

# The caring relation in teaching

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According to John Macmurray, ‘teaching is one of the foremost of personal relations’. This paper describes that relation in some detail from the perspective of care ethics. This involves a discussion of the central elements in establishing and maintaining relations of care and trust which include listening, dialogue, critical thinking, reflective response, and making thoughtful connections among the disciplines and to life itself.

Keywords: *John Macmurray; care ethics; listening; dialogue; critical thinking*

## Introduction

John Macmurray consistently held that ‘teaching is one of the foremost of personal relations’ (1964, p. 17). But what sort of personal relation is it, and how do the responsibilities deriving from the personal relation affect institutional and intellectual responsibilities? In this article, I will explore possible answers to these questions from the perspective of care ethics.

## Care ethics and relational caring

Care ethics as a recognised approach to moral philosophy, based largely on the experience of women, appeared in the 1980s (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984). Since then, interest has grown rapidly, and the ethic of care is now widely recognised in philosophy, psychology, education, political science, library science, business, nursing, religion and bioethics. Current work debates the priority of justice or caring—or reconciliation of the two concepts—and the extension of care ethics beyond the family and small community into global affairs (Held, 2006).

In care ethics, relation is ontologically basic, and the caring relation is ethically (morally) basic. Every human life starts in relation, and it is through relations that a human individual emerges. With Martin Buber (1965), care ethicists start

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discussion with neither the individual nor the collective, but with the relation. In an encounter or sequence of encounters that can appropriately be called *caring*, one party acts as carer and the other as cared-for. Over time, in equal relations, the parties regularly exchange positions. Adult caring relations exhibit this mutuality.

However, many important relations are, by their nature, not equal relations, and mutuality cannot be expected. For example, the parent–infant relation is not one of equality. The parent can, *must*, do things for the infant that the infant cannot possibly do for the parent. In the wider community, other unequal relations are important: physician–patient, lawyer–client and teacher–pupil. Yet, although these potentially caring relations are not equal, both parties contribute to the establishment and maintenance of caring. In what follows, I refer to the carer as ‘she’ and the cared-for as ‘he’ in order to avoid the awkward s/he or repetition of ‘he or she’.

The *carer* is first of all *attentive*, and this quality will be central to the discussion in the second section of this paper, on listening. The attention of the carer is receptive. Its objective is to understand what the cared-for is experiencing—to hear and understand the needs expressed. From the perspective of care ethics, the teacher as carer is interested in the *expressed* needs of the cared-for, not simply the needs assumed by the school as an institution and the curriculum as a prescribed course of study. We can therefore anticipate a possible conflict that will have to be resolved by caring teachers: When should teachers put aside the assumed need to learn a specific aspect of subject matter and address the expressed need of the student for emotional support, moral direction, or shared human interest?

Second, as the carer attends, she is likely to undergo motivational displacement; that is, her motive energy will begin to flow toward the needs and objectives of the cared-for. This phase is often unproblematic for teachers; the student needs help with the solution of an academic problem, and the teacher provides that help. But sometimes the student needs something else and, as noted above, conflict can arise. Although the carer feels a tug toward helping, she may also feel that the student’s expressed need is somehow illegitimate. She may want to persuade the student to rethink his wants or interests.

After listening and reflecting, the carer must respond. If she can, she responds positively to the student’s expressed need. But, if there is a reason why she cannot respond positively to that need, she must still respond in a way that maintains the caring relation. There are many times when, as carers, we cannot satisfy the expressed need of the cared-for. Sometimes we lack the resources, and sometimes we disapprove of the need or how it has been expressed. In the latter case, it is especially important to find a mode of response that will keep the door of communication open. Instead of meeting the expressed need, the carer’s objective is to maintain the caring relation.

What role does the cared-for play in maintaining the caring relation? His role is both simple and crucial. He shows somehow that the caring has been received. He does not have to express gratitude. He may simply pursue an agreed-upon project with renewed energy, ask further questions, or smile and nod. Teachers sometimes

forget how dependent they are on the response of our students. Similarly, physicians depend on the responses of patients, social workers on those of clients, and parents on those of their infants. The response of the cared-for completes the caring relation. Without it, there is no caring relation—no matter how hard the carer has tried to care. This conclusion is basic to the idea of *caring as relation* (Noddings, 1984, 2007, 2010).

There is, however, an everyday sense of *caring* that concentrates on the conduct or character of the teacher, not the relation. When a teacher works conscientiously, perhaps very hard, to help her students to succeed, we often give her moral credit for caring. She seems to know what her students need, and acts faithfully on those beliefs. However, these are *assumed* needs, rather than expressed needs, and these teachers are often remembered as saying, ‘Some day you’ll thank me for this!’ I have called such teachers ‘virtue carers’, contrasting their mode of teaching with that of ‘relational carers’: they do not establish caring relations or engage in ‘caring-for’ as described in care ethics. As a result, their efforts to care often misfire, and the students who most need to be part of a caring relation suffer most.

Care ethics emphasises the difference between assumed needs and expressed needs. From this perspective, it is important not to confuse what the cared-for wants with that which we think he should want. We must listen, not just ‘tell’, assuming that we know what the other needs. So Martin Buber, also, in his positing of relation as ontologically basic and of dialogue as the basis of the relation in teaching claims that ‘The relation in education is one of pure dialogue’ (Buber, 1965, p. 98).

Some writers interested in care ethics put great emphasis on *empathy* (Hoffman, 2000; Slote, 2007), using it instead of *sympathy*. Martin Hoffman, for example, acknowledges two meanings of empathy: ‘empathy is the cognitive awareness of another person’s internal states, that is, his thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and intentions’ and ‘empathy is the vicarious affective response to another person’ (2000, p. 29). In his book he ‘deals with second type: affective empathy’ (2000, pp. 29–30). The first definition, however, is the one with which *empathy* entered the English vocabulary, and its dictionary definition still emphasises the intellectual identification with another’s feelings, thoughts or attitudes.

Many feelings are associated with caring as relation. A carer is concerned to realise a caring relation—however brief—in each encounter. She may feel sympathy (or empathy) even before the actual encounter. When we observe an accident, for example, we feel a rush of sympathy for the victim immediately. In other cases, sympathy is aroused when we listen to the cared-for. Thus, the condition—the expressed need—of the other moves us. It is this capacity to be moved by the affective condition of the other that teachers try to develop in students as part of their moral education.

### **Listening**

A carer is first of all attentive, and watches and listens. In her attitude, and sometimes explicitly, she asks the question posed by Simone Weil, ‘What are you going

through?’ (Weil, 1977, p. 51). The response of the cared-for to this question sets the stage for what the carer will do. Michael Fielding and Peter Moss place listening at the heart of teaching:

Listening to thought ... questions and answers of children and adults alike; struggling to make meaning from what is said ... Listening ... is one of the foundations of the educational project. (Fielding & Moss, 2011, p. 5)

Listening to the ideas of students is clearly important pedagogically. It is the very foundation of the powerful method of overt thinking used by Claparede and Piaget. The idea is to ask students to think aloud. The teacher urges the student, ‘Let me hear you think.’ At first, it may be frightening, but when students realise that their thinking will be respected, they enter the spirit of dialogue. Another way for teachers to profit from students’ thinking is to listen as they talk to one another. As students work together in pairs or informal small groups, the teacher may listen, remind them to treat each other with respect, make small suggestions, and even join the dialogue. When she hears the same error in several groups, she may bring the class together briefly to clarify matters. There is no blame attached to making errors; rather, mistakes can help to improve the teacher’s explanations as well as the students’ understanding. In this process, students not only learn the subject matter, they also get to know one another.

Listening is important emotionally as well as intellectually. A teacher-carer listening receptively to a student may hear that the student hates school and especially mathematics. How should the teacher respond? She is caught up in a real conflict. As one-caring, she must respond to the expressed need of the cared-for. She also has a clear responsibility to the school. Her job is to teach mathematics, and she must find a way to do this. She also has an intellectual responsibility to the field of her academic expertise, mathematics. Yet her most deeply felt moral responsibility is to the cared-for, her student. To respond as carer to him, she must put aside, temporarily, the demands of the institution. She needs time to build a relation of care and trust. This effort may require her to engage in dialogue with the student about matters other than mathematics. Today, in some of our communities, many students may be in need of such dialogue, yet there are pressures to ‘teach the subject’, and there is a danger of a relational carer giving up and settling for a virtue-caring attitude.

Good teachers must be allowed to use their professional and moral judgment in responding to the needs of their students. They will not ignore assumed needs—the curriculum cannot be ignored—but they will attempt to address the more basic expressed needs. When a relation of care and trust has been established, the teacher may elicit the student’s cooperation in tackling the assumed needs or, together, they may agree that the student might reasonably reject these needs and pursue another path in life. In either case, both teacher and student have accomplished something worthwhile. Time spent on building a relation of care and trust is not time wasted. The student will have the teacher’s support in

finding an honest—if divergent—path to educational fulfillment. What more has the student gained from this carer-teacher?

Trust, trust in the world, because this human being exists—that is the most inward achievement of the relation in education. Because this human being exists, meaninglessness, however hard pressed you are by it, cannot be the real truth. (Buber, 1965, p. 98)

There is another facet of listening closely connected to learning. *Believing* can be a powerful strategy in learning, involving listening receptively, becoming absorbed, fascinated. Receptive listening (attention) is at the heart of caring for human others, but it is also central to hearing the messages from books, art, music and nature.

### Thinking

It should be clear that caring requires thinking and the caring characteristic of caring relations has both cognitive and affective dimensions. Both the philosopher, Michael Slote (2007), and the psychologist, Martin Hoffman (2000), put great emphasis on the affective dimension of empathy. We respond empathically when we ‘feel’ what the other is going through or something congruent with the other’s feeling. Caring, as a way of being-in-the-world, prepares us to undergo such synchronous feelings.

But caring cannot be reduced to empathy. When we care, we sometimes respond immediately to an expressed need; the need is obvious. However, there are times when we must elicit further expression. We are sometimes too quick to say, ‘I know how you feel’, and misunderstandings arise easily. For this reason, we should strive for empathic accuracy (Ickes, 1997; Steuber, 2006). We have to ask questions and reflect on the answers. Dialogue is fundamental in building relations of care and trust. Within a well-established relation, we are more likely to achieve empathic accuracy.

There is a familiar difficulty here of attributing to the other feelings that we would have under similar conditions. Indeed, traditional philosophy and religion inadvertently support this error. We have been urged to ‘do unto others as you would have done unto you’, and as children we were often asked, ‘How would you feel if someone said that to you?’ Care ethics suggests that, as nearly as possible, we do unto others as they would have done unto them. Similarly, in teaching the young to be more sensitive—to be prepared to care—we ask them to think about how the other feels, not how they would feel in the same circumstances. The hope is that, gradually, they will come to understand that, when different people are involved, circumstances are never quite the same.

In the conflict mentioned earlier where the teacher is supposed to teach mathematics but recognises that the student needs something else, she must think how best to address the student’s expressed need. But there are other students whose needs must also be met, and in many cases, their expressed needs match the needs assumed by the school and its prescribed curriculum. These students are ready to

learn what is prescribed. This is always a difficult situation, but the current ways of organising classes for instruction have made it even more difficult.

Continuity is a concept often neglected in educational theory. John Dewey made continuity and interaction the fundamental criteria of educational experience (1963[1938]). A truly educational experience must be connected to past and future educational experiences and to other on-going life experiences. Dewey spoke of them as the 'longitudinal and lateral aspects of experience' (1963, p. 44). Teachers must find a way to address both. It is easier to ensure continuity of educational experience if teachers and students stay together for, say, three years rather than the conventional one year (Noddings, 1992). Clearly, a teacher in her second or third year with the same students knows what they have studied in the past year, and she has had time to build the all-important relations of care and trust. Continuity of persons and place increase the possibility that there will be continuity in educational experience.

The lateral dimension is more difficult for most teachers, especially at the secondary or high school level. Here the challenge is to connect the various subjects that students are required to study, and to ensure that high school teachers are teachers of the whole child as well as teachers of their own subject. E. O. Wilson, biologist and Harvard professor, has argued that scholars of the future will have to know a great deal beyond their specialities. He writes of 'an inevitability to the unity of knowledge' (2006, p. 137). He recommends starting each set of lessons with the big idea or problem that generates the study, not with details for which students can see no reason. Then, as study moves along and the details are learned in context, 'proceed laterally ... into the consequences of the phenomenon to history, religion, ethics, and the creative arts' (Wilson, 2006, p. 131). Make connections longitudinally within a discipline and laterally across disciplines.

This kind of disciplinary and interdisciplinary thinking is actually generated by a thoughtful consideration of what it means to be a caring teacher. If we are to take the expressed needs of students seriously, we must continually build our own store of knowledge in order to respond intelligently to their needs and interests. Thus, we do not have to know as much biology as the biology teacher or as much literature as the English teacher, but we do have to know how our own subject connects with these subjects.

*Caring also implies competence.* Policymakers have made a mistake in insisting that people preparing to teach, say, mathematics should take exactly the same courses as any other student majoring in mathematics. In fact, teachers need a richer, broader education:

Competent teachers who, as carers, want to respond to the voiced and unvoiced needs of their students must have what might be called latitudinal knowledge. They should be able to draw on literature, history, politics, religion, philosophy, and the arts in ways that enrich their daily teaching and offer multiple possibilities for students to make connections with the great existential questions as well as questions of current social life. (Noddings, 1999, p. 215)

Given the variety and legitimacy of the needs expressed by students, teachers should have unusually broad intellectual competence.

### **Creating a climate for caring**

A climate in which caring relations can flourish should be a goal for all teachers and educational policymakers. In such a climate, we can best meet individual needs, impart knowledge, and encourage the development of moral people. Every teacher is a moral educator, and social/moral issues should be discussed in every class as they arise. A climate of care and trust is one in which most people will want to do the right thing, will want to be good. We need to spend time in our classrooms talking about the moral problems we all face—the temptation to cheat, to feel envy, fear, anger—and ways to manage them.

In discussing moral education today, as mentioned earlier, some psychologists put great emphasis on empathy. The idea is to encourage children to learn to ‘read’ and respond appropriately to the feelings of others. There are at least two cautions for teachers to observe in teaching empathy. The first, noted before, is that the idea of empathy is too often interpreted with reference to the self. The person supposedly empathising projects herself into the other’s situation and asks how *she* would feel under those conditions. But the empathy of care ethics is other-oriented, not self-oriented. The second difficulty is that, often, not enough time is spent attending receptively to the other. We are too quick to assume that we know what the other is feeling. Our lack of empathic accuracy is partly a result of self-reference, but even when that mistake is avoided, we simply do not know the other well enough to make an accurate reading.

In talks with teachers about this approach, I am often asked how they can ‘do this’—establish a climate of care—‘on top of all the other demands’. My answer is that establishing such a climate is not ‘on top’ of other things, it is *underneath* all we do as teachers. When that climate is established and maintained, everything else goes better.

The academic demands on teachers today are increasingly misdirected. Standardisation requires the same curriculum for all regardless of interests or aptitudes, with achievement measured quantitatively by test scores. Teacher quality, in turn, is judged by student test scores. Almost explicitly, the aim of education is to gain high test scores. What has happened to the idea that education should help people to find out what they are good at, what they would like to do in life, and how they might live their lives as individuals, friends, parents and citizens?

Change is needed, but it will be very difficult. All over the world, thoughtful educators now emphasise the need to place cooperation over competition. This does not mean to eliminate competition entirely; some competition is both necessary and healthy. At its best, it helps us to improve performances and turn out better products. In the 21st century, however, recognition of our global interdependence and a commitment to cooperation must replace the 20th-century emphasis on competition.

Care ethics endorses this new spirit of global cooperation and advises that we should rethink much of what we do in schools to prepare students for this new world. Academic achievement, for example, should not be evaluated entirely by how much higher one scores than others on a standardised test or by one's rank as measured by grade-point average (GPA). Yet that is exactly the accepted measure of educational success today in the United States, and students often register for Advanced Placement courses to increase their GPA. It is appropriate that students receive college credit when they pass Advance Placement tests, but why should excellence in such courses gain more high school credit? Why is an 'A' in calculus worth more than an 'A' in metal shop? We do a disservice to both students when we put a higher value on the calculus grade than an equally well-earned grade in metal shop. The future welder or metal craftsman is warned that his contribution to the world of work is not highly valued, and the calculus student is confirmed in his belief that few people would study calculus without some extrinsic reward. To preserve and enhance our democracy, we must acknowledge our interdependence and teach our young people to appreciate it at both national and international levels. Suppose we stopped awarding extra points for Advanced Placement and Honors courses. Suppose, instead, we called them courses for the passionately interested? That would be a powerful first step in renewing integrity to the search for knowledge.

Two great educational aims are impeded by our continued mode of evaluating students' achievement by where they stand with respect to their peers. The newly (and wisely) embraced aim of worldwide cooperation is impeded by the fierce competition encouraged in our schools. Most thoughtful people today recognise that nations must work together for global peace and prosperity, but the spirit of 20th-century competition still dominates in our schools. Second, this competitive spirit and the notion that economic motives should drive schooling undermine the richest aims of education: full, moral, happy lives; generous concern for the welfare of others; finding out what one is fitted to do occupationally. On this last, Dewey said, 'To find out what one is fitted to do and to secure an opportunity to do it is the key to happiness' (1916, p. 308). We give students little help toward this key aim. Instead, we tell them simply to study what we order, go to college, and all will be well.

We need a system of evaluation that considers both assumed needs and expressed needs. There are some things that all students need to know and be able to do, but what are these 'things', and where should they be addressed in the curriculum? Then there are things that individual students *want* to learn. Well-designed education should help them to discover what they might want to do and help them both to explore areas of interest and to evaluate their own aptitude in an area of choice. A truly useful form of evaluation would tell students and parents how their children are doing on the universal requirements and in the specialities they have chosen. A good system of education would also make it possible for students to try out specialities and change them from year to year. We should seek modes of evaluation that will encourage students to cooperate—to work together



to achieve universal competence, to identify and respect a large range of talents, to provide help to students in finding out what they are suited to do. It is counter-productive to continue with modes of evaluation that rank all students from top to bottom on tasks forced on them, on which they have no choice and no opportunity to exercise their individual capabilities.

### **Extending the moral climate**

Good teachers, like good parents, hope that the personal relations formed will enhance the likelihood that their students will live in and promote a public climate in which caring relations will continue to flourish. An important task for teachers is to connect the moral worlds of school and public life. At the present time, we are plagued by cheating at every level in our schools. Because they are seeking academic advantage, not knowledge, students cheat in classroom tests and the tests on which college admission is decided, plagiarise essays—sometimes buying them on the internet—and sometimes hire other people to take their tests. Teachers and administrators, fearing the loss of jobs and financial support for their schools, falsify test results and misrepresent final scores.

Teachers should spend time talking with their students about the moral foundation of the knowledge world. Instead of increasing surveillance, devising more and more sophisticated ways of detecting cheating, and imposing harsher punishment for infractions, teachers should emphasise our mutual dependence on honesty in the quest for truth. They might mention, for example, that the philosopher C. S. Peirce argued for the primacy of ethics over science (Thompson, 1963). Since the truths uncovered by science depend on continued inquiry, scientists must first of all be committed to the honesty on which continued inquiry depends. We do not just hurt ourselves (as some teachers like to say) when we cheat, and we do not simply hurt others with whom we compete unfairly, we undermine the whole enterprise of knowledge seeking. At an even deeper level, we damage (and sometimes destroy) the structure on which relations of care and trust are built. It is hard to exaggerate the moral importance of these discussions which should be opened and extended regularly.

While it is certainly possible for students today to reject cheating, the system makes it increasingly difficult for them to do so. Too much is made to depend on high test scores, admission to a prestigious college, and eventually a high-paying job. Indeed, we come close to encouraging the ‘doublethink’ that Orwell later described in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949): on the one hand students believe that education encourages virtue, good citizenship, and a full personal life; on the other, they believe that the purpose of education is economic well-being and, because that is all-important, they are justified in distorting the first set of aims. Held in balance, these aims need not be contradictory, but when one dominates all others, we are in the land of doublethink.

Caring teachers hope that their students will take a caring attitude with them into both professional and civic life. As noted earlier, *listening* is fundamental in

caring. As we teach critical thinking, listening should be continually emphasised. Cass Sunstein (2009) has reminded us that we now live in a world characterised by group polarisation. Within a group, common beliefs unite us; between groups, differing beliefs divide us. Too often, we do not even listen to the ideas or arguments made by those in an ‘other’ group, and we fail to challenge faulty arguments made by those in our own group. We simply cling to a party line.

The task of getting students to listen receptively to others has both intellectual and moral connotations. Receptive listening is the very heart of caring relations. It is also, as mentioned earlier, a powerful strategy for learning. But more than simple learning is at stake intellectually. We must understand opposing views if we are to defend our own intelligently. John Stuart Mill argued eloquently that:

He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side; if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion. (1993[1859], p. 43)

The result, as we see over and over again, is that people stubbornly stick to the opinions voiced by ‘their’ group.

Receptive listening is a powerful intellectual tool. But, from the perspective of care theory, it is more than that; it is the basic attitude that characterises relations of care and trust—the personal relation of teaching extolled by Macmurray. The other may sometimes be right, and we should be persuadable. Even when the other is wrong, however, we should respond with care to his or her need for human regard. It is the hope of all caring teachers that their students will enter the adult world prepared to care.

### Notes on contributor

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