

Relational Self, Nel Noddings's and Emmanuel Levinas's Ethics, and Education

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In the past decades, the traditional western approach to ethics has been questioned, challenged, and criticized. The focal point of the critique is that western ethics is built on the notion of an independent, even autonomous, self. Critics note, "Kantian and consequentialist moral theories focus primarily on the rational decisions of agents taken as independent and autonomous individuals. Even virtue theory focuses on individuals and their dispositions."¹ Such ethics focus on "issues of fairness, equality, and individual rights, seeking impartial and abstract principles that can be applied consistently to particular cases."² In such ethics, individuals, "as instances of the general and timeless conception of person," are privileged as the center of consideration, and ethical actions become meaningful only when they are seen as the originators of the actions.³ The problem with such an approach is that when the self is positioned as an independent agent and privileged as the originator, it has the power to see the other, to define the other, and to know the other. With or without good intentions for the other, this power is already an act of violence to the other. For Emmanuel Levinas, this philosophy of totalizing absorbs, identifies the other, and makes the other the same. In Sharon Todd's words, the "very otherness" is "at the heart of hideous inequity and social violence."⁴

An ethics that apparently fails so terribly in its regard for the other raises the question whether it can still legitimately be called ethics. Thus a new movement occurred that aims at grounding ethics on a related and embedded notion of the self. This movement draws on our phenomenological experiences as related to and always being with others. It attends to the other as the center of concern. This new movement has been taken up in education, mostly to re-envision teachers' relations and responsibilities to students. The questions often asked are "How do we act toward our students? How do we come to their calling? What is it in the pedagogical relation that compels us, as teachers, to continue to 'reach out'?"⁵ I argue in this essay that we should not forget the other part of our job: not only are there ethical elements in the way we act toward students, but we are also educating students who are emergent and will be full-fledged moral and ethical citizens. We teach ethics, expect them to act ethically, and provide rationalization, conceptualization, and motivation for ethical behaviors. How are we to do this job in the current atmosphere of ethical discourse? Is the new ethical approach relevant here? This essay attempts to answer these questions by looking at two prominent theories of the new ethics: Nel Noddings's ethics of caring and Levinas's ethics as the first philosophy.

Noddings's ethics of caring is not typically characterized by her ontological analysis of a relational self. Only through scattered statements does it become clear that she defines humans as ontologically related to others. "Relation will be taken as ontologically basic."⁶ "I am not naturally alone. I am naturally in a relation from

which I derive nourishment and guidance... My very individuality is defined in a set of relations. This is my basic reality" (*Caring*, 5). As Ann Diller comments, "we are born in relation and we grow in relation. For Noddings this is the starting point."⁷ This naturalistic account of the self, however, does not provide a clear deliberation on how exactly human relations constituted the self. Since the notion of a related self is the condition for a new ethics, an analysis of the soundness and insightfulness of the self as the foundation for a new ethics is difficult. Nevertheless, throughout her exposition of the ethics of caring, it seems clear that mother and mothering is the model self and relation on which she bases her ethics. The mother's self as unconditionally related to the infant, her instinct to ensure the safety and growth of the child for whom the mother is the source of nutrition and comfort, is the model of the self Noddings is looking at. As Diller remarks, "Nel Noddings unabashedly ties her exposition of the Ethics of Care to the mother-child relation as one of the central paradigmatic cases for understanding what is entailed in the actions, experiences, and deliberations of caring and being cared for."⁸ For Noddings, caring, as stemming from the motherly instinct, "is essentially nonrational in that it requires a constitutive engrossment and displacement of motivation" (*Caring*, 25). "We love, not because we are required to love but because our natural relatedness gives birth to love. It is this love, this natural caring, that makes the ethical possible" (*Caring*, 43). In this mother-child orientated ethics of caring, "we consider the other's point of view, his objective needs, and what he expects of us... The one-caring desires the well-being of the cared-for" (*Caring*, 24).

Hence, for Noddings, the relations with others by which persons are "partly constituted" are not to be found in all human circumstances.⁹ Other relations she mentions are also primarily particular relations characterized by physical proximity and a degree of nurturance, such as mother-child, teacher-student, and those between friends, colleagues, and spouses.¹⁰ But can such a particularly related self, mother or mothering in particular, be used as the model self for an ethics of caring? I share Sarah Hoagland's opinion that it cannot: "I do not think mothering can be properly used as the model for an ethics of caring."¹¹ The problem with such a notion of the self and its ethics is that it is ontologically particular and cannot be applied or extended to general relations. If the bonding force of ethics is for all humans, not just for mothers or like figures, we have to provide a model of the self that applies to all. The mothering instinct for care is not shared by all humans and cannot be expected to be developed in all humans, and therefore, cannot be used to define ethics and provide general ethical guidance. How can we expect our students to develop their moral sense by modeling motherly figures? Based on such an ethics of caring, how can we teach our students to treat ethically or caringly the other who is just a stranger? A mother loves and cares, not because she and the child are related in the same way any of us is related to any other, but because she has a particular relationship with this particular child that is hers. Noddings argues that her concern is neither about universal judgment nor act, but about how to meet the other morally. But do we still expect all individuals to meet the other morally, and if conditions are sufficiently similar, does it mean they meet the other morally in a similar way? A boy

could never care for somebody, even his own mother, the same way as his mother cared for him, and we should not define the mother's way of caring as morally required and expect him to act the same way. An ethics for all cannot be based on such an instinctive, particular love but has to be based on something we all share as humans.

But Noddings argues that she has rejected universality:

I shall ... reject the notion of universalizability. Many of those writing and thinking about ethical judgment — being an ethical judgment — must be universalizable; that is, it must be the case that, if under condition X you are required to do A, then under sufficiently similar conditions, I too am required to do A. I shall reject this emphatically. (*Caring*, 5)

She argues that her attention is not on judgment but on “how we meet the other morally,” on the “uniqueness of human encounters” (Ibid.). But if she does claim that “caring comes first in importance, first in time, and first in the construction of human morality,” and that “ultimately it is in caring relationships that we achieve our highest moral ideals;”¹² if she does argue for a replacement of the ethics of principle by the ethics of caring, then the ethics of caring has to provide guidance for all ethical actions and to do so requires universality.

Noddings is not unaware of such a need for a universal ground for her ethics. In her exposition, she struggles to seek out common human ground by looking cross-culturally for things that we share as human species. Citing anthropologist Ralph Linton, she claims that “an objective morality is possible” because indeed “morality is based on common human characteristics and needs.” “[M]orality is rooted somehow in common human needs, feelings, and cognitions.” She further explains, “I want to build an ethic on caring, and I shall claim that there is a form of caring natural and accessible to all human beings. Certain feelings, attitudes, and memories will be claimed as universal.” Even though she has claimed that “the [caring] ethic itself will not embody a set of universal moral judgments,” she is seeking universal sentiments to provide grounds for an ethics of caring that is an ethics for all (*Caring*, 27–28). But what is “universal in the whole species” for her? It is “the sentiment of natural caring” (*Caring*, 79). She claims that we have all been cared for or have cared for others; therefore, the sentiment of caring is shared by all. But as I argued above, no matter how much we have been cared for, we should not define the mother's caring as morally required and expected for all. We cannot expect persons to develop a moral sense of caring by modeling a mother's caring for her child. Noddings is circling back to her position of basing her ethics on the natural but particular and specific sentiment of mothering. Her account of caring seems to embody an inherent impossibility.

The favoritist nature of a mother's love and a mother's unconditional sacrifice for her child, when used as the basic universal sentiment on which to ground an ethics of caring, has caused great difficulties. In responding to some of the difficulties, Noddings claims, “I am not obliged to care for starving children in Africa” (*Caring*, 86). But as Hoagland argues, “An ethics which leaves starving people in a distant land outside the realm of moral consideration is inadequate.”¹³ Its failure to consider global economic issues has also led some to conclude that it is a domain ethics. “I

doubt that we should take any one relation as paradigmatic for all the others.... I am inclined at this point to think that we will continue to need conceptions of different types of relations for different domains.”¹⁴ The asymmetric relation between the caring and the cared-for, for many feminists, also signals a pursuit of oppression.¹⁵ Some feminists strongly criticize its promotion of servility, which comes from the motherly unconditional sacrifice for the cared for, and its undermining of women’s autonomy. For many, this has indeed become a “dangerous ethics.”¹⁶ Hoagland comments,

If an ethics of caring is going to be morally successful in replacing an ethics located in principles and duty, then it must provide for the possibility of ethical behavior in relation to what is foreign, it must consider analyses of oppression, it must acknowledge a self that is both related and separate, and it must have a vision of, if not a program for, change.¹⁷

For a system that is tasked to educate students into moral citizens, this ethics of caring also seems insufficient.

I suggest that the problems with Noddings’s ethics of caring come first from a lack of careful deliberation on a related notion of the self. An analysis and exposition on how we are ontologically related to, or constituted by, the other can provide the philosophical basis for a sound ethics.

Levinas seems to be working in this direction. Since the ethical turn in philosophy, and in educational theory as well, there has been growing interest in the philosophy of Levinas. Levinas’s well-thought-out exposition of human subjectivity emphasizes the asymmetrical responsibility of the self to the other and a self that suffers for the pain and destitution of the other. An ethical relation with the other, for Levinas, is not a decision made by the already formed subject, but the condition we are in before any conscious actions can take place. In this sense, Levinas’s ethics is no longer ethics in its traditional form. Nevertheless, the unconditional subjection of the self to the other’s call points to an ethics where human beings can live together peacefully and caringly.

However, as Todd observes, Levinas’s “insistence upon an ego-less and non-conscious passivity in relation to being responsible for that Other” has also made some “skeptical about how his work can address difference in education at all.” “How can an ethical theory that relies so heavily on the category of Other be at all helpful?”¹⁸ I argue such an interpretation of Levinas’s account of subjectivity as only ego-less and non-conscious passivity is misguided, perhaps due to his over-emphasis on the subjection phase of the subject. It misses the whole structure of the subjectivity Levinas was trying to articulate. In the following, I explore Levinas’s concept of subjectivity and analyze how it can help us in our task of educating students into ethical citizens.

When Noddings describes the asymmetrical relation between the self and the other, she is still following the long western tradition of projecting the self and the other as subjects well-formed before they enter into a relationship, even though she claims that the relation will be considered ontologically basic. The modern notion of the dignity and freedom of the well-formed subject is shared by Noddings, so she insists on seeing the other as a person “with her/his own subjectivity and with

her/his own ego.”¹⁹ To care for the other, the one-caring meets the cared-for as a *subject*. “Caring involves stepping out of one’s own personal frame of reference into the other’s” (*Caring*, 24). Noddings states, “Indeed, this recognition of the freedom-as-subject of the cared-for is a fundamental result of her genuine receiving of the cared-for” (*Caring*, 72). But for Levinas, the very notion of the formed subject centered on its ego and consciousness is at the root of the problem. Levinas is deeply concerned with the subjective, egoistic, and biased tendency of human consciousness that totalizes and suppresses the other. Consciously knowing the other means comprehending, absorbing, and thus possessing the other, and in this process the other is made the same and its independence lost. “For possession affirms the other, but within a negation of its independence. ‘I think’ comes down to ‘I can’ — to an appropriation of what is, to an exploitation of reality.”²⁰ “Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power.”²¹ This distaste for totalizing thinking has led him to search for a human subjectivity that is not centered on consciousness; that is “older than the ego, prior to principles.”²²

In Levinas’s account, before intentional consciousness, prior to contemplation and synthesizing, the self already encounters the other. As human beings, we are social beings who are always surrounded by others. But the other for Levinas, as Todd remarks, is a “concrete manifestation of absolute difference.”²³ Unlike the objects in the world, the absolute alterity of the other cannot be seen as the content of knowledge and cannot be absorbed or assimilated into the known. More importantly, the calling from the other has effectively suspended or “blocked” the formation of the self. According to Levinas, “knowing of oneself by oneself” rests on a “subjective condition:” an existence of an ego or I.²⁴ But before I “show myself, before I set myself up,” I am called out of myself, “in exile,” fissioned and traumatized. In the face of the other, the “ego” or the “I” has dropped out of being (*OTB*, 103).

In this state of “not being,” the self has no escape but to answer the other’s call. Thus responsibility becomes “that which founds and *justifies* being as the very being of being.”²⁵ “It is an assignation to answer without evasion, which assigns the self to be a self” (*OTB*, 106). Subjectivity in this phase is born out of our very responsibility to the other; it is openness and subjection to the other. Levinas’s phenomenological analysis of human existential experiences as social beings has shown that from the very beginning of our existence, we are with others and our self, our ego, is already profoundly affected by such encounters.

This phase of ego-less passivity caught the most attention in scholarly circles and is often read as the only structure of Levinas’s subjectivity. But Levinas further suggests that ego and consciousness come after this phase of openness, and are born out of our encounter with the third party. According to Levinas, the presence of the third party motivates “justice and consciousness” (*OTB*, 162). When there is a third party, even though the neighbor and the third party are incomparable, for the purpose of justice, “There must then be a comparison ... thematization, thought, history and inscription” (*OTB*, 16). Thus subjectivity as essence and consciousness is affected by justice; it is “a function of justice” and is only legitimized by justice (*OTB*, 162).

Essence and consciousness indeed do come to be, but again, only on the basis of the self's sociality, to use Levinas's term.

Therefore, for Levinas, the overall structure of subjectivity is the dynamics between being and not-being. "Being and not-being illuminate one another, and unfold a speculative dialectic which is a determination of being" (*OTB*, 3). Essence, consciousness, the call from and the face of the other, are all elements that ontologically constitute and deconstitute the self. Subjectivity conceived of in this way is being with consciousness but at the same time a withdrawing from being; it appears and manifests, but bears the trace of its own interruption and destruction in the face of the other. Grounded on the self's sociality, such subjectivity maintains its roots in its subjection to the other and can no longer hold its totalizing power. It is far less secure and stable than the alleged independent and autonomous modern subject. Only when "in insomnia," will the "imperturbable" ego and consciousness return to "monotony, anonymity, insignificance, into an incessant buzzing that nothing can now stop and which absorbs all signification" (*OTB*, 163). In that case, subjectivity will become absolute and imperialistic in its thinking and appearing. This is why, even when subjectivity is born out of our encounter with the other and when the self is unconditionally open to the other in its very constitution, there is still violence against the other and the totalizing, egoistic, and subjective tendencies still dominate philosophy, ethics, and our relationships with others.

Such an account of the related self provides great opportunity in our task of educating students into ethical citizens. To be sure, the self is no longer an independent agent whom education will enable to make ethical decisions and choices. The self is already in ethical relations with the other, and ethics is not a choice. We have no escape from our responsibility for the other. According to Levinas's account, my responsibility for the other, "for the faults or the misfortune of others," for his or her freedom, is not something we decide as a formed subject. So in this sense, ethics cannot be taught and we cannot teach students to be ethical citizens. But students, like all of us, are often in "insomnia;" we often forget the root of our consciousness and subjectivity and turn a deaf ear to the unsettling sound deeply rustling in the underside of our ego. We continue to assume an absolute, stable, and complacent ego that has power over the other and above the world. Thus the task of education becomes to unmask our ego and to urge both students and ourselves to listen to the deep sound of our responsibility to the other. We have to allow the unease of the self in the face of the other to affect the very formation of our own being.

Thus our job becomes two-fold. First, we can assist students in their daily struggle to rationally and consciously come to terms with themselves. If a subject does not have a stable and fixed essence, but is constantly suspended and inverted by the face of the other, and has to be regenerated and re-gathered, the subject will be in a historical process of never-ending becoming. In responding to the call of the other, the self will be forced to form and reform itself. As educators, we can help with this process of becoming. On the other hand, we can urge students to pay attention to the sound of *there is*, the trace of signification, to disrupt the ego's complacency

and aggression. As educators, we can help facilitate the events of essencing — from time to time, and with no finish line; at the same time, as Gert Biesta suggests, we can do something that will break the immunity of students by interrupting, by opening up all that might affect and interrupt them.²⁶ Fighting the egoistic tendency of consciousness, and maintaining our responsibility to the other — that will be our job as educators, a difficult job, but a job worth doing!

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1. Virginia Held, "Care and Justice in the Global Context," *Ratio Juris* 17, no. 2 (2004): 143.
 2. *Ibid.*, 144.
 3. *Ibid.*
 4. Sharon Todd, "On Not Knowing the Other, or Learning from Levinas," *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002), 67.
 5. Jan Jagodzinski, "The Ethics of the 'Real' in Levinas, Lacan, and Buddhism: Pedagogical Implications," *Educational Theory* 52, no. 1 (2002): 81.
 6. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 3. This work will be cited as *Caring* in the text for all subsequent references.
 7. Ann Diller, "Review: The Ethics of Care and Education: A New Paradigm, its Critics, and its Educational Significance," *Curriculum Inquiry* 18, no. 3 (1988): 327.
 8. *Ibid.*, 331.
 9. Held, "Care and Justice in the Global Context," 143.
 10. Diller, "Review: The Ethics of Care and Education."
 11. Sarah Lucia Hoagland, "Review: Some Concerns about Nel Noddings' 'Caring,'" *Hypatia* 5, no. 1 (1990): 109.
 12. Quoted in Diller, "Review: The Ethics of Care and Education," 329.
 13. Hoagland, "Review: Some Concerns about Nel Noddings' 'Caring,'" 113.
 14. Virginia Held, quoted in Diller, "Review: The Ethics of Care and Education," 332.
 15. Hoagland, "Review: Some Concerns about Nel Noddings' 'Caring'."
 16. Diller, "Review: The Ethics of Care and Education."
 17. Hoagland, "Review: Some Concerns about Nel Noddings' 'Caring,'" 113.
 18. Todd, "On Not Knowing the Other," 67.
 19. Julian Edgoose, "An Ethics of Hesitant Learning: The Caring Justice of Levinas and Derrida," in *Philosophy of Education 1997*, ed. Susan Laird (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998), 266–74.
 20. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 46.
 21. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 46.
 22. Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Cambridge, U.K.: Blackwell, 1989), 107.
 23. Todd, "On Not Knowing the Other," 69.
 24. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 102. This text will be cited as *OTB* for all subsequent references.
 25. Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 75 (original emphasis).
 26. Gert J.J. Biesta, "Education after the Death of the Subject: Levinas and the Pedagogy of Interruption," in *The Handbook of Cultural Politics and Education*, ed. Zeus Leonardo (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2010).