply not adequate. We are left

unsure how to proceed. For example, should teachers use indoctrination to enlist students in liberatory causes? Is it right for fourth grade teachers to assign students to write letters to political figures expressing a “liberatory” opinion? Is it acceptable for teachers to argue for an increase in the minimum wage without letting students know something about opposing arguments? Should we urge students to attend an affirmative action rally but discourage them from participating in one for pro-life?

Moving beyond individual classrooms, consider certain features of school reform that are presented as liberatory — that is, as moves likely to produce greater equity in our society. Is the high-stakes testing movement “liberatory?” Most of us scoff at the very idea. Why? I consider the slogan “Leave no child behind,” to be an outrageous example of newspeak. It really means to leave many children behind by holding them back a grade or refusing them a diploma. Yet a well-meaning policymaker could reply that, yes, some youngsters will feel terribly hurt (we know how kids fear being “left back”), but in the long run many will profit from the policy. Yes, they might say, our hands are a tad dirty, but it is in a good cause. In making a persuasive response, we have to show that the claim of large scale benefit is simply false (more kids will be hurt than helped and those hurt will come disproportionately from traditionally oppressed groups) or (like Kantians) that we cannot justify deliberately inflicting harm in the name of “good” consequences or (from the care perspective) that there are better, less harmful ways, to accomplish the avowed purpose. Whatever ethical justification we offer for our position, we have *to do* something and, if we claim that our actions will increase freedom and equity, we must be able to show that this is true. We also need to admit that we might be wrong in the position we take.

I hope Glass will expand this essay considerably. Using many examples, he can help us to sort recommendations that are truly liberatory from those that merely purport to be. I think it was Wittgenstein who said that philosophy *is* examples. We need lots of them here.

1. See Nel Noddings, *Starting at Home: Care and Social Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).