

Caring as an Epistemic Relationship: Noddings, Peirce, and Triadic Caring

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Rather than ground care theory on monadic descriptions of agent-centered virtues, or on principles like justice, Nel Noddings builds her moral framework upon the dyadic relationship between a carer and the cared-for. Unfortunately, in certain cases, Noddings's descriptions of how to respond to a cared-for's rejection of one's attempts to care seems to leave those seeking guidance from the ethic of care without support for continued care-based action. When a cared-for continuously rejects a carer's actions, and when the carer continues to judge that caring requires withholding endorsement of the cared-for's project, then the carer seemingly is left to appeal to non-care-based resources for guidance, such as virtues associated with inner strength or appeals to justice-based ethical principles. In what follows, I explicate the contours of this problem and offer a redress that provides guidance from *within* care theory. To make this argument clear, I draw upon the work of Charles Sanders Peirce in order to assert that caring involves triadic, and *not* dyadic, relationships.

REJECTION AS AN EXPRESSION OF CARE

Rather than agreeing with Raja Halwani's assertion that the following case signals the bankruptcy of Noddings's care theory, I instead use it to illustrate the underdeveloped tension I wish to explore in this essay.

Suppose a friend of mine is in a love relationship which, though it began well, has turned sour. My friend's spouse, Y, has started abusing her, say, verbally and psychologically. My friend, given her love for Y and her closeness to the situation, cannot perceive that the situation is hopeless and clings to the goal of preserving the relationship. I, on the other hand, having the advantage of being an external observer, am able to grasp the basic fact: Y is a man who does not love and respect my friend. The question that this case gives rise to is whether it is a requirement that the goals of the cared-for be good in order for the one-caring to support them, or whether it is enough that the former believes that they are good. In the above case, my friend believes that her goal of preserving the relationship is a good one, while I believe — and know — that it is not only worthless but actually bad.¹

Because caring demands that the one-caring support and promote the goals of the cared-for, Halwani argues that care theory demands that the carer embrace the abused wife's project to preserve her relationship; anything less signals that the carer is "acting under a diminished ethical ideal."² However, this example indicates that the carer ought *not* support the friend's stated goal to continue in the abusive relationship. Halwani thus argues that Noddings's account of the ethic of care is crippled. The case at hand signals that the carer must act *from* care (as a monadic virtue), but not *within* the ethic of care's dyadic framework.

While I will not address cases of abusive marriage within educational contexts, teachers nonetheless will have to confront the need to respond to students' projects, including projects that teachers may deem are *not* good for students to pursue. Cases like Halwani's, or others within the school context, are not easy cases because they

entail numerous variables; we risk interfering with a friend's marriage, or with students' lives, at possibly great costs. Because of space constraints, however, I will accept the conclusion that follows from the previous case: Caring demands that one not support the spouse's attempts to rescue the abusive marriage.

Noddings also embraces this conclusion. For example, in *Starting at Home*, Noddings asks and answers the pertinent question: "As carers, must we support the projects of the cared-for regardless of the worth of the projects?"³ Noddings's response is clear. As Ann Diller observes, Noddings argues that carers need not support all the projects that cared-for wish to undertake, especially those that result in harm to others.⁴ Of course, since she is concerned with the pernicious perils of paternalistic interference, Noddings stresses that, when we say no to a cared-for's project for any variety of reasons, including logistical ones, we should attend to the *form* that the rejection takes. The challenge is to say "no" in such a way that preserves the caring relationship. Again, it is clear that the carer need *not* endorse a cared-for's project within Noddings's formulation of caring.

Of course, Noddings wants us to withstand the pathological temptation to interfere paternalistically with others' choices, so she encourages us to reexamine our own reasons and actions in situations where the cared-for rejects them; these rejections should signal a need to revisit our care-based "plan."⁵ This seems quite reasonable. Carers *should* be wary of paternalism. Determining what caring means *for* someone else, without allowing that individual to decide, reduces the relational aspect of caring to a solitary endeavor. Noddings urges us to remember that the ontological primacy of relation that drives the ethic of care *requires* a dyadic relationship. But not so fast. To add to the confusion, and to push home the problem more clearly, we find places where Noddings argues that carers *can* infer needs *for* the cared-for from the cared-for's situation. These are needs that the cared-for does not explicitly express. Consequently, "an inferred need proceeds from the carer's framework. It may include meticulous consideration of the cared-for's condition, available resources, and cultural demands in which carer and cared-for are immersed, but it does not arise directly as a want or desire in the cared-for."⁶

Despite her repeated exhortations to check our caring efforts against the cared-for's responses, Noddings argues that "there are circumstances in which we must take the risk" and infer needs *for* another.⁷ Cases like abusive marriage, or students who clearly are threatening to harm themselves or others, seem to be clear examples. Noddings argues that:

Interpretation and negotiation are required with expressed and inferred needs alike. Carers do not simply impose such needs in the way that rightly worries opponents of positive liberty, but neither do they simply accept the initial refusal of the cared-for. They fear that rejecting a need as irrelevant may be equivalent to inflicting actual harm, and they want to prevent those "in need" from harming themselves. *They initiate a dialogue that should result in a decision that is acceptable (or nearly acceptable) to both parties.*⁸

This is the crux of the issue: Noddings stresses the importance of interpretation and negotiation. I will return to that detail below. But first, let us focus on Noddings's conclusion. Unfortunately, Noddings does not extend the discussion to include the sort of hard case that concerns us here. So long as we are able to maintain caring

relationships through a process of negotiation, we remain within the sphere of an ethic of care. But if a carer responds, and continues to respond, to an inferred need that the cared-for rejects, and continues to reject, then we seem to step outside the caring framework, even though our initial judgment emerged from within the guidance of the ethic of care in the first place. Because Noddings defines possible conceptions of caring relationships as necessarily guided by the response of the cared-for, the cared-for's continued rejection pushes us toward drawing on virtue ethics. Noddings herself seems to endorse this conclusion: "From the virtue perspective caring is perhaps at its height at this point; from the relational perspective it has lapsed, and I think it is best to face this."⁹

On this point, critics like Halwani can argue that caring loses its footing. This kind of situation in fact inspires Halwani's argument, and leads to comments like the following: When "acting from care" as a virtue, Halwani states, the "one-caring gladly acts out of care, much as the brave person, according to Aristotle, gladly acts courageously even while facing fear and danger."¹⁰ Such a monadic, carer-focused view takes us too far afield from the original attraction of the dyadic nature of caring. Those seeking guidance from the ethic of care are left without support for care-based, continued action. If the cared-for continues to reject the carer's actions as signs of caring, and if the process of inference continues to reveal to the carer the need not to endorse the cared-for's project, then the carer is left to appeal to inner strength for guidance. Noddings seems to support this view. Despite this conclusion, however, there is more to be said. We can forge ahead *within* the care framework. To do so, we turn now to two features of Charles Sanders Peirce's pragmatism: an aspect of his triadic semiotics, and his discussion of epistemic fallibilism. This move is inspired by the recent surge of interest in Peirce's work within the field of philosophy of education. While the Deweyan roots of Noddings's work is well known, bringing Peirce into the discussion helps us understand the ethic of care in a new way.

PEIRCE AND TRIADIC CARING

Any casual encounter with Peirce will reveal that he uses triadic relationships throughout his *oeuvre*, and since his work is a complex work-in-progress, Peirce revises his understanding of triadic divisions throughout his career. To begin, I focus on Peirce's last formulation of triadic divisions. Inspired by G.W.F. Hegel, Peirce describes this formulation in phenomenological terms as the "logic of relations."¹¹ This logic characterizes anything that exists as consisting of three categories. While we will talk about each of the elements of the categories as distinct, it is important to emphasize that the three parts cannot stand alone. Peirce uses the Aristotelian/scholastic method of "prescision" to undertake this analysis; it entails the separating of a concept into distinct elements that are in fact not separable, except within the task of analysis.¹²

For example, Peirce breaks a simple event like noticing a breeze across one's forearm into three parts. First, we have the direct experience of the event. In what Peirce describes as "Firstness" — the limitless possibility of direct existence — we *feel* the direct stirring of the breeze across the skin, but at the moment that our

attention turns to the breeze, Firstness moves into Secondness — the noticing of that sensation as a happening. It is the apprehension of the feeling, not the feeling itself. As such, Firstness is “present, immediate, fresh, new, initiative, original, spontaneous, free, vivid, conscious, and evanescent. Only, remember that every description of it must be false to it.”¹³ While Secondness is “hard fact” — the moment of contact — Firstness is monadic — a singular and unique potential. Secondness, in contrast, is always dyadic. It describes a direct experience of some other event, force, or reaction. Finally, Thirdness entails the mediation of reasoning — the rational mind’s establishing a causal relationship between the feeling and some event’s causing it to happen, like the event of a person appearing at one’s side. (In this case, the breeze is caused by the person’s movement.)¹⁴

To relate these categories to the framework of caring, we can characterize Firstness as the motivating and undiluted potential of caring. Peirce observes that, once we attempt to think about Firstness, “it has flown!”¹⁵ Thus, Firstness captures that caring potentiality that is the response in the carer at the moment before the mind begins to recognize that a care-related action has occurred. When such a reaction occurs, Secondness describes that moment in which the caring action is grasped by the mind. Finally, Thirdness is the necessary mediating judgment between the potential of caring and the resulting reaction of the cared-for that is based upon an action made by the carer. It is necessarily triadic. While Noddings mostly emphasizes caring’s focus on the cared-for’s response to a caring action, or, in these terms, Secondness, Peirce helps reveal that we cannot understand an action to be an act of caring without Thirdness, the mind’s mediating rationality.

As I observed above, Noddings almost acknowledges that judgment links the potential of care to the resulting interpretation of the ethical action. It is worth taking a moment to focus on this detail. Peirce helps us see how what Noddings usually describes as a dyadic relationship is essentially triadic:

We cannot grasp what it is for *a* to give *b* to *c* without the notion of intention mediating between *a* putting *b* down and *c* picking up *b*. There must be an intention to give on *a*’s part and a realization of that intention on *b*’s part. Peirce also says that law, necessity, and generality manifest Thirdness. A law, or necessary connection, mediates between the action of one thing upon another, making it more than an accident that they behaved in the way in which they did.¹⁶

As Peirce’s work suggests, intention is paramount to the judgment of a caring action. We cannot care accidentally. Usual descriptions of the ethic of care seem to focus on Secondness: the result of the caring action, as directly experienced by the cared-for. Focusing on the necessity of judgment in Thirdness emphasizes that we cannot grasp what it is for the friend, as carer, to express care for the abused friend without focusing on the mediating intention. This brings us directly into Thirdness and a triadic way of looking at caring relationships.

REDRESSING THE INITIAL PROBLEM

We concluded the first section with a dilemma: Hard cases such as abusive marriage that entail rejection as an act of caring reveal an unresolved conflict within the ethic of care. Noddings offers us the resources to *infer* that the friend needs

someone not to endorse her aims to repair the abusive relationship, but to offer other ways of conceiving her situation and the range of options she might explore. But if the cared-for here rejects the friend's action as a sign of caring, then the caring relationship is not sustained. Noddings urges the carer to reassess her actions, and then make adjustments in order to reestablish the caring relationship. But in this instance, if nothing changes in the abusive relationship (let us suppose that the evidence of abuse is clear), then the substance of the carer's judgment will not alter. The carer can continue attempts to rescue the caring relationship through a variety of means, including establishing that her actions are grounded in genuine concern, maintaining the friendship through other channels not directly related to the topic of abuse, empathizing with her friend, and so forth. But if the cared-for continues to equate disapproval of the abusive marriage with an indication that the friend does *not* care, then, in Noddings's current formulation of caring, critics like Halwani argue that we seemingly have to resort to *other* ethical frameworks to guide our actions.

Noddings rightfully points us to the necessity of focusing on the cared-for's judgment of our actions, helping us to see that, if the cared-for rejects the result of an action as representing care, then we have failed to care in a substantially important way. In her efforts to get us to focus on the necessity to attend to Secondness, or the resulting influence on the cared-for of the caring sign that the carer offers, Noddings downplays the necessity of judgment in the caring relationship — judgment that motivates both the action of the carer and the judgment of the cared-for. Without judgment, we would not be able to make sense of the causal connections associated with the action in question. That is, the cared-for must respond to the Secondness of the potentially caring action by judging it. We are no longer dealing with the brute force of the original action. Importantly, the analysis by "prescission" allows Peirce to make the next, important observation: All such judgment happens in memory.¹⁷ We are no longer able to experience directly the result of the action that the caring action gave rise to — the breeze I caused on your arm when I moved to stand beside you has stopped. Thus Peirce opens the way to introduce doubt into the caring formula, a doubt that attaches to the judgment of Thirdness, but *not* to the reaction of Secondness. On this account, Noddings seems to give epistemic authority to the *reaction* to the carer's caring action; it is the primary determinant of whether or not a caring relationship has been established. But if we emphasize the necessity of Thirdness, of judgment, then the cared-for's judgment of the intention behind the carer's initial action *can be wrong*.

In some ways, this is not new. Care theory already emphasizes the importance of embracing the fallibility of the carer. Noddings importantly helps to focus our attention on how carers must beware of certainty in the face of evidence that their caring actions are indeed *not* caring; hence the importance of the need to attend to the results of one's caring attempts. But care theory can address the complexity of the sort that Halwani's domestic abuse example raises. In such instances, the carer *can* use care theory as a guide, and thus remain within the sphere of enhancing a caring action, *even if the cared-for fails to judge the action as one of care*. The

cared-for may be wrong. We turn now to Peirce's account of fallibilism for the last piece of this puzzle.

PEIRCEAN FALLIBILISM AND TRIADIC CARING

Fallibilism is an essential aspect of Peirce's pragmatism; it dovetails nicely with the ethic of care. It entails the recognition that our claims to knowledge may be error-laden: Because knowledge is a product of human inquiry, and because we have no access to infallible methods of reaching error-proof truths, any belief may be overturned or altered as a result of future inquiry.¹⁸

Peirce moves in at least two different directions in order to invoke the worry about the fallibility of our knowledge claims. First, Peirce grounds his argument regarding the fallibility of our beliefs (of any sort) on an acknowledgement that "knowledge claims remain imprecise and indeterminate."¹⁹ That is, the justifications that we use to support our beliefs are built upon networks of beliefs and claims that also depend upon other judgments and other networks of belief to support them. As a result, our claims to knowledge point to systems of belief, revealing how potentially imprecise any substantive knowledge claim may be.²⁰ Peirce shows how imprecision is exacerbated when he analyzes how thoughts as symbolic representations, or as signs of various objects, concepts, and phenomena also reveal that our thoughts are always incomplete representations. Elizabeth Cook observes that, for Peirce, "knowledge is mediated, interrelated, and somewhat imprecise."²¹ The equivocal nature of our systems of knowledge claims leads Peirce to advocate that we healthily doubt the strength of their abilities to represent that which we hope that they do.

Peirce's second source for recognizing the strong pull of fallibility emerges once again from the acknowledgement that our knowledge claims result from our constructed tools of inquiry. We can find endless examples of the ways that history reveals the limitations of the results of the scientific method. In fact, the dialectical ideals of scientific inquiry are premised on the fallibility of the whole research enterprise, regardless of the domain. As Cook observes, "we can never get outside of these methods to see if we have reached certainty."²²

Peirce's fallibilism infuses his arguments regarding the nature of truth; it is the fallibility of inquiry that motivates his most famous dictum that we should let nothing bar our truth-seeking endeavors: "Do not block the way of inquiry."²³ The simplicity of the statement belies the complexity of his epistemological framework. As he describes it, Peirce's objective realism embraces "the real as that whose characters are independent of what anybody may think them to be."²⁴ He goes on to explain reality as "the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate."²⁵ For Peirce, then, a true belief is something that would emerge through a communal truth-seeking process of inquiry. Cheryl Misak helpfully restates Peirce's stance: "a true belief is one which would stand up to the evidence and reasons, were we to inquire as far as we could on the matter."²⁶ For Peirce, then, reality exists outside the independent knower, but as individuals, we may be not be able to apprehend reality, or know truth. We must, then, inquire with others, and true beliefs are those that would stand the tests of investigation.

By extension, we see that a Peircean definition of truth commits us to embracing the fallibility of individual knowers, even with respect to self-inquiry. It stands in direct opposition to the liberal insistence that autonomous knowers have privileged access to self-knowledge. The value of Peirce's definition rests on the way that it directs inquirers not to end inquiry too soon. If we are seeking to hold true beliefs about ourselves, such an approach to self-understanding requires that we question our beliefs until we can inquire no more. This doubt, then, moves in both ways — it moves not only in the way that the carer approaches how she infers needs in the cared-for, but also in how the cared-for should approach understanding others' potentially caring actions. The result is that, while the ideal caring relationship might entail the cared-for's reception of a care-based action as caring, it is also an ethically focused, epistemic relationship. Carers and cared-fors are engaging in a shared care-based and truth-directed project of inquiry.

CONCLUSION

While Noddings's care theory has focused on describing caring relationships as aiming toward a general but singular ideal, focusing on fallibility and a triadic description of caring, as we have done here, opens the door to a way of conceiving of at least — perhaps not surprisingly in this Peircean discussion — three different forms of caring relationships. Conceiving of caring relationships in this way addresses the challenge posed by hard cases that entail rejection as an act of caring.

First, we see the ethical ideal of caring as a relationship that is equally focused on Secondness and Thirdness, or both on the result of a caring sign and the mediating judgment necessary to its recognition. Thus, while engrossment focuses the carer's attention on the way that the caring action is received by the cared-for, the caring relationship is also marked by the shared epistemological project of determining what caring truly demands and consists of, within this particular relationship. This relationship places equal weight on both Secondness and Thirdness, and is marked by a fallibilism held by both the carer and the cared-for. That is, while we have been traditionally focused on the way that carers should be wary of paternalism, this form of the caring relationship positions the cared-for as participating in the judgment of what caring demands *with the carer*.

There is also a lesser form of caring, one focused more on Secondness than Thirdness. Of course, this is a matter of degree, for there could be no true caring relationship without all three components. But in this lesser form of caring, Secondness is foregrounded, while Thirdness receives less attention. This is captured in Noddings's description of the focus on reception: "The consciousness of being cared for shows up somewhere in the recipient of care — in recognition, an attitude of response, increased activity in the direction of an endorsed project, or just a general glow of well-being."²⁷ Now, within the context of the abusive marriage case, the caring friend could make caring gestures that are received by the cared-for, and develop in the cared-for a general feeling of well-being, without attending to the underlying issues of abuse and harm. Such a form of caring may very well result in a caring relationship, but, as the hard case stresses, it does not capture all that caring demands here.

Finally, there is another lesser form of caring, in which Thirdness is foregrounded more than Secondness. That is, Secondness is not ignored, but as in the case we have been drawing upon here, the cared-for is not participating in the relationship directly enough to provide the carer with enough feedback or information upon which to continue to build caring actions. The carer, then, continues to act upon inferred needs, drawing upon as much information as she can glean. What I am describing here is distinctly different from acting from within monadic virtues or justice-based accounts. It is healthily driven by a fallibilism that demands an uncertainty about the caring action, an uncertainty that forces the carer to continue to seek the reaction and participation of the cared-for within the care-building project. It also induces the cared-for to be open about inquiring into the motivations, intentions, and actions of the carer. Again, the motivating force of fallibilism keeps the path of inquiry open, and any actions are necessarily hesitant and directed toward establishing a full-fledged, triadic caring relationship.

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1. Raja Halwani, "Care Ethics and Virtue Ethics," *Hypatia* 18, no. 3 (2003), 165.
 2. *Ibid.*, 166.
 3. Nel Noddings, *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 42.
 4. Ann Diller, "The Ethics of Care and Education: A New Paradigm," in *The Gender Question in Education: Theory, Pedagogy, and Politics*, eds. Ann Diller, Barbara Houston, Kathryn Pauly Morgan, and Maryann Ayim (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996).
 5. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Nel Noddings, *Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); and Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005).
 6. Noddings, *Starting at Home*, 64.
 7. *Ibid.*, 65.
 8. *Ibid.*, 65–66 (emphasis added).
 9. *Ibid.*, 42.
 10. Halwani, "Care Ethics and Virtue Ethics," 167.
 11. Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. Charles Sanders Peirce, "A Guess at the Riddle," in *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition, 1886–1890*, vol. 6, ed. Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 170–171.
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 15. Charles Sanders Peirce, "A Guess at the Riddle," in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings (1867–1893)*, eds. Nathan Houser and Christian J. W. Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 248.
 16. Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*, 73.
 17. *Ibid.*

18. Elizabeth Cook, "Peirce, Fallibilism, and the Science of Mathematics," *Philosophia Mathematica* 11, no. 3 (2003); Cheryl Misak, *Truth and the End of Inquiry: A Peircean Account of Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004); Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955); Charles Sanders Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in *The Essential Peirce*, eds. Houser and Kloesel.

19. Cook, "Peirce, Fallibilism, and the Science of Mathematics," 158.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 159.

23. Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Scientific Attitude and Fallibilism," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Buchler, 55.

24. Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," 137.

25. Ibid., 139.

26. Misak, *Truth and the End of Inquiry*, 1.

27. Noddings, *Educating Moral People*, 28.

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