

Ontological Tensions in the Ethics of Pedagogical Relations of Care

Mel Kutner

University of Georgia

In “Reciprocity, Exchange, and Indebtedness in Noddings’s Concept of Care,” Jessica Lussier argues that while Nel Noddings’s ethics of care is foundational to how teaching is conceived as a profession of care and education as an affective relational pursuit, Noddings’s theorization is susceptible to being co-opted by economic logics because it requires reciprocity between the “care-giver” and the “cared-for;” in which the “care-giver” is assumed to be a teacher and the “cared-for,” students. This turns what Lussier sees as a foundational ethical obligation of the pedagogical relationship into a transactional calculus, and risks setting students up to become what Wozniack calls “an indebted man:” a figure whose debts are not monetary, but emotional, psychic, and temporal; a subject whose agency is subject-to something outside of itself.

Educational scholars have described the ways policies and discourses that emphasize individual responsibility, competition, and technical efficiency reframe schooling as a strategic investment (for the country, community, or individual) and the educator as responsible for producing a return in the form of student performance on standardized exams. Lussier’s paper provides a fresh perspective by considering how the economic logics reframing the purposes of teaching and learning in general may affect students as subjects of the system of education and in relation to teachers. However, we already live in a context where students are expected to become life-long learners, not from the joy of learning or knowledge, but in order to be flexible and responsive to the workplace.¹ We live in a proliferation of digital media tools that encourage self-surveillance of one’s body, finances, interactions, and activities, which are encoded with moral implications about productivity and cost to social resources that minimize historical context and social interdependence.² Even the ideal of self-care, of disrupting the affective circuits of neoliberal logics, works within

discourses that put the onus on the individual (and most notably women) to more efficiently manage their time to find “work-life balance” while maintaining the status quo.³ In other words, the threat of the “indebted man” seems less of a threat and more like a reality of late-capitalism where we are already subject to what Berlant describes as the “crisis of ordinariness” and the cruel optimism that drives us to seek out an impossible “good life.”⁴

Whether or not Noddings’s concept of care *created* the conditions for economic logics to infiltrate into education and color the affective dimension of teaching and learning, it seems fair to say that transactional logics, as well as professional and personal precarity, are already here. By focusing on Noddings’s ontological theorization of care and examining the shifts that occur in Rotteburg’s “gift” and Rocha’s “offering,” Lussier’s paper illustrates how different ontological constructions of subjectivity are imbricated within ethical arguments for pedagogical practices. I am interested in leaning into these moves, as I think they also reveal a tension that sits at the heart of theorizing the ethics of pedagogical relationships in schooling.

Although goals and hopes for education may differ, and indeed may be conflicting, education is an enterprise that is future-oriented. Education for democratic society, for social or racial justice, for knowledge development and curiosity, for art and beauty and creation, even for economic gain: each purpose implies different roles and responsibilities for teachers and students, conceived within epistemological arguments about what constitutes thinking and knowledge. Furthermore, how we understand the moments, interactions, and relationships of learning is dependent upon ontological parameters related to experience, agency, and causality.

In particular, it seems important to unpack causality to examine the ethics of pedagogical relationships, as these are questions about what types of interactions will affect students’ future abilities to be, do, think, or act. The purpose of such evaluations, from a normative ethical standpoint, is to evaluate and promote interactions which will produce the ‘best’ results. For any project of ethics to be possible, we have to assume that the future is something that *can* be predicted and manipulated, in the present. This process, put to service

for a different purpose, follows a similar pattern of the transactional logics that project economic evaluations.

This projection of an assumed causality also seems to be the ontological structure within which Noddings theorizes “care” as entailing “reciprocity,” as well as why it seems susceptible to being co-opted by transactional logics. As Lussier notes, Noddings took pains to contrast her notion of reciprocity in contrast to the contractual version that had its origins in the social contract theory and liberal political philosophy. While she may have had different political and ethical commitments, Noddings developed her concept of care using some of the same assumptions about the subject and causality that structure humanism and empiricism. For example, Lussier draws connections between Noddings’s “care,” Arendt’s “natality,” and Ruttenberg’s “gift” by framing all three approaches as reflecting an ethics of interdependence but that all require a form of reciprocity. In her analysis, Lussier focuses on the different degrees to which the “cared-for” is required to respond. I am interested in how all three relationships are defined through a general projection of an assumed future. Furthermore, I find this approach more fruitful for considering the out Noddings gave herself, as leaving open the possibility for reciprocity to be covered with the generalized “Leading a good life” – a point which Lussier’s paper mentions but left me curious to hear a more in-depth response.

In Noddings’s “care,” it’s the assumption of a future recognition from the cared-for to the care-giver; “natality” implies that the subject can and *will* freely interact within a shared political world; and, the gift definitionally assumes that there is someone who actively receives it. In suggesting that Rocha’s “offering” is a better framing than Noddings’s “care,” Lussier emphasizes that the “offering” is different from the other three concepts because it emphasizes students’ ability to refuse or consent. This construction expands the potential future possibilities for students as the receivers of pedagogical care. However, keeping the power of “offering” with the ability of the student to refuse left me to wondering whether students should be granted the autonomy to opt into or out of instruction as a remedy to the influence of economic logics in education. While this idea is intriguing, it also would seem to magnify instead

of nullify the influence of neoliberal logics on upholding individual choice/responsibility, free-market competition, and frame the pedagogical relationship as one of customer (student/family) and service provider (educator). I also wonder what it may imply for a “post-truth” context and our responsibilities for challenging the misinformation or disinformation students may bring with them into a classroom.

More than allowing for student’s response, Rocha’s “offering” opens to indeterminacy of both the outcome and the parameters of what constitutes the “offering” itself: “the teacher never knows for certain that an offering is given; the exchange is never cleared or realized. The teacher can only be present...with the hope of showing something real, a hope without expectation or confirmation”²⁵

Although Rocha’s development of the “offering” is presented and theorized within phenomenology, and is not directly attributed to Derridian post structuralism, indeterminacy is crucial to Derrida’s very specific theorization of hospitality and non-ethical ethics; concepts which Lussier notes influenced both Rocha and Ruitenberg’s elaborations of alternatives to pedagogical “care.”

Where normative ethics are constructed from projections of what one should do to ensure the best outcome, for Derrida ethics happens when one does not know what to do but must respond anyway.⁶ Derrida lays out how this approach represents an intentional resistance to normative liberal humanist ontology by attempting to recast ethics as something that serves to reference a historical geopolitical context, which he charges gives primacy to political-economic forces and their efforts to identify what “*actually* happened.” For Derrida ethical events “necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic” between Real or “effectivity or actuality” and Not Real, or “a non-presence, an ideality.”⁷ In other words, they disrupt and trouble concepts of causality and experience within humanist ontology and empiricism. This is further illustrated in Derrida’s comment that “Inheritance is never a given, it is always a task,”⁸ a statement that serves to illustrate his “hauntology” and stands in contrast to the

ontological understanding of “care” as an inherited, given, or essential structure of human experience. In other words, for Derrida hospitality is not something that originates with an offering or a gift, rather it is what happens only in the afterwards, as a welcoming response to whatever stranger has appeared; thus, Derrida’s emphasis on an ethics of justice and democracies that are “to-come.”

Lussier’s reading of the transactional logics of reciprocity in Noddings’s ontological conception of care illustrate a tension in education; between being responsive to the affective relationality with individual students and being responsible for a larger promise and project of schooling, between an expansive present and a projected future. Derrida’s reconfiguration of ethics cannot tell the teacher what or how to be but may offer an invitation for considering the incongruities or tensions that occur in models of ethics of pedagogical relations which reflect different conceptions of the affective-relational dimension of subjects engaging in thinking and learning together.

1 Mark Olssen, “Understanding the mechanisms of neoliberal control: Lifelong learning, flexibility and knowledge capitalism,” *International Journal of lifelong education* 25, no. 3 (2006): 213-230.

2 Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, eds. *New femininities: Postfeminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity* (New York: Springer, 2013).

3 Catherine Rottenberg, “The rise of neoliberal feminism,” *Cultural studies* 28, no. 3 (2014): 418-437.

4 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2008).

5 Samuel D. Rocha, “Folk phenomenology and the offering of teaching,” *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 13, no. 2 (2016): 126.

6 Madeleine Fagan, “Jacques Derrida: The Im-Possibility of Responsibility” in *In Ethics and Politics after Poststructuralism: Levinas, Derrida and Nancy* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 70-98.

7 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and*

the New International, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 78.

8 Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 67.