

The Question of Ethical Citizenship

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Engaging the work of Nel Noddings and Emmanuel Levinas makes sense for one part of Guoping Zhao's project, which is to think about the grounds for a relational ethic that is not so "ontologically particular" that it "cannot be applied or extended to general relations." This quest for a universalizable conception of the subject is important to Zhao's project of moving relational ethics from its preoccupation with the dyadic relationship between teacher and student to the more complicated challenge of educating young people for ethical citizenship. But this is where both Noddings and Levinas prove to be curious choices. Both are skeptical of efforts to smooth over the very real differences between the ethical, as each understands it, and the political. The demands of political life are such that the ethical is at best a perpetual question, and at worst, a devastating impossibility. This puts the very concept of "the ethical citizen" in question. This recognition of the limits of relational ethics troubles the second part of Zhao's project, which is to harness Levinas's thinking about subjectivity to the task of educating for ethical citizenship.

Zhao's essay begins with a critique of Noddings's ambivalence toward the idea that caring is a universalizable ethic. There are two parts to this critique. The first part takes issue with Noddings's naturalistic grounding of the ethic of care, which asserts that women are more likely to be able to tap into "natural caring" than men. Zhao wonders whether such a claim can be a basis for a universalizable ethic. Zhao is right to worry about an approach to relational ethics that is based on experiences that are not widely shared, but she also overlooks Noddings's considerable efforts to address this problematic. While it is true that Noddings suspects that women can more easily tap into caring, this does not mean that it is inaccessible to others. The very idea of an *ethic* of care follows from Noddings's recognition that there are those for whom caring does not come naturally. With the right motivation, even these people can develop the capacity to care.¹

The second part of Zhao's concern about the extent to which caring can be said to be a universalizable ethic is much more interesting. Zhao is right to note Noddings's resistance to the idea of a universal ethic, but she misconceives Noddings's rationale. As I read Noddings, this reluctance to universalize the ethic of care stems from a profound, if unsettling, recognition that there are real limitations to genuine caring that must be faced up to. The problem hinges on the inevitable corruption of care that ensues when caring *for* is reduced to caring *about*. The simple but devastating fact of political life is that there are "many beyond the reach of my caring."² Public life is rife with distancing mechanisms that allow us to make an ethical shift from feeling that "*I* must do something" — the subjective here is essential — to saying "Something must be done."³ This is not necessarily because we do not see how we are each personally responsible for a particular problem, but because the burden of responsibility is too great; there are too many problems to be

accountable for, and too many claims made on our attention. We cannot possibly answer to all of them with the investment required of genuine caring. And finally, in Noddings's view, public life is not particularly fulfilling for most people precisely because its structures and institutions are designed to discourage the creation of the kinds of caring relations through which we become our best selves. This is not to say that Noddings cordons off the ethic of care completely. She is as weary of the retreat into the private realm as she is of the grand claims made on behalf of the public realm.⁴ While public life cannot sustain the ethic of care, the ethic of care can humanize small corners of public life, as is the case when unexpected friendships form, or when hospitality is extended to strangers. As I see it, Noddings's reluctance to universalize the ethics of care is thus not a shortcoming in her thinking about the ethics of care. If anything, her recognition of the limits of this ethic for public life is a theoretical strength.

Noddings addresses the problem of "the many who are beyond the reach of my caring" by delimiting the realm of caring in a way that doesn't cordon it off from the political realm but faces up to its limitations in the midst of conflicting, multiple, and ultimately not very satisfying demands of political life. By contrast, the tension between the ethical and the political threads through Levinas's thinking in ways that perpetually unsettle the seemingly seamless formulation of the "ethical citizen." The elusiveness of the ethical citizen hinges on the difficulties presented in the encounter with "the third." This concept of the third is Levinas's shorthand for the many others for whom I am responsible. How to meet these multiple, simultaneous, equally pressing, and potentially conflicting demands? And how to do so in a way that neither reduces the "otherness" of the other nor refuses my singular responsibility? It becomes apparent that while the Other, in his or her singularity, motivates the ethical, the third continually undercuts it.

Jacques Derrida wrestles with the difficulties posed by the third in his moving if perplexing tribute to Levinas, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*.⁵ He reminds us that the third is not simply another person calling me to account; but also one who stands in relation to the Other. The third prompts questions that take us far from the ethical as Levinas conceives of it: "What am I to do? What have they already done to one another? Who passes before the other in my responsibility? What, then, are the other and the third with respect to one another?"⁶ These questions sully the "purity of the ethical desire devoted to the unique" because they ask us to grapple with the question of justice: Whose demands are more pressing?⁷ The "weighing ... thinking ... calculation, the comparison of incomparables" takes us quite far from the notion of unmediated, preconscious ethical responsibility.⁸

It's important to understand that the third is there from the beginning; one does not begin with the face to face and gradually expand the circle of responsibility as one enters the realm of the political. The political requires a different order of engagement, which alerts us to the "sharp distinction [that] must remain between the ethical subject and the civic one."⁹ In the political, "justice ... takes precedence over the taking upon oneself of the fate of the other."¹⁰ Derrida writes that "it is no doubt

in facing this ineluctability that Levinas imagines the sigh of the just: ‘What have I have to do with Justice?’”¹¹ It is significant that Levinas *imagines* the sigh of the just; he does not embrace it. The condition of the third, which *precedes* the ethical, and presses down on the seemingly singular encounter of the face-to-face, makes it impossible to set aside the demands of justice. In this condition, the ethical proves to be as elusive as it is illuminating. As Levinas frequently reminds his interlocutors in interviews, the fact is that we live “in a world of citizens, and not only in the order of the Face to Face.”¹² This is the paradox of the ethical citizen. Whereas the ethical subject is enjoined to “assume responsibilities,” the civic subject “must judge.”¹³ Judgment here is not simply a singular responsibility, it is also a collective matter: the political is structured by institutions and held together by a State. These, too, are necessary: “if there were no order of Justice, there would be no limit to my responsibility.”¹⁴

Thus, we return to the question of limits, and to the recognition that relational ethics, with its focus on the singular responsibility of the face to face, does not translate easily into the civic realm. Zhao concludes from her analysis of the structure of subjectivity that “ethics is not a choice. We have no escape from our responsibility for the other.” The problem with this is that in the political realm, in which I am not responsible for a singular Other, but for multiple others, who also bear some responsibility to one another, it is, of course, possible to escape the ethical. But worse, even when we aspire toward it, in the political realm — which is to say, for the civic subject — the ethical is perpetually out of reach. This is the “intolerable scandal” of justice that Derrida writes about in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*.¹⁵ Zhao wonders whether we can teach “for” ethical citizenship, and concludes that the best teachers can do is create the conditions wherein students are always a question to themselves. The paradox of ethical citizenship begins with a different set of questions, about the relationship between the ethical subject and the multiple others — never just the one — who summon this subject and are in turn, called into question.

1. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). See chapters 4 and 5 in particular.

2. *Ibid.*, 18.

3. *Ibid.*, 25.

4. Nel Noddings, *Happiness and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 176.

5. Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).

6. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1991), 157, quoted in Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 32.

7. Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 33.

8. Emmanuel Levinas, “Peace and Proximity,” in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi, trans. Peter Atterton and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), quoted in Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 32.

9. Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 32.
10. Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Continuum, 1998), 104.
11. Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 34.
12. Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," 105.
13. *Ibid.*, 104.
14. *Ibid.*, 105.
15. Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 34.