

Nell Noddings

Starting at home: Caring and social policy

BERKELEY: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 2002

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ISBN: 0520230264

It is difficult for me to overstate the importance of *Starting at Home* for those interested in care ethics. If a friend asked me for a recommendation on a single work as a comprehensive discussion of care ethics, this would be the one.

Reading Nel Noddings's first work on care ethics, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984), was an important enough event in my life that I remember where and when I read it. I was familiar with Carol Gilligan's work on care, *In a Different Voice* (1982), and the idea of "a different voice" in morality was captivating, but Noddings developed a comprehensive vocabulary and a moral philosophy of caring. She also provided a phenomenology of caring, employing terms such as the one-caring, the cared-for, engrossment, etc. What made *Caring* (Noddings 1984) so memorable is that it captured the richness of morality in human relationships in a way that no abstract theory of ethics was capable of. Noddings's latest work, *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy* (2002) is equally valuable as the discussion of care ethics moves from adolescence to maturity.

While many notable feminist philosophers—including Seyla Benhabib (1987), Susan Hekman (1995), Virginia Held (1993), Rita Manning (1992), Sara Ruddick (1995), and Joan Tronto (1993)—expanded the notion of care ethics throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it was the publication of *Caring* in 1984 that marked the arrival of care ethics as a viable philosophical discourse. And much-discussed it was! Noddings and other care ethicists received internal feminist criticism (for example, that perpetuating the notion of female selflessness in caring was dangerous; that care ethics had limited social applications; and that the distinction between justice and care was artificial) as well as external critique (for example, that care ethics was relativistic, and that "caring" was just another virtue). While lively criticism is par for the course in philosophy and a healthy means of intellectual growth, some of the responses appeared to overlook what a short history this discourse has had: feminist care ethics remains less than twenty years old.

One significant discussion took place in the pages of *Hypatia* in the spring of 1990. In carving out an intellectual space for caring, some commentators believed that Noddings had created too much distance between care ethics—an approach to morality centered upon relationality and concrete contexts—and justice approaches to morality (that is, traditional ethical systems such as rule-based or rights-based ethics). In her contribution to this discussion, Noddings responded: "Several thoughtful critics, including Claudia Card and Susan Moller Okin, have suggested that justice and care must be combined in an adequate ethic. These critics might be right, and I want to think through the matter thoroughly" (Noddings 1990, 120). Her latest book, *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy* (2002), responds in part to the discussion of care ethics over the

past fifteen years and is a more comprehensive treatment of care ethics than its predecessor, *Caring* (and twice as long).

*Starting at Home* accomplishes many things, but two important aspects of this work are that Noddings provides a thoroughgoing and novel approach to establishing care's viability in social policy, and that through her discussion of social ethics, she also develops a helpful approach for linking justice and care.

Like many feminist theorists, Noddings approaches a challenge by reframing the question. Instead of asking how care can fit into social policy, Noddings asks how social policy fits into care. Unlike traditional social philosophers such as Plato, Jean Jacques Rousseau, or John Rawls, Noddings believes the normative condition and starting point for political philosophy is the home and not the wider political entity. She queries, "What might we learn if . . . we start with a description of best homes and then move to the larger society?" (2002, 1). In particular, Noddings views home as where we learn how to care. Noddings acknowledges that many homes are far from caring, but she posits that, "the caring orientation arises at home . . . A social or political theory that begins at home has different components than does one that starts with the larger community or state" (2002, 5). Implicit in Noddings's approach is a critique of the Western philosophical tradition that undervalues the moral significance of the private sphere.

To integrate justice and care, Noddings distinguishes between caring-for and caring-about. Caring-for describes direct personal caring, which is hopefully learned at home. Noddings claims that caring-for describes what much of the work on care ethics has addressed. Caring-about describes those situations when we desire to exercise caring-for but we cannot. We learn how to care about others from experiences of being cared-for and caring-for others. Noddings argues that justice ethics—rights, duties, moral calculations—comprise an extension of caring: "justice itself is dependent on caring-about, and caring-about is in turn dependent on caring-for" (2002, 6).

Pragmatist feminists, and in particular those interested in John Dewey's and Jane Addams's work, will find *Starting at Home* of particular interest. Noddings indicates, "I think, like Dewey, that education is not just a category of social policy; rather it must be at the very heart of an adequate social theory" (Noddings 2002, 221). Not only is Dewey referenced extensively (as well as Addams, a few times) but also the spirit of Noddings's social philosophy and her emphasis on education, broadly construed as associative with an emphasis on experience, is very reminiscent of a Deweyan project.

My criticism of *Starting at Home* reads more like internal quibbles rather serious concerns that undermine the importance of this work. For example, I am continually frustrated by the neglect by feminist philosophers of Carol Gilligan's later research (see, for example, Gilligan and Attanucci 1988; Gilligan, Lyons, and Hanmer 1990; and Gilligan 1995). Like any theoretician working in groundbreaking areas, there are rough spots in Gilligan's early work that she, sometimes elegantly, refines in her later works. Unfortunately, Noddings only briefly references *In a Different Voice* (Gilligan 1982) and does not consider Gilligan's later contributions at all. By comparison, given the important advancements she continues to make as her own thought has

evolved over the course of the past fifteen years (see, for example, Noddings 1992 and 1998), I would not want Noddings to be known exclusively by *her* first work on care ethics.

It is difficult for me to overstate the importance of *Starting at Home* for those interested in care ethics. If a friend asked me for a recommendation on a single work as a comprehensive discussion of care ethics, this would be the one. Noddings skillfully weaves examples from literature and many genres of philosophy in an accessible style that will not frustrate the non-philosopher. In some ways this appears to be Noddings's *magnum opus* on care, given the refinement of her earlier claims and the breadth of the subject matter.

When I read *Caring* over ten years ago, I was moved to adopt Noddings's motto, "The student is infinitely more important than the subject" (1984, 20), by reprinting it on all of my syllabi and discussing the idea with my students. Reading *Starting at Home* moves me to a more profound consideration of how I can conduct my philosophy classes in such a way that I prepare students for a rich private life that will extend into their public life. As Noddings concludes, "An ethic of care, private and public, works to create a world in which it is both possible and attractive to be good" (2002, 352).

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