

Of Care, Commerce, and Classrooms: Why Care in Education May Best Be Achieved through Markets

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Care ethics is a normative moral theory whose proponents argue that the morally salient feature of relationships between people (or people and things, such as our environment) is whether those relationships exhibit appropriate care. Care ethicists have argued that there are two elements to good caring relations, although they differ in what importance they assign to each element. Over the past twenty or so years, care ethicists have increasingly argued that care ethics need not be limited to a theory about personal relationships (between family members, friends, or known others), but can be extended to deal with political philosophy and public policy, offering an alternative (or needed supplement) to theories of justice.

Probably due to their sensitivity to the role of proximity (geographical, familial, emotional, etc.) to care, care ethicists often favor a decentralized role for government, in which either government bureaucracies do not attempt to provide care directly, or they do so through local governments that might be more responsive to individual differences and needs. Nel Noddings writes that “We do not care, in the direct sense, through welfare grants, coercive schooling, or military action. We have to work toward a world in which ‘it is possible to be good’ — one in which carers are enabled to care without sacrificing their own lives.”¹ Because people have different needs than might be provided for by a centralized (and hence, usually standardized) policy or institution, Daniel Engster suggests that “care theory... favors a more flexible and decentralized policy approach that offers individuals more choice and input in determining how to care for themselves and others.”² Because caring is most natural and effective (because one can be most attentive and responsive to those one knows and sees) directly, care ethicists most often advocate for (centralized) governments not to provide care directly, but rather, to create and maintain conditions in which caring relationships between people are fostered and care can flow most easily and effectively between people.

Many care ethicists are skeptical about the compatibility of educational services being offered primarily via markets and care ethics. Though Noddings is troubled by the trends toward standardization that American public schools have undergone over the past several decades, she worries that “to treat schools like businesses is a category mistake of significant proportions” and that leaving educational services to be bought and sold on the market threatens the idea of schools as “centers of stability and community.”³ Virginia Held has similar concerns, arguing that “Once an educational institution has been taken over by the market, anything other than economic gain is unlikely to be its highest priority, since a corporation’s responsibility to its shareholders leads it to try to maximize economic gain.”⁴

In what follows, I will argue that markets in educational services may be more likely to achieve care ethicists’ stated goals of seeking to create more caring relations

in the world than government-provided public education. Particularly, I will argue that by care ethicists definition of care, there are compelling theoretical and empirical reasons to suppose that markets in education will produce more caring relations between producers and consumers than will public school systems.

EDUCATIONAL MARKETS LEAD TO MORE ATTENTION AND
RESPONSIVENESS TO NEED THAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Arguably, private schools operating within markets are more likely to be attentive and responsive to parents and students than public schools. This is not primarily because private schools are more likely to adapt their policies in response to parent and student feedback. Rather, it is because markets allow parents and students to find schools that best suit their needs, and entrepreneurs to create schools that attempt to satisfy unserved needs, in a way neither group can in a public school system.

Care ethicists tend to emphasize attentiveness and responsiveness (on the part of the carer) as necessary conditions of caring relations. The most conventional definition of these terms by care ethicists is that attentiveness refers to our abilities to perceive the needs of others, and responsiveness is our ability to meet the needs of others and adjust how we respond to others based on how they react to our efforts. Joan Tronto gives a concise description of attentiveness as “being able to perceive needs in self and others and to perceive them with as little distortion as possible.”⁵⁵ For Nel Noddings, attentiveness means more than simply being able to perceive the needs of others, but being momentarily “engrossed in (or receptively attentive to) the needs expressed in an encounter.”⁵⁶

Of course, care entails not only being able to attentively decipher others’ needs, but also one needs to follow that with an attempt to address those needs. Responsiveness to need is the competence we show when we address the needs we find in others. Responsiveness is not only about whether we respond, but also how we respond, and in cases where the caring relationship is ongoing, whether (and to what effect) we adjust our continuing care efforts in response to the other’s changing needs.

Public schools in the United States and many other countries are organized bureaucratically; authority to create and change school policies at least is vested in districts (local school boards and superintendents, in the United States) and often in state and national bodies (state boards of education and legislatures, the national legislature and Department of Educations). The farther removed centralized decision-making authority is from parents and students, the less responsive those systems are likely to be. Even in school systems where decision making is done quite locally, concerned citizens have two options for providing feedback to schools: to vote in school board elections, and to voice concerns to the school board and local superintendents. Neither method is likely to yield the kind of attentiveness or responsiveness that care ethicists argue is necessary for the caring administration of social services.

Voting for school board members has several limitations. For example, elections are held at several year intervals, majoritarianism tends to leave those who didn’t vote for the winning candidate disaffected, and there is no guarantee that the winning candidate will (try to) enact policies in their platform once in office. Further, as policy

changes must be district-wide, generally speaking any changes enacted by school boards threaten to alienate others in the district. Lastly, contra several care ethicists' concern that priority go with the needs of the most vulnerable, voice tends to favor those who have time enough to attend school board meetings, can produce the most sophisticated and articulate arguments, and have the wherewithal to "politic" for their cause (forge political connections, organize turnout on behalf of a particular issue, etc.).⁷ For these reasons, exercising voice to elected or appointed officials will often be an ineffective way to ensure that public school systems exercise care toward their consumers.

Are markets likely to produce schools that are more attentive and responsive to parent and student need? Traditionally, the affirmative case is made by suggesting that market forces will incentivize schools to take account of and adapt to consumer demands. Evidence shows, however, that this may not hold. Two qualitative studies of California public and private schools show that public and private schools are equally likely to take account of and respond to consumer feedback and demand (and that whether they do so may be contingent on the socioeconomic status of the school's clientele).⁸ Similarly, James Tooley's description of the private SABIS® International Schools Network depicts a private schooling company that is heavily standardized, with a patented curricular system, and so is inflexible to consumer demand.⁹

Even if we assume that private schools are no more likely than public schools to change or modify their operations by taking consumer feedback into account, there is still reason to think that they will achieve results more amenable to care ethicists' conditions of attentiveness and responsiveness than public schools. As consumers will have more choice and exit rights in a market than in a public school system, families may choose between schools in order to pick that which best meets their children's (and the family's) needs. While Luis Benveniste et al. concluded that private schools were no more likely to respond to parental input than public schools, they did note that "the ability of parents to influence what happens in private schools appears to be greatest at the moment of their initial choice of educational establishment or if they exercise the option to exit to an alternative school."¹⁰ Even if families can only choose between several inflexible schooling options (each offered on a "take it or leave it" basis), this is likely to result in families finding schools that better fit their children's needs than in a public school system (where, per above, the most impactful ways to change the public school curriculum are appealing to and voting for school board representatives).

While it is an open question whether educational markets will result in schools that are more attentive to and responsive to parental feedback, it can be argued that the market system allows families to be more attentive and responsive in their purchase of educational services for their children. The market's allowance of choice and exit rights to enable parents to attentively and responsively choose schools for their children fits with Daniel Engster's conception of care ethics, which "favors a more flexible and decentralized policy approach that offers individuals more choice and input in determining how to care for themselves and others."¹¹ Unless there are reasons to think that public schools will be more responsive than private schools

(and neither Richard Rothstein et al. or Luis Benveniste et al. found public schools to be either more or less attentive or responsive than private schools), the choice and exit rights present in the market should lead to the result that students are more likely to have their needs met than in public school systems.

MARKETS WILL CREATE AND NURTURE CARING RELATIONS BETTER
THAN PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS

For most care ethicists, one goal when applying care ethics to social policy is to create a world where people can and do most freely enter into caring relationships with others and where those relationships are best able to flourish. Noddings puts the point well when she suggests that social policy sufficiently guided by an ethic of care will find policy makers “choos[ing] a theory of justice that aims to establish or restore conditions in which natural caring might flourish rather than to invoke an entirely different moral approach or to attempt caring directly.”¹² For similar reasons, Engster recommends that a caring government “should shift the delivery of care as much as possible to the personal and local level, facilitating the care of individuals primarily by providing support for parents, families, caregivers, and local organizations.”¹³

Yet, care ethicists are almost uniformly skeptical of the idea that markets can facilitate genuinely caring relations. Joan Tronto writes that markets, with their impersonality and motives of self-interest, are unlikely to incorporate genuine care, which is “distinctive because of its intimate nature.”¹⁴ Virginia Held is similarly skeptical. She writes: “once an educational institution has been taken over by the market, anything other than economic gain is unlikely to be its highest priority,” values certainly not easily reconcilable with other-oriented care.¹⁵

Many care ethicists (and other critics of markets) believe that markets are impersonal and also fear that, in education, they will reward schools that are simply the most cost-efficient and least personal. Recall Tronto’s suggestion that “another serious problem for care on the market is the way in which care is distinctive because of its intimate nature.” For her, “us[ing] the language of the market...ignores the fact that care is intimate, often involving an emotional attachment” in a way that impersonal markets cannot or will not likely provide.¹⁶

In fact, as long as markets are driven by consumer demand and choice, companies that provide services in markets will be as impersonal or personal as customers demand. Tronto is right to note that education and other care services are costly and not easily automated. But contra her argument that this difficulty in depersonalizing care services is an argument against their ability to be offered in markets assumes that markets cannot offer personal or personalized services. Of course, markets do offer such services: yoga instruction, career counseling, and (of course) private schooling are examples of personalized services that are offered through markets. Economist Randy Simmons explains that, in markets, “products that are easily produced at low cost lend themselves to mass production and few firms; complex, highly individualized products or services are apt to be offered by many firms, none of which has a large share of the market.”¹⁷ The fact that education is not easily automated because it requires personalization does not mean it could not be provided by the market; it

just means that the educational market *might* be populated by more small firms rather than by fewer large firms, because the service is less amenable to standardization.

In fact, there is good evidence to support the idea that markets are impersonal when they need to be, and personal when they need to be. When Linda Price and Eric Arnould¹⁸ examined the formation of “commercial friendships” between hairstylists and customers, their surveys not only indicated that a certain kind of friendship and loyalty did develop between customers and hairstylists, but also that hair salons often recognized the value of encouraging such personalized “commercial friendships” as a successful business move. In interviews with patrons of a local Chicago restaurant, Mark Rosenbaum et al.¹⁹ found that the restaurant functioned as a “third space” where supportive bonds formed between patrons and staff. In a larger study, Emory Cowen²⁰ found not only that similar support bonds formed between hair dressers, family-practice attorneys, industrial supervisors, and bartenders and their respective clients, but also that employees felt professionally good about nurturing such bonds with clients. In these cases — all services that require personal interaction between producer and consumer — producers not only found ways to deliver good service without sacrificing personal relations between themselves and consumers, but also found the maintenance of such personal relations to be a central part of providing a good service. As long as education is a service whose effectiveness is related to personal interaction between producers and consumers, there is every reason to suppose that educational markets will reward those who best nurture those interactions.²¹

None of this is to say that caring relationships cannot develop between public school faculty/staff and public school students/families. I have only argued that, contra many care ethicists’ depictions, markets can and do provide services that carry significant elements of care between producer and consumer. But is there reason to think that educational markets may produce more or better caring relations between consumer and producer than public school systems?

I believe that the relationships developed between private schools and consumers operating in a market will likely be better and stronger than between public schools and their consumers. This partly has to do with what I’ve argued in the preceding sections: relationships formed in markets will be more attentive, responsive, direct, and reciprocal between producers and consumers than those within a public system. Also, however, there is a developing body of evidence that shows the very act of trade between parties produces empathic bonds between them. Research by neuro-economist Paul Zak and colleagues, for example, has demonstrated that the very act of trade between parties increases the level of oxytocin — the neural chemical seemingly responsible for empathy and compassion — between parties.²² If the act of trade does increase empathy between traders, this would certainly be a reason to prefer relations developed through educational markets than through tax-supported public school systems. As mentioned previously, public school systems are funded indirectly, by taxpayers paying local, state, and national taxes to governmental bodies that choose how to allocate such funding toward schools and other public works. Families whose children attend public schools, then, did not directly pay for their child to attend those schools. By contrast, school services bought on the market are

the product of a direct transaction between families and schools. Schools know that the students who attend the school come from families who have paid the school for their services, and consumers know that their money has gone to a school they chose to support and have their children attend. This sort of direct transaction, in some sense, binds the interests of each party to the other. Each party provides the other with something they value and, in so doing, may create a reciprocal sense of obligation (the school, to provide education worthy of continued payment and the consumer, the money that rewards the educational service). By not involving direct reciprocal trade between producer and consumer, a public education may not create the same sense of obligation between parties (consumers may not feel a sense of obligation toward a school they did not directly pay for while producers may not feel as much obligation toward families who did not pay directly for the school).²³

It can be objected that the care most of us aim for is between teacher and student more than between school and family, and that any direct relation in a market for education will be between parents (the payer) and school (service provider). This is correct, but two responses are possible. First, we should not undervalue the forging of direct and potentially caring relations between parents and the school, especially given that the other option is often a very indirect relation between these two parties (where public schools get their money from governments rather than from parents directly). Second, the indirect relation between teacher and student in a private system will likely be more direct than in a public system. In the former, the teacher, who teaches the child, is employed by the school, and the school has a direct relation to the parent; thus, the school may have more interest in ensuring that the teacher is meeting the needs of the child, as the school has a direct relation both with the family (who pays the school for service) and the teacher (whose work is necessary for the school's continued success and financial well-being). In a public system, the relation between teacher and child is potentially less direct, as the teacher is employed by the school district, and funded by the parents indirectly, not through tuition but taxation. Caring teachers may receive more encouragement from private employers whose well-being depends on providing good service to paying parents (assuming that parents see meeting their child's needs as a condition of good service) than in a public school system, where schools are more beholden to governments for their budgets than to parents directly.

While there exists various degrees of choice within many public education systems — choice between public schools or teachers/programs within public schools, as well as charter and magnet schools — the fact that financial transactions between parties help to create empathy may be one reason to prefer school choice among private providers; while choice is valuable within the public sector, any financial transactions between consumer and producer will be more direct in a private system where the consumer pays the producer directly. It could be objected that in a private system, the money still goes from the consumer to the company who runs the school (and, thus, there is no financial transaction between the consumer and teachers). This is true, but within a private system, there *is* a direct transaction between family and school, while in a public system, there is no direct transaction at all.

My case has been conditional: if one accepts the goals of creating a more caring world (in the way care ethicists most often conceive of care), then there is good reason to suppose that educational markets will produce better results than public school systems. I have not argued either that care ethics is the superior moral theory by which to set public policy or that markets produce ideally caring results that perfectly align with care ethicists' conception of care; only that markets are likely to do so better than public school systems, all things considered.

Lastly, I have not argued for what shape markets should take in education (e.g.: Should there be a role for government in redistributing "voucher" money to families for educational use, or should they stay out of education entirely? Should there be regulations that limit what forms of education people can purchase or what policies schools can set?) While these questions are very interesting, I have not dealt with them here largely because, in order to talk about what shape educational markets should take, we must first discuss whether educational markets are morally preferable to public school systems. It may well be that, in order to fully settle the questions of whether educational markets are morally preferable to public school systems, more time and thought must be spent on figuring out what kind of market with what kind of role for government we are talking about.

For now, though, I hope I have spoken to many care ethicists' concerns that markets in care services (or education services particularly) are inimical to care theory. Contra this, I believe that a market in educational services is likely to be more attentive, responsive, direct, and reciprocal and to sustain healthier caring relationships than governmentally administered public school systems.

1. Nel Noddings, *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 60.

2. Daniel Engster, *The Heart of Justice: Care Ethics and Political Theory*, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 24.

3. Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005), xxi.

4. Virginia Held, "Care and the Extension of Markets," *Hypatia* 17, no. 2 (2002): 27.

5. Joan C. Tronto, "An Ethic of Care," in *Ethics in Community-Based Elder Care*, ed. Martha B. Holstein and Phyllis B. Mitzen (New York: Springer, 2001), 62.

6. Nel Noddings, *The Maternal Factor: Two Paths to Morality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 43.

7. For these reasons, and after an extensive review of the results of voice models of public service in health care and education (where public sector producers receive input directly from consumers in order to improve service), economist Julian Le Grand concluded that voice models "can violate a fundamental social democratic principle: that of the promotion of social justice and equality" and that "there is a respectable case for arguing that voice does not deliver equity." See Julian Le Grand, *The Other Invisible Hand: Delivering Public Services through Choice and Competition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 118–119.

8. Richard Rothstein, Martin Carnoy, and Luis Alberto Benveniste, *Can Public Schools Learn from Private Schools?: Case Studies in the Public & Private Nonprofit Sectors* (Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, 1999), chap. 1; and Luis Benveniste, Martin Carnoy, and Richard Rothstein, *All Else Equal: Are Public and Private Schools Different?* (New York: Routledge, 2003), chap. 3.

9. James Tooley, *From Village School to Global Brand: Changing the World Through Education* (London: Profile Books, 2012).

10. Benveniste, Carnoy, and Rothstein, *All Else Equal*, 122.
11. Engster, *The Heart of Justice*, 24.
12. Noddings, *The Maternal Factor*, 33.
13. Engster, *The Heart of Justice*, 73.
14. Joan C. Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 123.
15. Held, "Care and the Extension of Markets," 27.
16. Tronto, *Caring Democracy*, 123.
17. Randy T. Simmons, *Beyond Politics: The Roots of Government Failure* (Oakland, CA: Independent Institute, 2011), 166.
18. Linda L. Price and Eric J. Arnould, "Commercial Friendships: Service Provider–Client Relationships in Context," *Journal of Marketing* 63, no. 4 (1999): 38.
19. Mark S. Rosenbaum et al., "A Cup of Coffee With a Dash of Love: An Investigation of Commercial Social Support and Third-Place Attachment," *Journal of Service Research* 10, no. 1 (2007): 43–59, doi:10.1177/1094670507303011.
20. Emory L. Cowen, "Help Is Where You Find It: Four Informal Helping Groups," *American Psychologist* 37, no. 4 (1982): 385–395, doi:10.1037/0003-066X.37.4.385.
21. Some may worry that if consumers demand less personal educational services (perhaps valuing cost over personalization), educational markets may reward those who offer the cheapest and least personal services. This is certainly possible, but it should be noted that the other option is to offer only educational services that do not satisfy consumer demand (those that are more expensive and personal when consumers value less expensive and less personal). If care ethicists were to prefer the latter (on grounds that individuals may not always be the best judges of their needs; cf. Tronto, *Caring Democracy*, 122), then we run the risk of violating the care ethicists' goals of encouraging attentiveness and responsiveness on the part of carers.
22. Zak has summarized much of this research on market transactions and oxytocin levels in Paul J Zak, *The Moral Molecule: The Source of Love and Prosperity* (New York: Dutton, 2013), chap. 7. Also see Paul J. Zak, "Moral Markets," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 77, no. 2 (2011): 212–233, doi:10.1016/j.jebo.2010.09.004.
23. As a former public school teacher, I do not in any way mean to discount the caring efforts of public school teachers and staff. I simply suggest that, if trade does induce empathy between parties produced by oxytocin, even the most dedicated public school teacher may find that they'd experience a more direct sense of empathy toward students and families if they knew those families paid directly to receive education at that school. (Particularly if we recognize the reward function of money, teachers may do their best work if they know they are teaching students whose families monetarily reward their school's services directly.)