

Philosophy and Film in a Dialogue on Care

Megan Laverty

Teachers College, Columbia University

I am pleased to respond to Michael Katz's essay, as I share his desire to discuss philosophy and film in relation to ethics and education. Katz explains three models of caring: the first two derive from the philosophies of Milton Mayeroff and Nel Noddings, and the third is developed through a reading of the protagonist of the film *Stand and Deliver*, Jaime Escalante.¹ In responding to Katz I will bypass his instructive comparison of Mayeroff and Noddings, to focus upon his representation of Escalante as a model of "professional care." In my view *Stand and Deliver* represents dialogue as the fundamental condition of human existence, and this has important implications for the role of care in human relations.

Noddings equivocates on the meaning of care, sometimes using it descriptively to posit relationality as the fundamental feature of the human condition, and, at other times, using it normatively, to refer to the obligation to care and develop communities that promote caring relations. The duty of care is Noddings's version of the categorical imperative based on our inherently relational existence. Caring is "characterized by engrossment and motivational displacement."² Teachers help students develop the capacity to care through a complex process of modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. For Noddings, dialogue is one element of pedagogical caring: it manifests care and is necessary for its effectiveness. The carer receives and addresses the cared-for in an ongoing dialogue: the carer learns about the cared-for as he or she develops a sense of what the cared-for needs.

I appreciate the significance of caring, but I consider it secondary to our fundamental condition of being in dialogical relationships with one another. Individuals become themselves in response to events and interactions that are governed by chance. Life is unpredictable. We can be assured neither of how we will behave in the future nor of who we will become. Ambiguity is the limit of our lives, and thus it is impossible to be certain of having made morally right choices. Ethical imperatives that assume dialogical relationality are only ever, at best, hypothetical and noncategorical. Care, then, is one element of a complex pedagogy of dialogue that includes naiveté, reverence, humor, *and* the honest acknowledgment of conflict, resentment, jealousy, fear, and misunderstanding. Significantly in *Stand and Deliver* Escalante's care for fellow Latinos is constrained by the complexities of human psychology and the unpredictability of life.

Katz contrasts Noddings's and Mayeroff's concepts of personal care with Escalante's "professional caring." Mayeroff and Noddings describe the teacher-student relationship as one in which individuals care for each other *as persons*. Neither view of caring is, Katz writes, "conditional upon, subordinate to, or instrumental for, promoting student learning." The chairperson of Escalante's mathematics department embodies a crude form of personal care: she does not expect too much academically from her students for fear that an inability to meet

expectations will cause them to lose what little self-esteem they have. She is genuinely surprised that Escalante's students pass the Advanced Placement (AP) examination, and, when suspicions of cheating are raised, her worst fears are realized. By contrast, Escalante embodies a view of caring that incorporates the teacher's commitment to student learning. Katz observes that "Escalante cares passionately about math and his students' academic potential." This care is conditional upon his students' "commitment to take him and his course seriously."³

Noddings's emphasis on personal care is part of a larger debate about the purposes of schooling, in which she argues that education should aim at personhood over academic achievement. She insists that moral nurturing should be the primary aim of education. It is conceivable that care for an individual student or group of students *may* involve a demand that they succeed academically. I interpret *Stand and Deliver* as arguing that personal care should demand high standards of academic success when social, racial, and economic considerations are taken into account. It proposes a social justice model of care. Escalante cares that his students succeed at mathematics, but not just because he loves mathematics (he applied to teach computers) or conceives of himself as fulfilling a role-related obligation. Escalante decided to teach at Garfield High School, an urban school with a Hispanic population in a neighborhood where gang-related crime and violence, poverty, unemployment, and lack of health care are endemic. Originally from Bolivia, Escalante is passionate about Latinos, "his people." Escalante is concerned that Hispanics are thwarted by the lack of opportunity and the anti-intellectual culture of first-generation immigrants. He is passionate about teaching them to expect greater social mobility and how to achieve it.

Social mobility is possibly the most important theme of the film. Accordingly the visual imagery of the film concentrates on people moving across bridges, up and down corridors, along sidewalks, and on motorways. The car is an economic status symbol that serves both as the object of crime and the means of enacting it. The film's most dramatic events — gang violence, altercations with the police, and expressions of frustration and gratitude — occur in and around cars. Significantly, Escalante uses driving to persuade Pancho to study calculus, saying: "All you see is the turn. You don't see the road ahead." Escalante's conviction that education can improve his people's lives makes him a dedicated and exacting teacher. He not only teaches mathematics at Garfield High School but is a volunteer English teacher at the local evening school. He compromises his health to the extent that he suffers a minor heart attack two weeks before the AP calculus examination.

In the service of realizing his educational ideals, Escalante humiliates and ridicules his students. One student addresses this issue saying, "I don't appreciate you using my personal life to amuse this class." Noddings disapproves of Escalante's use of sarcasm as a pedagogical strategy, because although many of the students "see the caring that lies underneath the surface cruelty, some do not."⁴ In challenging us to consider whether Escalante is justified in treating his students impolitely, Noddings overlooks the fact that Escalante's teasing teaches the students how to look at themselves from a perspective not their own. Escalante makes fun of their

gang culture in order to trivialize it and provoke an inquiry into its values. He compels the students to consider what is important to them. The students warn Escalante when his teasing goes too far, and he typically responds appropriately with affection, sensitivity, or restraint. The students also reciprocate with their own forms of sarcasm. In my view Escalante's approach encourages a critically honest, loving and, paradoxically, nonjudgmental relationship among the students.

Interestingly, from the perspective of Noddings on care, Escalante remains detached from his students. He refuses to listen to their individual reasons for lateness or failure to study and resists sympathizing with their feelings of inadequacy or frustration. His approach addresses Lisa Delpit and others' concern that the new liberal emphasis on caring and inclusive, multicultural classrooms may hurt disadvantaged minorities by compromising the educational standards that they so desperately need to achieve. Until the Educational Testing Service accuses Escalante's students of cheating on the AP calculus test, he believes that education is the great equalizer. He learns the hard way that education is not an escape from racism. He protests to the racially diverse inspectors that if the students had non-Spanish names and came from a white middle-class high school, the inquiry would not have been conducted.

The students resit the AP exam under intense supervision. The film's final scene reveals that they did pass the exam a second time, and Escalante and his students are finally vindicated. Until this point no one, including the viewer, is certain that the students had not cheated. Escalante felt it was right to teach his students advanced calculus although another teacher did not, and at each turn in the film, one or the other feels justified. This creates suspense in the film, which in turn serves to unsettle the viewer from complacent attitudes. This process demonstrates how fictional narrative can interrogate, and encourage us to interrogate, our inherently dialogical existence. We become ourselves in relationship to a world that exceeds our control and understanding. If teachers are in dialogue with their students, subject matter, school and broader community, then this determines whether care is always a value, for what and whom teachers care, and the manner in which they care. The point is that shifts within the dialogical relationship significantly alter these determinations. Teachers know this all too well.

My debate with Katz over the interpretation of *Stand and Deliver* not only reflects our shared commitment to the indispensability of literature and film for philosophical inquiry, but also demonstrates how such focused dialogue can productively clarify the philosophical discussion of care and education.

1. *Stand and Deliver*, directed by Ramón Menéndez (Burbank: Warner Brothers, 1988). Although *Stand and Deliver* is a dramatized account of real people and events, I focus exclusively on the cinematic version.

2. Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in School: An Alternative Approach to Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 15.

3. Katz points out that the situation becomes more complex: once committed to his students' educational welfare, Escalante finds himself involved in their personal welfare and his professional caring becomes deeply personal.

4. Nel Noddings, *Challenge to Care in School*, 158.