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AFTER ONTOTHEOLOGY: RECIPROCAL, CARING, CREATIVE, AND RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract: With the end of ontotheology we may realize, as Dewey did, that what sustains us is our caring relationships with physical nature, biological life, and other persons. My paper argues that relationships are ontologically basic and caring relations are morally basic. Right relationship binds us to the world and holds us together. We live by the grace of others. I conclude that after ontotheology, we must seek to form reciprocal, caring, and creative relationships.
Keywords: Caring; ontotheology; creativity; relationships.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1882/1974) portrays a madman that lights a lantern in the bright morning hours and begins to cry: "Whither is God?" and answers himself:

> I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I . . . . But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? . . . . Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? . . . . Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? . . . . Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? (section 125).

In this famous passage, Nietzsche proclaims God is dead. Postmodernity starts with this homicide and the excesses of postmodernity start with the claim that we must ourselves become like Gods to justify the crime. In slaying God, Nietzsche slays the entire Western tradition of ontotheology. Because our transcendent (e.g. Plato) and transcendental (e.g. Kant) Gods and ontology are anthropomorphic creations, in killing God Nietzsche also destroyed the very idea of a human essence, although Charles Darwin actually does a better job. Nietzsche and Darwin combine to undermine the self-assurance of the modern subject supposedly born with a mind and self along with innate natural rights, freedom, and rationality.

Nietzsche seeks an aesthetic solution to the problem of nihilism arising from the death of God and the human subject. We must relentlessly create the meaning of the self and the universe. Nietzsche has the right idea, but is mistaken to think we need "a monster of creation" such as the "superman" Zarathustra endlessly exercising his "will to power" to replace God and justify our murder. Deweyan pragmatists think all of this is just pretentious silliness that leads directly to the irrelevance of postmodern hyper-theory. You cannot kill something that never existed; hence, there is no crime, and we do not need a surrogate for God.

Greatly influenced by Darwinism, Dewey does for all essences what Darwin does for the essence of any given species. While essences (universals, laws, including ethical laws, and such) evolve, our task is to render them stable and repeatable enough to survive and thrive in an ever-changing universe. Similarly, we must endless work out the human essence in history. For Dewey, we must continuously create rationality, rights, and freedom; likewise for the mind and self. He indicates that "individuality" itself is not "an original possession or gift. It is something to be achieved, to be wrought out" (LW 2:61).[1] For Dewey, self-creation means social self-creation through right relationship with others involving the co-creation of meaning. I want to show that ordinary, everyday, *practical* caring relationships are what preserve our existence. Creating and preserving *caring* relations is what we require and not monsters of selfish self-creation. Relationships are more ontologically basic and caring relations more ethically basic than Gods, the will to power, transcendental rationality, freewill, or any other hypostatized metaphysical or quasi-metaphysical (e.g., a superman) substance.

Let us begin at the bottomlessness of human being. Martin Heidegger (1927/1962) makes the disturbing claim that human beings enter the world without an identity. We are not born with minds, selves, reason, or free will. They are all contingent social constructions. This fact accounts for a great deal of violence as we strive to force our contingent identity constructions on others for fear that their otherness and difference might force us to confront the bottomlessness of our being.

Unlike other forms of being such as rocks, plants, and animals, "*Dasein* exists as a being for which, in its being, that being is itself an *issue*" (*ibid.,* 458). Without essence, it is pure potential that "has been thrownly abandoned to the 'world', and falls into it concernfully" (*ibid.*, 458). Emptiness brings a profound existential anxiety, angst, and unsettledness (*unheimlich).* Realizing it is interpretation all the way down, that the deep dark secret of humankind is that there is no deep dark secret, results in the hermeneutics of suspicion that endlessly seeks the unmasking of disguises. While Marxism, critical theory, and deconstruction often penetrate cultural deception, they cannot reveal a truly authentic, fixed, and final essence of self because there is none. Sometimes we resist unmasking because it requires us to recognize our groundlessness.

For Heidegger, newborns actualize their potential for truly human being through socialization into norm driven socio-linguistic practices that allow them to acquire self-identity. Human beings are made not found. The being of *Dasein* is not entirely in its own power. It cannot choose itself from the bottom up:

> [T]he Being of *Dasein* itself is to be made visible as care. This expression too is to be taken as an ontological structural concept. It has nothing to do with 'tribulation, 'melancholy, or the 'cares of life', ... *Dasein* when understood *ontologically* is care [*sorge*] (*ibid.*, 83-84).

Thrown into the world, having no essence, we are the being whose very being is a matter of constant care and concern. Human being is care and discloses itself as such. For *Dasein*, "Being-in-the-world is essentially care," while "Being-alongside" things and tools is "*concern*," and "Being with the *Dasein*-with of Others as we encounter them within-the-world could

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[1] Citations of the works of John Dewey are to the critical edition published by Southern Illinois University Press. Volume and page numbers follows the initials of the series. Abbreviations for the critical edition are: EW for *The Early Works* (1882-1898); MW for *The Middle Works* (1899-1924); LW for *The Later Works* (1925-1953).

be taken as *solicitude*" (*ibid.*, 237). Nothing reveals our character better than our cares and concerns. I would like to conclude my discussion of Heidegger's concept of care by pointing out that *Dasein* is curiously selfish, self-absorbed, and sometimes arrogantly self-assertive in caring only for itself and its self-gratification.

I find the bottomlessness of human being exhilarating and liberating. With Nietzsche, I affirm the need to constantly create our world and our selves anew. However, contra Nietzsche, it also allows us to recognize our co-dependent origination, that our existence and development depend on others and that we need them to re-create our selves, and they need us. Right relationship binds us to the world and holds us together. We live by the grace of others. Dewey insists: "There are at a given time unactualized potentialities in an individual because and in as far as there are in existence other things with which it has not as yet interacted" (LW 14:109). We have the potential to learn and grow only insofar as there are other things, places, and people different from us with whom we have yet to enter into functional transaction, and they may need us. There is a profound link between artistic creativity, freedom, and the ethics of caring relation if only we can perceive it.

In her book Caring, Nel Noddings (1984/2003) makes two bold claims I want to endorse and develop. She takes relations as "ontologically basic" and "the caring relation as ethically basic" (*ibid.,* 3*)*. Noddings considers caring ethically more basic than the ethics of justice and rules. For her, we derive rules to secure reciprocity in caring relations. I will show that the same also holds for Dewey's ethics.

Noddings (2002) notes that construing "caring as an attribute of a relation draws our attention to both parties in a situation" *(ibid.*, 19). Noddings asks, "Should we begin with the carer as moral agent, or with the cared-for? Or should we perhaps begin, as the pragmatists might, with the situation?" (*ibid.*, 12). The Deweyan pragmatist begins with the entire *situation* where two people, A and B strive to functionally coordinate the caring transaction in terms of some object or objective O that may ameliorate the needs of B, and, if the transaction is to be completely fulfilling, B acknowledges A's efforts. In a reflexive relationship, the object O ameliorating the need is A themselves. Sometimes being immediately present to the other, perhaps hugging them, is the greatest need. Partially fulfilling caring relations occur when A can at least recognize they have met B's needs or wants. Of course, the object O may fail to ameliorate the needs of B and yet B recognize that A expressed care. I examine caring as an organic functional relation where the one-caring and the cared-for are subfunctions of a single functional whole.

Dewey is a naturalist who draws considerably from biology and insists on continuity between biological functioning and social functioning. For him, a living function is any "process sufficiently complex to involve an arrangement or coordination of minor processes which fulfills a specific end in such a way as to conserve itself" (MW 6:466). As such, it is "a moving equilibrium of integration" (MW 13:377). He observes that any "operative function gets us behind the ordinary distinction of organism and environment . . . . It is primary; distinction is subsequent and derived" (*ibid.*, 377). Substituting "mother" for "organism" and "infant" for "environment," provides an instance of the one-caring-one-cared-for relationship as a functional coordination. In such transactions, organism-environment, one-caring, and one cared-for, are subfunctions of a single emerging, developing, and evolving function. Functions are not simply located: "[I]f asked, 'where' a transaction is located, the only possible answer . . . appears in many cases to be that it is located wherever it has consequences" (LW 1:156). Here is how Dewey puts it:

> As a moving equilibrium, a function is serial or temporal. This temporal phase introduces the ground of distinction between organism and environment; that is between those sets of factors that represent the maintenance of the function (organism) and those which intervene first as disturbing and then as restoring equilibrium (environment) (MW 13:378).

In the caring relation as temporal function, the one-caring differs from the one cared-for in that the latter's needs, desires, purposes, and such intervene to first disturb the caring situation and, when ameliorated by some object, to restore equilibrium. As a moving equilibrium, what is organism and what is environment, or who is one-caring or who is cared-for, evolves. In any atemporal cross-section, there is no ground for distinction. As we move from the care for ideas and things, to the care of plants, animals, human infants, children, and adults, the moving function of care becomes more complicated and the possibility for the one-caring and the cared-for reversing roles in the larger caring function increases. Because caring cannot fulfill itself unless we address the needs of the cared-for, the cared-for always contributes something decisive to the caring function. At very least they disturb and restore the ongoing relation.

Dewey affirms: "An organism may be studied just as organism . . . separately from study of its surroundings. But at every point the connection with environment—or a prior unity of function is presupposed and implied" (*ibid.,* 381*).* Likewise, we may study the one-caring or the cared-for, but at every point, we must presuppose the unity of function. Each subfunction of a functional relation is a co-constituent. Let us think of the caring relation as a functional transaction wherein the subfunctions are co-dependent, reciprocally constituting, and mutually trans-forming.

Dewey does for the idea of "self" what he does for the idea of "organism." He declares:

> The distinction of subject and object is not simultaneous but has reference to phases or stages in a series. The self, subject, individual, like organism, refers to just those factors in a moving and re-organizing function which at any point in the process immediately and directly determine the going on of the process *(ibid.*, 379).

Once we comprehend the self (mind, rationality, freedom, and such) functionally, it is easy to understand that to care for ourselves, we must care for others, including physical nature, biological life, and the Earth. Similarly, we must also care for ourselves. That is because the self incorporates otherness and difference into itself while other selves incorporate our otherness and difference into themselves from the other side of the transaction.

Noddings (1984/2003) is also a naturalist. For her, ethical caring emerges from biological caring. Her emergent ethical naturalism is obvious when she asserts that "the impulse to act on behalf of the present other is innate " (*ibid.*, 83). She insists that "interest in moral behavior arises out of our natural impulse to care" (*ibid.*, 51). For her, there is simply "the sentiment of natural caring" (*ibid.*, 79). She believes there is an "initial impulse that arises as a feeling . . . saying 'I must do something,' in response to the need of the cared-for" (*ibid.*, 81). Nevertheless, she warns us, "this 'must' is not yet the moral or ethical 'ought' " (*ibid.*, 83). That is to say, it is a natural, "premoral good" (*ibid.*, 84). "Even maternal animals," Noddings points out, "take care of their offspring, and we do not credit them with ethical behavior" (*ibid.*, 79). Still, such natural caring for the needs of others is the basis of ethical caring.

We should do the right thing even when we are not naturally inclined. In such moments, "the development of an ideal self," an "ethical ideal," may sustain us (*ibid.*, 94 and 80). Noddings believes that the ethical sentiment and ideal arises from the sentiment of natural caring and from the memory of caring acts committed while in the natural sentiment. It involves

the memory of "our own best moments of caring" that transfers a feeling to present action "analogous to the transfer of learning" (*ibid.*, 79-80). What the maternal dog feels, we may feel. Further, Noddings writes: "We cannot always decide with certainty whether our caring response is natural or ethical" (*ibid.*, 84). We cannot always decide because of the continuity between the biological functions of caring and the social, ethical functions. Let me add that if others had not first cared for us during our long dependency, we would not now be able to care for others. Our memories, therefore, contain more than reminiscences of our best moments as one-caring. We also recall the feelings of having our biological and social needs met as well as sad memories of not receiving proper care. There are also unconscious records of events we may never name.

Ethical caring requires Noddings to take a stance on the ethical notions of Duty. Here we begin to combine the ethics of care with the ethics of justice. Noddings, like Dewey, derives the Right (or Duty) from the Good. Noddings calls on Kant when she makes her transition from natural to ethical caring: "Kant has identified the ethical with that which is done out of duty and not out of love, and that distinction in itself seems right" (*ibid.*, 80). Kant emphasizes good motives (i.e. intentions) over good consequences because, to his lights, the latter do not depend upon the moral will. In a later work, Noddings (2002) reiterates that if the "I must" does not arise naturally, then we must "summon ethical caring—a dutiful form of caring that resembles a Kantian ethical attitude. On such occasions we respond as carers because we want to uphold our ideal of ourselves as carers" (*ibid.*, 30). Nevertheless, care theory reverses two critical Kantian priorities. The first is that she places "natural caring above ethical caring" and insists that "ethical caring is instrumental in establishing or restoring natural caring" (*ibid.*, 30). The second is that "care theorists do not turn to logic for a categorical imperative" (*ibid.*, 30). Noddings does not derive the content of ethical caring from the heights of reason, but from the biological and animalistic depths of natural caring. Further, for her:

> At bottom, however, care theory is consequentialist (but not utilitarian). It asks after the effect on recipients of our care . . . . [I]t counsels us to consider effect on the whole web or network of care (*ibid.*, 30).

Dewey too emphasizes consequences of actions rather than antecedent motives while rejecting utilitarianism. He also reinterprets Kant's categorical imperative in ways that respects Noddings's two reversals.

Like Noddings, Dewey insists that relationship is basic: "Right, law, duty, arise from the relations which human beings intimately sustain to one another, and that their authoritative force springs from the very nature of the relation that binds people together" (LW 7:219).[2] Moral Duty arises from human association, for instance, the one-caring-one-cared-for transaction. However, Kant, as Dewey notes, found moral authority "in a law of practical reason resident in man but having an entirely different origin and constitution from his impulses and affections" (*ibid.*, 219). The reason for this, Dewey states, is that for Kant:

> The ruling principle of all desires is Self-love, a development of the instinct for self-preservation which according to him governs all appetite and impulse. Thus the moral good is not only different from the natural goods which man experiences in the regular course of living but is *opposed* to them (*ibid.*, 220).

[2] Dewey co-authored the Ethics (LW 7) with James Hayden Tufts. I only cite from chapters written by Dewey.

Note that Kant considers moral good superior and opposed to natural good. He disparages our animal instincts while Noddings bases her entire ethics on the animal instinct to care. Kant does not consider self-transcending love.

Agreeing with Noddings against Kant, Dewey acknowledges a natural, instinctive level of caring:

> Natural impulse suggests to a mother care of her infant; but to be *morally good,* the motive of her conduct must be reverence for the moral law . . . . [A]ccording to Kant, the parent must suppress the tendency of natural affection to become the *motive* for performance of acts of attention to offspring. She must bring . . . her affection *under* a deliberate appreciation of the *obligatory* nature of what she does. Her act is not morally good because it flows from affection, nor because it promotes the welfare of the young as its consequence (*ibid.*, 220).

Kant is mistaken to denigrate the motives of natural caring.

Dewey calls attention to a well known problem with Kant's categorical imperative: "When all regard for consequences and for all ends which desire sets before us is excluded, what concrete material is left to be included within the idea of duty?" (*ibid.*, 221). Kant himself acknowledges the categorical imperative is empty and formal, but thinks we can derive content for it from the height of abstract reason. Noddings (1984/2003), however, insists that "an ethic of caring is not merely formal" (*ibid.*, 107). She goes so far as to reject exclusively sociological and psychological accounts that would "set aside or minimize biological arguments" (*ibid., 128).* She derives ethical content from the animal depths of natural caring rather than from the heights of supernal reason. She also derives a good deal of content from ordinary social relations. Dewey does the same.

Kant thinks we are innately autonomous and self-determined when we exercise our free will in accepting a universal law dictated to us by our very essence, which is reason. Dewey thinks what really binds us is recognizing the concrete consequences of our relationships, so what the categorical imperative is truly saying is:

> Consider as widely as possible the *consequences* of acting in this way; imagine the results if you and others always acted upon such a purpose as you are tempted to make your end [i.e., your ethical ideal], and see whether you would then be willing to stand by it . . . . [I]n reality, although not in formal theory, Kant's universality signifies regard for social consequences instead of disregard of all consequences . . . . (LW 7:223, emphasis added).

Rights, duties, and the moral oughts derive from "the claims of others to whom we are bound in social relations" (*ibid.,* 224*).* Relationships are ontologically basic and relations of care, concern, and solicitude are morally basic, not abstract rationality. The role of intelligent inquiry is to discover the consequences of our connectedness and derive rights from what we come to realize constitutes good relations.

Properly understood, the so-called "categorical imperative" is always hypothetical in that it remains constantly connected to contingent social consequences that may modify it. Our neighbors, including immigrants, minorities, and the poor make claims on us. When responded to positively, we may generalize these demands into reciprocally agreed on expectations from whence we formulate oughts as laws and duties constituting the right in distinction from the good:

> But their ultimate function and effect is to lead the individual to broaden his conception of the Good; they operate to induce the individual to feel that nothing is good for himself which is not

> also a good for others. They are stimuli to a widening of the area of consequences to be taken into account in forming ends and deciding what is Good *(ibid.*, 225).

Dewey's expansive notion of the ethical ideal requires human reciprocity.

Only an individual's ideal of the ethical good arising from concern over the consequences of their actions for others yields the proper sense of ethical rightness. The moral ought should express a co-created ideal that seeks the good of all who must suffer the consequences of various actions. According to Dewey, when one betrays a legitimate rule, they contradict "not as Kant would have it, some abstract law of reason, but the principle of reciprocity when he refuses to extend to others the goods which he seeks for himself" (*ibid.*, 230). Recall that reciprocity is critical for Noddings (1984/2003) who avers: "The very goodness I seek, the perfection of ethical self is, thus, partly dependent on you, the other" (*ibid.*, 48). Noddings insists: "An ethic of caring is a tough ethic. It does not separate self and other" (*ibid.*, 99). Moral rights, laws, duties, obligations, and such only arise from care and concern for the general welfare.

Once we understand the transactional, functional nature of the self, it is easy to acknowledge that the self is not separate from the other, which means that self-development always involves reciprocal relations. These relations not only constitute the ethical self, but because relations are ontologically basic, these relations constitute our very self-identity. Dewey urges us to understand "the *essential unity of the self and its acts*" (LW 7:288). Dewey remarks: "The self is not a mere means to producing consequences because the consequences, when of a moral kind, enter into the formation of the self and the self enters into them" (*ibid.*, 287). As the consequences of our responses contribute to constituting the stimulus-object that controls our future conduct, so too do the consequences of our caring responses contribute not only to the constitution of the cared-for but, indirectly, ourselves. Dewey insists:

> Now every such choice sustains a double relation to the self. It reveals the existing self and it forms the future self . . . . [I]t is proper to say that in choosing this object rather than that, one is in reality choosing what kind of person or self one is going to be (LW 7:286-287).

For instance, in choosing to care for someone, we express the present caring self and, through the consequences of our acts, form the future caring self. Our acts may diminish or enhance our ideal of one-caring. Noddings declares "that which connects me naturally to the other, reconnects me through the other to myself. As I care for others and am cared for by them, I become able to care for myself" (*ibid.,* 49*).* I would only add that "others" here includes not only other persons, but also the physical and organic environment of planet Earth—and beyond.

For Dewey, freedom does not depend on an antecedently existing free will. Instead, he states, "Intelligence is the key to freedom in act" (MW 14:210). Intelligence, like the mind, self, and freedom is something wrought out. Further, "There is care, concern, implicated in every act of thought" (LW 6:14). Intelligence, for Dewey, involves care, good intuitions, emotional perspicuity, creative imagination, and cognitive clarity. Cultivating intelligence in democratic relationship with others allows us to understand the natural and social world that originally constructed us. Without reflective, critical, and creative intelligence, autonomy may actually enslave us by cutting us off from our web of relationships, especially relations with those different from ourselves. Understanding the self functionally, we can see that autonomy may actually inhibit freedom. By recognizing and creatively transforming our *co-dependent*, transactional relationships with others, we can transform ourselves and realize our unique potential as we caringly help others realize theirs. When critical and creative intelligence allows us to consider the consequences of our action "on the whole web or network of care" we may

co-create moral ideals of duty and right action that determine a genuine good for everyone in the community (Op. cit.). The result is an ethics of reciprocal, caring, creative, and right relationships.

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