Doing What is Right in Whose Eyes?

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"I feel you are judging my writing," the young woman said. She had come up to me after class to explain a comment she was leaving on her daily talk-back journal entry. "I don't want you to think I am being rude, but I'm concerned about my grade in this course."

She and the other students, seniors in the education program who were only months away from graduating and then entering classrooms as state-certified teachers, had turned in their first short assignment the previous week, and had received their grades on the assignment. On this first assignment, I told students that as long as they turned in something they would receive full credit. The instructions were deliberately vague but not incomprehensible, as I wanted to see how they assessed the assignment as much as how they wrote, and a detailed rubric was provided. I also told them, however, I would grade the paper as if it were not the first assignment so they would have a sense of how I grade "for real."

Most students' responses scored in the 85-100 range, with a few as low as 60. Of the students in the first category, most writing included some details, used technically correct sentence structure, and had few conventions errors. A few responses were highly detailed and strongly voiced. The responses turned in by students in the second category were lacking details and focus, contained vocabulary that was repetitious and vague, and had several sentence structure and conventions errors.

What surprised me about the student's concern about her grade was that I hadn't recalled her work falling into the second category. When I checked later, I found her work had, indeed, earned a 9.5 out of a possible 10 points. Rather, that is what the work would have earned had I not given the full points because it was the first assignment.

Perhaps ascribing a grade to the work of a short assignment does not seem like a situation

fraught with ethical concerns, but I almost always have at least one student who is taken aback

that I grade with such attention to detail to the writing. And yet the course is about teaching

children to write, about learning how to grade students' writing, and about learning how to

communicate in writing to other professionals and to parents about students' writings.

Nel Noddings (2013), who writes extensively about an understanding of ethics based on

caring, might argue that because the student was feeling uncared for that the "relationship cannot

be characterized as one of caring" (p. 68) and, therefore, a breach of ethics had occurred.

Noddings doesn't always make the connection between ethics and caring clear in her work,

leaving me, at least, feeling she is wallowing about in a sea of emotion with no solid land in

sight. Being rocked by warm waves beneath a sultry sun may be enjoyable for the moment, but I

for one soon long for a foundation on which to stand and a purpose toward which to journey.

This paper, then, is an attempt to tease the meaning from Noddings' writings and to then

consider how her thinking adds to my own understanding of ethics.

Noddings (2013) begins by calling ethics "the philosophical study of morality" (p. 1),

which is confirmed by the Oxford English Dictionary's entry for *ethic* and to a lesser degree by

the OED's entry for *ethics*. If this is so, then perhaps we are misusing the term *ethical* when we

call a particular behavior *un-ethical*. When we call an action or a policy *un-utilitarian*, for

instance, we are not making a value judgment about the action, the policy, or the philosophy; we

are merely saying the action or policy does not meet the working or practical or theoretical

definition of utilitarianism. If we used the term *anti-utilitarian*, we might evoke more of a sense

of opposition to utilitarianism. *Unethical* implies without a basis in ethics, which should mean

without a basis in a philosophy of morality. But there is a difference between being without a

basis in a philosophy of morality and being without morals, isn't there? On the other hand, one

could argue that every action is, in some respect, a moral action; therefore, every action has a

basis in a philosophy of morals regardless of whether the actor has thought through his or her

reasons for the action. Which brings us back to the question of whether the term *unethical* means

what we think it means. If every action has a basis in a philosophy of morals, acknowledged or

not, then no action can be unethical.

The next logical question is what is morality? Dictionary definitions for *ethics* and

morals/morality seem circular with each referring to the other and neither introducing new terms.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for *moral,* used as an adjective, offers some insight into

this confusion in its etymology of the word, noting "Classical Latin *mōrālis* was formed by

Cicero (*De Fato* ii. i) as a rendering of ancient Greek ἠθικός ethic…(*mōrēs* being the accepted

Latin equivalent of ἤθη)" (para. 1). By the 6th century BCE, Aristotle's works had resurfaced and

were translated into Latin. The OED entry for *moral virtue* noted, "Post-classical Latin *virtus*

moralis is apparently a translation of ancient Greek ἀρετὴ ἠθική, used by Aristotle (e.g.

Nicomachean Ethics 1103[a] 5ff.) in contrast with ἀρετὴ διανοητική 'intellectual excellence'"

(para.1). Note that the Greek word *ethic* has been translated into Latin as *moral*, just as Cicero

had done half a millennium or so prior. Also note the distinguishing of morals from intellect.

By the 13th century, BCE, the Italians were using *morales* to refer to that which is "decent

or proper" and, a half a century after that, as "concerning modes of behaviour" (para. 1). But

who decides what is "decent or proper" as regards to "modes of behavior"—which sounds like a

very post-modern question until we consider that writings dated to a thousand years before

Cicero's time record one society as operating under an ethic that, while not formalized, was

operationalized in this manner: "There was no king in Israel at that time; everyone did whatever

they wanted" (Judges 17:6 Today's English Version). Lest we think this produced an idyllic society, the remainder of the *Judges*, which contains accounts of event occurring in Israel before the time of Saul, records acts of extortion, kidnapping, rape, murder, and other brutalities before ending with the same phrase, "There was no king in Israel at that time. Everyone did whatever they pleased" (Judges 21:15 Today's English Version), suggesting that what they pleased was often fraught with evil.

That the writer records Israel as being without a king implies that this was the problem; a king would impose and enforce laws. Then, people believed, everyone would do what was right in the king's eyes, and all would be well. Except that didn't work either. The books of 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, and 2 Chronicles record wars and conflicts and rapes and murders of the next period of Israel's history, from the kingship of Saul to the dividing of the country into two kingdoms to the conquering and enslavement of one country by the Assyrians and the conquering and enslavement of the other country by the Babylonians—mainly due to the kings' being human, too, and establishing laws that were merely right in their own eyes. The only times during this period when peace and order were established were when the kings recognized a divinely-given moral law, sought to obey it, and sought to lead their people to obey it.

Going back even further, and without arguing one way or another for a literal Adam and Eve in a literal Eden, the Biblical account of the first people ends with their doing what was right in their eyes rather than following the instructions they had been given by the being who, it is recorded, had created them out of love and who had given them everything they needed. D'Heurle, Feimer, and Kraetzer's (1975) comparative study found themes of obedience and disobedience in folklore around the world (p. 81). Perhaps even more pertinent is their observation that "a great deal of the fascination of the tales lies in this unpredictable question of

help [in staying alive in a precarious world]. Collectively the tales establish the rules for survival, but they also paradoxically set forth the principal that ultimate reality likes beyond the rules of men" (p. 83).

C. S. Lewis (1952) said that the concept of fairness and of a person quarreling when he (or she) feels he has been unfairly treated suggests a "standard of behavior which he expects the other [person] to know about" (p. 17) and that this standard is remarkably consistent throughout all times and in all places.

If anyone will take the trouble to compare the moral teaching of, say, the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Hindus, Chinese, Greeks, and Romans, what will really strike him will be how very like they are to each other and to our own. Some of the evidence for this I have put together in the appendix of another book called *The Abolition of Man*; but for our present purpose I need only ask the reader to think about what a totally different morality would mean. Think of a country where people were admired for running away in battle, or where a man felt proud of doublecrossing all the people who had been kindest to him. … Men have always differed as regards what people you ought to be unselfish to…. But they have always agreed that you ought not to put yourself first. Selfishness has never been admired. Men have differed as to whether you should have one wife or four. But they have always agreed that you must not simply have any woman you liked. (p. 19)

Lewis argued further that none of us actually adhere to the moral ideal or Law of Nature. We each have our own list of excuses, but the truth is that we each, at least sometimes, "have failed to practice ourselves the kind of behaviour we expect from other people" (p. 20). Even our quickness to offer excuses, Lewis said, argue for the existence of this Law of Nature. "For you

notice," wrote Lewis, "that it is only for our bad behaviour that we find all these explanations. It

is only our bad temper that we put down to being tired or worried or hungry; we put our good

temper down to ourselves" (p. 21). Noddings described such excuses [given to explain why she

might yell at her child] as "my special weakness under pressure" (p. 121)

Lewis's reasoned arguments for the existence, not just of a moral ideal but also for the

existence of an outside-this-contained system-and creator-of-it Originator of the ideal are too

long for me to recount in this paper. Suffice it to say that I find it impossible to separate

discussions of ethics and morality from discussions about the origin of moral ideals and from my

own conviction that that Originator IS those ideals in ways beyond our fathoming, has our

ultimate good (again, a good beyond our finite imagining) at heart, and has designed us for an

eternal existence far beyond the limitations of this earthly one. This conviction and these

understandings—limited by my human, still-veiled mind and as yet belied by my human inability

to fully do "the good I want to do [but instead] do the evil that I do not want to do," as Paul put it

(Romans 7:19 *Today's English Version*)—are the solid foundation I sensed missing from

Noddings' discussion of an ethic of caring.

Noddings' understanding of Originator appeared very different from mine as did her

understanding of gender. The passage which follows included both basic differences; I have

placed alongside Noddings' passage my own responses and thoughts. Because Noddings referred

to God, I do also; however, I also note that connotations of this three-letter word vary widely:

From *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, p. 97:	My observations and responses:
There are many women who will deplore my insistence on locating the source of caring in human relations.	I do not deplore this, but I think she is mistaken. The source of caring—perfect caring—IS Caring. "God is Love [Caring]," wrote John (1 John 4:16 *TEV*). "We love (care) because He [Love/Caring] first loved (cared for) us" (1 John 4:19 *TEV*).
The longing for something beyond is	Aside from Noddings' condescending tone toward

From *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, p. 97:	My observations and responses:
lovely—alluring—and it persists. It seems to me quite natural that men, many of whom are separated from the intimacy of caring, should create gods and seek security and love in worship. But what ethical need have women for God?	men, I find it difficult to believe—nor does she provide evidence for—her statement that women receive all the caring they need from human relations. Second, Noddings fails to distinguish between masculine and feminine aspects of caring. In the index, for instance, the listing under "Caring: feminine approach to" contains eight pages, but there is no listing for Caring: masculine approach to." The listing for "Caring: and mothering" notes three pages, but there is no listing for "Caring: and fathering."
I do not mean to suggest that women can brush aside an actually existing God but, if there is such a God, the human role in Its maintenance must be trivial.	Well, yes. God doesn't actually *need* us at all. God *chose* to create a universe for us to inhabit and *chose* to create us.
We can only contemplate the universe in awe and wonder, study it conscientiously, and live in it conservatively.	Does Noddings never wonder, with awe, why this intricately designed and magnificent universe came to be?
Women, it seems to me, can accept the God of Spinoza and Einstein.	Noddings relegates women to less-than and incapable of accepting a more complete understanding of God.
What I mean to suggest is that women have no need of a conceptualized God, one wrought in the image of man.	Correct. I have no need of such a God. Thankfully, there is a God who isn't just a concept but is "actually existing," to use Noddings' words, one who chose to make us—men and women (Genesis 1:27)—in the perfect image of Love/Caring. Perhaps it is Noddings' concept of Love/Caring that is too small, too temporal, too confined because she can only see fallen humans as the pattern.
All the love and goodness commanded by such a God can be generated from the love and goodness found in the warmest and best human relations.	**On the one hand:** What evidence does Noddings provide? How is she quantifying "all" and how is she making this determination? Most important, where are these idealized relations? **On the other hand:** How sure can Noddings be that whatever love and goodness is found in human relations does not originate from Love/Caring/God?

This passage violated the terms Noddings set at the outset of her work—that she would

"do this without recourse to notions of God or some other source of "sanctity" in human life" (p.

4). I suggest that what Noddings really wanted to do was what she did in the passage just

parsed—she wanted to actively reject particular notions of God—but that in not discussing other notions of God, she put humans in the position of being God. Her assumption was that God is the source of "principles," which are the cause of all the problems in the world because an "ethics of principle as ambiguous and unstable" because "wherever there is a principle , there is implied its exception" and principles generate separation, self-righteousness, and other-ing (p. 5). What Noddings has not grasped is that the God of caring she is trying to create already exists in far greater form than she can comprehend. God is not a dispenser of principles; God IS Love/Caring which needs no principles to direct it. As Paul wrote, "For the whole Law is summed up n one commandment: Love your neighbor as you love yourself" (Galatians 5:14 *TEV*).

With this in mind—that Noddings is reaching toward not just an ethic of care but toward Caring, I also note that Noddings wrote, "Aristotle noted long ago that one process may find its actualization in another. So that teaching is completed in learning and that caring is completed in reception by the cared-for should be neither incredible nor incomprehensible" (p. 69). And I now return to my encounter with the young woman who was concerned about her grade and who presumably felt non-cared-for because I had judged her writing to be less than perfect.

The immediate context is the relation between myself and the student; at issue is my caring or lack of caring and her perception or misperception of being cared for or of not being cared for within the context of teaching/learning. Looking only at the immediate, I can see that because she does not feel cared for, not only is the caring relationship incomplete but my teaching did not become completed in her learning. At this point, I have an obligation to reach out and try to express care in a way she can perceive but which still accomplishes the teaching intended. It should be noted that the National Council of Teachers of English (2009) offers guidance in this area, stating, "Assessments may alter [students'] educational opportunities,

increase or decrease their motivation to learn, elicit positive or negative feelings about themselves and others, and influence their understanding of what it means to be literate, educated, or successful. It is not enough for assessment to serve the well-being of students 'on average'; we must aim for assessment to serve, not harm, each and every student" (Item 1, para. 1). Along with this, I need to examine the assignment itself to be sure it does what I think it is doing and is serving the purposes intended.

However, my teaching occurs within a wider context than just the immediate here-and-now student and assignment. I also must care for the student's future self and her ability to present herself in writing in such a manner as to secure and maintain a teaching position in less than a year's time. Nor is the student's future self my only obligation. I also must care for the children this student's future self will teach and her ability to model writing that will help them pass standardized writing tests and, down the road, secure and maintain employment and communicate effectively with various parts of society. I also have an obligation to the student's potential self. Given that she would have earned a 9.5 out of 10 possible points, the student's present writing ability likely is sufficient to secure employment and to model acceptable writing to her students. But what about the student's potential for growth as a writer? When do we stop teaching gifted students or students who have mastered a skill? Looking even more widely, what is my obligation to language itself? If I let "less than" writing slide in the name of some assumed form of caring, does language deteriorate and become a less sharp tool for communication?

All of these concerns and obligations sound reasonable, and I likely will walk the student through them when we meet—after all, they are the same issues, concerns, and obligations she will have with her own students in the not-too-distant future. However, I have not considered the widest perspective of all: In the grand scheme of eternity, what is my obligation? Will this grade

matter? Will whether she gets a job or not matter? Those questions are too big for me, and I must leave the web-weaving to Someone with perfect knowledge, perspective, and understanding of the future. What I can know, however, is that Love/Caring begets love/caring, which begets love/caring. My ultimate obligation is to seek to know how to share love/caring with her, to listen and follow instructions, and to keep trying. The rest is in the hands of Love.

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