

# The Role of Imagination in an Ethic of Care

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## Introduction

Let me begin with a short story involving imagination and human conduct.

A man wants to hang a picture. He has the nail but not the hammer. The neighbour has one. So our man decides to go over and borrow it. But then he has some doubts: What if the neighbour does not want to lend me the hammer? Yesterday, already, he greeted me somewhat hastily. Perhaps he was in a rush. Maybe, he just pretended to be in a hurry, and he has something against me. But what? I did not do anything to him; he is imagining something. If someone wanted to borrow a tool from me, *I* would give it to him right away. And why not? How can someone deny such a simple favour to a fellow human? People like this guy poison others' lives. And then he imagines that I depend on him. Just because he has a hammer. Now, that's enough. – Thus, he rushes over, rings, the neighbour opens the door, but before he can say "Hello", our man shouts at him: "Keep your hammer, you lout!"<sup>1</sup>

This story is by Paul Watzlawick taken from his book *Instructions on How to Be Unhappy*. The man in the story undoubtedly has a rich imagination, and it is the way in which he makes use of his capacity to imagine that centrally contributes to his unhappiness about his situation and to his negative conduct toward another person. I assume that all of us can recall situations in which our imagination led us to unfounded assumptions on which we based our conduct toward other people, although, hopefully, not to the same extreme degree as the man in the story.

On the other hand, following the so called Golden Rule is impossible without imagination. If the Golden Rule demands to treat others only in ways that you are willing to be treated being in the same situation<sup>2</sup>, then it requires of the *treating* person to *imagine* being in the same situation as the *treated* person.

To state that imagination plays an important role for morality seems close to a triviality. More challenging is to identify what the role exactly is, where the challenges imagination poses for moral living lie, and what implications the role of imagination has for moral education.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper I want to address the first challenge for a specific theory of morality: ethics of care. Following this introduction I will briefly characterize the conceptual framework of care ethics as it pertains to the topic of this paper and then, turning to the main part, identify and elaborate on three ways in which imagination functions in an ethic of care.

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<sup>1</sup> Watzlawick, 1983, pp. 37-38 (my translation).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Gensler, 1996, p. 93.

<sup>3</sup> Although this paper investigates the role of imagination for morality, I want to mention the role morality has for imagination. Equipped with the capacity of imagination, humans live in constant tensions between reality and imagination (for the ease of the argument, I ignore ontological and epistemological issues around 'reality'). Mishandling those tensions can very well become pathological, as in the case of the man in Watzlawick's story. Our formal and informal knowledge and understanding about the 'physical reality' around us help us not to actually jump off a cliff when imagining being a bird. And it is a certain type of other formal and informal knowledge and understanding about our 'social reality' around us that generally helps us not to conduct ourselves the way the man in the story does. I consider this kind of knowledge and understanding part of a person's moral structure. In this sense morality plays the role of a guide to handle our imagination so that we can maneuver through our 'social reality' without too many bruises.

## Ethics of Care

Ethics of care characterizes a certain type of approach toward human morality. In a narrow sense the approaches are about conduct in moral situations, in a wider sense they are about a way to live one's life. Historically, ethics of care started out in the 1980s as a response to Lawrence Kohlberg's dominant approach in moral psychology and moral education, an approach which put the emphasis on the development of specific notions of justice and moral reasoning. In response to that approach, Carol Gilligan pointed out that there is a 'second voice' relevant to decision making and conduct in moral situations beside the one of justice and moral reasoning: the voice that looks out for building and maintaining relationships to others.<sup>4</sup> Ethics of care emphasizes a relational view of morality: It is the human relationships that give rise to morality, and it is the caring for the needs of the other that is central to the building and maintaining of such relationships.

'Caring' as used in an ethic of care is a technical term within that theoretical framework, and it should not be mixed up with an every-day notion of caring as in 'looking after someone' or in a 'gentle smiles and warm hugs' approach in teaching<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, the term caring is defined or explicated differently in different approaches to care ethics. Hence, for the purpose of this paper, I want to focus on one specific approach to care ethics, the one Nel Noddings developed over the last 20 years.<sup>6</sup> Whenever I refer to ethics of care, I will have Noddings's approach in mind. Following I want to briefly characterize an ethic of care as far as it is necessary for the purpose of the paper.

The fundamental concept of an ethic of care, of course, is the concept of caring, specified in the notion of a caring encounter between two people, the carer and the cared-for. Noddings defines a caring encounter as an encounter in which the carer and the cared-for are in a certain state of consciousness.<sup>7</sup> The carer's state of consciousness is characterized by engrossment and motivational displacement. Engrossment here means that the carer is attentive to and receptive in a non-selective way for the needs of the cared-for. Motivational displacement here means that the carer's motivation to do something is directed toward the cared-for's needs. The cared-for's state of consciousness, on the other hand, is characterized by receiving and recognizing the care provided to him or her by the carer (= the reciprocity feature of caring).

An ethics of care is situation-based. What it means to care in a situation is guided by the particularities of the situation. Hugging is caring in one situation and can be un-caring in another. There is no common form of caring conduct.<sup>8</sup> An ethic of care as a theory of morality puts at the centre of decision making and acting the striving for sustaining and building relationships with others (relational ethics).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Gilligan and her followers look at a caring approach to morality as an *alternative* (a 'second voice') way of approaching moral issues in one's life, as one approach *beside* the justice approach. They did not want to replace the latter by the former. (See Brown et al., 1995, p. 314). There is still an ongoing debate around the relationship of caring and justice (see Katz et al., Eds., 1999).

<sup>5</sup> On the concern in general and the issue in the latter case see Goldstein, 2002, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Noddings, 1984, 1992, 2002a, 2002b. I have chosen Noddings's approach for two reasons. First, it is today one of the dominant approaches in ethics of care. Second, her approach is the most developed care approach for moral education.

<sup>7</sup> See Noddings, 1992, pp. 15-16; 2002b, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> See Noddings, 1984, pp. 24-25; 1992, pp. xi-xii, 17; 2002b, p. 27. Noddings contrasts the situation-based character of an ethics of care with what she calls a principle-based ethics like Kant's ethics of duty. In response to critics who pointed out that an ethics of care is also based on principles (like the principle 'Always act so as to establish, maintain, or enhance caring relations') she responds that these principles in an ethic of care are descriptive and not, as in principle-based ethics, prescriptive (Noddings, 2002b, pp. 30-31). However, her view seems to overlook the interconnectedness of prescription and description in practical ethics (similarly in the case of language grammars, which function generally in both modes). If one describes principles of caring, they will be used prescriptively to guide one's efforts to develop and maintain a caring self.

<sup>9</sup> See Noddings, 2002b, pp. 30-31.

To confirm the other in encounters is a central feature of relating to others in a caring manner. Confirming the other means to see, encourage and support the best possible in the other.<sup>10</sup> We can confirm the other by attributing the best possible motive for their conduct without contradicting reality.<sup>11</sup> I am tempted to call this principle “The Golden Rule of Caring”. If only the man in Watzlawick’s story had followed this Golden Rule of Caring.

The last feature of an ethic of care relevant to this paper is the distinction between natural and ethical caring. Natural caring is a spontaneous or habitual caring out of affection or inclination. Ethical caring is a more dutiful caring and draws on our view of ourselves as caring persons (our ethical self ) to provide a conscious ‘I must’.<sup>12</sup> Even in our closest relationships there are situations where we are not able to care naturally; then an ‘I ought to’ takes the place of the not available ‘I want to’. Both forms of caring play an interconnected role in a person’s moral self.

### **The Functioning of Imagination in an Ethic of Care**

In the following I will identify three functions imagination has in an ethic of care, without claiming these to be the only ones.<sup>13</sup> These three functions were identified by different authors as roles imagination plays for morality in general or a particular type of moral theory. However, none was identified and characterized for their functioning in an ethic of care.

The first function imagination has in an ethic of care is that it supports or allows for the understanding of the situational environment in general and human conduct in particular. First, I want to demonstrate *that* this kind of understanding is important in caring encounters, then I want to demonstrate *how imagination* supports or allows for this kind of understanding.

Blum (1994, pp. 57-61) emphasizes that, generally, the *perception* of a moral situation *precedes* the engagement of the moral agency.<sup>14</sup> Applying Blum’s ideas on moral perception to an ethic of care, a potential carer has to perceive (i) the situation as calling for a caring response and (ii) the care-ethical characteristics of the situation.<sup>15</sup> The perception of both can be called *the understanding of the care-ethical significance* of the situation.<sup>16</sup> Understanding the significance of *someone’s*

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<sup>10</sup> See Noddings, 1992, pp. 25-26. Noddings lists confirmation as one of the four components of *moral education* in an ethic of care (1992, p. 22). However, from an ethic of care’s point of view we are all responsible for bringing out the best in others. In this sense moral education is happening in each caring encounter and is not left up to parents, teachers, etc.

<sup>11</sup> See Noddings, 2002a, pp. 20, 25.

<sup>12</sup> See Noddings, 2002a, p. 13; 2002b, pp. 29-30.

<sup>13</sup> Due to the constraints for this presentation, consideration is given only to these three functions, each of which with different degree of comprehensiveness.

<sup>14</sup> However, the statement has to be understood as characterizing a general principle of order only, because perception of a situation and engagement of one’s moral agency are more interwoven than the linearity the statement suggests. Generally, perception of a situation proceeds the engagement of the moral agency. However, the first perception (e.g., my wife comes home in an unusual state of excitement) is often only preliminary and only after an initial engagement of the moral agency (like inquiring further about her state and its cause) the perception of the situation will get richer (e.g., finding out that she was involved in a car accident on her way home), which, in turn, will engage my moral agency – or bring the already engaged agency to a new level (e.g., through an empathetic conversation about her experience). The continued engagement can give rise to a more developed perception of the situation, which, in turn, can motivate further engagement of one’s moral agency, etc.

<sup>15</sup> According to Blum, this step is preceded by the step in which the agent has to perceive certain aspects of the flood of sensual data as characterizing a situation with certain features. [...] the “perceptual individuating of the ‘situation’ in the first place” (Blum, 1994, p. 44) As far as I can see, imagination is not relevant for this phase.

<sup>16</sup> This terminology is an expansion of Kekes’s (1995, p. 102) for the understanding of the significance of human conduct.

*conduct* means knowing of the context of the conduct, the reasons behind the conduct, and the importance of the conduct for the people involved.<sup>17</sup>

Let us look at an example. During lunch break at a high school a teacher walks with her lunch bag through the hallway toward the staff room to have her lunch. A few meters in front of her two boys are engaged in a heated conversation, with one boy being very agitated. She does not know the two students. Before the crossing of the paths of the two students and the teacher can become a caring encounter, the teacher has to perceive the situation as calling for a caring response to the situation, i.e., a situation which asks for her engrossment and motivational displacement. She does not have to perceive the situation in such a way. For instance, if her ethical self does not allow for a self-initiated involvement with strangers, she will not perceive the situation as calling for a caring response by her.<sup>18</sup> Let us assume that the teacher perceives the situation as calling for a caring response. Then she also needs to perceive care-ethical characteristics of the situation because the engagement of her moral agency is motivated by wanting to turn the encounter with the students into a caring encounter. Since a caring encounter requires the students' receiving response (the reciprocity feature of caring), the way the teacher approaches the students becomes important. Before she engages her moral agency (here: starts to initiate a caring encounter), she will look for characteristics of the situation that give clues to the answer of questions like 'What is the immediate need of the students in this situation?', 'How will the students respond to my interference?', 'How can I approach the situation without the students perceiving my interference as motivated by a kind of teacher obligation to interfere whenever students behave 'out of the ordinary'?', etc. Those clues will decide how the teacher will approach the students. If an involvement of the teacher in the students' conversation will be accepted by them, the teacher then will be able to find out more about the context and the reasons for the students' conduct and emotional states, which then, in turn, will allow her to engage her moral agency in a way that will improve the chance of turning the encounter into a caring encounter.

How does imagination support or allow for the understanding of the situational environment in general and human conduct in particular? I see three ways.

(i) Imagination is central to the understanding of a person's conduct because it allows us to consider alternative possibilities for conduct in a given situation and possibilities of motivation for the conduct; and we use these possibilities to understand the significance of a particular conduct in the particular situation. Kekes (1995, p. 102) summarizes this point as follows<sup>19</sup>:

Understanding the context, the reasons behind, and the importance of actions matters because it reveals what the agents' possibilities were and what led them to realize one among

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<sup>17</sup> See Kekes, 1995, 102.

(i) Considering what I said in footnote 14, there should be no problem in accepting that *perceiving* a situation is identical with *knowing* of the context of the conduct, etc. Nevertheless, 'knowing' has to be taken cautiously, since the perception of a situation will often still be based on many assumptions (believes) rather than knowledge (see, for an illustration, Blum's third example in 1994, pp. 36-37).

(ii) Kekes emphasizes the relevance of the understanding of the significance of human conduct for life in general and moral living in particular. He distinguishes the understanding of the *significance* of human conduct from the understanding of the *causes* of certain conduct. He sees the former as part of the domain of the humanities, where the emphasis is put more on the understanding of particular conduct by particular individuals in particular situations, while he considers the understanding of the causes of certain conduct more part of the domain of the sciences, where the aim is to arrive at law-like generalizations from all particularities. (Kekes, 1995, 104)

<sup>18</sup> There is a difference between not perceiving a situation as calling for one's engrossment and motivational displacement and not responding to such a call. For instance, the teacher can perceive the situation as calling for her caring engagement, but does not respond accordingly, because she is tired and hungry and wants to have her lunch. The focus in the sentence this is a footnote to is on situations that are *not perceived* as calling for one's engrossment and motivational displacement.

<sup>19</sup> See also Johnson, 1993, pp. 202-203.

them. It is the nature of this type of understanding that it should attempt to illuminate the significance of what happened by considering what might have happened. The assumption behind it is that the significance of a particular action emerges only by viewing it against the background of competing possibilities and by identifying the agents' reasons for attempting to realize one of these possibilities. Moral imagination is an essential element of this understanding because it is the activity by which we attempt to re-create the possibilities particular agents faced.

Let us assume that in the above given example it turns out that the students were talking about an incident the night before and that the agitated student was in that emotional state because of the incident. Engaging in a conversation with the students, the teacher hears about it and judges that the incident would be a trivial matter to most people. Before this judgement can happen, imagination has to be involved because the teacher has not experienced most people, maybe not even a single person, being involved in such an incident. Furthermore, overcoming this initial judgement will also require imagination. Exploring imaginatively the possibilities of the states the student might have been in during the incident and the experiences he might have had before the incidence will allow the teacher to better understand the *significance* of the emotional state the student is in. The 'Golden Rule of Caring' can be followed only through the employment of imagination because the significance of human conduct is generally underdetermined by the situation as it is perceived by a potential carer.

(ii) Imagination also supports or allows for the understanding of a person's conduct in the form of 'empathetic imagination', which is the "imaginative empathetic projections into the experience of other people" (Johnson, 1993, p. 199). Empathetic imagination allows us to 'participate' in someone else's experience by imagining us being in that person's place (Johnson, 1993, p. 200). While Kekes emphasizes the role imagination has for creating the possibility background against which one can perceive the significance of another person's particular conduct, empathetic imagination creates a background for perceiving that significance by bringing the conduct closer to our own possibilities and limitations.<sup>20</sup> Since care ethics has at its center the attention toward sustaining and building relationships with others, empathetic understanding can help in this struggle, because it is much easier to sustain or build a relationship to someone whose conduct can be seen in a more 'sympathetic' light, which, however, is not the same as condoning the conduct.<sup>21</sup>

Noddings illustrates this point in an article (Noddings, 1998), in which she tells of her own and three others' responses to a story about a young Jew, who is taken from a death-camp to give absolution to a dying Nazi soldier, who confesses to horrible atrocities toward Jews. Noddings asks why she pities the soldier, and she traces it back to her empathetic understanding (although she does not use the term), which she develops by putting herself 'into the soldiers shoes' not when he

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<sup>20</sup> 'Understanding' is used in everyday English with at least two meanings: (i) Understanding in the sense of 'getting the meaning of' as in "I understand what you mean (but I still think you are wrong)"; here 'understanding' is a more cognitive state or process; (ii) understanding in the sense of 'having a better appreciation for' as in "Come on, be more understanding for what your uncle does with his life, he did not have the same protected childhood as you did"; here 'understanding' expresses a more 'affective' state. Johnson does not use 'empathy' as having only an affective aspect (1993, p. 200). Kekes emphasizes that there has to be an affective aspect in the understanding of the significance of human conduct (1995, p. 103).

<sup>21</sup> Noddings (1984, pp. 30-31; 2002b, p. 13-14) does not see empathy in the sense just used as central to caring. She contrasts this kind of empathy, in which one *projects* oneself 'into the shoes of someone else', with a *receptive* 'feeling with' the other person, which is the basis of the receiving of the other person through engrossment and motivational displacement, which are so central to her notion of caring. My claim here is only that empathetic imagination as used here can positively contribute toward or in a caring encounter. Noddings also seems to support this idea in other publications as the following example will show.

committed the atrocities but rather the time of his growing up. She asks the question whether the capacity to imagine ourselves *as perpetrators* is not an essential part of mature empathy?<sup>22</sup>

(iii) Furthermore, imagination supports or allows for the understanding of a person's conduct through its contribution to construal and inference. Construal and inference play a role in the perception of a moral situation in general (Blum, 1994, p. 37) and a care-ethical significant situation in particular.<sup>23</sup> Expanding on the school example used before, let us assume that the agitated boy is a grade 8 student and the other one a grade 12 student. Now, the approaching teacher might frame the situation as one of potential bullying. She now perceives the immediate need of the agitated student as one of immediate protection, and, consequently, she will definitely intervene and in a more resolute way, using her authority as a teacher of the school. In this scenario the teacher's understanding of the student's emotional state is based on the construal of a potential bullying situation, which the teacher inferred from the age difference between the students and the fact that it was the younger student who was the agitated one. It was through the imagination of the situation as a bullying situation that the teacher perceived the situation as a potential bullying of a junior by a senior student.

It was in this kind of contribution to the perception of a situation that imagination had its devastating effect on the man in Watzlawick's story. In his imaginative exploration of the possible construals for the situation he was in, he picked the one that inferred the worst intentions of past and even future conduct by his neighbour.<sup>24</sup>

Here imagination can use some guidance in its contribution to moral living, for instance by the 'Golden Rule of Caring'. Imaginative explorations of possibilities can help address biases, prejudices, and the assumption of negative intentions in general, but those explorations can also help seeing new situations through the lens of already created images, and thus reinforce biases, prejudices, etc.<sup>25</sup>

The second function imagination has in an ethic of care is the self-exploratory function, i.e. the exploration of the breadth of available possibilities through imagination in order to form a (more) realistic view of one's possibilities as a carer.<sup>26</sup> As we can know from our own care experience, we do face challenges and limits in our caring for another person or for oneself.<sup>27</sup> The distinction between *natural* and *ethical* caring is to capture the nature of many challenges and limits of our possibilities as a carer: Even for people from the inner circle of our relationships there are times and situations where the 'I want to' and the 'I ought to' are not indistinguishable anymore, but an inner obligation to care in that particular circumstance is required. Facing this inner obligation is a challenge to us and can show us our limits as carers.

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<sup>22</sup> Two other points in Noddings's article might be of interest here. First, she wonders whether we do not need to develop our capacity to see ourselves as perpetrators in order for horrors exemplified by the Nazi soldier's atrocities not to be repeated. The second point is (although she does not make it in these terms) that empathetic understanding in the sense used here can enrich moral conversations (1998, p. 135).

<sup>23</sup> Johnson calls the use of construal and inference to understand moral situations 'the semantic framing of situations', which "often involves a broad range of imaginative structures, such as image schemas, various types of prototype structure, metonymy, and metaphor." (1993, p. 192)

<sup>24</sup> The perceiving of situations through construal and inference was very central to Iris Murdoch's view of moral growth. According to Holland (2001, p. 1192) Iris Murdoch "holds that moral activity can take place in thought, that moral change is often a matter of altering how one sees the world, and that conduct grows out of and reflects the quality of one's moral awareness." (Holland, 2001, p. 1192)

<sup>25</sup> A point already made by Egan (1992, pp. 55-56); see also footnote 3.

<sup>26</sup> The following draws on Kekes's general exploration of the 'exploratory aspect of moral imagination' (2001, pp. 1131-1132).

<sup>27</sup> See also Noddings, 1984, pp. 12, 37-40.

Exploring imaginatively the breadth of possibilities for us as carers in different circumstances can help us deal with the challenge the inner obligation to care poses for us. The idea is that the imaginative exploration allows us (i) to step outside *our* tradition of caring, *our* view of caring and *our* way of caring to contrast and compare it with other possibilities to care, and (ii) to overcome our tradition, view, and way of caring. For instance, stress – a very relevant factor in the teaching profession - can pose a challenge to not just our ability to naturally care in a particular situation but also to our ability to follow through with ethical caring. Exploring the breadth of possibilities in caring under stress for us as carers can, for instance, let us realize where the limits of our own natural and ethical caring are. Or the exploration of our possibilities as carers might allow us to expand our view of the connection between caring for ourselves and caring for others, by, for instance, seeing us as carers using certain practices, like meditation, which take care of our own well-being, which, in turn, can expand our possibilities to care for others.

To give another example, exploring the breadth of possibilities for teachers as carers might allow us to realize that a given institutional structure of schooling can hinder or foster natural caring and the following-through with ethical caring. One traditional high school structure limits the student-teacher contact to one hour a day for a semester, has the expectation that a comprehensive subject-specific content is taught during that time, and does not build in any continuity for the teacher-student relationship. Exploring imaginatively the possibilities of one's caring in an institutional structure that is different than the traditional one, can widen our horizon on caring in schools.

Beside the challenges and limits that are captured by the distinction of natural and ethical caring, there is another class of challenges to us as carers, which revolve around the notion of a person's need. A cared-for's need has defining status for a caring encounter because it is the cared-for's need in the respective situation that the carer's attention and willingness to do something about is directed toward. Hence, being aware of the needs of the other in a caring encounter is central for the carer. But how do we know what the 'true' needs of a person in a particular situation are? There is constant tension between the needs expressed by the cared-for (expressed needs) and the needs as seen by the carer (inferred needs).<sup>28</sup> Exploring imaginatively the breadth of possibilities for us as someone being attentive to others' needs can help us to step outside our traditional way and view of attributing and responding to needs of others in order to contrast and compare it with other possibilities, and to overcome those ways and views.

The third function imagination has in an ethic of care is the corrective function in the form of, what could be called, retroactive imagination.<sup>29</sup> Here, imagination is used to explore how what has passed could have been. The exploration of alternative possibilities of past caring encounters allows us to become aware of our preferences for certain kinds of possibilities in caring encounters and, hence, allows us to better understand ourselves as caring selves. On that basis, the exploration will also allow us to become aware of which kind of possibilities would improve our caring selves and, hence, allow us to aim for correcting our caring selves.

While the first function of imagination for care ethics addresses the issue of the perception and understanding of the care significance of an encounter, the corrective function provides for a retroactive reflection upon that perception and understanding and our response in the situation. Considering how underdetermined many care situations are for the carer with respect to the needs of

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<sup>28</sup> See Noddings, 2002b, p. 284.

<sup>29</sup> The following draws on Kekes's general exploration of the 'corrective aspect of moral imagination' (2001, pp. 1132-1134; 1995, pp. 106-112).

the cared-for, it should not be surprising that retroactive reflection is considered an integral part of an ethic of care.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See Noddings, 1984, p. 114.