CHAPTER ONE: ENGROSSED CARE

Introduction

I shall begin directly with the compelling aspect of caring. This is to my mind the most ambivalent aspect of caring: it is precisely this aspect that propels one, sometimes irrespective of one’s choice, into relations of caring and it is therefore also the aspect that repels those who do not desire such intimacy. The ‘propelling’ or ‘compelling’ quality of care will receive attention in this chapter.

The care ethicist who has the most unique and outspoken approach to this aspect of care is the philosopher Nel Noddings, author of *Caring. A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984). Noddings has come to occupy a prominent position in care ethical literature that is primarily concerned with emotions and experience: she is one of the founders of this tradition in care ethics - her approach is (unlike Gilligan’s whose approach is psychoanalytical) primarily philosophical, focussing on existential and phenomenological issues in caring. Noddings will play a prominent role in elucidating what I mean by an ‘ontological’ type of care ethics. I have dubbed this type “engrossed” care, an oft-cited phrase of Noddings’.

This chapter concerns caring in an ontological sense: a phenomenological account of what it is to experience the urge to care and how this urge is given form in the relationship essential to humankind, namely an urge that is given form in the mother-child relation. This relation, as argued by Noddings and others, is basic to all human experience and forms and informs all our other relations – it captures the essential human relationship and I therefore call it ontological.¹

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¹ By what are referred to as “maternal thinkers” like Sara Ruddick and Nancy Chodorow, for example; feminists such as Jean Elshtain, Susan Okin and Adrienne Rich. Philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, David Hume, Charles Taylor and others centralize not so much the mother-child relation but family relations in general as basic for moral development and maturation.

² Strictly speaking, the mother-child relation is a posteriori - for the mother at least. The infant’s experience of this relation however is arguably so early that it is prior to experience and serves to form experience rather than being a conscious experience in itself. Noddings places the ontological emphasis on the universality of the infant’s experience and regards it as a pre-rational basis existing in all human beings.
What is the structure of this chapter? As to the title, “engrossed” refers to the manner in which Noddings argues the other must be perceived in a caring relationship: the person caring must be entirely involved or ‘engrossed’ in the other’s reality. Noddings has created her own terminology to deal with (what I have characterised as) her ontological approach to caring and I shall start off this chapter with a section specifying her ontological approach, followed by a section on terminology. Her terminology is derived from the existential and psychoanalytical literature she refers to but has a very distinct, neologistic feel to it. I shall therefore take time to elucidate her concepts. I shall only be dealing in depth with three concepts key to her ethic of care – “engrossment”, “reciprocity” and “joy”. In particular, I shall discuss Noddings’ account of “motivational displacement” involved in caring as engrossment. I will discuss the advantages of Noddings’ account – and also the disadvantages - and I will sketch Harry Frankfurt’s (similarly phenomenological) account of caring as an alternative to the notion of displacement.

Ontological caring

Noddings’ gives her central question - “how to meet the other morally?” - an ontological reply, in other words, a reply in terms of the essential and definitional characteristics of human beings. Noddings argues that the mother-child relation is basic to human beings, so much so that this relation - and only this relation – is definitive for the normativity of other relations. “Meeting the other morally” can only be done well if it is done so within the bounds of the essential goodness of the mother-child relation. Ethical caring, she says, arises out of “natural caring”, in particular from the “natural bond” between mother and child; and this ideal caring relation is

(…) that condition toward which we long and strive, and it is our longing for caring - to be in that special relation - that provides the motivation for us to be moral. We want to be *moral* in order to remain in the caring relation and to enhance the ideal of ourselves as one-caring. (Noddings 1984, 5)

This short quotation contains, in a nutshell I argue, four aspects of Noddings’ care ethics: first, the general human element – we all “long and strive” towards the mother-child relation. Second, this relation is “special” because it is basic and good and definitional for human beings. Third, on this basis we are driven to be moral – this relation creates in us the preparedness to strive toward goodness. And fourth, we all desire to return to or repeat, in some
way, this special relation: we want ideally either to be cared-for or to care. These are the most important suppositions of Noddings’ distinctive care ethics and, throughout this chapter, I shall tease out their implications for how to understand what Noddings’ caring involves.

Importantly, according to Noddings, “an ethic of caring locates morality primarily in the pre-act consciousness” of the person caring. Thus experience of, and longing for, a caring relationship is condition general to all humans - which it must be, she argues, in order to avoid relativism. She expresses it as follows: “the caring attitude is universally accessible”, in other words, everyone has, or has had, access to one or more caring relationships and we all know, “pre-act consciously” what this relationship entails. However, she insists that this is not a command to care but a human capacity to do so.

This ethical ideal guides us when we attempt to form a relationship with another person – what Noddings calls “meeting the other morally”. Our attitude towards the other is an integral part of “the quest for personal goodness”. This quest must be in reference to other people: my goodness, she stipulates, is partly a function of how the other receives me and responds to me. This is what being “moral” means – working to achieve goodness – and is, if I understand Noddings correctly, a pre-condition for being able to take part in a caring relation. The other ought to be met, not provisionally or nominally, but with her three caring concepts of ‘engrossment’, ‘reciprocity’ and ‘joy’. Being caring, for Noddings, is what it is to be human.

Terminology

Noddings’ ontology has two traceable origins, namely developmental psychology (including the authors Carol Gilligan and Lawrence Kohlberg, and others) and existentialism. However, her version of existentialism is her own. An important difference between an ethic of caring and other ethics

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3 Noddings 1984, 28.
4 Op cit, 5.
5 Op cit, 4 ff
6 Op cit, 6.
7 What precisely the defining characteristics of an existentialist approach are will not be gone into here. Suffice it to say that a distinctive phenomenological position, an emphasis on consciousness, and a defining ontology characterise ‘the’ existentialists. One of the problems is that existentialism varies considerably from author to author, whether one is reading Martin Heidegger, or Søren Kierkegaard, or Jean-Paul Sartre,
that focus on subjectivity is ethic of caring’s foundation in relation, she argues. This relationalism and especially the form she gives it, characterises Noddings’ particular brand of existentialism. The philosopher, she says (presumably Sartre), who begins with a supremely free consciousness - an aloneness and emptiness at the heart of existence - identifies anguish as the basic human effect. Noddings, on the contrary, identifies joy as a basic human effect. Thus what we have here is a modified existentialist ethics: a large part of the anguish that existentialist philosophers associate with our apprehension of freedom springs from our awareness of obligation and the endless claims that can be, and will be, made upon us. Noddings transforms this dread for freedom-versus-obligations into joy in the impulse to care for others and therefore a willing acceptance of these claims.

Noddings distinguishes her definition of care from that in dictionaries. According to her, dictionaries define care in terms of a “state of mental suffering or of engrossment”; ‘to care’ is to be in a burdened mental state, one of anxiety, fear, or solicitude about something or someone. Alternatively, she argues, one cares for something or someone if one has a regard for or inclination toward that something or someone. Noddings offers another definition (based on Milton Mayeroff, On Caring, 1971): “To care for another person, in the most significant sense, is to help him grow and actualise himself”. Thus, for Noddings, caring is primarily a nurturing involvement rather than a state of anxiety. This nurturing definition of ‘care’ is utilised - more or less consistently - by care ethicists after Noddings.

Noddings uses the phrase “apprehending another’s reality” throughout her book and means “taking on the other’s reality as possibility and begin to feel its reality and to feel that you must act accordingly”. In other words, says Noddings, apprehension of another’s reality is in effect “feeling impelled to act as though on my own behalf, but on behalf of the other” (this may sound

or Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Noddings leans heavily on Sartre, in particular on his essay “The Emotions: Outline of a Theory,” in Essays in Existentialism, written in 1939, contemporaneous with Nausea. She also refers to Kierkegaard, especially Either/Or and Fear and Trembling, and to the Judaic scholar and philosopher Martin Buber (I and Thou, translated from German by Walter Kaufmann, 1970), and the theologian Paul Tillich (The Courage to Be, 1952).

8 This is in fact only one of the meanings of ‘care’. The English Oxford Dictionary (1993) also gives three other meanings: 1. serious attention, heed; caution, pain; regard, inclination; 2. charge, protective oversight, guardianship; and 3. an object or matter of concern; a thing to be done or seen to.

9 Noddings 1984, 9.
a little confusing. I will try to paraphrase: ‘I feel as if I am acting for myself but it is not my action; it is that of another’). Thus ‘possibility’, in the phrase “taking on another’s possibility”, has a very specific meaning. It refers to a form of compulsion, being ‘impelled’ to comprehend the other’s reality (situation, position, dilemma or standpoint). What is significant here is not only the notion that one can apprehend someone’s reality, but that this apprehension has an immediate effect - you feel you must act according to the reality of the other. In this sense the reality of the other is a possibility – it is an additional or alternative reality for the perceiver. Noddings derives this concept of “apprehension” from Kierkegaard who originally used the word “possibility” in the sense of apprehending another’s reality as possibility.\(^\text{11}\)

What happens once you have “apprehended the other’s reality”? This other perception has an effect upon you: just as your own reality (your situation, your sense perception) affects you. Once the reality of the other has been admitted into your consciousness, you cannot ignore it just as you cannot ignore your own reality (at least, it cannot be done unless at some expense either in terms of repressing or in some way containing this apprehension). This apprehension is by no means a given. It requires effort. Noddings refers to it as a “struggle” and its goal is to “eliminate the intolerable, reduce the pain, fill the need, and actualise the dream.”\(^\text{12}\) All of this is what Noddings implies when she uses “caring”. Encapsulated in the notion of apprehension is the drive to care for the other – and apprehension inevitably leads to the desire to intervene in another’s life (just as one would act in one’s own life).

A last point on terminology: when Noddings refers to the person caring, she calls them “one-caring” who is “universally feminine”, “she”. The person who is cared for is the “cared-for” (“masculine”, “he”).\(^\text{13}\) In creating her own terminology, Noddings thus - like other existentialist philosophers, especially Heidegger - sets up a system of neologisms. The advantage of so doing is that

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10 Noddings 1984, 16.
11 Kierkegaard *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, translated by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie 1941, cited in Noddings 1984, 14. Apprehending in this way is to be touched, to have aroused in me something that will disturb my own ethical reality: instead of only my own perception of my reality, I must see the other's reality as a possibility for myself.
12 Noddings *op cit*, p 14.
13 As a result of Noddings' choice of normative gender specifications - the one caring is a 'she' and the one cared for is a 'he' - I find myself in somewhat of a dilemma. Usually I refer to the agent as a she, as is the trend in much contemporary ethical writing, but that alternative has been corrupted by Noddings' usage. Ironically I find
it draws our attention to Noddings’ very distinct way of thinking and talking about caring ethically. The disadvantage is that it creates a hyperbolic language that resonates ritualistically rather than adds to the discussion of what is, to my mind, an important yet commonplace human activity. Nevertheless, because Noddings’ contribution to care ethics is important and influential, it is worth our while to pay these neologisms some attention.

Three key concepts

Three key concepts in Noddings’ account of caring are “engrossment”, “joy” and “reciprocity”. These concepts characterise her version of an existentialist ethics of care and address what she perceives as problems in such an ethics.

Noddings uses “engrossment” to provide solutions to two problems: that of the movement away from the self which apparently characterises caring; and that of commitment to, and sustaining of, a caring relationship. The first problem, that of caring resulting in a denial of, or distancing from, the self, Noddings solves as follows. She argues that caring is so basic to humanity that whatever roles I assume in life, I may be described in constant terms as one-caring. My first and unending obligation is to meet the other as one-caring. Formal restraints may be added to the fundamental requirement, but they do not replace or weaken it, she says.14

Thus caring, in this account, does not lead to a diminution of self; it is self. This is because caring is so basic to the self that the one cannot be thought of without the other. “Engrossment” gives expression to this form of being in the sense that by caring, the boundaries between the self and other are dissolved (the other’s “reality” becomes your own). Her description of what happens is derived from Buber who describes “engrossment” in caring as follows:

> He is no longer a He or a She, limited by other He’s and She’s, a dot in the world grid of space and time, not a condition that can be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. Neighbourless and seamless, he is Thou and fills the firmament.” (Buber, 1970 quoted in Noddings, 1984, 74)

Noddings describes ‘engrossment’ as “a total conveyance of self to other, a continual transformation of individual to duality to new individual to new

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14 Noddings 1984, 17.
duality’. The only limitation in caring that she is prepared to accept is that of caring for those beyond her comprehension: unknown others. Universal caring is impossible to actualise, she argues, and leads us to abstract problem-solving and mere talk instead of genuine caring. Thus Noddings’ concept of caring is relevant only for people who are both proximate in both space and acquaintance.

Noddings uses “engrossment” to solve the potential problem of sustaining caring relationships over time and in varying intensity: in other words, problems of temporality and of commitment. Caring relationships must often be sustained over a period of time and they have a “requirement of engrossment” in order to be good relationships, according to Noddings. How can the caring relationship be sustained under varying pressure and over time? As far as temporality is concerned, Noddings argues that engrossment is not always equally active. It can also be latent for long periods, she says: “it endures, but only in the alternation of actuality and latency”. As far as the issue of commitment is concerned, Noddings argues that the cared-for seeks for something that tells him that the one-carer has regard for him, that he is not being treated perfunctorily. This attitude can be described as “disposability, the readiness to bestow and spend oneself and make oneself available, and its contrary, indisposability”. In the terminology of Noddings, one who is disposable recognises that he has a self to invest, to give. He is present to the cared-for. Whereas indisposability closes the cared-for off from the one-caring: “When I am with someone who is indisposable, I am conscious of being with someone for whom I do not exist; I am thrown back on myself”.

Being indisposability is the state of not being available for the cared-for. This is not merely a lack of disposability: it also has negative consequences for the one-caring. Noddings says that we hear the “I ought” - direct and primitive – and is ignored at the cost of suffering guilt. Why? Because of what I ought to respond to, I will feel even if I ignore or reject it. Furthermore, even if I do

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15 Noddings 1984, 61.
16 Op cit, 86.
18 This is what Buber says of love, cited in Noddings op cit, 17.
19 This term is taken from the Christian existentialist philosopher Gabriel Marcel, translated from the French disponibilité. In H.J. Blackham, Six Existential Thinkers, 1959, cited by Noddings op cit, 19. Note that “disposability” is used in the sense of being free and available.
20 Marcel cited in op cit, 19.
make myself disposable - in genuine response to the other and to the internal “I ought” – it may go awry, bringing pain to the cared-for and guilt to me.\textsuperscript{21}

Caring is thus not without risk.

Thus “engrossment” is an all-encompassing involvement in the other, an overwhelming empathy, regard and desire for the other’s well being. In this sense Noddings argues that sustaining or committing oneself to caring is not problematic because (1) caring is indistinguishably basic to human beings and (2) involves dissolution of the boundaries of the self. In other words, Noddings describes caring as necessary (in the sense of being essential to human beings) and direct (in the sense of being able to access the reality of the other). These are broad and interesting claims – in particular in the light of my quest in this chapter to describe ‘compelling’ care.

The second key concept is “joy”. According to Noddings, joy is our “basic reality and affect”: it frequently accompanies a realisation of our relatedness. It is the special affect that arises out of the receptivity of caring, and it represents a major reward for the one-caring. The experience of joy-in-relatedness encourages growth of the ethical ideal. Joy is an “affect” or “feeling” rather than an emotion in Noddings’ vocabulary. She distinguishes between reflective and non-reflective modes of consciousness; “joy” is reflective and emotion, non-reflective. Joy is an awareness of ourselves feeling, and is therefore reflective. Noddings regards emotion as being non-reflective because it is a mode in which we meet objects directly and are apparently unaware of ourselves as conscious beings. It is the relation, or our recognition of the relation, that induces the affect she calls “joy”.\textsuperscript{22}

“Joy” is Noddings’ substitute for the existentialist concept of anguish. Existentialist philosophers, in Noddings’ account, often speak of anguish as a basic affect in relation to an object. For Jean-Paul Sartre, ontology posits a lonely emptiness trying to actualise itself, a consciousness forever subject to some object. Anguish is the inevitable accompaniment to our realisation of our aloneness - of our essential freedom to choose our world and ourselves. Noddings’ view of basic reality is the direct opposite of this view: it is a view of relatedness rather than aloneness. If relatedness rather than aloneness is our fundamental reality, and not just a hopelessly longed-for state, then recognition or fulfilment of that relatedness might well induce joy. Recognition of our obligation in relation arouses anguish, says Noddings, but

\textsuperscript{21} Noddings 1984, 40.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Op cit}, 132.
recognition of the actual or possible caring in relation produces joy. Joy then - at least one form of joy - must be reflective; that is, it necessarily involves consciousness looking at itself. Joy is different from anger, fear, and shame in that it flows from that caring relation between the one-caring and the cared-for in general. It has thus no direct object. It is also not a “basic emotion” in that it is essentially reflexive, according to Noddings.23

What is its place in the realm of care ethics? Noddings argues that joy - as ordinarily experienced, not at the level of religious ecstasy - is empirically linked with altruism, and it tends to increase appreciation and social responsiveness. It sustains the one-caring. (But it is not necessarily linked to the ethical good.) Receptive joy is important to caring: a willing transformation of self under the “compelling magic” of other “subjectivities” points to a receptive consciousness, one that is energised by engagement and “enlightened by looking and listening”.24 Noddings’ version of joy might not be - as she says - experienced religiously, nevertheless it is the means by which the individual can participate in a larger, or greater ‘whole’ – “the joy”, or “absolute joy”. Noddings speaks of “the sense of connectedness”, of “harmony” which is the combination of excitement and serenity, and the sense of “being in tune” with other subjectivities.

“Reciprocity”, Noddings’ third concept, is the ideal role for the cared-for in the caring relation. By responding to caring in an equally open-minded and spontaneous fashion as the one-caring, the cared-for completes the gesture made to him and regenerates the caring impulse. Thus caring and reciprocity, according to Noddings, ideally succeed and generate each other. The cared-for responds to the presence of the one-caring. He feels the difference between being received and being held off or ignored (the “indisposability”, in the words of Noddings, of the one-caring). Whatever the one-caring actually does is enhanced or diminished, made meaningful or meaningless, in the response of the cared-for. Something, not necessarily identical to engrossment as one-caring, is required of the cared-for.

The key, according to Noddings, lies in Buber’s “experience”. When we experience something, we have already made that which we experience into an object or thing. Thus the cared-for need not hear my ‘Thou’ (meaning the cared-for) in his experience; that is, he need not acknowledge it propositionally. But he must respond to it. (Again, Noddings touches on the

24 Op cit, 144.
compulsive aspect of her definition of caring.) The freedom, creativity and spontaneous disclosure of the cared-for that manifest themselves under the nurture of the one-caring complete the relation. Reciprocity contributes to the maintenance of the relation and serves to prevent the caring from “turning back on the one-caring in the form of anguish and concern for self”.

These three concepts, “engrossment”, “joy” and “reciprocity”, reflect the heart of Noddings’ ontological approach to care ethics. All three reflect the manner in which Noddings perceived caring to be a compelling activity: “engrossment” because it is a basic human necessity to perceive the reality of the other as directly as possible; “joy” because this is what caring evokes, both for the one-caring and the cared-for; and “reciprocity” because it is part of the compulsive response of the cared-for to the one-caring. With this terminology Noddings aims to solve the problems of the (bounded) self, the issue of temporality, the anguish of the realisation of our aloneness and the asymmetry of caring relations. Caring, in her vision exemplified in the mother-child relation, is a basic human activity that constitutes the normativity of all human relations – it is the source of goodness, the standard by means of which other relations must be measured. It is at the same time the origin of goodness and also the ideal towards which we strive. While, no doubt, an ontological account of caring must qualify as a most compelling account of why we should care – it is indeed empirically impossible to refute that caring is essential to human beings – there are certain distinct disadvantages to Noddings’ ontological ethics.

Normative vacuity

Certain critical points merit mentioning in relation to Noddings’ account of caring. Quite apart from the question whether or not this type of care ethics will appeal to a broad philosophical audience, with its holistic emphasis on joy and harmony and limitless engrossment in the proximate other, there are several critical points that I wish to mention.

Firstly, there is the problem of the falsification of Noddings’ more general claims. Noddings, for example, argues that the mother-child relation is basic to all relationality and argues that our ability to act caringly is in memory of this mother-child experience. Noddings quotes the nineteenth-century philosopher Friederich Nietzsche as confirmation of her position:

25 Noddings 1984, 74.
There is something so ambiguous and suggestive about the word love, something that speaks to memory and to hope, that even the lowest intelligence and the coldest heart still feel something of the glimmer of this word. The cleverest woman and the most vulgar man recall the relatively least selfish moments of their whole life, even if Eros has taken only a low flight with them. (“Mixed Opinions and Maxims”, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, Kaufmann (ed.), 1954, quoted in Noddings 1984, 79).

Noddings’ admixture of metaphysical, existentialist philosophy and developmental psychology makes it difficult to separate empirical statements from her descriptions of ideal caring relationships. This “glimmer” that Nietzsche speaks of is far removed from the emotionally fulfilling, mother-child relation that Noddings wishes to base her ethics on. Ironically, the proof that Noddings needs in order to argue for the centrality of the mother (or rather nurturer)-child relation is found in the branch of developmental psychology that studies dysfunctional relations. Adults who are incapable of sustaining good caring relations have very often experienced poor caring relations as young children. Noddings’ claim that the nurturer-child relation is key to our being able to have relations is therefore correct but, if she wishes to make an appeal to the empirical sciences in order to do so, she can only find evidence to support a limited claim: only those children lucky enough to have a good, caring relation with their nurturers might develop into adults capable of good, caring relations. Noddings’ claim that the mother-child relation is good in fact an ontological claim: it a claim about the nature of being rather than a statement about what kind of relationship the mother-child relation should be. It is ‘factual’ and not normative.

Secondly, there is the issue of essentialism. Women, argues Noddings, give reasons for their acts that point to feelings, needs, situational conditions and their sense of personal ideal rather than universal principles and their application. Women prefer to discuss moral problems in terms of concrete situations. Women’s deeper understanding of feelings and needs is due to the social role that they have played. Noddings cites Carol Gilligan, who argues that

. . . women not only define themselves in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care. Women’s place in man’s life cycle has been that of nurturer, caretaker, and helpmate, the weaver of those networks

Noddings posits furthermore that there is reason to believe that women are somewhat better equipped for caring than men are. This is because the most intimate situations of caring are ‘natural’, not ‘moral’ (by which she means judgements governed by universal principles). She gives psychological reasons as explanation: girls can identify with the one caring for her and thus maintain this relation while establishing identity. A boy must find his identity with the absent one - the father - and thus disengage himself from the intimate relation of caring.26

I must confess that I have great difficulty accepting this type of, what I regard as, essentialistic argumentation. I find it most unsatisfying as well as inherently untrue. If women have been cast into the role of nurturers because of their biological role and enforced by cultural factors, then this does not mean that this either an ideal situation or an unchangeable, ontological fact. Supposing that women are better nurturers, then why is it necessary to have an ethic of caring? We could, for example, pose the question which Annette Baier poses in her *Moral Prejudices* (1994, paraphrased): if women are already inherently moral, why do they need to be made more so? And why should so much time and effort be spent trying to persuade men that they should be more caring if they are naturally bad at it? In all fairness to Noddings, it must be said that her book is intended as a treatise on moral education (albeit that the subtitle of her book is *A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*): it is her intention to educate men and women who do not do caring, or do it badly, to learn to be caring.

It might seem, thirdly, that Noddings is arguing from an ‘is’ to an ‘ought’ – women are better equipped to be carers (biology, psychology, history) and therefore they should be the better carers. Noddings does however anticipate this critique: she distinguishes between “ethical caring” - reflective or secondary considerations about caring - and “natural caring” - actual examples of caring as in the mother-child relation. Noddings argues that recognising that ethical caring requires an effort that is not needed in natural caring does not commit us to a position that elevates ethical caring over natural caring. An ethic built on caring strives to maintain the caring attitude and is thus dependent upon, and not superior to, natural caring. The source of

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ethical behaviour is, then, lies within twin sentiments - one that feels directly for the other and one that feels for and with that best self, who may accept and sustain the initial feeling rather than reject it. Thus, according to Noddings, both ‘is’ and ‘ought’ are distinct and equally necessary for making judgements in caring.

Fourthly, and this has to do with Noddings’ ontological approach to care ethics, I find myself increasingly irritated by Noddings’ lack of explicit normativity in her ethics of care. The terms that she uses to describe the affect of caring – ‘joy’, ‘engrossment’, ‘harmony’ and ‘reciprocity’ - are strikingly non-normative (or are given a non-normative content like ‘intensity’). Noddings never claims to want to establish normative boundaries for good caring. Her reliance on existentialist literature can probably provide the key to her lack of normative commitment. Existentialist ethics is often regarded as being a ‘non-naturalistic’ type of moral philosophy because it is in principle uninterested in the contents of life, in utility, human nature or evolution, in God, or in any other a priori hall-marked moral authority. However existentialism is significantly naturalistic in that it fundamentally rejects the concept of diversified intrinsic qualities of good and evil, right and wrong, obligatory and forbidden as apprehended in moral experience. Furthermore, it reduces the moral problem of the human race entirely to the theme of its being genuinely ‘existent’; thus reducing ought, not to what ‘is good’, but to Is.27 The value-experience underlying twentieth-century existentialism is unmistakably aesthetical, argues the philosopher Aurel Kolnai, rather than moral. Existentialism is not moral because “it tends to value intensity at the cost of direction, and the presence of man’s ‘full personality’ is in his action rather than in the goodness of its describable objective features”.28

Without going further into Kolnai’s objections to existentialism, the point I wish to make is that Noddings (mostly) shares this lack of normativity with the existentialists of whom she is so fond. However there is an ambiguity in her text: there is no doubt that Noddings regards caring as a superior and worthy form of ethical behaviour yet she sticks to the tendency to describe it as the existentialists describe ‘existence’: as an intensity, without direction. Noddings’ caring – that which she argues to be basic to all ethical behaviour – consists of apprehension and engrossment. Joy flows out of the caring experience and reciprocity in caring. The more intense these three

27 Aurel Kolnai “Existence and Ethics” 1977, 142.
28 Op cit, 143.
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experiences are, the better the caring is, argues Noddings. Noddings’ caring is a curious admixture of, on the one hand, normatively empty intensity, and on the other, a caring relation that is the source of all goodness. But this ‘goodness’ is not a normative quality; it is an ontological given – essential to human relations.

I have laid some serious charges at Noddings’ door: especially that of essentialism and normative vacuity. I am prepared to accept that her ontological grounds lead Noddings to a degree of essentialism – after all, she is pursuing what she believes to be basic truths about human beings. This, in turn, leads her to make strong statements about the nature of the existence of humans, statements that run the risk of being both essentialistic and non-empirical, I find. The charge of normative vacuity is somewhat more serious. Noddings only addresses the question whether caring is basic and she barely designates where caring ends (and self-caring begins). She does so only at a few points in her book: in her discussion of non-disposability for example, and her mentioning that the strain on one who would care can be great (page 47), further borne out by a discussion of what she calls the “toughness of care” (page 98 ff.). Noddings does touch on the fragility of human beings and the enormity of the task of caring. However, the overwhelming message of her book is that caring must be done in terms of “displacement” (which is the “total conveyance of self to other”), an adoption of the reality of the other with no holds barred; a process in which the individual (the one-caring) becomes a “duality”. I dub this approach in which the one-caring can apparently experience the same reality as ‘vicarious’.29

Vicarious caring meets volitional necessity

A vicarious approach to caring appears to have distinct advantages: the self melds into the other, regards the other’s reality as its own and responds to the pain, or the discomfort, or requirements, as it would to its own. Caring for another becomes as direct and as uncomplicated as caring for oneself (can

29 One of the two meanings of ‘vicarious’ is to experience something someone else experiences as if you yourself have the experience. This is how I use the term. For example, “Read about mountain climbing and experience the vicarious thrills!” (http://www.thefreedictionary.com/vicarious) ‘Vicarious’ can also mean substitution, for example, Christ crucified on our behalf, or a whipping boy in Roman times experienced punishment vicariously. (New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1993). Noddings does not mean ‘substitution’ with her ‘engrossment’; she means experiencing someone’s ‘reality’ – as if you where there.
be). It solves the nefarious epistemological problem of perceiving someone else’s pain and reduces the problem to a first-person phenomenological experience. It also goes some of the way in explaining why the predicament of another might motivate us to caring deeds – if we care as much about their well-being as we do our own, then we will be motivated (hence Noddings’ term “motivational displacement” to describe this ‘melding’ of self and other).

The disadvantages though, are legion. Is it feasible? What happens to the self with its baggage of interests and desires when you ‘convey’ yourself to the other? Where does it go? When do you get it back? What happens when you don’t want to ‘convey’? (Not to mention the normative question that Noddings does not pose: why should you?) Perhaps these concerns are exaggerated: after all, there are many people who do caring and they do not walk around as if devoid of selves. But what worries me is the following: Noddings is very clear that ‘engrossment’ involves not merely experiencing what the other experiences but having the same reality as the other. This means that the reality is directly felt as if it were your own. My question is then: can you still be caring if you feel the reality of the other to the same extent that they feel it? Are there extra moral intuitions that the one-caring has that the cared-for does not and do these intuitions supersede the reality of the cared-for so that the one-caring can be caring while at the same time not be overwhelmed by the reality of the other? Noddings does not provide an answer to this; she does not see it as an issue.

The alternatives to Noddings’ ‘engrossment’ are altruism and empathy. I can certainly make an empathetic effort to understand what the other is experiencing, and on those grounds imagine what the other is going through, but this does not mean that my mental and emotional baggage disappears. I can temporarily suspend my own interests when considering those of another, and if they are similar or identical then there is a match. But if my interests should clash with the other’s then I shall only be made more acutely aware of my own preferences. If my motives are altruistic then I shall be concerned for the welfare of others - from my own viewpoint. Empathy and altruism are mental actions performed by a self-aware (or self-conscious) person: there is no conveyance of the self as there is in Noddings’ vicarious approach.

Where do the limits lie in ‘apprehending the other’s reality’? There are many realities which I would not wish to or could not apprehend to the extent that they too became my reality. I have no desire to feel another’s anguish and I am unlikely ever to share the collector’s paroxysms of joy over stamps or
bottle tops or matchboxes. Noddings does not impose any limitations on this ‘apprehension’. She does however speak of the anticipation of hardship when an unknown other (in contrast to a proximate other) makes a claim on her: she does not know what the extent of the claim is or what the cost to herself will be. In this respect I believe she is entirely right: the claim to care made by something (one of her examples is a stray cat) or someone (the stranger) is initially unbounded in the sense that it is unknown or unfamiliar. However, the next step should be: what can I do? What am I prepared to do? What should I do? The idea of positing an unbounded preparedness to care – as Noddings does - in reply to an alien claim is unnerving!

I wish to offer here an alternative to the vicarious account of caring while retaining the strength of Noddings’ account of the phenomenological experience of the other. The American philosopher of action and moral psychology, Harry Frankfurt,\(^{30}\) has developed an account of “volitional necessity”. Presupposed in this account is a self that has agency and is self-conscious. What Frankfurt does is to offer us an explanation of what it is for this agent to have that peculiar concern for the well-being and existence of something or someone – namely, what it is for him to care.

An important concept in Frankfurt’s theory is the concept of “second-order desires”.\(^{31}\) In this theory Frankfurt defends a so-called hierarchical model of independence, a model in which expressions of will, or desires, or wants, occupy different levels. We are motivated by effective first-order desires - which often (but not always) involve the satisfaction of primary needs and short-term desires for food, stimulants, chocolate, comfort and the like – which are then supported or confirmed by second-order desires. Wanting to have a particular desire is a second-order desire. Restraining my desire, or controlling myself, is also the exercise of second-order desires. The capacity for reflective self-evaluation is manifested in the formation of second-order desires, argues Frankfurt. Persons who respond only to first-order desires and have no or undeveloped second-order desires are “wantons”. All adults can at some stage or other behave wantonly but a committed wanton is someone in the grip of their first-order desires only - namely an addict (whether they are willingly addicts or not). But what does this all have to do with caring?

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\(^{30}\) Author of *The Importance of What We Care About* 1988, *Necessity*, *Volition and Love* 1999 and *The Reasons of Love* 2004.

CHAPTER 1

Frankfurt starts his account of the importance of what we care about with the statement: “Caring, insofar as it consists in guiding oneself along a distinct course or in a particular manner, presupposes agency and self-consciousness.”\(^{32}\) Caring is reflexive because a person who cares about something identifies themselves with what they care about. This they do by making themselves “vulnerable to losses and susceptible to benefits depending upon whether what (they) care about is diminished or enhanced.”\(^{33}\) In this sense, by caring about something, the agent is connected to that thing – he shares its fate, as it were.

Caring about something, according to Frankfurt, is not the same as liking or wanting it (because it is possible to care for something that you might never have); nor is it necessarily intrinsically valuable or desirable (what you care for might be low on my list of things I care about). Caring, according to Frankfurt, is specifically prospective: to care about something is to consider it having a future. Caring is not only identification with the thing cared for, but also identification in the sense of an investment (to invest something with importance, or significance, or meaning).

These aspects of caring as reflexive and prospective are important. But that which is most significantly distinct about Frankfurt’s analysis, to my mind, is his emphasis of the fact that what a person cares about is not generally under their (immediate) control. Luther’s declaration “Here I stand; I can do no other” is an example of what Frankfurt refers to as the “necessity” of caring: caring so much for something that you cannot forbear from a certain course of action.\(^{34}\) This is neither causal nor logical necessity: what Luther was unable to exercise was not the power to forbear, but the will. This necessity is moral.

Frankfurt refers to this kind of constraint as “volitional necessity” – a type of necessity that renders it impossible for a person to act in any other way other than he acts; it renders it impossible by preventing him from making use of his own capacities. Luther might have prevented himself from taking the action he took. But he could not bring himself to do so. He was unwilling to oppose it and, furthermore, his unwillingness was itself something that he was unwilling to alter. To put this into caring terms: Luther cared about

\(^{32}\) Frankfurt 1988, 83.
\(^{33}\) Op cit, 83.
\(^{34}\) These words are (unfortunately) apocryphal. Luther in reality probably said something a lot less succinct. Op cit, 86.
caring about whatever it was that made him take a stand – he was constrained/motivated by his own higher-order desires.

Frankfurt asserts that the reason a person does not experience the force of volitional necessity as alien or external to himself is because it coincides with – and is partly constituted by – desires which are not only his own but with which he actively identifies himself. This is why Frankfurt, right from the start, insists that caring presupposes agency and self-consciousness. Necessity is thus to a certain extent chosen, or allowed, or even self-imposed - and to a certain extent imposed or maintained involuntarily. The latter must be the case otherwise we could not explain why the agent cannot prevent himself from caring merely at will. Caring is not a matter of willing, or at least, not only a matter of will. What is it then?

The answer is that the person caring is “captivated” by the object of care. “(His) attention is not merely concentrated upon the object; it is somehow fixed or seized by the object.”\textsuperscript{35} Frankfurt analyses “seized” in terms of being guided by the characteristics of the cared-for object rather than the agent’s own; he succumbs to, what I call, the ‘normative pull’ of the other. The normative pull is effective because of the agent’s feelings for the other and he voluntarily concedes to this pull because he wants to (because he regards the other as important for himself). He has the right concerns or love that link him to the object of care. Or he concedes to the pull because he doesn’t not want to. Thus to care for something is also to be (willingly or not unwillingly) “captivated”, “seized” or “pulled”. It is not inactive in the sense that caring is mere submission – there is a distinctly volitional aspect to caring in terms of being an investment or a prospective interest. How does this relate to the necessity part of caring?

‘Volition’ usually means consciously wishing or willing something, whereas ‘necessity’ implies being under (considerable) constraint to do something. Frankfurt’s “volitional necessity” model of caring about something, or feeling that something is important, expresses precisely this tension between willing and being constrained: a person who is constrained by volitional necessity, says Frankfurt, accedes to (the constraining force) because he is unwilling to oppose it and because, furthermore, his unwillingness is itself something which he is unwilling to alter.\textsuperscript{36} The most resonant aspect of Frankfurt’s volitional necessity is the image of the agent in the grip of that for

\textsuperscript{35} Frankfurt 1988, 89.
\textsuperscript{36} Op cit, 87.
which he cares. Caring about it because it is something that he, as a self-conscious agent, finds worth caring about, yet seized by his commitment to that thing, its fate, its future successes or failures. Necessitated to care, yet done willingly.

There is an inherent dynamic in Frankfurt’s account of being ‘seized’ by the cared-for object, a dynamic which is also prominently present in Noddings’ “engrossed” care. Noddings describes caring as something that does not happen entirely voluntarily. Although the one-caring must be prepared to care, or be “disposable”, once he has “apprehended the other’s reality as possibility” for himself, seeing this inevitably leads to the desire to intervene in another’s life. Apprehension can be willed but the compulsion to intervene and to care is not. This compellingness or involuntary character of caring in Noddings’ account is the factor that first alerted me to an interesting overlap between the, what might seem at first glance to be, different approaches of Frankfurt and Noddings.

Another factor that they share is a deliberate avoidance of normativity in their accounts of caring - that neither accounts tell us when ‘the pull’ to care is justifiably present or absent.37 As far as Frankfurt is concerned, the object of caring has no inherent qualities whatsoever other than it is cared for by someone. “What makes the thing worth caring about is… that the justification of importance originates from the caring and not from the object of care.”38 Noddings, in her turn, chooses intensity above teleology or normativity in her account of the caring process. Neither of these authors have the pretension of providing us with a normative account. Noddings does however, unlike Frankfurt, hold the one-caring responsible for replying to the cared-for’s appeal and provides us with an account of the consequences of caring (reciprocity and joy).

Conclusion

Noddings’ ‘engrossment’ is enabled by perceiving what she calls the ‘reality’ of the cared-for. Once the one-caring has perceived the cared-for as possibility, the one-caring cannot but ‘struggle towards’ the cared-for’s reality, which is to attempt to understand the situation, pain, and desires of the other. This perception of the cared-for’s “reality” makes the one-caring want to “eliminate the intolerable, reduce the pain, fill the need”. And once

37 Frankfurt, “The Importance of What We Care About” in *Synthese* 1982, 269.
38 *Op cit*, 270.
this perceptive step has occurred, it is not possible to deny this pain, or the need of the cared-for, because the one-caring feels an irresistible compulsion to eradicate the pain or fill the need.

“Engrossment” is an all-consuming involvement, a total commitment, a concentrated absorption in the cared-for. It is a perception of the reality of the cared-for so that it becomes the once-caring’s own reality and he feels as compelled to alleviate pain or meet the needs of the cared-for as urgently as he would for himself. I have dubbed it “vicarious caring” because the emphasis is on having the same feelings as the cared-for. It is not imitation, or substitution, or empathy (the projection of one’s personality into, and so fully understanding, the object of contemplation). Imitation, substitution and empathy keep the desire-set of the one-caring intact. Engrossment is full-blown absorption.

But in order to become engrossed in the cared-for, the one-caring must first be disposable: the one-caring must be open to the apprehension of the cared-for’s claim; the one-caring must be prepared to care, willing to “engross” in the cared-for’s reality. Noddings even argues that one must always be susceptible to caring: “Whatever roles I assume in life, I may be described in constant terms of one-caring.”\textsuperscript{39} This is the willing part of caring.

There is also a compelling or necessary part. Noddings argues that appeal for caring is irresistible: the one-caring must make himself “disposable” to the cared-for. How can these two things – the disposability or willingness to care and the compelling appeal to care - be combined? On the one hand caring is a volitional; on the other it is necessary. “Volitional necessity” has been coined by Frankfurt: caring for, he argues, is to be ‘captivated’ by something irrespective of your will and yet it is also something you do because you are willing to do so – to be caring is something that can only be done volitionally.

How can something be both necessary and yet volitional? If something - say care - is indispensable, or required or even inevitable in human relationships, then how can that care also be something that is (voluntarily) willed? On the one hand, if the will expresses a logical set of desires, then necessity and will are compatible. But, because we can imagine that something is willed, then we can also imagine that is not willed, this means that the will, unlike logic, is not bound to the same inevitabilities. In other words, how can something be indispensable, inevitable or required and yet voluntary and contingent?
This is the tension that characterises the ontological approach to caring: the determinism of the necessary caring relationship in relation to the (potential) contingency of the will.

There is much that I do not like about Noddings’ *Caring*, its essentialism and modified existentialism, its quasi-evangelical message about the holistic qualities of joy through caring. Her ethics of care is only suitable for what she calls “proximate others” and can be described as “personalist” or affective care ethics – it is an ethics that operates on the dynamic of one-to-one connections or closeness (as is evident in her terminology: ‘apprehension’, ‘engrossment’, ‘conveyance of the self’, ‘reciprocity’). This is not, I would argue, an ethics that will provide a good basis for a political or conceptual notion of caring; nor is it a suitable basis for a competent practice of caring - for the same reason. Noddings’ lack of concern with the boundaries of caring (she advocates ‘constant’ disposability and ‘total’ conveyance of the self) only adds to the impracticality of her ethics of care.

But what Noddings does do, I believe, is to give us a very vivid phenomenological account of the irresistible forces at work in the context of a caring relationship. Her account of caring has been very influential and subsequent care ethical accounts are often related in some way or other to Noddings’ phenomenological account. She has addressed most of the major themes in the ethics of care: what the appeal for care by the cared-for does to the one-caring; how the one-caring should react to this appeal; who the one-caring can care for; and what the reward is of caring for both one-caring and cared-for.

The following chapter, Postmodernist Care Ethics, takes the theme of non-normativity a step further. This is part of the attempt to formulate an ethics that is entirely free of fundamental assumptions and non-naturalist definitions. I shall introduce the important theme of particularism in this chapter, a theme typical of (most of) care ethics. The dynamics of motivation in this postmodernist care ethics are unlike anything yet discussed - there will be no talk of the compelling or necessary nature of care. What then motivates post-modernist care ethics?