

[Special Interview]

## **The cross-cultural communication between Confucianism and care ethics: An interview with Professor Nel Noddings**

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**Abstract:** *This paper is the transcription of an interview with Nel Noddings, an original thinker of care ethics and now an Emeritus Professor of Stanford University. The interview was initiated by the interviewer's avid concern of the world peace and eagerness of knowing the internal relations between Confucianism and care ethics. It shows a dialogical knowing process of identifying a number of important commonalities and differences between Confucianism and caring ethics. Specifically, while human feeling, social relations, and reciprocity are conspicuous commonalities, the importance of dialogue, the understanding of the development of moral virtue and the ethical ideal (the vision of the best self) are remarkable differences. The cross-cultural communication of this kind deepens our understanding of a number of key elements on both Confucianism and care ethics, and it will eventually promote moral education at an international level, which is a demand more urgent than ever.*

**Key words:** *cross cultural communication; Confucianism; Ren; care ethics; caring relations*

## Introduction

The interview was taken by Keqi Liu with his English name David. It took place on May 26, 2016 at Professor Nel Noddings' home in New Jersey. The interviewer took a leaning attitude and started the interview with asking questions based on the reading of Noddings' seminal book, *Caring, a feminist approach to ethics and moral education*, first published in 1984 by University of California Press.

## The Interview

**David:** I feel grateful that you have agreed to my interview and created this learning opportunity for me.

**Noddings:** I am glad to help you.

**David:** This is my third reading of your book. My first reading is *Caring, a feminist approach to ethics and moral education* published in 1984.

**Noddings:** This is so interesting for me. Because you remember, that was my first whole book, and I wrote about 200 articles and 19 more books since then. Every time I talk with people about this first book, I am just waiting for the question, what have I changed?

**David:** This book in my hand, *Caring, a relational approach to ethics and moral education*, published by University of California Press in 2013. I think it is the newest edition.

**Noddings:** Yes. You are right. That is the one I call "relational" ethics, and changed the feminist into "relational" as you can read in the introduction.

**David:** I do agree with you. The change of the title will embrace the males. You made fathers included, it is a better title. For a better reading and understanding, nearly all my questions are based on the reading of this 2013 edition.

**Noddings:** OK.

**David:** On page 95, you ask, "How to meet the other morally?" This is the central question your book raises. I think the last sentence of the book answers this central question on page 201: "One must meet the other in caring. From this requirement, there is no escape for one who would be moral." I like this very much.

**Noddings:** All right.

**David:** My question will start from the general to the specific. First I would like to know: what is ethics? What is morality, and what is virtue?

**Noddings:** Whoa...

**David:** I don't want to give you any pressure. Just tell me freely from your own understanding?

**Noddings:** I don't think the definition of moral varies that much. I mean, when you talk about what is moral you are talking about what is right and what is good. Some theorists put more emphasis on right and some put more emphasis on good. I mean, caring as a moral ethic is different; there is no question about that. I have been enormously pleased that people have become so interested in this that we have got a long list of care ethicists now. People from all over the world who are on this list exchange information with each other, and there is new stuff coming out all the time. Some I completely agree with, some worry me, I don't agree. But...

**David:** I hope I won't worry you.

**Noddings:** No, no. It is good to be worried. It invites more conversation. For instance, there is a fairly recent book; the title is *The core of care ethics*...

**David:** *The core of care ethics*, right?

**Noddings:** Yes, that's right. The author is a very generous critic. She looks at other people's work and criticizes it but very fairly. I read towards the last thirty pages of the book, and then I began to worry because what she is doing is to try to formalize care ethics. Of course, that is exactly what we don't want in care ethics.

**David:** Right.

**Noddings:** I'm glad that you agree against the formalization of care ethics. When we get into the discussion that I know you want - to compare the commonalities and differences between Confucianism and care ethics - one of the things that is so attractive to me about Confucianism is the importance of educating both hearts and minds, not dependent entirely on reason. That is extremely important. When someone comes along with care ethics and tries to formalize them, then... You know John Rawls?

**David:** Yes, I do. The author of *A theory of justice*.

**Noddings:** Yes, that's right. He made the differences between ideal theories and non-ideal theories. Here is an ideal theory; it's like the development of a mathematical system. You start with definitions and postulates, all that stuff, and then you develop a theory. And that start in math is beautiful, but it is not what we do in care ethics. We don't start with ideas in our heads as we make a mathematical system. It is more like, as John Dewey described, of course, he didn't use the words ideal or non-ideal as Rawls did in his writing, but he says, we can't set up a government out of our heads.

**David:** Exactly.

**Noddings:** We have to deal with a practical situation. We have to look at if there is something wrong, we have to say that's wrong and why we think that's wrong. And the other thing that for me is so attractive in Dewey and in people working in caring ethics is that we don't buy any one line completely: "Take onto it, this is the way to go, you don't deviate from it!" We don't do that.

**David:** We don't want that.

**Noddings:** We don't want that. If something is interesting, we might try. We don't throw the whole system out, we jiggle with it, you know, change it to try to make it work.

**David:** That's right. You know, if we want a better reading we must understand the concepts we come across.

**Noddings:** Sure.

**David:** I have no intention to formalize. Why have I come up with this question? Because here on page 95, we have: "It sounds all very nice, says my male colleague, but can you claim to be doing "ethics"? After all, ethics is the study of justified action. . . . Ah, yes. But, after 'after all,' I am a woman, and I was not party to that definition. Shall we say then that I am talking about "how to meet the other morally"? Is this part of ethics? Is ethics part of this?" Just after this, there comes a subtitle: "WOMEN AND MORALITY: VIRTUE". Then the question comes into my mind: in this discourse, what is ethics? What is morality, and what is virtue? OK, from my understanding, ethics is the study of morality, right?

**Noddings:** Yes.

**David:** And how we can perform morally is through virtue, right?

**Noddings:** Yes. But, That said, . . . you still have to distinguish care ethics from virtue ethics.

**David:** OK.

**Noddings:** Care ethics is different from virtue ethics.

**David:** What's the difference, excuse me?

**Noddings:** The main difference is that care ethics is fundamentally relational. Both caring and cared for contribute to the relation. That is central.

**David:** Right. That is why in page 97, you say: “The fulfillment of virtue is both in me and in the other.”

**Noddings:** Correct. We have got a long history in this country of virtue ethics. And of course, in your culture you have a bit more history of virtue ethics.

**David:** Yes, a very long history of virtue ethics in China.

**Noddings:** We don’t discard virtue, but we don’t put as much dependence on it as character educators would. Because whether what I do is morally right depends not only on the other’s exercise of virtue, but how the other is affected by it, so see how the other is affected by it. If I see bad effects on the other, I draw back. It doesn’t mean it isn’t moral necessarily, but it means I should have questioned. So we are talking about a thoroughly relational ethic. Why it is so important today is because our communication in this country just falls apart. We’ve worried a long time about something called a communication gap...

**David:** Yeah, communication gap...

**Noddings:** Yeah...usually between classes, say, between the upper middle class and the lower class, differences in language, differences in interests, etc. and etc. But 40 or 50 years ago, we only thought we knew. Now it is becoming increasingly difficult. People even talk about a so called professional gap, so the professional class can’t come to see and talk with the working class. It is going on and on, many people worry about that. A lot of people are writing about it because it quite frightening. If you look at what’s going on in our pre-election periods, it is very frightening. But going back to the fundamentals of care ethics, I think that the factor of the relation is probably the extremely important feature.

**David:** But this induces a question about the individual. On page 103, you write, “the duty to enhance the ethical ideal, the commitment to caring, invokes a duty to promote skepticism and non-institutional affiliation. In a deep sense, no institution or nation can be ethical. It cannot meet the other as one caring or as one trying to care. It can only capture in general terms what particular ones-caring would like to have done in well-described situations. Laws, manifestations, and proclamations are not, on this account, either empty or useless; but they are limited, and they may support immoral as well as moral actions. Only the individual can be truly called to ethical behavior, and the individual can never give way to encapsulated moral guides, although she may safely accept them in ordinary, untroubled times.” This means in terms of morality we must pay attention to the individual rather than a nation or institution because the individual is the subject or agent of morality. In my opinion, this also shows the hope of morality rests on the individual.

**Noddings:** Right. But, but, be careful, here the individual is different from that in individualism. You know how influential individualism is in the western culture. Too much emphasis on the individual will mislead people to individualism. In care ethics, we emphasize caring relations.

**David:** The individual is always the individual in caring relations, right?

**Noddings:** Yes, right.

**David:** You are talking about natural caring and ethical caring. If my reading is correct, natural caring is mothers’ caring for the children; ethical caring is an extension of mothers’ caring of children to the other or to the stranger. This is very similar to Confucius; his idea

is to extend family caring relations to a bigger community.

**Noddings:** That's lovely, the same as caring ethics.

**David:** On page 80, you mentioned, "ethical caring requires an effort", but what sort of effort does it require? For some Confucian philosophers, to extend family caring relations to a bigger community, to develop moral consciousness of community, becomes an effort of understanding, that is, reason. I am wondering, in terms of care ethics, how can we move from natural caring to ethical caring? That is, "how can we meet the other morally?"

**Noddings:** The fundamental factor here is when we're talking about the lack of our society right now, that is, communication. The effort here isn't like I am going out to dig up the yard for something. I am not talking about physical effort. We are talking about trying to understand. And that requires communication because listening as well as talking may require even a greater effort. If we dislike, we don't hear. Because there are times we do dislike listening. I certainly know we have friends and neighbors who have political positions we do not like, you know, but that requires an effort to get beyond that and talk to those friends and neighbors and keep things in a friendly mode. That is the effort we are talking about, not necessarily a physical effort. It is the effort of understanding the other, not for the purpose of winning an argument. This is another whole area I am doing a lot of work on critical thinking. And often we think critical thinking as the sort of competence and work we need in order to prove our point and win an argument. So debaters are usually good critical thinkers, but in care ethics, we are not so interested in winning an argument as we try to understand the other. So we invite conversation, even if we don't like what we hear, the effort continues, we try to get across. Of course, it becomes quite important in peace education now.

**David:** Yes, communication is the effort we need. The aim of communication is to understand the other as a whole person.

**Noddings:** Correct.

**David:** Here on page 94, you write, "Ethical caring depends not upon rule, or principle but upon the development of an ideal self", and particularly on page 104: "The effort required to summon ethical caring is greatly reduced by renewed commitment to the sentiment from which it springs. For if we commit ourselves to receptivity, natural caring occurs more frequently, and conflicts may thereby be reduced." That is, we shift our attention from high principle to receptivity.

**Noddings:** Yes, receptivity is very important.

**David:** That is also Confucius' idea, reciprocation. In terms of receptivity, I can see the difference: in care ethics, we shift our attention from high principles, or rules and codes of conduct, to receptivity or to reciprocation, and it will help the development of an ideal self or for the one-caring; by contrast, Confucius also emphasizes high principles. A big headache here for me is how to deal with high principles. Why? According to Confucian tradition, high principles also help people to achieve their ethical ideal. My question is: if high principles help the development of an ideal self, then why should we shift from high principles to receptivity?

**Noddings:** That is a big difference between care ethics and Confucianism. Because we are almost afraid of an ideal self, because we might think we know what to do but other people do not, so we hold back from that. In fact, from the very idea of ideal, everything is under consideration in care ethics and undergoes change. It is a continuing process of communication. I may revise my ideals, you may revise yours, but I never reach a stage

where I know, and operate from that, and there is nothing you can do and cooperate, because I am on the way, on the top. And that today is so important in international ethics. I mean, Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation*, writes very powerfully on this. He admires the desire of good people to liberate and make free people who are oppressed, but the problem he finds is that they are too eager to tell other people what to do because they lead them, and they already know, they are on the way to that ideal.

**David:** On the top.

**Noddings:** Yeah, on the top, and never wonder why it doesn't work and why the oppressed then pull back. Actually we press them to go back into their first place, which is often religion and hang onto it tightly. Because we don't invite communication, and tell them what to do instead of saying "well, what do you think we need to do? Why don't we work together to make things better?" And then work from there.

**David:** The problem is that we place principles or ideals above people.

**Noddings:** That's right.

**David:** But now if we place human beings above principles or ideals, if principles and ideals can work for this purpose of caring, as you mentioned in your book, if reason is at service of caring, it's OK, right?

**Noddings:** Dead right. You certainly grab it. It is going to govern everything you do.

**David:** Following the ethic ideal, I still have another question. According to your book, the ethic ideal refers to the best vision of the self. A scholar, Chengyang Li, I think he teaches in Middle Washington University. He wrote an article and published it in *Hypatia*, he argued that your highest ethical ideal is care, and Confucius highest ethical ideal is *Ren*. You know, according to Kant, humans are the end not the means. I think both care and *Ren* are the means, not the end. Care ethics per se is an action framework, which works for the betterment of human relations. Li's argument sent me here to ask you in person, what is your highest personal ethical ideal if we understand that as the best vision of the self?

**Noddings:** Well, again I am almost reluctant to brand something the highest, etc. and etc., then claim what I am doing is right because I am obeying that principle or an ideal. If we have to define care, of course, it is the highest one. But it does not necessarily mean I will physically take care of you or economically take care of you. In other words, we have to enter into a probably interminable dialogue about what we mean by care, that's where the relational emphasis comes back. After a certain amount of conversation, would I say, "I think I understand you now, and OK, would you say the same thing?" "That sounds pretty good, sounds like we are making progress". But keep in mind, in order to see whether a particular act should be labeled one of caring, we have to hear from both parties. That is the difference. We just can't say, "Well, she obeys the principle, that's that." You know.

**David:** Yes, I see.

**David:** Excuse me; given that to brand the ethical ideal the highest is problematic here, I am eager to know your personal ethical ideal. I know it a private question, but it is important to me. Let me put it across. I want to compare you with Confucius. If we understand ethical ideal as the vision of the best self, in Confucius' case, it is concrete, his ethical ideal or a role model is to become a sage like a successful politician called Zhou Gong in West Zhou dynasty.

**Noddings:** uh...

**David:** Excuse me for my curiosity. You are in such a respectable high age, 87 years old, but you are still working, you told me in your email that “You have been writing a book”.

**Noddings:** Sure.

**David:** So what drives you to do the work? I am wondering if there is a definite ethical ideal that motivates your work.

**Noddings:** It is a way of life. I was a teacher, a professor, a mother... and I am still loaded with ideas and still writing. I am still working.

**David:** So in this sense, the best vision for you is not definite, according to your book that is a process.

**Noddings:** Right.

**David:** It’s a becoming the best of myself. In this way, we cannot identify because we cannot fix our becoming up.

**Noddings:** That’s right. No point where we can say: now I got it. You can normally say, hey, things are doing pretty well on this, but I’ve got to keep working on it.

**David:** This is impressive, becoming reveals being. Now I understand why you feel hesitant to answer this question and don’t like the word “highest”. For Confucius, the ethical ideal is static, it is a goal for his life time striving, it is also an individualistic spiritual drive. But for care ethics, the ethical ideal is changeable. It is conditioned by the receptivity of the cared for. In other words, in care ethics, we cannot impose one’s own ethical ideal upon the other. It is open to continuous communication and often becomes adapted in caring relations shaped by concrete life situations.

**Noddings:** Correct.

**David:** I am not clear about the concept of evil you are talking about on page 115.

**Noddings:** You know I have written a book on evil, *Women and evil*.

**David:** Yes, I do. I know that. On page 115, you say: “There can be no greater evil, then, than this: that the moral autonomy of the one caring be so shattered that she acts against her own commitment to care.” In this paragraph it seems to me that you are talking about the forced situation. In the next paragraph, you write: “When one intentionally rejects the impulse to care and deliberately turns her back on the ethical, she is evil, and this evil cannot be redeemed. Sartre also says that ‘evil cannot be redeemed,’ and I think he is pointing to the same thing—that evil is chosen by the evil one as good is chosen by the good.” In this paragraph, it seems to me that you are talking about “making conscious choices”, or willingly to do something bad. But what is the main point that you are trying to make here? I can’t understand.

**Noddings:** Let me see. And again I am rejecting this whole business of setting it all ahead of time: here are all virtues, here are all bad things, here are all the good outcomes, and here are all the bad outcomes. We have got to work through these things. “Evil is not An Evil sustained by cosmic forces and just waiting to trap the weak and unwary. It is created by individual human beings making conscious choices.” Pay attention: “It is created by individual human beings making conscious choices”.

**David:** Ah, yes, I see. The point is that evil is not there in abstract metaphysics; it is not originally there made by cosmic forces, it is not original sin, but it is here created by individual human beings in practical situation.

**Noddings:** Right.

**David:** Now let’s draw the common feature between Confucianism and care ethics. The concept of Confucius’ *Ren* in Chinese is central to Confucianism, it means benevolence

or concern for humanity; basically, it is about how to love and care for people. So Ren and care are fundamentally related.

**Noddings:** That sounds...obviously there is a common feature. The other thing I would say because reading so much western philosophy is the balance between thinking and feeling with an emphasis on feeling. Of a few western philosophers, who do make a point to concentrate on feeling, David Hume is one. And of course, he is my favorite western philosopher. About the role of reason, he said, we are not motivated by reason. I think this is so important. We are motivated by feeling, and reason can direct us, can help us decide what to do and how to do it, we are up against the rest of it. Without that feeling, without that passion, we probably stand beside and do nothing.

**David:** In *Being Good*, Blackburn remarked, "The foundations of moral motivations are not the procedural rules on a kind of discourse, but the feelings to which we can rise. As Confucius saw long ago, benevolence or concern for humanity is the indispensable root of it all (2001, Oxford University Press, p.133)." So feeling is the common feature for care ethics and Confucianism.

**Noddings:** Yes, that is the common feature.

**David:** Feeling is very important as we talked, but one thing tortures me a lot. That is a very sad incident. A Chinese student studied overseas in Japan; his poor mother was a poor working class person. She tried her best to support her son's study. But in the end, her pay was too low to afford her son's study. Finally, the son came back from Japan. At Shanghai airport, the son was too angry for his mother's inability to keep him to study in Japan. And he had a quarrel with his mother. In the quarrel, the son became so outraged that he took a knife and started to stab his mother...

**Noddings:** Oh, gosh.

**David:** At the moment an American guy just came and stopped him. When I read your writing about obligation, I have a sense, obligation for Kant is fixed and dead obligation, but obligation in care ethics is alive, moving; it is in action and in progress. Sometimes we spoil a child, but I would ask: how do we? From reading your book, I understand, we have a caring relation, one-caring, the cared for. In this caring relation, we not only care for a child, but also show him/her how to care others, even how to care for pets. Now a very common phenomenon in China, like this poor mother, they just know how and how much to give love and care for their children, but they don't know the importance of educating their children to become one-caring. If students could not become the one-caring, but always stay in the status of the cared for, I think this tragic event that took place in Shanghai Airport will occur again and again. I think this is a kind of illness in our parenting in China. Do you understand me?

**Noddings:** Yes, I do. You are certainly not alone on that. We are going through a lot of that in this country as well. In fact, Laurie and I are just reading an article in a most recent New Yorker about kids going to very prestigious schools in this country, but they see and are always thinking about themselves, and no sense of whatever gratitude for what they participate in, what they are given, what they have by way of future. So what you're saying concerns Confucianism and concerns care. We don't care well for our kids if we don't teach them how to care.

**David:** Yes, right.

**Noddings:** Showing them how to care, that doesn't mean punish them and force them. It means talking to them. Like saying to a kid who has done something that would possibly



hurt her friend. You say: “How do you think she felt when you did that?” Usually the kid would answer by saying all the wrong things why she did, etc. etc. Let’s say, “All right, wait a minute, that’s how you think you felt? Not what she did, not why you did, not what you did, but how do you think she felt.” We just do and operate. That’s a kind of conversation you have to have if you want the kid to feel both cared for and learn how to care for others. Yeah, it is better for the kid to get some sense of what others are going through.

**David:** True, thank you very much.

**Noddings:** It’s my pleasure.

### **Conclusion**

Caring ethics integrates the human natural sentiment of affection into the understanding power of reason and thereby combines moral spontaneity with moral obligation. This practice based and also practice oriented ethics pays attention to specific human beings in particular social relations and life situations rather than principles and rules in metaphysical abstraction. On the one hand, love and dialogue can serve a solid philosophical foundation for an interactive, cooperative dialogical way of teaching and learning, which prevails in the educational discourse all over the world now. On the other hand, the building of caring relations through communication is a down to earth approach of moral education to realize Confucius’s social ethical ideal of Ren, that is, all people in the world should live as harmoniously and peacefully as they live in a loving and caring family. The cross-cultural integration of this kind is conducive to the construction of a humane and caring society, the core of a global ethics and peace education.