

Reciprocity, Exchange, and Indebtedness in Noddings's Concept of Care.

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As a profession, teaching is commonly understood under the umbrella of “care work,” a term used to refer to work directly involved with those in need of “care.” “Care work” stretches from those working in healthcare, to childcare, elderly care and of course, teaching. Those who perform the labor of “care” are often pushed aside in conversations on the ethics of this work, leaving the conception of these ethics to those outside caring professions. Work by philosopher of education Nel Noddings, however, has been a major influence on the perception and understanding of teaching as “care work.” By grounding her work within relationality and affect, Noddings’s framework has appealed to many educators seeking an ethics that reflects the relation-centered environment of the classroom. I turn to examine Noddings’s “caring relation” more closely in order to understand how teaching, as a profession, is actively becoming transformed by economic thinking, and how our work as philosophers of education might work to resist this transformation.

I begin with a discussion on Noddings’s work on “care” and its legacy and influence on the teaching profession. Drawing from the literature of feminist ethics of care, next I turn to look at Nel Noddings’s framework of the “caring relation.” Rather than conceiving of “care” as a virtue, Noddings’s framework locates “care” within the relation between persons, where “care” is exchanged between the “one-caring” and the “cared-for.” After outlining Noddings’s relation, I turn to consider some possible objections to an “ethics of care” and state my intention to bracket these critiques in order to pose my own. In the following section, I examine how Noddings’s insistence on “reciprocity” in the caring relation reveals a transactional underpinning of the caring relation, allowing it to operate within what I call an “economy of exchange.” Although Noddings’s framework centers the caring relation as an *ethical* encounter, when caring is transformed into an exchange, I argue, ethical reasoning is replaced by economic thinking shaped specifically by capitalist

logics. The terms of this capitalist exchange, I argue, risk producing a state of indebtedness within educational relations. In order to avoid this transformation, I argue we must look to conceptions of the relation that operate outside this “economy of exchange.” I turn to look at Claudia Ruitenberg’s work on “hospitality” and Sam Rocha’s work on “the offering” which operate within an economy of “excess” or economy of the gift. Finally, I discuss debt and our relations, drawing on recent work by Jason Wozniak on the existential effects of indebtedness, before concluding with some final remarks on the future of “care” in educational research.

TEACHING AS “CARE WORK”

Educational research on “care” has been led for many decades by philosopher of education Nel Noddings. Having served as the philosophy of education society president from 1991 to 1992, Noddings has dedicated a lifetime of scholarly work to advancing ideas of “care” within academic and educational spaces. Her conception of educational “caring relations” has remained a prominent framework for educators within schools. The 2012 book *Dear Nel: Opening the Circles of Care* is a group of collected letters written by a group of scholars, educators, and activists to Noddings, sharing how her work has influenced their work and lives. Like many entering the profession, as a primary school teacher I looked upon teaching as “care work;” with it came the responsibility to “care for” my students. From my time teaching kindergarten and second grade, I recall countless picture books and texts that I introduced in my classroom that all shared the underlying questions: *What does it mean to get along? What does it mean to be a good friend? How can we care for another?* Like my classroom pedagogy, the guiding ethical ideal for an ethic of care is the creation of caring relations, in the aims of creating caring students. Care, of course, is not the only aim of education. Noddings describes that education seeks multiple aims:

An education worthy of its name will help its students to develop as persons, to be thoughtful citizens, competent parents, faithful

friends, capable workers, generous neighbors and lifelong learners. It will try, too, to develop aesthetic, ethical and spiritual sensitivity.¹

For Noddings and other care theorists, these aims are developed and pursued within “caring relations.” In my own experiences, I relied upon “care” as a motivational force, one that I returned to many times throughout my teaching career. At the beginning of my school year, transforming my blank classroom into a warm, caring space required many hours of work before, after, and outside my workday. I recall countless weekend hours spent lesson planning, scouring local thrift stores and yard sales for things like wicker baskets, board games, toys, and costumes for our dramatic play area. The motivation of my care came from the belief that my care, towards this space and my group of 24 or so students, was directed at something beyond my school building. Like planting seeds in the early spring, I had a faith that even if I was not there to see them bloom, the seeds must still be planted. While I acknowledge “care” is not the only motivating factor among teachers, issues of care and caring relationships remain central to the institution of schools and their function.

Among my colleagues and peers, the idea of teaching as “care work,” especially at the elementary level, presented itself as fairly self-evident. In speaking with current and prospective teachers, I continually hear how “relationships with students” serve as a key motivating factor for the professional choice of teaching. I continue to hold on to student notes, drawings and photos from years ago as my time as a primary school teacher, tokens of care and affection. I was originally drawn to Noddings’s work because it encompassed my understanding of teaching when I began my career. As a teacher I felt that *care* was what I was ultimately giving my students. Between the worksheets, tied shoes, and runny noses, I liked to think that *care* was what held us together. It is from this position that I turn, in the next section, to look at feminist ethics of care, focusing on the “caring relation” as conceived of by Noddings.

NODDINGS'S "CARING RELATION"

Feminist ethics of care began as a response by female thinkers to the domination of moral reasoning within the field of ethics. Early work in ethics of care, by writers such as Carol Gilligan, responded to theories of moral development that markedly found women as morally deficient. Rather than build upon philosophies that either denigrated or denied the status of women as moral agents, these writers sought an ethics of care, "rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness."² While ethics of care have been taken up and developed by many authors, in this paper I choose to focus on Noddings exclusively because her conception of the caring relation is one of the clearest and most developed within the literature, and her work remains central to the work of education-focused care ethicists. Noddings and I begin our understanding of ethics from a number of shared viewpoints, many of which I owe to my reading of Noddings herself. We also diverge on a number of points that I will begin to explicate in the second half of the paper. However, both Noddings and I locate the origin of our ethics in the universal memory of being cared-for in infancy. Our very existence as adults mark us as the recipient of care at some point in our lives, having been brought into this world as helpless infants. Although our memories can be, and often are, marked by trauma or pain, we all share the experience of having been cared-for at some point. Care ethics thus positions the relation as *ontologically* basic, and the caring relation as *ethically* basic: "it is our longing for caring... that provides the motivation for us to be moral. We want to be *moral* in order to remain in the caring relation and to enhance the ideal of ourselves as one-caring."³ Ontologically interdependent, the caring relation arises as *ethically basic*, reminding us of the natality of our interdependence.

Caring, for Noddings, is not a virtue but a quality of the relation between subjects, what she calls "the one-caring" and the "cared-for." A relation can be understood as "a set of ordered pairs generated by some rule that describes the affect—or subjective experience—of the members."⁴ Emphasizing the affective creates a relation between *subjects*, that is, those capable of being affected and affecting others. This caring requires "engrossment" from the

one-caring: a displacement of one's own desires or motivations in an attempt to "try to apprehend the reality of the other."⁵ Noddings's focus on individual relationships managed to capture how I viewed the process of making decisions as a teacher, that is, inherently relational, reliant upon the context, setting, and subjects involved. Noddings proposes that a caring teacher must be competent not only in their subject matter, but also able to listen and attune to their students and respond to a range of needs. This attentiveness often requires the use of reason and can demand a much higher intellectual engagement than simply relying upon universalized principles. Thus, Noddings grounds her ethics within the affective, challenging the primacy of reason within deontological ethical frameworks without abandoning it all together.

OBJECTIONS TO ETHICS OF CARE

Noddings and other care ethicists have been subject to many critiques, many of which lay outside the argument and scope of this paper. These include criticisms of gender essentialism, a disregard for power relations and political contexts, and ignoring the intersectionality of female experiences shaded by differences in race, class, sexual orientation and gender diversity. In her early work Noddings was heavily critiqued for her tendency to essentialize gender, rooting caring within the feminine. Her writings on the maternal and morality have sparked backlash from thinkers both within and outside feminist circles. Noddings has responded to these critiques in many ways, including in the renaming of her 1984 book "*Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*," replacing "feminine" with "relational" for the 2013 updated edition. Noddings displays a lifetime of work that has grown and developed from scholarly conversations such as these critiques. While some strains of care ethics continue to locate the source of natural caring in the maternal, I contend it is an innate capacity in all, but has been encouraged and rewarded in females, who have historically performed the labor of caregiving.

Care ethics as a whole has also been critiqued for focusing too heavily on interpersonal relationships while ignoring issues of justice and autonomy.

Some have responded to Noddings's rejection of universal principles as an argument for moral relativism, though Noddings herself has addressed this point at length.⁶ Like the progression of Noddings's work, feminist ethics of care has grown, changed and developed over the years. Although I agree the above critiques merit further engagement, I wish to bracket these objections in order pose my own. In the following section I outline how Noddings's insistence on reciprocity within the caring relation situates her framework within a model of transaction or what I call an "economy of exchange."

RECIPROCITY IN THE CARING RELATION

Noddings, echoing Martin Buber's sentiments in his book *I and Thou*, argues that reciprocity is a form of recognition. She emphasizes that caring is completed in the encounter with the other:

In a perspective that claims relation as basic, the emphasis is necessarily on dyads, and this emphasis generates another—on reciprocity. Buber writes on reciprocity: "Relation is reciprocity. My You acts on me as I act on it. Our students teach us, our works forms us... How are we educated by children, by animals! Inscrutably involved, we live in the currents of universal reciprocity." Buber's reciprocity is not the contractual reciprocity familiar to us in liberal philosophy.⁷

Noddings specifically draws a distinction between the form of reciprocity that she and Buber propose and that of "contractual reciprocity" found in liberal philosophy. From her insistence on reciprocity, however, I find a transactional nature underpinning Noddings's notion of the caring relation, permitting it to be transformed from a human relation to an economic one. Although Noddings's work on care seeks to draw a divide between her caring ethics and liberal philosophy, I would contend that both operate within an "economy of exchange." If we begin with the definition of "exchange" as "the act of giving or taking one thing in return for another,"⁸ we can reflect on Noddings's caring relation as an act of exchanging care. The guiding aim of care ethics, Noddings explains, is to establish equal, mutual relations with

other competent adults. Noddings does not assume that the teacher is automatically the “one-caring” and the student the one “cared-for,” but maintains that “over time, in equal relations, the parties regularly *exchange* positions. Adult caring relations exhibit this mutuality.”⁹ While Noddings’s emphasis is on the relation, not the individual, she poses the relation as a temporary meeting place for individuals to meet, assuming their ability to exist *outside* the relation. In this manner individuals enter a relation to encounter the other. In a caring relation, the one-caring becomes engrossed, temporarily displacing their own interests in the aims of apprehending the reality of the other. In exchange, the one-cared for is expected to mark this care with some form of response: “It is this response of the cared-for that completes a caring relation or encounter.”¹⁰ In her 2015 book *Unlocking the World*, Claudia Ruitenberg writes on ethics of care: “Its emphasis on reciprocity, for example, on the need for the self to receive something—minimally some response—in return for the caring it gives, is not just pragmatic, but part of the ethical ideal of caring itself.”¹¹ This response indicates to the one-caring that their care has been received, thus completing the ethical caring relation. Within the teacher-student caring relation, a minimal response from a student, whether it be in student flourishing, reciprocal caring or gratitude, such as mementos of care like student drawings, is required. Although this response may be asymmetrical, a response from the one-cared for is required, for without it “care” cannot be said to have taken place. When a relation is bound by this obligation of return, I argue, the subjects of the relation are bound within a framework of indebtedness. This indebtedness mirrors an economy of exchange, where two parties are constrained by the terms of exchange, necessitating the obligation of return. This “economy of exchange,” I argue, creates the conditions for a transactional understanding of “care.”

Chatelier and Rudolph go even further and contend that within accountability-driven school settings teachers may be forced to shift their focus from care of the student toward caring for their professional selves:

The kind of emphasis determined by the accountability, evidence-based, data-driven, outcomes-focused logics of contemporary schooling policy function to reconfigure Noddings’ idea of relational-

ity from one between ‘persons’ to one between ‘stakeholders’. That is, there is a depersonalisation and an instrumentalism in the transactional nature of teacher–student relationships today.¹²

Solely data-driven forms of accountability cannot account for “care” outside forms of academic investment. Where-in Noddings’s caring relation the product of education is the creation of caring students, contemporary schooling policies funnel education toward economic goals such as college and career readiness. “Persons” in a caring relation affect and can be affected by one another, but “stakeholders” are mediated by the interests of the organization. Because stakeholders are invested in, and affected by, the success of their establishment, their responsibility is to their company or organization. The “who” of the relation of care thus is at risk of becoming coopted. This transformation reaches beyond teachers and students, to administration, parents, and actual stakeholders and donors, such as those invested in universities or charter schools. Teachers’ ethical relations are consequently mediated by “presuppositions such as the seemingly inalienable right of the student to gain marketable value.”¹³ Noddings’s relation of care is thus vulnerable to being transformed into a relation between two economic units. Wherein caring relations are expected to create caring students, when student success is reconciled as “economic success,” ethical reasoning is replaced by capitalist logics driven by goals of efficiency and productivity. This transformation from an *ethical* to an *economic* relation is my central concern. Like outcomes-based schooling policies, Noddings’s ethical framework assumes that future educational outcomes, such as the creation of caring students, can be predicated. It could be argued that if you switch out the goal of “creating caring students” with a goal toward economic benefit than this is no longer Noddings’s ethical system but rather a “distorted” form of care. In this distortion, “care” originally directed toward the affective subject, the “one cared-for,” is mediated by institutional policies that mirror economic forms of exchange. With its emphasis on reciprocity, the transactional underpinning of the caring relation is thus reified and rewarded in the neoliberal purview. Because Noddings’s framework of caring relations is still a prevalent model of looking at the teaching profession, our understand-

ing of teaching as “care work” risks being distorted by economic policies that have shifted the goals of education. In this way, teaching as a profession is being transformed without the consent of (predominantly female) teachers who perform the labor of teaching.

If we wish to sustain “caring relations,” then we must resist allowing them to operate on the terms of an “economy of exchange.” If education is to remain a relational, rather than economic, pursuit, then we might consider conceptions of the relation that operate outside of this economy. Many philosophers of education have written on relations that resist this transactional nature; in the next section, I will look briefly at Claudia Ruitenberg’s work on “hospitality” and Samuel Rocha’s work on “the offering” before closing with some remarks and questions to consider on reciprocity and indebtedness.

RUITENBERG, HOSPITALITY, AND AN “ECONOMY OF EXCESS”

Working from a Derridean position in her work on “hospitality” Ruitenberg relies on a conception of the subject that is decentered. The decentered subject, opposed to the “autonomous individual” of liberal philosophy, acts in *response* toward the other. This response is predicated upon the condition of being addressed; Ruitenberg’s decentered subject thus does not ask “*Who am I?*” but instead responds to the question “*Who are you?*” Ruitenberg conceives of education as the “process of introducing newcomers to the world”¹⁴ and cites this introduction as an ethical responsibility of those already inhabiting this world. Ruitenberg writes:

...hospitality is a gift given by a host who is aware of their indebtedness to the guest. Immediately, this marks a departure from other conceptions of hospitality based on reciprocity or exchange, in which the guest incurs a debt by accepting hospitality.¹⁵

Because of Noddings’s insistence of reciprocal care, the ethic of care “falls short of fully decentering the subject.”¹⁶ Without insisting on the terms of reciprocity, Ruitenberg’s ethic of hospitality maintains Noddings’s relational ontology, but resists allowing the relation to operate under the terms of ex-

change. Hospitality is instead presented as a *gift* given by a host who is aware of their indebtedness toward the other. Through the language of indebtedness, Ruitenberg joins Hannah Arendt in rooting her ethics in a sense of natality, not unlike Noddings's "memory of being cared-for." This ethic of indebtedness is marked by a horizontal transcendence that reaches beyond the human individual toward the other, both past and future. An ethic of hospitality is not an ethic of rights and does not claim to be reciprocal, in fact Ruitenberg describes "an ethic of hospitality is unapologetically asymmetrical."¹⁷ Wherein the terms of an ethics of exchange position the guest to incur some form of "debt" in accepting hospitality, Ruitenberg's ethics of hospitality operates within what Paul Standish refers to as an "economy of excess." This alternative economy operates more from the model of the "pure gift," that is the gift that holds no obligation of return. This gift is rooted in our responsibility toward the other, and in this relation we may be able "to breach the circle of exchange."¹⁸ In this breach, the model of the gift interrupts the opportunity for one to incur "debt" within relations, as reciprocity is never demanded. Hospitality resists the transactional nature that caring takes on by resisting the need for a response. An ethic of hospitality is not meant to create a model that positions the teacher as excessively self-sacrificing; instead, it is centered in the capacity of teachers to maintain their relational disposition, even in the face of institutional policies that threaten to redirect their labor toward economic outcomes. Derrida describes the requirements of hospitality when he writes, "that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity... or even their names."¹⁹

Within the language of the "gift," however, there is the question of acceptance, and whether one may reject a gift. Pointing to the assumed, or forced, acceptance of a "gift," Samuel Rocha, growing out of Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of givenness, presents "the offering" as an alternative.

The teacher never knows for certain that offering is given; the exchange is never clear or realized. The teacher can only be present, which is the first and last pedagogical offering, with the hope of

showing something real, a hope without expectation or confirmation.²⁰

Positioning the offering as just that, an offer, Rocha contends that the receiving party is given the opportunity to say “no.” Posing this consent as foundational, “the offering” positions both subjects within the relation as *active* subjects, capable of acting within the relation. “The offering” resists the logic of outcomes-based learning that assumes that the outcomes of learning can be fully predicted. Unlike caring, even if the receiving party were to reject the offering, it can still be said to have taken place. The offering conveys “a hope that never carries the expectation of a gift.”²¹

CONCLUSION: INDEBTEDNESS AND EDUCATIONAL RELATIONS

Noddings’s influence and legacy on the field of philosophy of education clearly cannot be ignored. Her work on care hovers over and within the work of the authors I have cited here and continues to inform the work of countless educators and researchers. In this paper I have argued that Noddings’s insistence on reciprocity in caring relations creates the conditions that allow educational relations to transform into economic exchanges. Both Ruitenberg and Rocha have presented frameworks that resist this transformation by arguing for non-transactional conceptions of the relation. If we conceive of our relations as transactional, operating within an “economy of exchange,” we risk producing a state of indebtedness in our relations. Recognizing the already prevalent forms of financial debt present in the student loan system, I grow weary of the coercive power of debt to further reshape our relations within education. Unlike Ruitenberg’s philosophical conception of indebtedness (which I read as an inherited responsibility toward the other), economic debt operates as a mode of control. Within educational research, recent work by Jason Wozniak on the existential effects of indebtedness warns us of the perils of this shift:

... debt’s ability to shape subjectivity through its ability to

delimit our existential time, the time of everyday life. Stated in simple terms, debt produces what Lazzarato calls, ‘the indebted man’ by capturing and controlling time.²²

This production of “the indebted man” poses some distressful questions for the future of education. If we allow educational relations to operate on the terms of exchange, then we risk allowing education to be governed by the obligatory control of debt. From this debt governance comes a form of induced precarity, an instability of the debtor whose time, at least in part, is held captive while under the obligation of repaying their debts. Education, Wozniak argues, and I agree, is a realm in which we can create experiences to disrupt the conditions that create this “indebted man.” As Chatelier and Rudolph posit, we must remain aware of how certain schooling policies mediate and redirect the labor of “care” to be directed toward economic ends, transforming not only the relation, but the subjects involved.²³ If education is to remain a relational pursuit, we must recognize how capitalist economic reasoning has seeped within our understanding of our relations. This transformation to an *economic* relation threatens the affective, caring relation that Noddings identifies as ethically basic, leaving us emptied of our ethical obligation to care. If we wish to maintain caring relations within education, then I propose we must challenge requirements of reciprocity, and conceive of our relations beyond an “economy of exchange.”

1. Nel Noddings, “Educational Leaders as Caring Teachers,” *School Leadership & Management* 26, no. 4 (2006): 339.

2. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics & Moral Education*. 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 2.

3. Noddings, *Caring*, 4.

4. Noddings, *Caring*, 3.

5. Noddings, *Caring*, 13.

6. Noddings writes “We need not reject principles entirely; they can be useful in getting us to think and to articulate an interpretation that we then may communicate to others, thus increasing understanding throughout the web of care.” in Nel Noddings, “Care Ethics in Education,” in *Educating the Young: The Ethics of Care*, ed. Jeanne Adèle Kentel (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 15.
7. Nel Noddings, “*The Maternal Factor: Two Paths to Morality*,” (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 127.
8. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, “exchange,” accessed September 3, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/exchange>.
9. Nel Noddings, “The Caring Relation in Teaching,” *Oxford Review of Education* 38, no. 6 (2012): 772 (emphasis added).
10. Noddings, *The Maternal Factor*, 127.
11. Claudia Ruitenberg, *Unlocking the World: Education in an Ethic of Hospitality* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 11.
12. Stephen Chatelier and Sophie Rudolph, “Teacher Responsibility: Shifting Care from Student to (Professional) Self?” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 39, no. 1 (2018): 6.
13. Chatelier and Rudolph, “Teacher Responsibility,” 6.
14. Ruitenberg, *Unlocking the World*, 4
15. Ruitenberg, *Unlocking the World*, 14.
16. Ruitenberg, *Unlocking the World*, 11.
17. Ruitenberg, *Unlocking the World*, 40
18. Paul Standish, “Towards an Economy of Higher Education,” *Critical Quarterly* 47, no. 1 □ 2 (2005): 61.
19. Jacques Derrida, “Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to Respond,” trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford University Press, 2000), 25.
20. Samuel D. Rocha, *Folk Phenomenology: Education, Study, and the Human Person*

(Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 7.

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

22. Jason Thomas Wozniak, “Towards a Rhythmanalysis of Debt Dressage: Education as Rhythmic Resistance in Everyday Indebted Life,” *Policy Futures in Education* 15, no. 4 (2017): 495.

23. In this paper I have emphasized “educational relations” within the setting of compulsory schooling, whether educational relations outside this parameter operate on different terms, or “economies,” remains open and unanswered here.