

## An Ethics of Hesitant Learning: The Caring Justice of Levinas and Derrida.

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### INTRODUCTION

Since the ground-breaking work by Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, caring has become a major issue in educational ethics. While the implications of caring have been extended to many areas,<sup>1</sup> the relation of caring to rational justice has remained contentious. In this paper I want to return to this issue by exploring the similarities between caring and the ethical concerns of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. I will argue that a hesitant and aporetic “caring justice” — a term I borrow from Axel Honneth<sup>2</sup> — preserves the empirical sense of asymmetrical responsibility which, I suggest, inspires caring. The moments in which such responsibility is exposed, moreover, punctuate all classroom communication but all-too-easily escape our notice. This paper aims to inspire a new awareness of this ethically rich drama that runs through education.

While Nel Noddings has noted a possible connection between the work of Levinas and Derrida and her own,<sup>3</sup> the parallels have yet to benefit from a full and detailed introduction. Such an introduction would be helpful, I believe, as the fresh perspectives of contemporary French thought are now enriching our field. Although I cannot promise to do justice to the task in the time available, I hope that I can initiate a conversation between the two.

In the next section I want to look at the empirical inseparability from the Other that, I will suggest, inspires the work of both Noddings and Levinas. I shall then go on to explain how Derrida relates this empiricist aspect to the question of judgment, both ethical and cognitive. Finally, I will argue that at every moment of judgment in the classroom one is exposed to a pressing responsibility for the Other that is characteristic of the ethics of care. These moments, I shall argue, transcend the continuity of the classroom and open windows for our interactions with students.

### THE EMPIRICISM OF CARE

Emmanuel Levinas’s lifelong concern for the face-to-face encounter was initially conceived of as foundational. But, as Derrida noted in his essay “Violence and Metaphysics,” Levinas’s foundational philosophy conflicts with his empiricism. Empiricism — which Derrida also identifies in his own work<sup>4</sup> — is not only at the heart of Levinas’s work but also inspires the literature on caring.

Derrida’s does not use “empiricism” in its common visual sense. Like most twentieth-century French thinkers, Levinas is critical of Western ocularcentric (visual) bias that, he claims, results in the world of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. Vision campaigns for a world of solid objects with clearly defined edges to ensure care-free separation. In a world of such objects, other people appear to me as moveable furnishings (*meubles*) — that I can rearrange or even dispose of unless opposed by a stronger will.

Levinas suggests that this tidy visual world is not the whole story. It is transcended in face-to-face interaction, where speech “cuts across the vision of forms”<sup>5</sup> and denies neat-edged closure. In the to-and-fro of conversation, he writes, closure is ever evasive. The ambiguity of language fails to satisfy the desires of speaker and listener for stable agreed meaning and mutual recognition. The content of speech — the Said (*Dit*) — strives for universality and solidity. Yet, in the failure of that striving, the Saying (*Dire*) is revealed — conversations continue and are not discreet exchanges of information. Simon Critchley writes that the Saying:

is precisely nothing that can be Said; it is rather the perpetual undoing of the Said that occurs in running against [the Said’s] limits...the Saying can only be comprehended in its incomprehensibility, in its disruption or interruption of the Said. (*ED* 43)

In schools, as in all other institutions, attention is paid only to the universality of the Said. The knowledge we intend our students to gain exists wholly within its bounds; power-hierarchies try to make the Saying invisible behind the Said, promising absolution for actions committed in the anonymity of title and job description. The uncaring teacher, for example, can avoid responsibility for individual students by identifying with the factory-like repetitive cycles of the school. The students become “just another Monday morning math class,” and he then becomes just another math teacher. The quest for teacher-proof curricula only shows how the “safest” educational paths dream of obliterating the Saying with the Said.

Yet there is no Said without Saying. In Saying we are vulnerable to the unknowable Other — our dependence upon, and responsibility for, the Other is exposed. When the words Said fail me, I am exposed as the one-Saying. Language fails me by refusing to mean to Others what I want it to mean. In this unconfined aspect of communication, Levinas claims, is hope.

The Saying can also be revealed behind the Said, Levinas writes, in the “ethical resistance” offered by the Other who: “can oppose to me a struggle, that is, oppose to the force that strikes him not a force of resistance, but the very *unforseeableness* of his reaction” (*TI* 199).

Alphonso Lingis helps to explain another aspect of the Saying by recounting his experiences at his mother’s deathbed. No words seemed appropriate — “It’ll be alright, Mom!” — but yet he felt he had to speak. “Anything one tries to say sounds vacuous and absurd in one’s mouth,” he writes:

[T]he problem is not simply that you do not have the skills in speaking or that you cannot come up with the right things to say because you have no experience in this kind of situation, but that language itself does not have the powers. There is not, in the words and the combinatory possibilities of language, the power to say what has to be said. Yet you have to be there, and you have to say something.<sup>6</sup>

In such situations, then, there is no adequate Said. Yet, in the imperative to speak that we feel, we find a situation in which it is the Saying that matters. It matters that *I* am there, speaking, sharing a proximity and uncertainty with the Other. This alone testifies to the very extent to which we are implicated in each others’ lives.

Levinas notes that we are all born into a world of maternal Saying.<sup>7</sup> That someone is Saying something matters to us long before we can tell what is being

Said. This vulnerable ethical interaction does not occur in a spatial relation to the Other that can be understood in terms of Euclidean geometry — no map-like understanding of being separate from (m)Other is innate. Before we can conceive of such a separation we are in *proximity*, Levinas writes. And it is into this very same uncertain yet responsible proximity that we are returned in our failures of articulation. The Saying exposes our non-separation from the Other. Since I cannot separate myself from Others, I cannot discard them as I can, say, throw away some *thing*. Therefore, *I cannot limit my responsibility for the Other with whom I am face-to-face*. My responsibility for them clings to me beyond my control. *I am my brother's keeper*.

Like Levinas, Noddings recognizes that an ethical caring depends upon the “natural caring” that stems from one’s maternal rearing. She writes: “We love, not because we are required to love but because our natural relatedness gives birth to love. It is this love, this natural caring, that makes the ethical possible.”<sup>8</sup> Noddings also acknowledges something like Levinas’s ethical resistance in the openness of conversation. She writes: “Dialogue is open-ended; that is, in a genuine dialogue, neither party knows at the outset what the outcome will be.”<sup>9</sup> But both she and Levinas go beyond what Derrida calls the “empiricism” that is present in, and inspires, caring. Empiricism is, Derrida writes: “the *dream* of a purely *heterological* thought at its source. A *pure* thought of *pure* difference. Empiricism is its philosophical name, its metaphysical pretension or modesty. We say *dream* because it must vanish *at daybreak*, as soon as language awakens.”<sup>10</sup> The ethical *empirical* Saying, then, evaporates at the appearance of the Said. The very language, with which we try to incorporate such pure difference into a philosophical text, destroys it.

Levinas and Noddings both try to argue for a smooth incorporation of the radical ethical encounter of care within a larger ethical project. They lose their empiricism at the point at which they move from the natural, empirical, caring. In Levinas’s case, this occurs in his attempt to reconstruct a rationality from the face-to-face (for example, *TI* 212-14). For Noddings, meanwhile, the difference comes with her attempts to see the Other as a person with her/his own subjectivity and with her/his own ego. This again puts her at odds with Levinas.<sup>11</sup> Her difference with Levinas, however, brings her closer to the writings of Derrida. But, as I shall explain, Derrida’s position in this instance makes demands for an aporetic ethics of hesitation that can expand our understanding of caring in education.

#### DERRIDA AND THE APORIAS OF CARING JUSTICE

Noddings goes beyond the empirical when she writes that the teacher, “must see things through the eyes of her student in order to teach him” or when she writes that a one-caring meets the cared-for “as a *subject*” (*CFA* 70, 72). These words are important because they show how the Other for whom I care cannot be just Other but must also be like me. The first quotation also suggests that ocularcentric universality must coexist with ethical proximity. Without this recognition of the Other as like me, the caring relation can easily become a relationship of exploitation, with the cared-for exploiting the one-caring, who cannot recognize that exploitation.

In his early essay “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida seems close to this position, although he suggests that the schism between justice and care is deeper and more unsettling than Noddings acknowledges. Levinas denies that the Other is alter ego and insists on the asymmetry of Self and Other, but Derrida writes:

If the Other were not recognized as a transcendental alter *ego*, it would be entirely in the world and not, as ego, the origin of the world. To refuse to see in it an ego in this sense is, within the ethical order, the very gesture of all violence. If the Other was not recognized as ego, its entire alterity would collapse. (*VM* 125)

The Other must be both wholly Other and, at the same time, an ego like me. Both symmetry and asymmetry; similarity and difference. Thus Noddings’s position is indeed similar to Derrida’s reformulation of Levinasian ethics.<sup>12</sup>

But does caring, as usually formulated, capture what Derrida goes on to call the “absurdity” and “impossibility” of this both/and combination? Noddings needed to combine the alterity of the Other with the sameness of the egoity of the Other in what she calls “ethical caring.” But this conception of the Other as ego (equal to me) makes ethical caring itself both particular and universal; caring and justice. Noddings is, therefore, on the aporetic territory of both/and.

Although she refers to the relation between caring and justice as incompatible, Noddings’s account of caring seems to be remarkably free from an inherent impossibility or absurdity. She does perceive a schism to exist between her account of an ethic of care and an ethic of justice. But, to Derrida, it is between the empirical openness to the Other before language and the arrival of universal (philosophical) language that the gap cannot be smoothly bridged. To Derrida, then, any philosophical exploration of caring is impossible, by which I mean that any such investigation would be riddled with aporias — the condition of impossibility. I shall further explain Derrida’s inherent tension of caring through a reading of his “Force of Law.”<sup>13</sup>

In this essay, Derrida makes the distinction between two types of justice: in French, *droit* and *juste*. *Droit* — “right,” “law” — resembles “justice” in the care/justice debate. It is universal and intelligible and can be written down and used to guide future judgment. But *droit* is not an idealization of the mechanism of law. It is not the case that *droit* represents the way in which unbiased and universal legal judgments are made — by the application of universal law and rights. *Droit* is, rather, the self-understanding that accompanies our sense of the law, but it is only a partial understanding.

*Juste*, on the other hand, has little to do with “justice” in the care/justice debate. But it has everything to do with the empirical openness to the Other which I have identified with Levinas and as the inspiration for the ethics of care. Yet for Derrida, as we shall see, the openness to the Other of care is involved in the process of ethical and legal judgment, and so the connotation of justice is still needed. Thus, I shall translate the adjective as “caring (*juste*)” and the noun as “caring justice (*juste*).”

Like Noddings and Levinas, Derrida believes that caring justice (*juste*) is born out of attention to many particular Others. It is defined by its very plurality. Derrida writes, for example, that “the condition of all possible caring justice (*juste*)” would

be, “to address oneself to the Other in the language of the Other” (FL 949). Caring justice (*juste*), then, is an openness to the Other before universal language or reason. It is, in Noddings’s terms, an engrossment with the Other. But this is impossible, Derrida tells us, in that it is excluded by law — in that law assumes a universality by which it can be applied to everyone.

We live in a world where there is always more than one Other. We are surrounded by different voices, different tongues. When we do not address ourselves to every singular voice, caring justice (*juste*) is denied. Yet this plurality cannot be collapsed into any unified narrative. It responds to the singularity of the Other, of each Other. As I explained in the previous section, I take such a radical openness to the Other to be the inspiration for the literature on caring — the inseparability from the Other that is born (as we are) in the maternal bond.

Law (*droit*), Derrida writes, which is able to be written, is related to caring justice (*juste*) through deconstruction. Deconstruction — a word notoriously associated with Derrida’s work — is a word that he does not claim willingly, and which he seldom defines. The reason for this may perhaps be clear from the attempts at a definition which he has offered. In an early interview Derrida said that to “deconstruct” something would be: “to think — in the most faithful, interior way — the structured genealogy of [its] concepts, but at the same time to determine — from a certain exterior that is unqualifiable or unnameable by [it] — what this history has been able to...forbid.”<sup>14</sup> The *both/and* theme of this passage — both *inside* and *outside* a tradition of thought; both continuity and discontinuity — makes the task of defining something problematic, for a definition seeks to enclose some meanings and exclude other meanings. But the orientation of deconstruction towards what is forbidden explains its openness to the radical otherness of the Other in Levinas. Thus, Derrida writes in “Force of Law”:

it is this deconstructible structure of law (*droit*)...that also insures the possibility of deconstruction. Caring justice (*juste*) in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible. No more than deconstruction itself, if such a thing exists. Deconstruction is caring justice (*juste*) (FL 945).

Deconstruction is the process of transition between the written, universal law and the many particularities that are the voices of Others. Law, in its universal language, cannot be made to converse at once with all Others, each in their idiomatic languages. Thus, a synthesis of caring justice (*juste*) and law (*droit*) is not possible. Both need each other, Derrida writes, yet there is always — necessarily — a gap between them. Law (*droit*) can never reach caring justice (*juste*) despite its constant striving.

It is this aporetic relation between universal and the particular that makes Derrida’s essay so important. Derrida extends Levinas’s concept of responsibility for the Other by stressing this unreconcilable tension between the universal and the particular; between the legal and the ethical; between rights (*droit*) and caring justice (*juste*). He does not write of a single aporia, however, but of three.

The first is the *aporia of suspension*. For a decision to show caring justice (*juste*), he writes, there must both be a continuity of legal precedent and the discontinuity of a fresh judgment with respect to each particular case. He writes:

it must, in its proper moment, if there is one, be both regulated and without regulation: it must conserve the law and destroy it or suspend it enough to have to reinvent it in each case, rejustify it, at least reinvent it in the reaffirmation and the new and free confirmation of its principle (*FL* 961).

Thus caring justice cannot be simply the product of a legal machine, but must stem from a fresh and complete re-engineering of that machine. It demands both lineage and rupture.

The second aporia of caring justice (*juste*) is the *aporia of undecidability*. There must be a decision between the continuous and the discontinuous, or between different singular Others. As Derrida warns us:

A decision that didn't go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision, it would only be the programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process. It might be legal; it would not be caring [*juste*]...And once the ordeal of the undecidable is past (if that is possible), the decision has again followed a rule or given itself a rule, invented it or reinvented, reaffirmed it, it is no longer *presently* fully caring [*juste*] (*FL* 963).

Caring justice (*juste*), then, demands the experience of undecidability but then, when we look back at an eventual decision (if there is one), we reconstruct the discontinuity of undecidability with brush-strokes of continuity. Hidden in the picture, though is a paralysis of indecision.

But one *must* decide. Here the third aporia — the *aporia of urgency* — comes into play. Ethical decisions cannot wait — a decision *has* to be made. Derrida cites Kierkegaard: “‘The instant of decision is a madness’ — This is particularly true in the instant of the caring [*juste*] decision that must rend time and defy dialectics. It is a madness” (*FL* 967). One *has* to decide, but a caring [*juste*] decision is impossible — this very mad impossibility makes care possible.

Let me relate these aporias to the earlier section where I suggested that a radical openness to the Other was the empirical origin of an ethics of care. In treating the Other both as Other and as an ego, Noddings is herself bringing in a non-empirical dimension into the caring encounter. The absurd, impossible or aporetic quality of this both/and is, however, only marginal in her writing. Derrida claims that caring, based upon a radical openness to alterity, can be preserved only as a result of the aporias of suspension, undecidability and urgency. Caring justice comes, then, from the failure of fluency, from an ethical hesitation in which the Said reveals its Saying.

#### THE HESITATIONS OF LEARNING

The aporia of undecidability alone would bring procrastination. But the aporia of urgency forces this into an instant of hesitation. Between the universal and the particular, as Kierkegaard well knew, one must leap. Levinas's contribution is this: to leap with the Other, as in conversation, is to be implicated and responsible beyond both history and understanding.

This exposure to responsibility — the empirical heart of caring — occurs in two sets of situations which punctuate classrooms. One is the face-to-face encounter in which we are exposed to the troubling proximity of the Other. The warmth of his/her breath, the engagement with the Other alone that strips away any vestiges of power. As an educator engages one-on-one with a student, the safe anonymity of

power difference is constantly being re-negotiated in the uncomfortable ambiguities of speech. I speak to my student by aiming my words at an image of them in which I imagine them contained. But my words miss the mark, and I encounter her/him as Other. In the ethical resistance offered by the student's face is a confounding of any power I might have claimed.

But, as the last section showed, there is a second set of situations where we sense the ethical vulnerability and responsibility of caring in education. These are the moments of hesitation which characterize judgment — and not only the legal and ethical judgment addressed in Derrida's essay "Force of Law." In a student's *cognitive* judgments we also share with them a desire to account for the plural particularity of experience with the universality of a language-based system — in this case knowledge. Understanding constantly courts the empirical just as the universality of law (*droit*) is constantly re-invented before the particularity of caring justice (*juste*). To learn from an experience, a student must feel the uncertain divergence of plural particularities before subsuming them beneath a single voice of understanding. In such a hesitant moment — as when one is in the moment of a caring (*juste*) decision — one is ethically exposed. One is unsure of one's own boundaries and he limits of one's liability.

This hesitation of understanding is well-known to the sensitive researcher who, with patience and uncertainty, observes the phenomena to be studied and makes only cautious steps towards understanding. This dynamic of engrossment is displayed by students of the complex. And it is found in cooperative situations — even if not literally face-to-face. If students are crowded around a project on a table, eyes fixed on the task at hand, speaking in bursts with little interpersonal interaction, then the ethical content might appear to be as vacant as it is for generals similarly gathered around a campaign map. But it is there in the negotiations and uncertainties of the project: the shared hesitation which may all-too-easily be drowned by a snickering caused by the embarrassment of interaction, or by disagreements.

And yes, maybe it's obvious: the aporias of undecidability and urgency are both familiar to any student taking a multiple choice or true/false test! There is indeed an ethical dimension to this hesitation. When students try to guess the motivations of the teacher, when they try to pick out trick questions or otherwise tag on to the thinking of the teacher, they are hesitating ethically. They are revealed in their ethical proximity with the teacher. Yet, if the exam has obviously been statistically randomized by a brain of silicon, this process is stifled. The teacher becomes a powerless victim of the same bureaucracy that necessitated the exam.

Moments of hesitation riddle our educational experiences, and yet they are all-too-often invisible to our critical studies of the classroom. In these moments, however, we are exposed with an important ethical sensitivity.

The very question of hesitation, of the stammer, raises the question of the body and its openness to the elemental world in breathing. Within the ethical vulnerability of the Saying the boundaries between spiritual and material fall away. In breathing we expose ourselves as passive — dependent on the elemental background to our

lives. This would provide an interesting path for thought about environmental issues in the classroom. For how can we get students to care about an environment if they do not feel their own passivity before it?

And how can we try to accentuate such moments in education? In terms of curriculum, the multiple perspectives offered in multicultural education frustrate the yearning for single universals and introduce a ghost of the undecidable into the classroom. Similar situations in science education might emerge from a study of Luce Irigaray's work<sup>15</sup> — favoring education in the parallel use of linear and non-linear paradigms of science. Such curricula would accentuate the decisions between different-but-equal approaches and amplify the crucial stutterings of hesitation.

But the main application of this paper should be in the very culture of our classrooms. Can all members of a school community come to accept the vulnerable feeling that surrounds them in times of judgment — ethical, legal or cognitive? All should be encouraged to play an active role in judging the legal and ethical issues of schools, and in making the cognitive judgments by which we try to understand the world in which we live. As educators we need to be attentive to the aporetic punctuation of the codes of morality and knowledge that we all-too-often sell as seamless. It is not a question of explicitly teaching students the virtue of hesitation, of course, but of educators developing a sensitivity to the discontinuities of our experiences. Perhaps then, schools might be able to become places of caring justice.

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1. See, for example, Ann Diller, "Pluralisms for Education: An Ethics of Care Perspective," *Philosophy of Education 1992* (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1993), 22-29; Dale T. Snauwaert, "Ecological Identification, Friendship, and Moral Development: Justice and Care as Complementary Dimensions of Morality," *Philosophy of Education 1995* (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1996), 438-43.

2. Axel Honneth, "The Other of Justice: Habermas and the Ethical Challenge of Postmodernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, ed. Stephen K. White (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 318.

3. Nel Noddings, *Philosophy of Education* (Boulder: Westview, 1995), 193, hereafter *PE*.

4. See Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 14, hereafter *ED*.

5. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969), 193. Hereafter *TI*.

6. Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 108.

7. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), 108.

8. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Morality*, hereafter *CFA* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 43.

9. Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 23, hereafter *CCS*.

10. Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," hereafter *VM*, trans. Alan Bass, in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), 79-153.

11. A case could be made that this is compatible with the later works of Levinas such as *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. In this case, the egoity of the Other is revealed aporetically in the recurring cycle of skepticism and its refutation (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 165).



12. The theme of “Violence and Metaphysics” is a reading of Levinas alongside Husserl and Heidegger, from whom Levinas was keen to be distanced. In the quote above, for example, Derrida is maintaining Husserl’s sense of the ego of the Other alongside Levinas’s sense of the Other as wholly Other. When Noddings approvingly quotes Derrida’s advocacy of “letting the Other *be*” (*PE* 194), she is testifying to the closeness of her thought to, in particular, Heideggerian ontology. The influence of Heidegger on Noddings, as seen especially in sections like that on caring for objects (*CCS* 139-42), is great and sometimes explicit (*CCS* 15).

13. Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority,” hereafter *FL*, trans. Mary Quaintance, *Cardozo Law Review* 11 (1990), 919-1070.

14. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 6.

15. Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 123-24.