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Consensual Discourse and the Ideal of Caring

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I discuss the extent to which caring for others involves relinquishing our own perspective and assuming the viewpoint of the one for which we care. I argue that there is no need to shed one's perspective, but that even in contexts in which the cared-for is the victim of political oppression there are occasions when caring might call for confrontation.

RESUME

Dans cette communication, je discute le point de vue selon lequel être bienveillant envers son prochain implique l'abandon de sa propre perspective pour adopter le point de vue de celui ou celle qui fait l'objet de cette bienveillance. Selon moi, il n'est pas nécessaire d'abandonner sa propre perspective, et il me semble que même lorsque le bénéficiaire de notre bienveillance est victime d'oppression politique, il est parfois nécessaire de le ou la confronter avec une autre perspective.

Caring and Responsibility

1. Leslie Wilson has raised some challenging questions about Noddings' ideal of caring, and she has proposed an even higher ideal of caring in its place. Wilson wants to propose a fem**inist** rather than a fem**inine** ideal of caring. While she accepts Noddings' vision of caring as a matter of trying to apprehend the reality of the other[1], she notes that this sometimes involves a refusal to accept the cared-for's interpretation of her situation. In cases of political oppression Wilson asks: "Is it enough that I receive and grasp her reality as she sees it? Can I shed my own perspective utterly while 'receiving' her perspective? Can I refrain from making judgments even at this level? Should I so refrain?"[2]

Noddings' idea of "apprehending another's reality" needs some clarification because the language she uses to describe her ideal of caring is misleading. This misleading description results in a crucial ambiguity. On the one hand, Noddings describes what it is to apprehend the reality of the other as a matter of considering the ways of life, needs and desires of whatever living things for which she is caring.[3] This is straightforward enough at first. If you want to care for an animal or a plant you must get to know what sort of things will help it flourish. You pay attention to the creature and provide it with what it needs. Simple enough, we all do it. When we see the other's reality as a possibility for us "we must act to eliminate the intolerable, to reduce the pain, to fill the need."[4]

On the other hand, Noddings explains that in truly apprehending the reality of another I must have my own "ethical reality" disturbed. In order for that to happen, I must "be touched,...I must see the other's reality as a possibility for my own."[5] She explains the meaning of this by contrasting it with seeing a person's situation "objectively" either by collecting data or looking at it historically. This amendment to the description of apprehending another's reality can be interpreted in two ways. First it sounds as though having my own ethical reality disturbed means that I have to come to view moral life differently, *i.e.*, shed my present perspective and adopt another one. Thus, I might be inspired to become a Buddhist, or a Conservative Catholic or a Stoic. This would seem to be what Noddings means, for she quotes Kierkegaard in this same paragraph as saying that "ethically speaking there is nothing so conducive to sound sleep as admiration of another person's ethical reality."[6]

It is this shift which is misleading in Noddings' account, for it looks as though it might be required that we adopt a different moral perspective. This is certainly a plausible interpretation because it is a significant part of moral growth that we acquire new, more demanding moral ideals by admiring those who manifest these ideals. Thus, seeing the other's reality "as a possibility for my own" could mean shifting perspectives and shedding my own perspective.

Noddings is hard to pin down here. Consider the inter-

esting example she presents to illustrate the ideal of engrossment. This is the case of the mathematics teacher trying to teach a student who hates mathematics. The teacher carefully avoids overpowering or manipulating the student with arguments about the importance of mathematics, knowing that this will not address the problem. She avoids the temptation to think, "I must help this poor boy to love mathematics, and then he will do better at it," for this would be to "project my own reality onto the student, and not to try to grasp the reality of the other as a possibility for myself."[7]

It sounds as though Noddings is saying that the teacher must really try to feel what it is like to hate mathematics, even though she herself loves the subject. It is difficult to know whether or not to characterize this attitude as shedding one's perspective.

Different situations call for different attitudes. In teaching mathematics to a student who hates mathematics, it is good pedagogy to be able to know that he construes it as *boring, boring, boring.* Arguments directed to establish the usefulness and beauty of mathematics fail to address the problem, namely that this student does not experience this utility and beauty, or if he does experience it, the experience is nowhere near as powerful as his experience of boredom. If the teacher takes the boredom seriously enough she may come up with some nonboring ideas that involve mathematical principles. Notice that in Noddings' description of the appropriate attitude to the mathphobic student she need not relinquish her own reality; the teacher can still love math. Indeed, it is probably an indication of how much she loves it that she is able to look for creative methods to teach it. She need not relinquish her reality, *i.e.*, her picture of the world as involving mathematical relations and the importance of coming to grasp these relations and of using mathematical thinking to solve problems. What she does give up is a dogmatic, domineering approach to teaching. To put this another way, she gives up the temptation to dismiss this student's reality as stupid. The reason she is able to avoid arrogance and intolerance is not that she is willing to give up her appreciation of mathematics, but that she is clear that, in addition to this appreciation, she values a world in which people are able to imagine what it would be like to be in the other person's shoes, to grasp what their experience must be like.

2. Leslie Wilson points out that by adopting the perspective of the person we wish to help we are prevented sometimes from really helping them. People whose suffering is the result of political oppression can be harmed if they ignore that dimension of their problem and continue to be confused or to blame themselves for the problem. This is evidenced often enough in cases of sexual harassment, and indeed, any of the countless problems that affect women's sense of worth, such as anorexia, bulimia, agoraphobia, and others. Without the political analysis, it is very hard to arrive at a sense of self-worth and harder to find resolution. Noddings fails to take that dimension into account.

Problems in learning to like mathematics, although more complex than this example would suggest, are nevertheless quite different than problems that arise from contexts of political oppression. It is far easier to accept that someone just might not ever come to see the value of mathematics than it is to accept their obvious suffering due to the injustice of political oppression. The importance of mathematics pales before the importance of basic justice and the erosion of self which results from political oppression. In both cases, to receive the subject's reality as she sees it, is not to shed one's own perspective. This is not what Noddings advocates even in the mathematics example. To receive the other's reality is to make a serious effort to grasp the subject's experience and interpretation of that experience and to reflect on what the accompanying feelings must be like. What we do next will depend entirely upon the situation. What effect will it have on the subject to offer an alternative interpretation? Is she ready to hear another point of view, or will she experience that as one more attempt to deny her her own point of view, to manipulate, to control?

I do not think that Noddings' view entails giving up our own analysis of the situation, although her description of apprehending the other's reality sometimes sounds that way. Leslie Wilson is right to note that Noddings does not present a feminist analysis. To be really helpful, a political analysis is often the necessary one. A person lacking a feminist perspective might not be able to judge to which feelings to be receptive, and so might fail to address the needs in question.[8]

3. Wilson and Noddings share one criterion for ethical caring, namely that it should result in confirming the sense of self-worth of the one cared-for. Wilson adds to Noddings' theory the claim that, to achieve this goal with people who are politically oppressed, it is necessary to hold a political analysis to know to what feelings to respond and how to respond. The trick, of course, is to do this without showing disrespect for the cared-for's own way of interpreting her situation, *i.e.*, without adding to her oppression by imposing an unwanted definition of the situation upon her.

There is another aspect to satisfactory caring. Sometimes caring means being willing to confront the cared-for, to judge some attitudes, or self-interpretations to be unworthy. Sometimes this kind of caring is called for even though a person is the victim of political oppression.

Iris Murdoch is one of the few moral philosophers I know of who elucidates this more morally demanding stance in relationships.[9] Murdoch's picture is of a fragile psyche continuously trying to defend itself by means of fantasy and consoling wishes. In her view, we frequently want to pin all the blame for our misery on others; we love to indulge in self-pity and to relinquish personal responsiblity. If we take Murdoch's view seriously, there will be times when, as carers, we will choose to confront someone we care for with their rationalizations or their excessive self-pity, and to point out their use of defensive strategies. Needless to say this line of approach seems to be antithetical to apprehending a person as a victim of political oppression, for it would seem to be adding to the victim's low self-worth; it would seem to be another way of blaming the victim. So most of us avoid this perspective and either focus, like Noddings, on the the expressed needs, or like Wilson, on the political analysis hoping to reduce the pain and fill the need.

To illustrate this point, I take an example of a friend whose husband, years ago, before the term "sexual harassment" became available, had the habit of fondling her breasts whenever he was in her presence. She objected very strongly to this practice, but he continued relentlessly, ignoring her protests. She systematically tried every response she could think of, including discussing it with him in the presence of a therapist. Nothing worked. One day a friend pointed out to her how threatening she must seem to this man because of her considerable verbal abilities and her assertive way of talking. It had never occurred to her that she might be contributing to the problem by her way of talking. She had only been able to see herself as a victim of aggressive behavior. As soon as she understood how she might be contributing to the situation she was able to modify her behavior and the problem disappeared.

A feminist analysis of the situation would focus on the sexual harassment and its debilitating effects on her. The resolution that I have described would appear to be blaming the victim. I want to be clear here. I am not repudiating a feminist analysis, nor rejecting the concept of sexual harassment. I am only suggesting that within such an approach it is important not to play into a person's inclination for rationalization and self-pity by attending only to the more obvious injustices of the political surround. Self-respect is built out of political balance of power as well as a capacity for ruthless self-examination to be rid of self-pity and irresponsibility.

NOTES

1. Leslie Wilson, "Is a 'Feminine' Ethic Enough?" p. 14.
2. Wilson, p. 12.
3. Nel Noddings, *Caring*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p. 14.
4. Noddings, p. 14.
5. Noddings, p. 14.
6. Noddings, p. 14.
7. Noddings, p. 15.
8. Wilson, p. 10.
9. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970.

Summer Passes & the Autumn Seed

Summer passes, & the autumn seed
reclaims its due from a resisting earth
as the sea its territory claims
from a weary & defeated dyke.

Leaves shrink & crumple, & aware
on their sure fate, ripen to gold.
Even clouds billow more, grow thicker fur
as their ties to earth shorten,

as the radius
of the nomadic sun dwindles,
till it barely lifts its weight above
the brown horizon, like a flickering
firefly ensnared by early frost,
as the strings, the ties, the glue of life
all loosen.

A loosening season: the leaf parts,
its distance to the ground shortens,
& the branches bend low, heavy
with the stinging weight of frost.

Summer passes, & the autumn seed
returns to its brown earth, to the promise of
a buoyant sleep, like the hibernation earned
by a drowsy & well-fattened bear.

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