Looking for the Ethical Self in Others: Relationality, Self-Knowing, and Education

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ABSTRACT: This paper seeks implications of human relationality and ethical subjectivity for education. Embracing relationality as ontologically basic, as well as the basis of self-knowing, has ethical implications for educators' self-knowledge and their communities. Focusing on ethics as relational draws the condition of living in and among a community of others to the foreground and refuses to resolve tensions based on universal and absolute principles. As educators assume responsibility within their communities and for students, they find themselves within an unsolvable predicament of partial self-knowing. However, through engagement with others they press against the limits of self-knowledge and risk themselves in caring for others. In the process, they uncover their vulnerability to the "Other" as a resource for an ethic of leadership and education.

Keywords: Ethics, Relationality, Intersubjectivity, Responsibility, Vulnerability, Reciprocity

RESUMÉ: Le présent article cherche à dégager les rôles que les relations humaines et la subjectivité déontologique peuvent jouer dans le domaine de l'enseignement. Un relationnel fondé sur l'ontologie et la connaissance de soi, joue un rôle éthique pour les enseignants et leurs sociétés, dans la connaissance du soi. Une politique relationnelle construite sur la déontologie exige, avant tout, une vie en communauté avec les autres et refuse de résoudre les conflits reposant sur les principes universels et absolus. Puisque les enseignants assument la responsabilité au sein de leurs environnements et pour les étudiants, ils se retrouvent emprisonnés dans une situation problématique insoluble

d'une connaissance partielle du soi. Il est à noter
cependant qu'à travers l'engagement avec les autres, ils
se retrouvent aux confins de la connaissance d'eux-
mêmes et s'exposent à prendre en charge les autres. Au
fur et à mesure, ils révèlent aux autres leur
vulnérabilité ; instrument dont ils se servent pour la
déontologie de l'encadrement et de l'enseignement.

Mots-clefs : déontologie, relationnel, intersubjectivité,
responsabilité, vulnérabilité, réciprocité

If human beings become ethical in and through
relationships with others, then modernist foundations of
education may not be suited for a democratic, pluralist
future. Biesta (2006) observed that modern education, as
derived from the Enlightenment project, has become based
on a particular conception about the nature and destiny of
the human being that connected rationality and autonomy
with education. If, as Biesta argued, the essence and
nature of human beings should not be assumed *a priori*,
then education must be treated as a "radically open
question," in which the question of what it means to be
human "can only be answered by engaging in education
rather than as a question that can be answered before we
can engage in education" (p. 4).   As Kolvenbach
(2001/2008) stated: "Tomorrow's 'whole person' cannot
be whole without an educated awareness of society and
culture with which to contribute socially, generously, in
the real world. Tomorrow's whole person must have, in
brief, a well-educated solidarity." (p. 155).   The Jesuit
educational standard to "educate the whole person of
solidarity for the real world," according to Kolvenbach,
who cites a papal address, is comprised of solidarity
learned through "contact" rather than "concepts" (John
Paul II, 2000). Human relationality and the call to

solidarity enable a move beyond the modernist foundations of education. Creating contact and fostering dialogue with others becomes the *modus operandi* of education and primary endeavor of the educator.

An Educator's Predicament

This paper seeks an understanding of ethics and responsibility for engaging in education that, as Todd (2003) wrote, "refuses to locate responsibility with a rational, autonomous subject but in the forms of relationality that structure our encounters with other people" (p. 141). It ponders how an educator's subjectivity is given and derived from others, particularly from the students to whom he or she is related and in some way ethically responsible. This means that the educator's subjectivity is not prior to engaging in education but is emergent and always just beyond the limits of what is known.

The educator's predicament bespeaks the fact that reality is radically relational and ethics matter in the mix. Ethical subjects emerge in relationship and through responsibility. Ethics typically refers to codes of conduct which regulate the ethical life and imply knowing how to act. Ciulla (2004) claimed, "[Ethics] is about what we should do and what we should be like as human beings, as members of a group or society, and in the different roles that we play in life" (p. 302). However, while leading an ethical life implies following an ethical code, there is little sense in speaking of an ethical subject apart from human relationality and without an "Other" to whom a subject is ethically related. Ethical codes of conduct must be grounded in a sense of relationality that understands humans as intersubjectively constituted by virtue of

mutuality, reciprocity, interaction with others and the world. Todd (2003) argued:

> In this regard, what counts as conditions of responsibility are therefore based in the quality of relations we have to others as opposed to adhering to predefined principles that we apply to the particular situations in which we find ourselves. . . . Each of us, then, is therefore burdened with a responsibility for the Other that is not of our own making. (p. 141)

Ethical responsibility, as well as both the possibility and difficulty of teaching and education, emerges from and within a position of susceptibility and the conditions of vulnerability and openness to others. In such a condition, the subjective self is literally ecstatic, outside of the self, a heteronomous identity, not in control of oneself, but nonetheless responsible. If relationality forms the basis of the ethical life and education, it becomes necessary to explore the ways in which human subjects are related and conceived to be in relationship with the "Other." This exploration leads to the limits of what is knowable about the subject's self, since the students, who relationally constitute teacher's subjectivity, are present as an "Other."

This paper first examines Butler's (2005) *Giving an Account of Oneself* to argue that impartial self-knowledge does not exonerate human subjects from leading an ethical life; rather, responsibility is established by the inescapable relation to the "Other." In the next section, it draws on Noddings' (2003) *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* to begin thinking how educators are reciprocally and ethically bound to their students in ways that extend beyond rationality. The implications of

Butler's analysis of ethical relationality and Noddings' ethic of care is expounded in following sections to draw implications for education in pluralist and democratic contexts. It begins to paint a picture of an ethical and dialoging educational community in which the "I" of an educator comes into being through intersubjective engagement within a community of students.

Limited Knowing and Unlimited Responsibility: Who Knows?

In *Giving an Account of Oneself,* Butler (2005) suggested that "the 'I' has no story of its own that is not also the story of relation – or set of relations – to a set of norms. . . . The 'I' is always to some extent dispossessed by the social conditions of its emergence" (p. 8). Butler asserted that this "dispossession" of the subjective "I" does not mean that we have lost the subjective ground for ethics but is the condition under which ethical considerations arise. The subject and its formulation is the very problem to which ethical inquiry lends itself. As one seeks to give an account of oneself, he or she must undertake a delimiting act with a set of norms that precede and exceed the subject (p. 17) and are not of the subject's own making (p. 21). The first chapter concluded with poignant questions to which Butler returned frequently:

> There is that in me and of me for which I can give no account. But does this mean that I am not, in the moral sense, accountable for who I am and for what I do? If I find that, despite my best efforts, a certain opacity persists and I cannot make myself fully accountable to you, is this ethical failure? Or is it a failure that gives rise to another ethical

> disposition in the place of a full and satisfying
> notion of narrative accountability. Is there in
> this affirmation of partial transparency a
> possibility for acknowledging a relationality
> that binds more deeply to language and to you
> than I previously knew? And is the
> relationality that conditions and blinds the
> "self" not, precisely, an indispensable resource
> for ethics? (2005, p. 40)

For Butler, ethics is tied to the critique of the ability to give an account of oneself and an acknowledgement of one's relatedness. Butler moved in ensuing chapters to construct an ethic based on the "shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves" (p. 42).

The acknowledgement that we will always fail to completely know ourselves and achieve self-identity is an essential resource of ethics. Butler (2005) wrote, "To know oneself as limited is still to know something about oneself, even if one's knowing is afflicted by the limitation that one knows" (p. 46). From this it also follows that one cannot reasonably expect anything different from others. Limited self-knowledge demands an ethical disposition toward humility and generosity that calls out for forgiveness on both sides, precisely since "any effort 'to give an account of oneself' will have to fail in order to approach being true" (p. 42).

Butler (2005) contended that the meaning of responsibility will need to be rethought on the basis of an avowing of the limits of self-understanding and establishing these limits as the condition for the subject, which is the human predicament (p. 83). This human predicament exists by virtue of the fact we do not belong to ourselves but are constantly given over to the "Other." Continuing this thread of thought, Butler wrote:

> I speak as an "I," but do not make the mistake of thinking that I know precisely all that I am doing when I speak that way. I find that my very formation implicates the other in me, that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others. . . . I cannot think the question of responsibility alone, in isolation from the other. If I do I take myself out of the mode of address (being addressed as well as addressing the other) in which the problem of responsibility first emerges. (p. 84)

Butler has shown that though the subject is authored by what "precedes and exceeds" its formation, this does not exonerate one from having to give an account nor does it render one not responsible (p. 82). What "precedes and exceeds" are social norms that are not of one's own making and an encounter with the "Other," by whom the accusative subject is addressed and to whom he or she must give an account.

The condition of being impinged upon by others belongs to the relational structure of social life. Butler (2005) laid out a social ethic focusing on social norms in identity construction and the second-person pronoun in a relationship of intersubjectivity. The "Other" impinges upon the subject such that from the onset, claimed Butler (2005), "*I am my relation to you*" (p. 81.), and similarly, "*I am only in the address to you*" (p. 82). The inaugural impingement on the accusative subject is the first formation of the self and ethical responsibility. The capacity to be "*acted upon*" implicates the accusative subject in a relationship that entails responsibility (p. 88). Butler wrote, "The other's actions 'address' me in the

sense that those actions belong to an Other who is irreducible, whose 'face' makes an ethical demand upon me...Thus responsibility emerges not with the 'I' but with the accusative 'me'" (p. 90). This susceptibility to the impingement of the "Other" creates the very conditions upon which one becomes responsible (p. 91).

Vulnerability to the other and the other's address does not remove the agency of the subject, but disassociates agency from responsibility for one's actions, and establishes responsibility by virtue of the relation to the "Other." As a consequence, claimed Butler (2005), "responsibility is not a matter of cultivating a will, but of making use of an unwilled susceptibility as a resource for becoming responsive to the 'Other'" (p. 91). In answering the question of what it means to construct an ethic on the basis of unwilled action upon the accusative subject, Butler proposed, "It might mean that one does not foreclose primary exposure to the Other, that one does not try to transform unwilled into willed, but, rather to take the very unbearability of exposure as the sign, the reminder, of a common vulnerability, a common physicality and risk" (p. 100). The human predicament entails an inescapable vulnerability and unwilled condition. This predicament, for which humans are not responsible, is "the conditions under which we assume responsibility" (p. 101). "To be human," stated Butler, "seems to mean being in a predicament that one cannot solve" (p. 103).

Educators live, act, and assume responsibility within the unsolvable human predicament. Butler's analysis of emergence of the ethical self and ethical responsibility, as identified not with the subjective "I" but emerging within the accusative "me" under address, suggests that leadership and education involve an accusative identity that is received from the "Other." As an educator, one's identity belongs or derives first from students and is

received by virtue of that relation. This relationality formulates the basis of the ethical responsibility the teacher must bear. As educators press against the limits of self-knowledge and risk themselves at the point of unknowingness, they must consequently acknowledge and embrace their own vulnerability and the frailty of human relationships. This embrace of vulnerability and frailty is the primary resource of ethics and demands a posture of humility and vulnerability which lives within the tensions of relationality.

An Ethic of Care through Reciprocity with the Other: Who Cares?

Challenging the Kantian concept of the rational self, or the transcendent logical ego, feminist ways of knowing propose a more complex and multi-faceted view of the self as integral and interrelated (Wesselius, 1997, p. 54). In *Caring: A Feminine approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, Noddings (2003) combined critical theory and relational ontology to express an ethic of care typified in the experiences of women and motherhood. She argued for an alternative naturalistic and intuitive ethic founded on relationships rather than rationality. Noddings contended:

> Many persons who live moral lives do not approach moral problems formally. Women, in particular, seem to approach moral problems by placing themselves as nearly as possible in concrete situations and assuming personal responsibility for the choices to be made. (p. 8)

Noddings looked to feminine notions of "receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness," utilizing motherhood as a model, to develop an ethic rooted in the act of caring (p. 2).

Noddings' (2003) approach enables a paradigm that is critical and concrete, while placing ethics in the foreground. Though Noddings distinguishes between natural and ethical caring, she portrayed ethical caring as arising out of the sentiment and recognition of natural caring (p. 79). Natural caring is the human condition in which one responds as "one-caring" out of love or natural inclination. This natural condition is "good" and drives humans to meet each other morally (p. 4). Noddings viewed absolute principles as unstable and ambiguous, functioning to separate humans from each other (p. 5). To preserve the uniqueness of human encounters and subjective experience, she rejected the notion of universalizability while striving to avoid an ethical relativism, even though the conditions under which objective morality is possible cannot be described. According to Noddings, an "irremovable subjective core, a longing for goodness, provides what universality and stability there is" (p. 27). Caring is natural and accessible to all, which implies that certain feelings, attitudes, and memories might then be taken as universal. An ethic of caring does not so much embody moral judgments, but considers moral impulses and locates morality in "pre-act consciousness" of the one-caring (p. 28). Noddings argued that rational, objective thinking may need to be suspended to allow subjective thinking and reflection: "Judgment (in the impersonal, logical sense) may properly be put aside in favor of faith and commitment" (p. 25).

A fundamental claim of taking caring as the primary ethic is the recognition that "we are dependent on each other even in the quest for personal goodness" (Noddings,

2003, p. 6). Thus, dependency is the source of ethics. The virtue one exercises is completed and fulfilled in the other. "As I think about how I feel when I care, about what my frame of mind is, I see that my caring is always characterized by a move away from self" (p. 16). Noddings (2003) utilized the term "engrossment" to draw attention to the fundamental aspect of caring (p. 17). Describing the term, she wrote: "When I look at and think about how I am when I care, I realize that there is invariably this displacement of interest from my own reality to the reality of the other" (p. 14). The one-caring is present in acts of caring and is sufficiently engrossed in the cared-for to take pleasure and pain in what the cared-for recounts (p. 19). Presence and engrossment entail vulnerability, as caring involves and embraces both guilt and risk (p. 18). Caring also increases the possibility of pain and joy (p. 39). It nurtures the ethical ideal of joy that accompanies and fulfills caring and satisfies longing for relatedness. This type of caring is at the heart of ethical relationships (p. 92). Noddings rejected universal caring and contended: "My first and formal obligation is to meet the other as one caring" (p. 17). Though one should be ready to care for whomever one may encounter and be committed to the possibility, for Noddings, caring refers to an actuality. This is the difference between "caring-about" and "caring-for." Noddings limited the focus of her ethic to a caring that has its object as the one "cared-for." Noddings insisted that in so far as caring involves stepping out of one's personal frame of reference into another's, it is specific action. "To act as one-caring, then, is to act with special regard for the particular person in a concrete situation" (p. 24).

Whereas the Western ethical tradition has removed the family and local communities from considerations of universal ethical principles, a feminine ethic puts it back in

center place. The act of caring is reactive, responsive, and exists within the concrete relationship. Noddings (2003) sought to avoid reducing the need for human judgment to a rule-bound ethic and resisted any movement away from the concrete act of individual engrossment (p. 25). Caring entails authentic presence and is fulfilled by the reciprocal presence of another. If leadership and education are about ways people relate, then an ethic of relationship and analysis of the care that occurs in the authentic acts of relating are paramount.

An ethic based on caring elucidates relationality as the preliminary ontological reality. As Noddings (2003) showed, caring rests upon a mutuality of presence in which "we are dependent on each other" (p. 6). Noddings' claim that "How good *I* can be is partly a function of how *you* – the other – receive and respond to me" (p. 6) echoes Butler's (2005) understanding of the ethical subject as derived from social norms in identity construction and the second-person pronoun in a relationship of intersubjectivity. If ethical responsibility emerges not with the "I" but with the accusative "me" and in reciprocal acts of caring then no one lives from or for himself or herself. No man or woman is an island but exists only in his or her relationship to the other. Ethical self-knowing and moral education require a community of caring persons, mutual dependence and vulnerable presence with one another.

Knowing and Being in Community with Others

Can education open an "other" way out of the totalitarian dilemma? Can the educator lead the way? A relational ontology opens ethical ways of self-knowing through contact with other persons. Caring and loving locate and concretize this ethical self-knowing in concrete

relationships. The inclusion of insights derived from theories of human relationality and intersubjectivity, like Butler's (2005) and Noddings' (2003) approaches that take ethical responsibility as primary, may enable such a turn in ethics and moral education. These insights inform the role of the educator, to structure the practices of theological education and formation of the educational communities, as intersubjective, interacted, and ethical.

Who I am: Who makes the teacher? When an "I" looks at itself in a looking-glass and peers into the face of the void, the "I" sees "You" too. "Who are you?" "You" too are a "Who." "You" also are a self-consciousness and self-reflective being, calling for recognition. Self-recognition and reflection is confounded, for the "I" sees itself in another self. When an "I" encounters another self-reflecting and knowing subject, whose presence gives evidence that he or she has taken one's sense of "I" and put it into a reflective process of his or her own, then the potential for unpacking one's own "I" is awakened (Loder, 1989, p. 78). It impinges upon the educator to ask, "Who am I in the experience of my students?"

In *The Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel (1910/2004) contends that in the process of recognition, when self-consciousness has before it another self-consciousness, it has come outside itself. It loses itself, since it finds itself as another being. It sublates the other for it sees its own self in the other, but also thereby sublates its own self for this other is itself (p. 224). As Butler (2005) urged, the "You" is a real "Other" with a face. The "You" is an "Other" which addresses me, impinges upon me, and makes an ethical demand upon me to which I am obliged to respond (pp. 90-91). The question "Who are you?" assumes that there is an Other before me who I cannot know or apprehend, who is unique and non-substitutable (p. 31). Self-recognition and reflection is not closed in

upon itself. Rather, as Butler (2005) admitted, one comes to recognize that "I exist in an important sense for you, and by virtue of you" (p. 32).

The educator's predicament emerges here at the limit of intelligibility and self-knowing. The problem occurs as the educators ask themselves, "How can I teach when I do not know who I am in the presence of the Other?" In Butler's (2005) words, the question of ethics emerges where it is asked:

> what it might mean to continue in dialogue where no common ground can be assumed, where one is, as it were, at that limits of what one knows yet still under the demand to offer and receive acknowledgement: to someone else who is there to be addressed and whose address is to be received. (p. 21-22)

In this condition,

> I speak as an 'I," but do not make the mistake of thinking that I know precisely all that I am doing when I speak that way. I find that my very formation implicates the other in me, that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others. (p. 84).

The relation one has to oneself is located in the context of an address to another (Butler, 2005, p. 131), which is formed within the social life of the educational context, with and through those by whom one is called teacher. The willingness to become undone in relation to others and by others becomes a primary necessity. It is chance "to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me," and so "be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and

so to vacate the self-sufficient 'I'" (p. 132). The self-sufficient "I" never existed anyway. No teacher is an island. While students are dependent upon and subject to the teacher, the teacher's subjectivity is also found to be mutually dependent on the students.

Thus, the predicament of an educator entails an inescapable vulnerability and unwilled condition. The educator is not an "I" alone, but only in relationship to "You." Through the practice of giving an account and the practice of dialogue, the condition of unknowingness about ourselves is shared and awakened. It is also through mutual accountability that responsibility becomes possible, as unknowingness and partial self-knowingness maintain dependence on the student by whom is addressing me and to whom one is bound. As a consequence, "I" become ethical and am able to profess along with Levinas (1974/1998), "Thanks to God. I am another for others" (p. 158). Individuality, subjectivity, and agency depend upon this relationality: "I" am "Who" as are "You."

Noddings' ethic, based on the reciprocal relationship of the one-caring and the cared-for, and Butler's analysis of emergence of the ethical self, identified within the accusative "me," suggests that leadership and education involve subjects whose subjectivity is received from others. Subjectivity is derived, received, and reciprocally constituted by virtue of the relationship. According to Semetsky (2004), the autonomy of the subject is "not given but contingent on acts of shared communication embedded within the experiential situation" (p. 324). Teachers are as dependent on the students as the students are on the teacher (Noddings, 1998, p. 196). Given that a teacher's subjectivity is heteronomously derived from the students to whom he or she is subject, Groome (1999) worded the difficulty of the educator well: "We are fellow

and sister pilgrims alongside of them, of whom they ask the way. As we point ahead of them, we also point ourselves ahead" (p. 17).

We are all in this together: Who are we? If we are ethically bound to each other, such that only together we become ethical subjects, then the question of what it means to be human "can only be answered by engaging in education rather than a question that needs to be answered before we can engage in education" (Biesta, 2006, p. 4). As Aristotle wrote in Nicomachean Ethics, "For the things which we have to learn before we can do them we learn by doing" (II 6 1106a 15-25). Furthermore, the turn toward relationality, the way in which I am bound to you, and you are bound to me, implies an inescapable intersubjective condition in which we are mutually accountable, responsible, and vulnerable. Applying an ethic of care to the shared condition of teachers and students entails that, as Noddings (2003) asserted, "all bear the responsibility for the ethical perfection of others" (p. 171). Noddings wrote:

> [Moral education] has for us a dual meaning. It refers to education which is moral in the sense that those planning and conducting education will strive to meet all those involved morally; and it refers to an education that will enhance the ethical ideal of those being educated so that they will continue to meet others morally. (p. 171)

Palmer (1999) similarly asserted, "If we are made for community, then leadership is everyone's vocation" (p. 74). Palmer (2007) also pointed toward a comprehensive form of community that has the capacity to support authentic education: "The hallmark of a community of

truth is in its claim that *reality is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it*" (p. 97). The reality we come to know, both teacher and student alike, is therefore relational. We do not know ourselves by ourselves.

Chinnery (2006) asked "what it might mean to think about community as a kind of 'permanent coexistence with the stranger' wherein community is based on a 'negative commonality – on our shared condition of existential lack or incompleteness" (p. 331). While no community comes into being without a shared condition and practice, the educational community, in which we seek ourselves, "rests, not on some form of shared identity, but on the recognition that we are all inescapably and irreducibly other to the other" (p. 331). The urgency of the question concerning how to live with others in a world of plurality and difference prompted Biesta (2006) to write:

> I challenge the idea that we can only live together in such a world if we can provide a common definition of our humanity. Instead I explore implications for the ways in which we educate if we treat the question of what it means to be human as a radically open question: a question that can only be answered by engaging in education rather than a question that needs to be answered before we can educate. (p. ix)

Taking up Biesta's challenge, we might cling to the almost impossible hope of knowledge about ourselves within an educational community, where others are encountered in their alterity and the single most important question, "Who are we?" is asked but never satisfactorily answered.

Though we may have little else in common beyond being bound to each other by our partial and limited knowledge of ourselves, educational communities are nonetheless called into ethical relationships with each other and by others beyond our own cultures and traditions. We are held responsible to those others, even as they marginalize and impinge on us, that we might learn together to live with ambiguity and uncertainty, while resisting the impulse "to reduce the other to the same, and to take that demanding path together" (Chinnery, 2006, p. 336).

At the Limit of Education

Embracing relationality as ontologically basic, as well as holding relationships to be the basis of self-knowing, has ethical implications for leaders, educators, and their communities. In a vein that echoes Noddings' (2003) descriptions of motherhood, Butler's claim that "To be human seems to mean being in a predicament that one cannot solve," is an apt description of education (2005, p. 103). Relational ethics draws the condition of community living to the foreground and refuses to resolve the tensions based on universal and absolute principles. As leaders and educators engage an impossible task of living, acting, and assuming responsibility within the unsolvable human predicament of partial self-knowing, they press against the limits of self-knowledge and risk themselves in caring for others and about things that matter.

The embrace of vulnerability to the Other is a resource for an ethic of leadership and education. In order to flourish and become more human, rather than simply survive in their professions and communities, leaders and educators must courageously commit to ethical postures of humility, generosity, and forgiveness. According to Biesta (2006), the responsibility of the educator lies in both the

cultivation of "worldly spaces" in which the encounter with otherness and difference is a real possibility, and in the asking of "difficult questions" that summon students to respond responsively and responsibly to otherness and difference in their own, unique ways (p. ix). In so doing, educators acknowledge and embrace their own vulnerability before the presence of their students. Equally important as moral courage is the posture of humility that lives within the tensions of human relationality and intersubjectivity. As Noddings (2003) wrote, "We are fragile; we depend on each other for our own goodness" (p. 102). Ethics matter, precisely because it may not be up to "me" but rather up to "you."

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