



On Care and Partiality

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...What is the essence of a caring relationship? What does it mean to “care”?

To put it as simply as possible, care can be defined as benevolent concern for those with whom we are involved in some intimate, personal and reciprocal relationship. As in the case of self-interest, our concern here is for the whole individual—physical, intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual. Human beings are more than mere bodies; our needs are not simply physical. Any authentic care, therefore, must take into consideration the whole person, if it is to succeed in promoting the good of the other.

In her book, *Caring*, Nel Noddings has developed a philosophy of care that provides a useful starting point for an analysis of any caring relationships. She begins by pointing out that real care always involves a movement away from oneself and towards another human being. Caring takes me, in other words, beyond the realm of my own self-interest and compels me to focus on the needs of others. Or, as Noddings put it, care involves “stepping out of one’s own personal frame of reference into the other’s. When we care, we consider the other’s point of view, his objective needs, and what he expects of us.”³ All of our attention in an act of caring is focused on the other, not on ourselves: we become committed to promoting his interests, to serving his needs, to protecting and to enhancing his life.

Another characteristic of caring relationships, according to Noddings, is that they always involves an attitude of disposability—that is, readiness to make oneself available to the other. When we care about someone, we typically are more than willing to put ourselves out to help meet his or her needs. For example, in telling a friend, “I’m here for you, man,” I am trying to assure him that he can count on me no matter what. The intentions that lie behind such a statement signify my willingness to share myself completely with my friend, precisely because he is an object of caring to me. Whatever time, energy or money that I have I am willing to give to him if he needs it. And, more than this, I should be willing to do so freely and joyfully.

An authentic caring relationship furthermore involves a total identification with the object of my care: it is a matter not just of “feeling-for” the other, but of “feeling-with” him. The distinction here is between sympathy (feeling-for) which doesn’t necessitate becoming emotionally invested in the well-being of the other, and empathy (feeling-with), which demands that I personally take on the joys and suffering of the other almost to the degree that he himself would. To put this in Noddings own terms, whenever I care for someone, I receive him “into myself, and I see and feel with the other. I become a duality.”⁴ The example that best illustrates this type of feeling-with is the way a good mother responds to the needs of her infant: when the infant cries the mother automatically receives and shares the feelings of her baby.

The final characteristic of all caring relationships is that they can never be reduced to mere mercenary relationships in which one expects to get back as much or more than he gives. Acts of care, then, would come closer to favors than to debts; they ought to be done with little or no regard for what I will get back in return. My goal in caring should simply be to promote the well-being of the other. If I succeed in this attempt, then I have received all the reward that I

should desire. If instead I expect some *quid pro quo* as the condition for engaging in acts of care, then I move perilously close to abandoning the realm of care altogether. For example, the mother who in caring for her child expects later on to get back as much love as she has gives, is not only bound to be sorely disappointed, but is probably also defective in her care for her child. Likewise, if I only come to the assistance of a friend in need because I expect that he will do the same for me, then I really have little understanding of what it means to be a true friend.

On the other hand, it also seems evident that there must be some degree of reciprocity in any real relationship. Although we should never expect that friends or family members will repay us fully for our acts of kindness, we have the right to expect something from them, don't we? Can we even speak of a real relationship if one party in that "relationship" does everything for the other and receives absolutely nothing in return? Think, for example, about a woman who devotes her entire life to caring for her husband—making sure that he is comfortable and happy, tending to his physical and emotional needs, supporting him during difficult times—but who receives absolutely nothing back from him in return. For all practical purposes, he treats her as though she was non-existent, except when he needs something from her. Such a marriage certainly cannot be described as a caring relationship, because it is completely unilateral. At the very least, a caring wife has the right to expect some gratitude for all the care she has shown to her husband. Gratitude, then, is the minimal response to being cared for, and without at least some demonstration of gratitude we cannot talk about care.⁵

Limits of Care

Because real care can only exist in a personal relationship where there is the possibility of some kind of reciprocity with the one being cared for, Noddings maintains that the scope of care will naturally be limited:

We behave ethically towards one another...because we carry with us the memories of and longing for caring and being cared for. There is a transfer of feeling and an opportunity...to commit ourselves to the recognition of the feeling and to the continuing receptivity that will bring it to us again and again. But we have already seen that our obligation to summon the caring attitude is limited by the possibility of reciprocity. We are not obligated to act as one-caring if there is no possibility of completion in the other.⁶

Noddings, therefore, rejects the possibility of universal care—for example, caring for those at the far reaches of the earth or for animals. It is even a misnomer to say that giving money to the homeless or collecting food for the hungry are acts of caring properly speaking, since such acts do not necessarily bring one into a relationship with those being served. Rather than simply giving money to the homeless, for example, one would instead have to spend significant time at a local homeless shelter, personally getting to know its occupants. Likewise, Noddings would maintain that a teacher does not necessarily care for her students simply by virtue of being in the classroom with them; she would also need a relationship that goes well beyond her professional responsibilities.

Although we may want to believe that we have the capacity to care for all those who are in need, the limitations of human nature and the demanding requirements of real care render such an idealistic perspective illusionary at best. As Aristotle points out in his *Politics*, two simple criteria are necessary in order to develop real care for any object: "One of them is that the object should belong to yourself; the other is that you should like it."⁷ We have seen that those who belong to us are those with whom we are involved in intimate reciprocal relationships: family, friends, sexual partners. Similarly, fondness or liking, which is the second of his criteria, usually takes time to develop, and is not possible to feel for large numbers of people. Thus while in ordinary conversation we might speak about caring for the starving in Africa, or the poor of our own inner cities, our real attitude towards these beings is usually more

like a kind of curiosity or interest than authentic caring.

Care and the Problem of Partiality

Another problem with an ethics of care such as Noddings and others have developed is that it would seem to restrict the sphere of moral concern primarily to those with whom we are involved in intimate relationships. The focus of acts of caring, as we have seen, is necessarily limited, and therefore calls us to channel our attention and energy primarily on those who are closest to us. Since I cannot care for everyone equally, it behooves me to give greater weight to the needs of those with whom I am intimately involved. Such a perspective flies in the face of most modern approaches to moral philosophy, which argue that one ought to strive for impartiality in all of one's moral decisions. An impartialistic ethics—and this would include both utilitarianism and deontology—would require, for example, that we allocate our time and resources without any favoritism towards ourselves or those with whom we are intimately related. It follows that an ethic of care, which by necessity restricts the scope of moral interest to intimate, reciprocal relationships, must be considered defective from the perspective of most modern ethical approaches.

John Cottingham, however, has successfully argued against impartialistic approaches to ethics in a way that seems to give greater validity to an ethics of care. A modified version of one of Cottingham's examples illustrates the problems inherent in an impartialistic ethical approach: imagine that on his way home a man comes upon two individuals trapped in a burning building. One is his daughter, a simple cleaning woman by profession; the other is a Nobel prize-winning scientist who is working on a cure for cancer. According to an impartialistic perspective, if this individual chooses to save his daughter rather than the scientist, he would be engaging in an "understandable but nonetheless regrettable lapse from the highest moral standards."⁸ Cottingham, on the other hand, argues that the morally correct choice for the parent to make would be to try to save his daughter even at the expense of the scientist. The person who acts in an impartial manner in such a circumstance, he maintains, is not heroic but a "moral leper."

He goes on to question whether the impartialistic approach is even possible. "Personal bonds, ties of affection, family ties," he argues, "are like the intimate concern one necessarily has for one's own body, an unavoidable part of what it is to be a human being. To say that the moral outlook is one which should attempt to ignore or transcend these bonds is to propose a concept of morality which seems inconsistent with our very humanity."⁹ We have already seen that psychologically intimate others are viewed as extensions of ourselves. It is therefore perfectly natural for us to give priority to their needs over the needs of strangers or of less intimate others.¹⁰

Once again, although one might imagine that impartiality would be a necessary element of a Christian ethic, this is in fact not the case. Several eminent Christian authors throughout the centuries have recognized the significance of special bonds of affection and the unique obligations that these place upon us. Augustine, for one, argues that while in principle we ought to strive to be equally concerned with the needs of all human beings, in reality we have a greater obligation to love those with whom we are involved in some intimate relationship:

Everyone must be loved equally; but when you cannot be of assistance to all, you must above all have regard for those who are bound to you more closely by some accident, as it were, of location, circumstance, or occasions of any kind....So, in the case of your fellow men; since you cannot take care of all of them, you must decide...in proportion as each one can claim a closer connection with you at that time."¹¹

One could maintain that from a Christian perspective the man who is committed to being a loving spouse or father, and who cares for his family to the best of his ability is, in fact, fulfilling his obligations both as a Christian and as a citizen. His devotion to his wife and children will

likely ensure that his family remains intact, that their basic needs will be provided for, and that his children will have a reasonable chance of growing up happy and well-adjusted. Such an individual should be recognized as a paragon of Christian virtue even if his dedication to his family's well-being leaves him with less time to care for the poor and needy in the larger community.

It also seems evident that society as a whole would benefit if its members committed themselves first and foremost to caring for those "who belong to them." Certainly, if everyone was equally scrupulous about caring for his family, friends and neighbors, the number of people in the larger community who are now living in poverty, despair, and isolation would be greatly reduced. We would also be able to eliminate the huge government bureaucracies that have been created to care for the vulnerable in our society essentially because individual citizens have forgotten their responsibilities towards those who are near to them.

This is not to say, however, that the caring individual will completely neglect all responsibilities towards others human beings. We have all known people who are so focused on the needs of those close to them that they virtually ignore the rest of humanity. The woman, for example, whose concerns are limited exclusively to the well-being of her family members, and who is incapable of demonstrating any real regard for those outside this intimate circle, should certainly not be praised as the ideal mother. Rather, she should be recognized as a narcissist who will likely raise her children to be equally narcissistic.

Partiality towards those we love need not lead to apathy towards other human beings, provided that we balance care with a healthy sense of respect for others. Subsequently, in giving special consideration to intimate others, we must always be sure not to violate any other person and to treat all human beings as having basic worth and dignity. Such provisos would at least allow for the most minimal amount of concern for the well-being of others, while at the same time allowing for more special care given to loved ones

NOTES

3. Nel Noddings, *Caring* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 24.
4. Noddings, 60.
5. For a more detailed philosophical analysis of gratitude see Fred Berger, "Gratitude," *Ethics* 85 (1975): 299-309.
6. Noddings, 149.
7. Aristotle, *Politics* 1262b
8. John Cottingham, "Partiality, Favouritism and Morality," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 36: 357.
9. Cottingham, "Ethics and Impartiality," *Philosophical Studies* 43 (1983) 89.
10. An intuitive argument in favor of partiality in our moral actions is given by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Most people, he argues, automatically acknowledge that acts of wrongdoing are magnified by the degree to which one is intimate with one's victim: "It is, for example, more shocking to defraud a bosom companion of money than a fellow citizen, to refuse to help a brother than a stranger, or to strike one's father than to strike any other person" (1160a4-7).
11. Augustine, *Christian Instruction* 1.28; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II.II.26.6.

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