Epilogue: Nel Noddings as Trailblazer

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Abstract

The epilogue closes this special issue, a festschrift in honor of American philosopher and philosopher of education, Nel Noddings, on her 90th birthday in 2019. Naming Noddings as a trailblazer, this essay is meant to complement the richness of articles from journal contributors with a personal and professional overview of her life and work. Organized from the structure of her library, its sections are care theory, philosophy, feminist theory, and education, including throughout vision for reform.

Keywords: Nel Noddings, trailblazer, library, care theory, philosophy, feminist theory, education

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Résumé

L’Épilogue termine cette édition spéciale, qui est une «festschrift» en l’honneur de la philosophe américaine et philosophe en éducation, Nel Noddings en son 90e anniversaire de naissance en 2019. En appelant Nel Noddings une pionnière, ce numéro veut compléter la richesse des articles des contributeurs par un survol personnel et professionnel de sa vie et de son œuvre. À partir de la structure de sa bibliothèque, les sections de cette édition spéciale sont la théorie du soin, la
philosophie, la théorie féministe et l’éducation, comprenant sa vision pour la réforme.

Mots-clés: Nel Noddings, la pionnière, la bibliothèque, la théorie du soin, la philosophie, la théorie féministe, l’éducation

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Resumen

El epílogo cierra este número especial, un volumen conmemorativo en honor de la filósofa americana y filósofa de la educación, Nel Noddings, en su 90 cumpleaños en 2019. Al designar a Noddings como pionera, la intención de este trabajo es complementar la riqueza de los artículos escritos por los autores que participan en este número de la revista con un repaso de su trayectoria personal y profesional. Este repaso toma como referencia la estructura de su biblioteca, sus secciones son la teoría, la filosofía, la teoría feminista y la educación, incluyendo la visión de la reforma.

Palabras clave: Nel Noddings, pionera, biblioteca, teoría del cuidado, filosofía, teoría feminista, educación

Introduction

A fascinating story in The New York Times in September 2019 relates that sculptor Wangechi Mutu is “changing the face” of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City with four commissioned female bronze figures that will grace the museum’s entrance this fall. The work of this woman immigrant, who lives today both in the USA and in Kenya, is beautiful and clearly trailblazing in a blend of African and Western motifs. International reach and trail-blending from a gifted artist struck a chord with me in thinking about the career of Nel Noddings, highlighted in this festschrift in honor of her 90th birthday. Even more salient, in the same newspaper section, Ms. Motu offers a proverb from her Kenyan roots: “They say that when an old person dies, a library goes with them.”

This epilogue begins with a tour of Nel’s library while she is alive, well, and continuing to write. A note that three of us in this volume are her former students and others may have seen her library as well. (We all call her Nel, so I shall also in this essay).

Nel lives in a large three-story home in a northeastern US shore town; today, her daughter Sharon lives with her, and family and colleagues visit. The home faces two streets with gardens on each block; people walking along the streets often stop to admire the home. Inside, books are part of virtually every room, including a pantry.
room and the kitchen. One of these books is a recipe collection with contributions from her large family. On the bottom floor, there is also a television room and books herein are informational, encyclopedias of plants for instance. There is also a large collection of DVDs with several favorites at the ready for viewing. In the large dining and living room, there is a coffee table with magazines and newspapers as well as one shelf of favorite authors and fictional series; an example is the Horatio Hornblower series. On to the second floor. Here is the sleeping and working hub of the house, including a couple of office spaces, a plant room, and a viewing porch overlooking the ocean. In the principal writing space, there is a large library table organized meticulously with books and note slips for a current project. A visitor here for a few days can also have a writing space at the table. Floor to ceiling shelves line three main walls and contain her professional book organization, literally many shelves for each category: principally philosophy, ethics, feminism, education, and recent books she is reading and using. These include the newest of other categories and especially histories and political writings on issues such as race. I will tell a small anecdote on the latter at the close of this introduction. Nel’s “business office” is in another space, with a computer and current files. Her own books and articles fill up one entire wall here. Finally, on the third floor, guest rooms have books too, collections of favorite novelists such as Alexander McCall Smith for leisure reading. Another note that Nel keeps a list of all the books she reads in a year; her oldest daughter, Laurie, also keeps a list for comparison and sharing.

Allow me this anecdote. In visits that occur usually twice a year, I get a tour from Nel of the recent books and make my own list of those to consider for writing. Every once in a while, I see a book that I already have! These events have become one of the most pleasurable moments of being with her.

Nel is known worldwide for her theorizing of care; her reputation is renowned. Following the introduction, a first section of this epilogue is a brief review of care theory, the philosophical trailblazing she has set out. This project is comprised of three volumes, beginning with *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education*, first published in 1984. The other two books are *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy* (2002), and *The Maternal Factor: Two Paths to Morality* (2010). The second and third sections of the epilogue are comprised of commentary on her interests and influences in philosophy and feminist theory, and in education, that are related and have evolved from care theory. In the latter, a key topic is Nel’s vision for societal and educational reform that has evolved across her texts, with a brief mention of favorite topics especially for the school curriculum.
Care Theory

Anyone wanting to understand care theory must return to the original volume for an analysis of key ideas. This means, too, in order to raise objections. To begin, the center is relation, an attitude, an affect that characterizes an ordered pair of persons. This pair relates the one-caring and the cared-for. Starting from a model of mother and child, relation is always asymmetrical even among friends as their positions in relation change with circumstances. It is important that relation is ethical even as interaction between a pair can well include insight beyond feeling. Several ideas that clarify the initial philosophy stand out: circles and chains, cares and burdens, obligation with strangers, ethical ideal, and ethical diminishment.

Nel’s notion of circles and chains sets the stage for an ethical world. For her, intimate circles of those loved are natural caring, the beginning. Moving outward, circles expand with caring relations that are potentially there. Often these persons exist within institutional boundaries—that might be termed relationships—and are and can be held in regard. Beyond these there are chains. Here is Nel:

Chains of caring are established, some linking unknown individuals to those already anchored in the inner circles and some forming whole new circles of potential caring. I am “prepared to care” through recognition of these chains.²

Preparation to care, a receptivity, even within inner circles, is sometimes difficult to maintain. Nel tells the story of a son whose relation with an aged mother requires an obligation to visit her every day, and he does so but without pleasure. His care has become a burden. Perhaps as his own situation changes, caring may return, but indeed it may not, a relation that he ought to confront for the sake of all involved. This is because ones-caring need to remain healthy selves, to remain open in order to care for others. Perhaps he might reach out to peers or professionals for assistance.

Now on to strangers. Being caring and an ethical person, Nel describes receptivity here as an “I Must.” (This is a story that I have used in teaching caring, but I do not believe it has been written.) A father brings his ten-year-old daughter and her friend to the shore for a holiday. The girls are swimming and are caught in an undertow. He swims out to save them and meets the daughter’s friend first and takes her to safety. He turns back toward his daughter, but she drowns. He faces severe family consequences from this turn of events, but Nel’s point is that he had no other ethical choice. This surely is an “I Must” that no one should ever have to endure! In another example, someone asking on the street for directions should be responded to, and refusal does carry guilt, but oh-so-much less.

The other two ideas in this brief interpretation are ethical ideal and ethical diminishment. Nel proposes that as people live in caring relations, and in relationships too, they each form what she calls a picture of oneself related to both the ethical self
and a vision of an ideal. Here she is again: “The ethical self is an active relation…born of the fundamental recognition of relatedness…that which connects me naturally to the other…[and] reconnects me through the other to myself.” Related to the ideal is the concept of ethical diminishment. Current visions of oneself and an ideal that do change themselves carry a form of burden. Persons live in a world of “imperfect” relations that may range from meanness to missed intentions. Picture, then, each person cautiously passing through life, trying to learn to be more ethical, but with a reminder of diminishment, of guilt, perched on a shoulder. For Nel, there is no religious atonement and forgiveness, but there is the acknowledgment that this condition is shared by all.

This brief conceptual consideration cannot do justice to caring. Other aspects for students of and users of a care theory are developed across Nel’s œuvre. In the first text, examples are engrossment and motivational displacement. In the two texts named at the outset, important ideas include the cared-for, response and receptivity, caring about, needs and wants, encounters, relational self, and maternal instinct. In addition to schooling per se, she has advocated for connections of caring to social policy, to war and peace, and to a just world.

At the time of writing this epilogue, this festschrift, essays in honor of Nel Noddings, is being compiled. Emphasis in most of the articles is on her influence, especially in schooling. Care theory itself may not figure prominently in specific contributions, but it is always understood as underpinning, initiating, and integrating her work, and thus its centrality in this epilogue. Hopefully it adds to the richness of contributors’ articles. Returning to trailblazing, care is her trail – the trail forwarded in the development of Nel’s central concepts and commitments and the trail of her reception and influence.

**Philosophy and Feminist Theory**

In widespread recognition and regard, Nel is a cross-over philosopher, beyond philosophy of education into philosophy and feminist theory. One more anecdote (with indulgence): At a recent lecture that I attended in my university’s philosophy department, a graduate student asked me who I was. I replied, “I do philosophy of education in the Ed School.” He said, “the only philosopher of education we know is Nel Noddings and she is in a philosophy department.” I smiled and said nothing, as Nel has always identified as a philosopher of education and has always resided in education departments, schools and colleges, while visiting and lecturing at other venues.

In this second section, her interconnections to philosophy are first in a brief journey through philosophical influences on her writing. Second is a very limited consideration of how her theory has responded to traditions in ethics, and third is an overview comment on her feminist stance.
To begin, a return to her library and her academic training is in order. As background, Nel’s dissertation was on Jean Piaget. Response to psychology is taken up subsequently in origins of her work. Her coursework and self-training were a function of the times she entered philosophy with an emphasis on existentialism, as in the work of John Paul Sartre and Martin Buber and in early and continued “participation” in pragmatism. One set of shelves, taking up an entire wall is her philosophy section, sub-organized by alphabetical order of the authors significant for her. One should know that Nel reads avidly and across decades has evidenced eclectic tastes and needs, but a clue to her favorites is indicated by shelf space. Standing out (for me) are the several shelves of John Dewey, his texts and those of others writing about him. Philosophers and philosophers of education alike are found here. With her broad reading, one of her favorites is Bertrand Russell—the relationship between he and Dewey an interesting story in its own right.

A second clue to philosophers important to her is found in individual texts and in who is incorporated for specific elements in her writing. Check out the always-good indexes. A standout example is her use of Gaston Bachelard’s concept of home in Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy, published in 2002. She uses only one Bachelard text but a look at the index shows its importance as part of this book. A comment on philosophy here: her stance in this book is to challenge the organizing origin of society, not from the state as in Plato but instead to begin in the home. Trailblazing again. Lastly, as influences on her work, Nel often cites favorite novelists and poets, two prime examples being Charles Dickens and Walt Whitman.

These and so many more sources have contributed to Nel’s care theory. What was philosophically important in Caring is one of the most significant aspects of trailblazing. The concept of relation, with an interpretation reminiscent of Buber, actually undermines the principled ethics of Immanuel Kant and its modern tradition emphasizing the universalist logic of duty and the base for ethics in “law.” In her text, she responds directly to this ethics in the stages of moral development from psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, very popular when she wrote the book.

While Nel’s theory is not based in principle, it is also not a virtue theory, the other major modern ethics tradition. There are virtues, but she writes that for her these are not “ethical.” The problem is that virtue focuses on the position of the bearer and not on the other or what relation can do. Further, if someone is somehow the recipient of caring, he or she is not obligated to be grateful or somehow to respond in kind. The cared-for’s reciprocity is to further her or his project instead. The philosophical issue of virtue is one area that has interested philosophers such as Michael Slote.

As a philosopher, Nel has made an important contribution to feminist theory. A sense is that Nel became a feminist as she developed her writing. She has been named a cultural feminist, perhaps, but she eschews any label and is just herself. Originally, her use of “feminine” in Caring refers to Jungian archetypes and her own study in psychology. Importantly, she has always been interested in and supportive of the
historic roles of women, as keepers of homes, as the primary parent because of traditional gender roles, and as offering significant values and practices to social life and culture. A proposal is that feminism became apparent in her view with a second book following Caring. This is Women and Evil, published in 1989. There, she takes on the twin historic misogynist myths of woman that have “made” women inferior as the angel in the house and the devil’s gateway.

Feminist philosophers have been very interested in care theory, many in error initially that it was attributed to educational psychologist Carol Gilligan. Nel’s first essay predates Gilligan’s A Different Voice, also critical of Kohlberg. One question is Nel’s positioning of women as ones-caring and men as cared-fors and their historic power inequalities. Of course, Nel understands issues of power, and from the outset she does not deny that men care. She does not see a problem for her theory. Moreover, while she acknowledges other views of society, relation precludes her from being a critical theorist, with their emphasis on structural, essentialist attributes of race, class and gender. One notes the change in title of Caring to A Relational Approach to Ethics & Moral Education in 2013 (see the preface to this edition). Importantly, there are feminist philosophers such as Virginia Held and the late Sara Ruddick whose own work on care theory and women’s lives has meant friendship between the women.

The most significant contribution to feminist theory is Nel’s attention to the history and continued presence of the uniqueness of women’s experience. Her points are not just its validation but also its importance for all people as part of the general culture. Central themes have been home, family relations and parenting, child rearing, and community life. She has emphasized women’s work in the home. Early on, she described large family meals and favorite tools, including a paring knife that she still uses every day. In later texts she writes about disparities that continue in the lives of women and men, recognizing income and other forms of gender inequality. For the larger social order, she has written about women’s leadership. An example from education includes the missing presence of females in STEM scholarship and occupation. In addition, from a principal interest of hers, she writes about women’s aversion to war and support of peace education and activism.

The theme of trailblazing is evident in Nel’s own wide reading experience for professional use as well as personal curiosity and preference. The library is wonderful, and visitors can use it—as long as books are returned to where they belong! Her trail is manifest in the philosophical interest in her work and her sterling reputation. Major areas include ethics and feminist theory and indeed education, to which she always connects. This alone raises the academic reputation of the field.
Education

Nel Noddings is a philosopher of education who has always been proud of this. As many know, she was a middle school math teacher, an administrator, and a teacher supervisor while living in New Jersey with a young family. She then attended Stanford University, and, taking ten children to the university, completed her doctorate in quarters and summers in a couple of years! With a long tenure as professor and dean at Stanford, she was elected president of the Philosophy of Education Society and the Dewey Society, and was inducted into and president of the National Academy of Education. She has published more than twenty books translated into many languages and several hundred articles. In the past two decades, including her third care theory text *The Maternal Factor*, she has published a half-dozen books that focus particularly on education and schooling (with more to come).

Nel’s focus on education is indicated in one way in an early “companion” to *Caring* for teachers to put care theory to work, *Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* first published in 1992. The structural elements of this book show a philosophical and educational pattern found across most of her books. These include the current educational climate or specific issues, often a return to and sometimes update on care theory, critique of existing school trends or practices, and turning to schooling organization and on curriculum with topics and ideas for alternative organization and teaching. The first chapters show Nel’s continued interest and connection to education today, and the last ones show imaginative use of her life-long engagement with sources and ideas well beyond those from traditional textbooks and materials. The text pattern usually concludes with a chapter on what schools can do.

Across education reform texts and significant attention to education overall, three themes occur. These are vision, continuing topics, and an emphasis on curriculum. Nel does pay attention to teaching, teachers, and teacher education. Her major contribution has been to describe interactions between teachers and students. This began with the concept of dialogue in *Caring* and has continued into proposing discussion—importantly of central issues to students’ lives by all teachers and not just in social studies. Questioning is part of these interactions, found in her own writing style as well as in classroom practice. As of this writing, Nel and her reading companion, daughter Laurie Brooks, recently co-authored *Teaching Controversial Issues: The Case for Critical Thinking and Moral Commitment in the Classroom*, published in 2017. As is typical for philosophers, Nel is most often a single author, although she has participated in several co-edited collections.

In this section on education, one more text merits attention. It is the second of Nel’s care trilogy. It is unclear whether many educators are familiar with it, given the more recent books specifically for them. As indicated above, *Starting at Home* is trailblazing as an alternative origin of western society in the home. In this book, Nel’s purpose is to
connect care with social policy. To do this, she asserts that “education...[is] at the very heart of an adequate social theory.”

Again, care theory is basic, but in ways that extend the one-caring and cared-for in the home to caring about in the larger society. Caring about emphasizes justice with aspects of freedom and equality. Two concepts have particular relevance for educators (personal favorites). The first as founding purpose is needs and wants; the second as primary venue is encounter. Encapsulated here is the idea of each. Nel proposes, indeed “demands,” through a brilliant analysis that every living being be guaranteed basic needs and wants. The basis of needs is biological, in expressed and inferred needs that go far beyond clothing, food, shelter, and, her important addition, security. Think what this can mean. Her own start is from Ruddick, named above. Nel relates from her, “A maternal figure (female or male) must respond to three great demands (or needs) of the child: Preservation, growth, and acceptability.”

To these needs, Nel adds that every person should have a few “wants,” desires that are just theirs and that can be realized. (Interviewing former poor and working-class graduate students a few years ago, they said that, as children and youth, they knew they were different because they did not have stuff!)

The second concept is encounter. Here, the idea is that home, school, and society should foster beneficial encounters for everyone and, as “founding education,” particularly for children and youth. She poses that encounters are essential to formation of selves. Starting at home, children are to be encouraged, to learn to wander forth into the world (the latter from Whitman). Encounters begin with animals, plants, and objects to which humans respond. This response develops as a basic moral need of selves, of the one-caring, to care for others as cared-fors, engaged also in caring about.

From above, the first education theme is vision. With over fifty years in education, Nel can take the long as well as contemporary view. She employs the terms vision and aims for a larger unifying purpose; for this epilogue, these three concerns need not be distinguished. An underlying vision for education has characterized all of her work. To begin, Nel’s focused position is that public education in the United States is in trouble. In near current times, she has critiqued a limited preoccupation with academic achievement, an over-reliance on narrow standards and testing, and in general, education that continues to promote inequality at the expense of benefit for all. Underlying this desire for universal benefit is education that contributes to democracy. Further is the faith that education and its educators can “do school” differently. In this regard, obviously, the interests and needs of all must be met by schools.

Noting above that “vision” and “purpose” have been taken as singular, this theme for education has both particular as well as general application, indeed, worldwide. Because the United States is the country, its history and its present, that she knows, Nel’s educational focus in her writings almost exclusively has been on it. The reform texts written most recently employ particular American issues, policy, and language. This journal issue, very importantly, is testament to her international reach that also
should be well recognized. She has traveled and spoken internationally, and as mentioned above, many of her texts are widely in translation.

Still another way to overview Nel’s educational vision, in addition to elements of care ethics and a caring society, is of democracy. Anticipating the 100th anniversary of Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* in 2016, Nel published *Education and Democracy in the 21st Century* in 2013. Starting from Dewey’s conception of democracy as a form of associated living, she moves quickly to values and education of individuals and groups for 21st century thinking. Indeed, most have been explicit across six decades of writing about aims for education. Nel reports, “Dewey recommended building from characteristics already present in at least some rudimentary form....[He] put his trust in the communicative interaction of actual groups working together for both improved education and an improved society.” One additional comment is that Nel has repeatedly emphasized the value of choice for all persons as central to learning in and for democracy.

To close this section on education, all too truncated, bringing Nel’s favorite topics for discussion and reform and her emphasis on curriculum in schools together is appropriate since they are so intertwined. A pattern of intertwining is found across her texts, first beginning in *Challenge to Care* with topics of care organized in learning centers. A range of curricular topics are then developed and presented as multiple interests for children and youth. One text, *Critical Lessons: What Our Schools Should Teach*, published in 2006, is exemplary of this formulation. Examples have been presented in this epilogue; these include war, house and home, making a living, and religion. A recent trend has been to spotlight a specific topic in a single volume: three examples indicative again of her range of philosophical and practical expertise are peace education, the contemporary high school, and controversial issues. One topic deserves special attention, since part of Nel’s vision for schooling is that college need not be appropriate for everyone. This has played out in her support for a reinvigorated vocational education—all too crucial in this educational age of standardization, and frankly, a curriculum that currently bores many.

**Conclusion**

This essay in honor of Nel Noddings began by describing the female figure sculptures inhabiting the portals entrance of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the fall of 2019, built by a remarkable woman artist, Wangechi Mutu. She has been described as a trailblazer, a term also rightly describing Nel and her remarkable philosophical and educational career. The epilogue has been organized around the organizational structure of her own library. In summary, her care theory has been truly ground-breaking in philosophy and in philosophy of education. Specific contributions have challenged, indeed changed, the conceptual scope of ethics and, as well, influenced
contemporary feminist theory. This base in care has received worldwide attention, perhaps with a common stylistic ingredient that her texts often read as common sense. This is no more so than in the theory and practices of schooling. Her vision builds for democracy and for meeting the needs of all, of course including those currently left “behind” due to societal inequality. It is important to state, at the close, that for Nel Noddings, flourishing lives for all people has been no idle abstraction. Her texts are replete with illustrations of actual classroom activities and communicative strategies. Even as a renowned philosophical and educational trailblazer, she is always a teacher.

Notes

6. Given the diverse and divisive world that currently is ours, *Starting at Home* deserves special attention by educators for what they can do in school and society.