

Care ethics, needs-recognition, and teaching encounters

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ABSTRACT

Care ethics takes as central the discerning of needs in those being cared for and attempts to meet those needs. Perceptive caring agents are more likely to be able to identify needs in those for whom they are caring. The identification of needs is no small matter, not least in teaching encounters. This paper modestly proposes that at least some of the needs a caring agent should attempt to meet are a function of the identity of the patient of caring action. Taking Nel Noddings' account of care ethics as representative, I present it in outline. This leads to the needs-identification problematic. Following this I turn to Soran Reader's account of needs. I interpret this to offer what I designate as identity as 'what-ness'. Such an understanding of identity-based needs is a starting point for the caring agent but a more nuanced account, of identity as 'who-ness', is argued to be preferable. Identity as 'who-ness', as expressed in Paul Ricoeur's work, advances the discussion, culminating in his concept of the 'capable human being'. Having brought this aspect of Ricoeur's thought into conversation with care ethics, I offer an account of identity-based needs conducive to the broader aims of the care ethical project. Finally, I consider what this bolstered account of care ethics might say about a brief and illustrative teaching encounter.

KEYWORDS: care ethics, needs-recognition, Nel Noddings, Soran Reader, Paul Ricoeur

NEEDS IN TEACHING ENCOUNTERS AND CARE ETHICS

Care ethics is generally taken to have emerged in the early 1980s through the work in child developmental psychology of Carol Gilligan and the philosophical endeavours of Nel Noddings (Gilligan 1993 [1982]; Noddings 2013 [1984]). In the intervening

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what is it that the person I am trying to teach needs in this particular instance?' Thus, there is a significant point of contact between care ethics and teaching: namely that both concern themselves with others' needs discerned in situations of relation.⁷

The emphasis on needs-meeting is felt throughout the care ethical literature; however, the nature of these needs remains undertheorized. It is this that prompts my turn to Soran Reader's ethics of need. Reader's account contains within in it the insight that there are some needs that are a function of a person's identity. Her approach to identity might be helpfully characterized as identity as 'what-ness'. This conception is not without utility, and I aim to carry forward the thrust of her argument. However, I take Ricoeur's work on identity and recognition⁸ to be a sea change. If Reader's account of identity is identity as 'what-ness', then Ricoeur's account of identity is identity as 'who-ness'. The latter, for Ricoeur, leads to his idea of someone being recognized as a 'capable human being'. The two sorts of identity should not be understood to be mutually exclusive; rather, when considered to be needs-generating, they tell the would-be one-caring different things about the would-be cared-for. Equipped with this enriched sense of needs, I explore, in the final part of the paper, how this might feature in a care ethical teaching encounter.

I will start by giving a brief presentation of Noddings' ethics of care. This will allow me to identify just where I see Ricoeur's recognition-theory and care ethics intersecting.⁹ Noddings seeks to give a phenomenological account of caring which is simultaneously descriptive and stipulative. She starts with caring dyads comprised of the 'one-caring', that is the agent undertaking the caring actions, and the 'cared-for', the patient of the caring actions.¹⁰ In a particular dyad the roles may of course switch, but in those cases where taking on the role of one-caring is an impossibility for a particular cared-for, it is all the more important that social structures are such that the one-caring does in fact receive appropriate care.¹¹ Substituting 'A' for the one-caring and 'B' for the cared-for, for Noddings:

⁷ In formal educational settings there are likely to be tensions between the aims of education for the individual and for their society (Kitcher 2022: 34ff) and whether, in the latter case, the perceived educational needs are response to a world to be met as is or resisted (Biesta 2022: 11ff). My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.

⁸ Luminaries including Charles Taylor, Paul Ricoeur, and Axel Honneth have each traced the emergence and development of the concept of 'recognition' through the history of ideas in the Western philosophical tradition (Taylor 1994; Ricoeur 2005; Honneth 2020). Moreover, recognition has received further treatment in these authors' other works (Taylor 1991; Ricoeur 1992; Honneth 1995). As such, I do not propose to retrace the history of the term 'recognition' but rather engage with how it was articulated by Ricoeur and the way I take it to contribute to how care ethics might enlarge understandings of teaching encounters.

⁹ Other examinations of recognition and care ethics include: Hegelian (Molas 2019), Ricoeurian (Lanoix 2015), Ricoeurian with an emphasis on health-care settings (de Lange 2014; Hettema 2014; van Nistelrooij 2014; van Nistelrooij et al. 2014; van Stichel 2014; Carney 2015), Honnethian (Leget et al. 2011), and Taylorean (Nguyen 2022).

¹⁰ The terms 'one-caring' and 'cared-for' intentionally echo the existentialist predilection for both hyphenated terminology and the use of such terminology to clarify without repetition the referents of discussion (Noddings 2013 [1984]: 4).

¹¹ A theme considered in Kittay 2020 [1999]: 70–7.

pivotal.¹⁴ Vitally, for care ethics, it is not the generalized other but the concrete other,¹⁵ embedded as they are in their particular socio-historical context and enmeshed as they are in webs of relationships, whose needs are to be met. Incongruously, despite the prominence of the concept of need in care ethics, ‘needs’ for the most part suffer from limited conceptualization. Sarah Clark Miller also observes this though we part ways in our responses to this lacuna (Miller 2012: 15). Across the care ethics literature, we can locate at least five themes related to the identification of needs in the cared-for.¹⁶ First, and already acknowledged, is the fact that meeting needs features heavily in many if not most accounts of care ethics. Second, there is the recognition that needs are shaped by the context in which they are found. Third, there are some needs that are more ‘basic’ than others.¹⁷ Fourth, despite recognizing the different urgency of needs there are some which can be said to relate specifically to a person’s flourishing. Fifth, a distinction between ‘needs’ and ‘wants’ is often introduced, with the fulfilment of the latter also connected to a person’s flourishing. However, though these are undeniably interesting and important aspects of the concept of ‘needs’, for the most part the accounts of ‘needs’ offered by these authors remain underdeveloped. For some care ethicists, this is said to be intentional; they insist that ‘caring needs are not to be specified and ought to be considered always within the context of *particular* situations and with regards to *particular* individuals’ (Bourgault 2020: 208 emphasis in original). Yet there is an important distinction to be made here. There is a difference between specifying, by means of a list, for example, the sorts of needs that care ethicists maintain ought to be met by ones-caring and just how ‘need’ should be understood within the ethic. The risk in the first situation is that the commitment to meeting the needing other, the cared-for, in their particularity, will be eroded. If this were to happen, then an emphasis thought central to care ethics would be lost. However, this does not mean that a more illuminating account of ‘needs’ cannot be developed within

¹⁴ For example, Noddings on care ethics and education: ‘To care means to respond to needs, and needs do not stop (or start) at the schoolroom door.’ (Noddings 2005a: xxii). Outside care ethics, what is meant by need has been the subject of a range of analysis. See, for example (Miller 1976; Thomson 1987; Wiggins 1987). In a different vein is Michael Ignatieff’s discussion of King Lear: ‘It is a play that sets out to show us why we must take the needs of others on trust, by showing how murderous and pitiless a place the world can be without such trust. The claim of need makes the relation between the powerful and powerless human, but the nightmare of the powerless is that one day they will make their claim and the powerful will demand a reason’ (Ignatieff 1990: 30).

¹⁵ To use Seyla Benhabib’s well-known distinction (Benhabib 1992: 148–77).

¹⁶ For example, on the difficulty of identifying needs (Held 2005: 39), on the importance of accounting for context (Barnes 2012: 31) and (Bubeck 1995: 129ff), and on basic needs (Engster 2007: 26ff). Kittay links needs-meeting and some wants-meeting to flourishing (Kittay 2019: 138). Relatedly Steven Steyl offers an account that uses the ‘Anscombean theory of action ... to defend a theory of caring actions as those whose proximate end is to meet a need and mount an argument for a eudaimonistic understanding thereof’ (Steyl 2020b: 284). This approach echoes Milton Mayeroff’s work on care which predates the literature typically subsumed under the title ‘care ethics’. For Mayeroff, care is directed towards helping the cared-for grow which will include meeting the cared-for’s needs (Mayeroff 1971: 4).

¹⁷ Universal human needs for water, sustenance, and shelter are basic in that they make themselves felt however society is organized.

to above, is that the obligation to meet needs is restricted to those situations in which people are in what Reader describes as ‘moral relationships’: ‘What distinguishes the relationships of which moral relationships are a species from mere relations is that relationships involve an actual connection, a real “something between” agent and patient which links them together’ (pp. 72–3). However, I take Reader’s account to be problematic because of the conception of identity through the use of second-natural phased-sortals, not because of how she understands moral relationships.²⁰

Metaphysicians and logicians in the Western philosophical tradition, since at least the time of Aristotle, have exercised themselves about how or if one thing can be distinguished from another, that is, how things are identified. If ‘things’ are taken to exclude ‘people’ then the use of sortals seems merited. However, Reader does not commit to this exclusion, far from it. Her claim for the obligation to meet needs is predicated on moral agents being able to discern by means of second-natural phased-sortals who the people with whom they are in moral relationships are. Reader’s claim is that for sortals like ‘mother’ or ‘philosopher’ there is a ‘constitutive link between the empirically ascertainable intrinsic principles of change or rest of members of a kind, and the question of the identity of things of that kind’ (p. 60). For adults, such sortal identities as ‘mother’ and ‘philosopher’ could be concurrent, unlike linear phases (an adult cannot concurrently be a baby). In order to rescue her account from being committed to saying that second-natural phased-sortal identities such as ‘mother’ and ‘philosopher’ are not as important as those identities which define linear phases, for example ‘baby’ and ‘adult’, Reader says:

given the Aristotelian concept of nature, I can only be essentially one thing at a time. This is because only one inner principle of unity and change can be active at any one time. So I cannot after all—actively—be both a mother and a philosopher at the same time. (Reader 2007: 62)

Unfortunately, there is no reference to which of Aristotle’s ideas are being taken in support of Reader’s assertion. Perhaps it is an oblique reference to the opening of Book 2 of the *Physics* where Aristotle discusses what it means to refer to the ‘nature’ of something.²¹ Aristotle contrasts natural objects, for example animals, plants, and fire with objects made by people. The difference is that ‘each of the natural ones contains within itself a source of change and stability ... on the other hand a bed or a cloak has no intrinsic impulse for change’ except in the case where the artefact ‘coincidentally’ has been made with something natural which itself provides the

²⁰ In a review of *Needs and Moral Necessity*, Bill Wringe observes that Reader’s account of moral relationships is underdetermined (Reader 2007: 72–7). He concedes that stipulating necessary and sufficient conditions for moral relationships may reasonably be eschewed in place of the paradigm relationships which Reader does present. However, as Wringe points out, Reader spends time at the outset of her book making the case that morality does in fact need defining or at least a clear account needs to be provided (Reader 2007: Chapter 2). As such, to leave the account of moral relationships as it stands is to not engage with her own project as stated (Wringe 2010: 884). Although Reader has not engaged with a great deal of literature about moral relationships, I do not find her characterization controversial.

²¹ Bk 2 192b8–32.

impulse for change (Aristotle 2008: 33). He goes on: ‘if a doctor, say, is responsible for curing himself, this does not alter the fact that it is not qua being cured that he possesses medical skill: it is just a coincidence that the same person is both a doctor and being cured, and that is why the two things are separable from each other’ (p. 33). It is plausible that this distinction is the motivating factor behind Reader’s claim.

In the preceding paragraph I have aimed for a charitable interpretation of Reader’s explanation about how an individual will often come under multiple second-natural phased-sortals at any one time, but that they are only ever actively acting under one such sortal at a time. However, the stance she takes strikes me as a severe weakness of her position. It seems to resist the interactions between different identities within the same person and how that materially affects their life. As Kimberlé Crenshaw observed in her seminal 1989 paper *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*, feminists who do not account for racial identity when discussing sexism fail to see that women of colour are typically multiply burdened when it comes to the experience of discrimination in ways that white feminists are not (Crenshaw 1989: 154). The date of publication indicates that intersectionality is not a recent area of scholarship and is surely something about which Reader would have been aware.²² Because identities combine, the claim Reader makes about it really being the case that one is at one moment a ‘mother’ and another a ‘philosopher’ does not carry water.²³ Even if Reader were correct about identities operating separately, where does this leave the moral agent who is trying to respond to the moral patients’ second-natural phased-sortal needs? As Crenshaw observed, to only attend to one aspect of identity such as gender, is to completely miss the effects of, say, race for that same individual. Thus, the agent who attends to one second-natural phased-sortal at a time is likely destined to fail to properly meet the needs of the moral patient. Just ‘who’ the moral patient is, is missed on Reader’s account.²⁴

Finally, even Reader herself seems to be aware that second-natural phased-sortals may be too blunt when she says ‘even second-natural phased sortals may not be specific enough to single individual human beings out, keep track of them, chronicle what they do or help them well ... my individual identity, too, is arguably not contingent, and is the source of my most morally demanding needs’ (Reader 2007: 62–3). I interpret this to mean that individual identity²⁵ is *not* the same as second-natural phased-sortal identity. Thus, it remains unclear as to how far second-natural phased-sortals help illuminate the relation between moral agent

²² See also Collins 1990; Collins and Bilge 2016; Hancock 2016.

²³ Reader also fails to explore how the use of sortals fits with their application to children. This is surprising as children are clearly the sort of beings whose needs ought to be met by someone. I do not propose to expand on this issue as it is hoped my arguments to date have demonstrated the shortcomings of second-natural phased-sortal identities.

²⁴ The formation of identity, especially sortals such as ‘mother’ is not neutral. The shaping of sortals amidst relations of power and oppression must not be underestimated. For example, see Alcoff 2021. However, this is not the topic of my paper.

²⁵ Miller 1976: 128–36 relates needs and harms to a person’s ‘plan of life’ which is to be understood as a person’s identity.

and moral patient. However, I do find the broader idea of identity-based needs fruitful and will carry that forward. Reader's project was to give an answer to 'what' this person is (pp. 58–63). Many will find this interrogative jarring when taken in reference to people but not when 'what' is used to ask after or about things. The discord provokes a reappraisal of how identity and attendant needs might be understood. In so doing I turn to identity as 'who-ness' and take up Ricoeur's line of thought. Importantly, identity as 'who-ness' is not to be taken as an adjunct to Reader's arguments, but rather as a significant change in aspect. Not paying attention to 'who-ness' risks missing what it is to be human.

IDENTITY-BASED NEEDS: 'WHO-NESS'

Ricoeur posits a self that is equidistant from the Cartesian cogito and Nietzschean anti-cogito (Ricoeur 1992: 23). This self will serve 'to fit in both with the ambition of self-founding certainty stemming from the Cartesian cogito and with the humiliation of the cogito reduced to sheer illusion following the Nietzschean critique' (p. 299).²⁶ His argument starts in the philosophy of language, proceeds through the philosophy of action and the philosophy of narrative theory, and culminates at the 'threshold between philosophical anthropology and ethics' (Ricoeur 2002: 280). Ricoeur introduces what he takes to be two meanings of identity, that is identity as sameness and identity as selfhood. Adopting the Latin words to mark the distinction, these two meanings of identity correspond to *idem* identity and *ipse* identity. *Idem* identity, that is, sameness, speaks to numerical identity, qualitative identity or similitude, uninterrupted continuity and permanence in time.²⁷ The concerns of *ipse* identity are somewhat different. *Ipse* 'implies no assertion concerning some unchanging core of the personality' (Ricoeur 1992: 2). Rather, selfhood seeks an answer to the question of 'who?' across time that is 'irreducible to any question of "what?"' (p. 118). Identity as sameness is the proper response to 'what', while identity as selfhood is the proper response to 'who'. This 'who' is not simply someone's name, it requires more, it requires narrative, the story of their life (Simms 2003: 102). Recall, the designation I gave to Reader's account of identity as 'what-ness': this finds its correlate in Ricoeur's *idem*. However, there is more to identity than the possibility of identification or re-identification that is offered by *idem*. *Ipse* identity could be the answer to all manner of questions but notably it is a comprehensible answer to 'Who did this?' As Ricoeur explains, if ascription of an action to a particular agent, takes on 'imputation' then there is an explicitly moral weight: not only is the agent the actual author of the action but they are also responsible for

²⁶ It was questioned by at least one contemporary reviewer whether or not Ricoeur had really advanced beyond Descartes, Kant, and Hegel, that is, whether his 'hermeneutics of the self ever get[s] beyond the thinking subject to the inscrutable other' (Anderson 1993: 244). This is contrary to Ricoeur's denials throughout his work. Whether or not Ricoeur was successful in this particular task with which he burdened himself is not something I propose to explore.

²⁷ See also (Ricoeur 1992: 114–18). These are the sorts of interrogations of identity commonly found in the work of Anglo-analytic philosophy. It is the discourse in which Reader, above, appears to have been working.

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