

When is Teaching Caring Good?

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One answer to “When is teaching caring good?” is that teaching caring is always good. That answer, however, depends very heavily on how caring is defined. Another answer is that “It depends on the kind or kinds of caring taught.” This essay will present an answer of the “it depends” type. It is vitally important, as Barbara Thayer-Bacon has recently done, to differentiate caring from kinds of not caring that can be mistaken for caring.¹ I think it is also vitally important to differentiate kinds that are beneficial from kinds of caring that are misguided and harmful. This latter differentiation relates to developing what Barbara Houston describes as criteria for distinguishing legitimate and illegitimate forms of caring.²

In this essay, I present an account of one beneficial kind of caring, liberatory caring, and of teaching this kind of caring. A central purpose is to address conditions that give rise to acquiescent and paternalistic caring as two misguided kinds. The approach to teaching caring has parallels with Barbara Applebaum’s approach to developing a trusting atmosphere in the classroom, which includes differentiating appropriate and beneficial trust from trust that is misplaced and contributes to harm.³ My essay has four parts: (1) some experiences and reflections on teaching caring; (2) some important qualities of caring; (3) misguided caring and beneficial caring; and (4) teaching beneficial caring.

SOME EXPERIENCES AND REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING CARING

In the middle 1980s, I was thrilled to discover the ethics of caring, especially as presented in Nel Noddings’s *Caring*.⁴ I envisioned this ethics as something school teachers could follow and teach to students. Filled with great enthusiasm for an ethics of caring and teaching such an ethics, I prepared a presentation on teaching caring for a professional meeting. After the presentation, some audience members asked challenging questions about the role of principles in an ethics of caring and what happens to impartiality with such an ethics. These questions did not come as surprises, and I was able to offer some thoughtful responses. However, coming as a shock, like a stroke of lightning, was a totally unexpected question. I was asked if I thought slave owners had sometimes cared for their slaves! After a time of being stunned and speechless, I could only say that the relationship was not one of caring.

Over a period of years in the 1970s and 1980s, I listened to stories and read papers by female students about their experiences as battered women. Beginning as very ignorant about battering and domestic violence, I found that these sharings dramatically raised my consciousness. By the middle 1980s, I was finding ways to address battering and domestic violence in classes. On one occasion, I saw a female student wearing a button which said “Never Another Battered Woman.” After class, I told her I was impressed by her button. She shared that she was a former battered woman who was preparing to do social service work through which she could prevent women from being battered or help them recover from being battered. As

the conversation with her ended, I thought she embodied and expressed a kind of caring which needs to be practiced and taught.

During a course in the early 1990s in which an ethics of caring was a major part of what I taught, an early elementary school teacher frequently related accounts of caring to her use of circles in teaching. She described how she gathered children in a circle and each child had a chance to speak and be heard without interruption. Once all the children had a turn to share, the teacher then guided the class in either moving into studies or taking further time in the circle to address sharings. As the teacher described these circles, I wondered if something like them could be a vital part of teaching caring in schools. I struggled with thinking that some children might be dominant and others silent in sharings and wondering how teachers could address such realities.

As I reflect on such experiences and consider important feminist concerns raised about caring, I struggle with doubts about advocating an ethics of caring and with trying to teach caring.⁵ Thinking about caring slave owners started me wondering if some kinds of caring are paternalistic and contribute to maintaining the subordination of others. Thinking about battering and domestic violence and becoming more aware of sexual abuse and sexual harassment have made me think some kinds of caring are genuine but are also acquiescent in ways that go with subordination and harm to oneself and others. Thinking about how, in teaching caring through circles, some children can be dominant and others silent has made me wonder what is needed for ways of teaching caring that challenge and seek alternatives to domination and subordination.

Unwilling to give up on teaching caring as vital and necessary, and yet believing some kinds of misguided and destructive actions are instances of caring, I think beneficial and misguided caring share qualities as kinds of caring while being radically different in some ways. I am uncomfortable with trying to describe caring in ways that make it only beneficial. Often it seems people acting in either paternalistic or acquiescent ways are genuinely caring but somehow misguided. To address these conditions, I believe it is important to identify qualities of caring and then differentiate between kinds of caring.

SOME IMPORTANT QUALITIES OF CARING

The following qualities I take to be important for caring both in relationships and communities. I take these qualities as reflecting people in connection rather than as virtues of singular individuals.⁶ These qualities apply to how teachers as beings in connection treat students as beings in connection, what teachers teach students, and what students are learning.

In caring, people are genuinely concerned with the welfare of the beings for whom they care and seek to contribute to their benefit. An example is a caring teacher striving to benefit students by aiding them in developing their written and oral expression. Another example is a caring student offering comfort to benefit another student who is in distress. Although this feature of caring is not emphasized in accounts of caring as much as other features I will describe, it is important for this

essay. With misguided caring, there can be a genuine intention to benefit even when consequences of caring actions are very harmful.

Part of caring is engaging, in which one's focus is on the beings for whom one cares and one's energies are directed toward those beings.⁷ The engaging that is part of caring means that one is involved with those for whom one cares. For example, a caring teacher sets aside anxiety about personal issues, such as having to change housing, and brings focus and energy to students. Students as caring are able to get beyond whatever fears they bring into the classroom in order to be involved with other students in a class project. It is possible for engagement to occur in settings that are non-caring, as when one is engaged in trying to harm another, but caring cannot take place without one being engaged or involved.

Another necessary part of caring is attending to the beings for whom one cares, which clearly helps in distinguishing engaging as part of caring from other kinds of engaging. In attending, one is receptive and one listens, mindful of what is happening with others. Attending to others involves recognizing, perceiving, and being sensitive to what others are going through.⁸ In attending to others, one is able to set aside one's own views and agendas, apprehending others on their terms.⁹ One is able, with attending, to understand and consider others' realities, needs, interests, and feelings.¹⁰ Out of attending can come a recognition of what is needed.¹¹ A teacher as caring is attentive, for example, to a student's fear of speaking in front of a group, another student's passion for justice, or tension between two groups of students. Students as caring are able to set aside presumptions, for example, about a student who is from a different culture and be attentive to how things are for that student. There seems to be a great range from attending well to attending badly, and students can be taught to attend better.

Also necessary for caring is responding or taking action based on one's attending. In responding, one addresses needs, conditions, and situations of the beings for whom one cares. Part of responding well involves considering the importance of different discernible needs, possible benefits of addressing different needs and possible harms of not addressing them, and one's capacity to respond to other needs, including those of oneself, that may be affected.¹² With one student, a caring teacher responds by being very patient and encouraging, discerning this as needed. Recognizing that another student needs something very different, the teacher as caring is challenging and very assertive. In working together on a class project, students as caring are responsive to how different students can contribute to the project and learn from it. With responding, as with attending, there is a great range from carrying it out very well to carrying it out very badly. Teaching students to respond better thus would be a vital part of teaching caring.

While maintaining that these qualities are vital and necessary for caring that is beneficial and in teaching such caring, I also claim that by themselves they are not sufficient for distinguishing beneficial caring from misguided caring. For example, a battered woman may try very hard to contribute to her partner's benefit, direct energies to the partner, and be attentive and responsive to the partner's needs and feelings. Such caring, although embodying the qualities outlined as important for

caring, is also misguided and may bring harm to the woman and others connected with her. I can also imagine a slave owner genuinely concerned about what benefits a slave, directing energies to the slave, and being attentive and responsive to needs the slave expresses. Such caring, while embodying the qualities outlined, is misguided in reinforcing the slave's subordination and leaving conditions of slavery unchallenged. In teaching caring, it is vital that teachers teach beneficial caring and resistance to misguided caring.

MISGUIDED CARING AND BENEFICIAL CARING

I describe here two kinds of misguided caring, acquiescent, and paternalistic caring, and contrast these with one kind of beneficial caring, liberatory caring. I see a battered woman's genuine caring for her partner as an instance of acquiescent caring. The genuine caring of a slave owner I see as an instance of paternalistic caring. Although I think many kinds of caring are beneficial, I will concentrate on liberatory caring as a kind of beneficial caring which contrasts with and is an alternative to acquiescent and paternalistic caring.

In conditions of acquiescent caring, one is dominated by expectations of others to whom one is subordinate. One seeks to contribute to the benefit of such others, is engaged, attentive, and responsive with them, but in doing so maintains one's subordination. Such caring may contribute to harm for oneself and others different from those to whom one is subordinate. In acquiescent caring, one seeks to preserve relationships and communities in which one is subordinate regardless of harm that may result from such efforts. Even in conditions of acquiescent caring in which a subordinate person is well-treated, the caring contributes to the person remaining in subordination rather than seeking to eliminate the condition.

Paternalistic caring involves people who are in positions of domination genuinely caring for people subordinate to them. With paternalistic caring, people seek to benefit, are engaged with, and are attentive and responsive to some significant needs and feelings of those who are subordinate. Yet no effort is made to address privilege or the subordination of others, and paternalistic caring serves to help maintain domination and subordination.¹³

To help in considering the learning of acquiescent and paternalistic caring and what is needed in teaching beneficial caring, I will develop an example similar to one presented and examined by Barbara Houston.¹⁴ Suppose, in an early elementary school classroom, a boy is subjecting a girl to unwanted attention. The girl may already enter the situation associating aspects of caring with accepting the attention as benign rather than resisting it or protesting against it. The girl may come to associate aspects of caring with taking care of this and other boys. Through acquiescing to the needs of the boy in this situation and future situations, the girl may come to care in ways that neglect her own interests, projects, and visions.¹⁵ As the girl grows to womanhood, she could be left unprepared to resist sexual harassment and unable to differentiate clearly between healthy care giving and acquiescence to abuse.¹⁶ Even if a teacher becomes aware of the girl's situation and seeks an alternative, the behaviors already established in the girl's life might have a momentum very difficult to change.

Extending the example further, picture a boy who perceives the girl's discomfort from the attention and wants to do something about it. Perhaps he tries to intimidate the other boy into stopping the unwanted attention. Such an effort, even if it reduces or ends the unwanted behavior, is paternalistic in not working with the girl to help her resist and become an agent. This correlates with efforts of adult men to protect women that may involve genuine caring but leave women in subordination and do not support developing their agency and ability to resist being harmed.

What might teaching and learning of liberatory caring, as an alternative to acquiescent and paternalistic caring, mean for this kind of situation? Picture the girl being taught both within and outside of school to resist such unwanted attention. She could resist the attention while being ready to care appropriately for the boy if treated with respect. Picture the girl developing into a woman who is able to resist sexual harassment and not be part of any abusive relationship, respecting self and acting as an agent in relationships and communities. Imagine the girl growing into a person who cares for others in ways that are beneficent, engaged, attentive, and responsive while being liberatory, seeking to aid movements out of subordination. With such a caring person, there would be a balance between care giving and care receiving.

Consider once again the boy who intervened to end the unwanted attention: picture him ready to work with the girl in finding ways to resist the attention that strengthens her agency and ability to be interdependent with others. Picture him growing into someone who seeks to benefit and is engaged, attentive, and responsive with people in subordination in ways aimed at aiding their movement out of subordination. Such a person would be able to create room for women and others in subordination to develop agency and share in power.

With liberatory caring as a kind of beneficial caring, caring is specifically inclusive of and oriented to changing realities of domination and subordination. With such caring, people seek to benefit and are engaged, attentive, and responsive in addressing their own or others' conditions of subordination and contribute to movements out of subordination and into shared power. As an alternative to a person in subordination caring acquiescently, liberatory caring involves working for one's own movement out of subordination while aiding movements out of subordination by others. As an alternative to a person in a position of paternalistically caring, liberatory caring supports others' movement out of subordination by combining active support and leaving room for efforts of others as part of sharing power.

TEACHING BENEFICIAL CARING

This section of the essay describes the teaching of liberatory caring as an alternative to acquiescent and paternalistic caring. Identification of and resistance to those kinds of misguided caring are part of what teaching liberatory caring involves. Such teaching aids students in learning to differentiate liberatory caring and other kinds of beneficial caring from acquiescent and paternalistic caring.

Think back to the teacher forming students into circles with each student having the opportunity to share. In spite of the opportunity to share, some children are dominant and others silent. A classroom or even a whole school promotes emotional sharing or sharing of stories, but some stories, for example those of some females

or some racial or sexual minority students, are still silenced.¹⁷ Using circles as part of teachers contributing to raising consciousness in teaching liberatory caring goes beyond emotional sharing or sharing stories.¹⁸ A necessary part of such teaching is providing students with greater vulnerability and lesser power space to be heard and have their situations addressed. Also, as part of teaching liberatory caring, teachers challenge students who are in a position of dominance to confront power structures by creating space for those with less power and to challenge those with greater power to find ways to share.

It might be easy for a teacher or for students who in some ways are privileged and advantaged to think that students in situations of subordination and vulnerability can simply speak out when given opportunities and encouragement. Teaching liberatory caring addresses the risk of being insensitive to fears, risks of reprisals, victimizations, and other conditions faced by students in situations of subordination and vulnerability. Teachers can work at teaching students who feel free to speak out to help in creating situations that will aid others in learning to speak out and enjoy more of this freedom. Teachers can also strive to teach students who are in conditions of subordination and vulnerability to work on expanding how and when they can safely speak out and assert their interests.

As an example of teaching liberatory caring, think of a junior high school or high school teacher structuring a series of role playing exercises in which each student responds to another student as though that student is in an abusive relationship. Through such an exercise, students could learn what goes into seeking to benefit, engage with, attend and respond to persons being abused in ways that aid in finding support, separating from the abuse, and making new beginnings. Students are helped to envision ways of aiding abuse victims find alternatives to their subordination and abuse in order to integrate care-giving with integrity, agency, and a sense of self worth. Such an exercise might make immediate connections with situations in which some students or people students presently find themselves. Where there are not immediate connections, the exercise can contribute to raising consciousness about subordination and abuse both for students in situations of privilege and students in situations of subordination.

Beginning in grade school, teachers can teach students ways to recognize and address power realities in their lives. Students can learn about impacts of physical size, physical strength, health, ability and disability, as well as gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. As part of seeking to benefit, engaging, attending, and responding, students work with power positions of other students and themselves. The teacher then aids students in creating diagrams or pictures or perhaps dramas or skits to portray and address power relationships in which students are involved.

Teachers of students at varying ages can develop ways of combining work in small groups with work with the class as a whole. Different kinds of groupings can be included. Students sharing in similar subordinations can come to develop solidarity with others along with increased awareness of their own situations. Indeed, mixtures of those in situations of subordination and those in situations of privilege challenge those in positions of privilege to listen and those in positions of

subordination to assert. The teacher can use whole group meetings to aid students in extending their caring and integrating it with raised consciousness.

Central to teaching liberatory caring are teachers who continually seek ways to raise consciousness for students across the entire spectrum of power realities present in the class. Privileged students can be challenged in their caring to be accountable in facing their privilege and in seeking ways to contribute to others moving out of subordination and in sharing power. Students in conditions of subordination could be aided in learning to care for others in subordination and themselves in ways that work to change the subordination and create cooperation.

This essay has presented liberatory caring as a kind of beneficial caring which can be taught as an alternative to acquiescent and paternalistic caring. Supporting the teaching of liberatory caring is a way of addressing issues around misguided caring evident in speaking of slave owners caring for their slaves or battered women caring for their partners. Teaching liberatory caring is vital for addressing and changing ways children learn to be acquiescent or paternalistic in their caring.

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1. Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, "The Power of Caring," *Philosophical Studies in Education* (1997): 1-32.
 2. Barbara Houston, "Prolegomena to Future Caring," in *Who Cares? Theory, Research, and Educational Implications of the Ethic of Care*, ed. Mary M. Brabeck (New York: Praeger, 1989), 95.
 3. Barbara Applebaum, "Creating a Trusting Atmosphere in the Classroom," *Educational Theory* 45, no. 4 (1995): 443-52.
 4. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
 5. For feminist critical responses to an ethics of caring especially relevant for this essay, see: Houston, "Prolegomena to Future Caring," 84-100; Claudia Card, "Caring and Evil," *Hypatia* 5, no. 1 (1990): 101-8; Sara Hoagland, *Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Value* (Palo Alto, CA: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1988); Sara Hoagland, "Some Concerns about Nel Noddings's Caring," *Hypatia* 5, no. 1 (1990): 109-13; and Barbara Houston, "Caring and Exploitation," *Hypatia* 5, no. 1 (1990): 115-19.
 6. Although this outline of qualities draws from a number of authors and differs in detail from what Noddings presented in *Caring*, I see it as still following much of her relational model.
 7. This kind of motivational shift is described in Noddings, *Caring*, 33.
 8. Attending, as here described, has much in common with the account of attentive love in Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990), 119-23.
 9. Noddings, *Caring* 14-16; See also Ann Diller, "Pluralisms for Education: An Ethics of Care Perspective," in *Philosophy of Education 1992*, ed. H.A. Alexander (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1993), 22-30.
 10. See Noddings, *Caring*, 14-16, 30-32.
 11. Paul Lauritzen, "A Feminist Ethic and the New Romanticism — Mothering as a Model of Moral Relations," *Hypatia* 4, no. 2 (1989): 34.
 12. See Rita Manning, *Speaking from the Heart: A Feminist Perspective on Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992), 64.
 13. Uma Narayan, "Colonialism and Its Others: Considerations on Rights and Care Discourses," *Hypatia* 10, no. 2 (1995): 133-40.
 14. See Houston, "Prolegomena to Future Caring," 90-97.
 15. This kind of concern is raised in Hoagland, "Some Concerns about Nel Noddings's Caring," 110.
 16. See Houston, "Prolegomena to Future Caring," 91-95.

17. The exclusion of some sharings and stories is raised in Debra Shogan, "The Philosophy of the Limit and Emotions in the Classroom," in *Philosophy of Education 1995*, ed. Alven Neiman (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1996), 170-73.

18. For a very helpful account of consciousness raising as part of a feminist politics of emotion, see Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 108-35.

I WISH TO THANK Barbara Applebaum, Megan Boler, and Barbara Thayer-Bacon for very helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.