Altruism, Non-relational Care, and Global Citizenship Education
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The potential roles of care, compassion, and related altruistic emotions in civic action have been continually defended in recent years against the Stoic and Kantian focus on de-emphasizing or reducing emotion in moral reason. Many further argue that the cultivation of emotions such as empathy, pity, and sympathy toward diverse others is a crucial component of an education toward living ethically with others both locally and globally. We find such views in calls for certain kinds of multicultural education, citizenship education for “compassionate globalization,” and education for understanding (and combating) white privilege. However, defenders of emotions concede that they can play fleeting, or even harmful, roles in shaping altruistic moral action, without restraint or appropriate judgment. Emotional learning can also lead students to take a step back and turn away, in confusion, anger, guilt, or fear. Even when emotional learning and development is aligned with educators’ aims, the actions that emotions motivate may be ineffective, or worse, may not lead to positive social change, and/or may lead students to take a cynical perspective.

In aiming to revise models of global citizenship against the backdrop of neoliberal society and globalization, it is worth reconsidering a kind of rational, less emotional or unemotional altruism and/or care as a global educational virtue. This essay defends limited, rational altruism, elaborated as non-relational care, as a virtue of global citizenship. First, I compare rational altruism favorably to defenses of the necessary involvement of emotional motivations such as compassion and care toward altruistic action. I then elaborate “non-relational” care (by which I mean a care that is not justified in terms of particular interpersonal relations) as a duty in the international arena that entails skills or cognitive capacities rather than (or prior to) affect. I conclude by briefly applying the argument for a less emotional, less relational altruism or care to education for sustainable development, as people often develop feelings for the planet, but perhaps to their detriment, since they lack a foundation of skills for systemic environmental action.

**Rational Altruism versus Emotional Altruism**

Thomas Nagel defends “pure rational altruism” as lacking in any emotional content: a duty of benevolence based in an objective, impartial understanding of common humanity. He argues that:

> without question people may be motivated by benevolence, sympathy, love…but there is also something else, a motivation available when none of those are, and also operative when they are present, which has genuinely the status of a rational requirement on human conduct.

Additionally he separates ethical altruism from “generalized affection for the human race.” In the course of his argument he defends the possibility to be objective: to “view ourselves from both the personal and impersonal standpoints.” From this possibility he describes prudence as a timeless orientation toward one’s good, and altruism as an interest in objective rather than subjective human good, and he identifies both as...
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(secondary) “rational requirements on action.”

Objective human good motivates action that benefits others, and it can (possibly) exist without any particular feelings.

There are three major critiques of this (and related) ideas of rational altruistic duty. First, some question the value of considering the possibility of rational duty split from affect when emotions of concern, care, and affection can be seen to motivate benevolent action. For instance, Lawrence Blum argues that:

a sympathetic, compassionate person is more likely to act to foster the good of others. This is part of what it means to be sympathetic and compassionate, insofar as these involve dispositions to have certain emotions, and these emotions involve a disposition to act for the sake of the other’s good.⁸

Martha Nussbaum similarly defends compassion as the primary emotion motivating altruistic action;⁹ relatedly, she identifies the development of emotional attachments of love and care toward family as “indispensable…for an adult’s ability to do good in the wider world of adult social concern.”¹⁰

Second, against Nagel, Blum defines altruism as a disposition that provides an emotionally-based good that is qualitatively distinctive from and superior to any similar good stemming from rational duty. Blum gives some examples here. He first imagines a husband (Bob) visiting his dying wife (Sue) at the hospital, out of emotional concern. He argues that it would make a difference to her appreciation of the act if she were to discover that he did not visit out of a sense of care, but out of objective duty. Though “the visit would probably bring about some good to Sue … [this] will be mitigated by her discomfort, anger, or disappointment,” upon recognizing that Bob was motivated by duty rather than concern.¹¹ In another example, he considers citizens striking against Californian fruit growers in support of farmworkers. In this case, although no direct interpersonal relationship exists, “the sympathy and human support” of citizens has a value to farmworkers independent from any “concrete assistance” the strike may also provide.¹² Blum thus argues that to act in the interest of others with an emotional orientation of concern “constitutes a kind of totality which is the bearer of the good to the recipient.”¹³ The good differs depending on the approach of the actor. Blum calls this the “intrinsic value” of altruism: a “morally appropriate” emotional concern that arises regardless of capacity to assist in a difficult situation.¹⁴

Nel Noddings similarly discusses the intrinsic or inherent value of care, arguing that because relationships of care are a fundamental good, we are morally obliged to care for others in a way that is recognizable to them as care.¹⁵ The relationship is essential to care, as it enables mutual recognition of care giving. Noddings has also stated that “feeling what [another] feels as nearly as possible, is the essential part of caring from the view of the one-caring,” while “in the deep human sense that [occupies] us, I cannot claim to care…if my caretaking is perfunctory.”¹⁶

Third, the argument is made that appeals to rationality without emotional affect conflate emotion with irrationality, and so unnecessarily regard rational altruism and emotional altruism to be mutually exclusive. Something like emotion is vaguely tolerated within (Nagel’s and others’) calls for rational altruism, according to this argument, so the case against affect is too strongly made.¹⁷ Blum identifies Immanuel
Kant’s true object of scorn in his writings as romantic, “dramatic and intense feeling for its own sake,” which substitutes feeling for action in a way that Blum would not characterize as morally appropriate. Relatively (bolstering this argument as well as Blum’s charges previously discussed), Blum notes that altruistic emotion can lead to good even in cases where assistance may not seem possible at first glance.

[Though] one can get too worked up over situations over which one has no influence at all … the coldly realistic attitude of appraisal which Kant recommends overlooks the indeterminacy with which situations present themselves to us. It might not be so obvious whether someone is suffering, nor so clear whether there is something one could do to help…. Encouraging compassion and concern, rather than always a focus on duties of beneficence, can, among other things, reveal greater needs for and possibilities of beneficence.

From Blum’s perspective, distinguishing affect from rationality is not only unnecessary, but also unhelpful, given altruistic affect’s inherent value and potential to inspire altruistic action.

Among these objections to rational altruism, the second is perhaps easiest to dismiss, as a claim about emotions as goods in themselves. I can imagine, if I were dying in the hospital, that I may feel extra warmth from observing my husband’s caring emotions. However, I can also imagine the opposite, in the case that his concern for me distracted him from potentially ethical duties: for instance, voting, or maintaining his personal health. When one takes Blum’s examples or related cases about appropriate caring outside of white North American/Western society, they become more problematic, as proper affect and its expression in different situations are culturally specific. Relatedly, Nussbaum’s capabilities approach has been criticized as a tool for helping or caring for others in compassionate globalization, as culturally-specific framings of necessary emotionality distract from critical social justice issues.

Eamonn Callan gives a compelling argument against the notion that the emotional good coming from care is better than the rational good, which also has implications for the first and third arguments above in relation to “the integrative strategy,” that care can facilitate greater justice through individuals’ actions. Callan first considers the case of an illiterate husband and wife. The wife wants to learn to read, but the husband forbids her. Finally, he accepts her wish. Callan asks: Does it matter in this case whether the husband’s change of heart stems from love, rather than his sense of her objective rights and his related duties? Callan argues that it does make a difference, as a “fundamental part of our self-conception is a worth we possess that does not depend on the affection of others,” which should be apart from any love from others, yet a priori. He then swaps husband and wife for slaveholder and slave. In this case, it is hardly morally superior or better for the slave if the slaveholder frees the slave out of love rather than duty. Because moral rights are independent of, and must come before, claims of partial affection and care, to be freed out of love would remain degrading.

The first and third criticisms of rational altruism see emotion as relating to and motivating altruistic behavior. Nagel does not fully address these issues as challenges, conceding that rationality and emotionality may both be involved, though they could be distinguishable. However, as empirical arguments, the necessity of
emotion to good intent and action is open to debate. As Blum notes, if appropriate emotion spurs altruistic action, then people should be led to feel such emotions in order to develop altruistic virtue. Kant similarly claimed that one should develop a social justice orientation by observing the situations of disadvantaged others in society. Yet Blum observes that contact with suffering can also produce feelings of disgust, revulsion, or contempt. Multicultural educators and philosophers of education find that students resist emotional learning in a variety of ways. Appropriate, intended empathy can be fleeting, disappearing as soon as one returns home from their field trip. Callan’s claim that one’s sense of justice should be primary to any sympathetic emotional response echoes interviews with rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe, who often expressed their motivations in terms of their sense of injustice and will to protest against evil, rather than in relation to sympathetic, emotional feelings toward others. Though Nussbaum argues centrally for compassionate global citizenship, she also understands compassion as insufficient by itself, as “even appropriate compassion is unreliable and partial.” The eudaimonistic judgment often “goes wrong”: people’s emotional responses can be unreasonable or disproportionate, directed more strongly to someone stuck in traffic than to a homeless person, as Nussbaum notes. Emotion may usually be involved in altruistic action, as Nagel concedes, but something additional and distinct from compassionate feeling remains essential to informing, guiding, and motivating altruistic action as part of civic virtue.

Joel Kupperman articulates a kind of bridled altruistic emotionality that can be seen as a disposition between rational and emotional altruism. He argues that stoics and Buddhists have not necessarily meant to promote a state completely devoid of affect by their encouragements to have “no feelings” on a matter, or to be “unemotional,” given the relation of “apatheia with ‘spiritual peace and well-being,’” and “Buddhist discussion of ‘the joy of quietness’.” Rather, he reads their intention as to encourage a calm reasonableness and reflective internal state, as one’s emotional attachments can be a liability in ethical action, which requires justice and impartiality. Kupperman thus promotes “limited altruism,” which relies on impartial application and judgment of issues of justice rather than on compassion, as the latter can be seen to fade as one moves from a circle of friends and family to the concerns of a larger public sphere. A kind of juggling act seems inevitable to Kupperman, as “the compartments of the limited altruist’s life may not be as sharply separated as in theory they might be. An element of impersonality may seep into private life. A degree of warmth may seep into public life.” Such a rational, limited altruism can be further elaborated as non-relational care, a care or concern for more-distant others that can be justified and characterized without focus on affect.

**Vulnerable Agents: Caring for International Others**

Though Noddings has focused primarily on “caring-for” and caring relationships in her work, she has suggested that “caring-about,” as the concern for more-distant others’ sufferings, may be the “foundation of justice.” Daniel Engster has incorporated care theory into explorations of how to consider and treat people across the
world. Engster understands care as having three aims: traditional caregiving; helping others to develop and sustain basic capabilities (following Amartya Sen); and helping others to avoid or relieve suffering. He partly echoes Noddings’ view of care by characterizing it (in any aim) as attentive, responsive, and respectful. Attentiveness is a kind of active-listening orientation toward others, which entails considering needs or causes of dilemmas below the surface in seeking to understand others’ situations, in line with views such as Kathy Hytten’s, that compassionate global citizens should address causes, not symptoms, of social injustice. Responsiveness relates to the appropriateness of a reaction. Engster takes an example from Noddings, of the flood of donations of food and clothing to Afghanistan after an earthquake, when what was needed were building materials. Respect is recognition that one is an end in their own right, with their own worldview, and not an extension of oneself.

For Engster, it is human interdependency that justifies a duty to care, rather than social-contract theory, self-interest, or individual autonomy. As he writes:

[S]ince all human beings need care and claim the right to be cared for when in need, and more generally depend upon the caring of others to sustain not only our own lives but also human life and society, we must logically recognize the rights of others to make claims upon us for care when they need it, and should endeavor to provide it when we are able to do so without significant danger to ourselves.

Like Nagel’s hope of objective altruism, care is articulated here as a generalizable ethical requirement, stemming from human need and vulnerability. Nussbaum similarly emphasizes the educational aim of extending student care across social borders and barriers. Yet her entrance via empathy distracts from the sense of duty that characterizes Engster’s view of care and Nagel’s view of altruism.

Sigal Ben-Porath argues, in parallel to Engster, that the fact of global interdependency justifies a global ethics of care as a practice of interacting with international others with attentiveness, responsiveness, and respect (which, as she notes, are often missing elements in international relations). Although Ben-Porath concedes that it may seem strange to discuss care of social entities such as nation-states, she elaborates that “caring relations among groups refer broadly to the common understandings they have about possible ways to perform caring acts. The way the other is portrayed … and the self-understanding of each group as related to its role with the other … generates the basis for the relationship among the groups.” The how of caring is crucial to Ben-Porath, as she notes that international relations cannot be well-engaged through prescriptions, but rather depend on understanding of particularity.

Such an expanded notion of caring-about others in terms of attention, responsiveness, and respect at a worldwide level complements a notion of altruism based on social justice rather than emotion. The focus on how can be promoted by educators, in place of emotional care and compassion, as an emphasis on critical thinking skills as tools to fight injustice. Students should not learn to be global citizens in a guilty, helpless, or naive way, which can lead to cynicism or real social harms down the road. As philosophers of education continually attest, students often want to know what to do and how when it comes to issues of social justice and oppression, in their own society or globally. Though some see this pragmatism as an avoidance
of responsibility, as in the case of white privilege, this can also be seen as a framing of the status quo as a problem to solve. The problem can be approached in more or less attentive, responsive, and/or respectful ways.

Attentiveness, responsiveness, and respect, as skills related to the virtue of limited altruism or non-relational care, may approach empathy and compassion in some people’s minds, and the latter may be involved in students’ skill development. However, these emotions need not be the aims of education, even if they are related to and involved in it. Attentiveness and respect also require an aspiration toward objectivity, refusing to circle back on oneself before developing a nuanced understanding of another. Responsiveness also need not be based on affect, but on identifying the type and level of reaction that can benefit another. The aim is not necessarily to feel, but to understand others’ situations and how one could help.

**Caring for the Planet**

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a global reform movement that aims to equip people to approach social problems from a holistic perspective that accounts for culture, economy, and ecology. Traditionally, it has encouraged environmental conservation; however it is widening now toward a notion of global citizenship, wherein we interact on a global scale and in the name of our shared fate, living on one planet. As Nagel sees both prudence and altruism as commitments to justice that focus on the objective good — in the case of prudence, in the future for oneself — Sudhir Anand and Amartya Sen similarly argue for a focus on sustainability as a universal, intergenerational duty to others. As a sort of altruistic prudence, a sustainability approach focuses on the future good; from the standpoint of limited altruism, this would further indicate an ideally impartial stance toward future others.

However, ESD discourse often emphasizes caring for people and the earth, in public campaigns and in outcomes-based education. As Michael Maniates notes, this framing of action in terms of students caring highlights individual responsibility: We can “save the earth” by recycling, riding bikes, and planting trees. The Environmental Defense Fund annual calendar encourages people to “help our planet,” by using energy-efficient lighting and avoiding purchases which use endangered species. Most solutions suggested in education are similarly aimed at the personal level and relate to private consumption, rather than collaborative civic engagement. We buy and plant trees, we buy some light bulbs, packaged beverages, and vehicles, rather than others.

As Maniates argues, this approach to ESD in campaigns and schools is a survival strategy for non-profit organizations lacking government financing and a means to regulate government and business practices. Yet such “liberal environmentalism … implicitly supports the very things that it should be criticizing”; to the extent that capitalist market values trumping environmental protection. Though public concern has increased worldwide in the last few decades, solutions have remained insufficient as they are individualized and personalized: “in practice, thinking globally and acting locally means feeling bad and guilty about far off and mega-environmental destruction, and then traveling down to the corner store to find a ‘green’ product that will allow you to feel better.”
whose purchase will somehow empower somebody, somewhere, to do good." People feel morally committed to the earth, but can hardly heal the planet by changing personal consumption.

The focus on personal feelings of care instead of rational systemic engagement is problematic here. Environmentalists can feel guilty in an unproductive way, as John Connolly and Andrea Prothero note: "if people now believe they are central to environmental solutions through their own individual consumption, invariably particular practices and materials goods will become identified as bad, yet these very same practices and materials goods may be central (meaningfully) in social relations." Connolly and Prothero observe people’s identification with environmentalism as emotional personal struggles about what to buy and what not to buy. This is often expressed in terms such as, "I know that I should and can do something, but I don’t know which is the right thing to do," due to the complexity of ecological consumption, even in such acts as choosing dog food. In ESD it has also been observed that students across diverse countries feel gloomy, pessimistic, and guilty, but not sure how to respond appropriately to these feelings, or to environmental challenges.

Care is there; but attentiveness, responsiveness, and respect related to the scale of global challenges are lacking, as saving the planet is naively conflated with shopping at different stores (and persuading your friends of the same). The focus on care must be revised in ESD, as "it is not so much a question of creating anxiety during environmental education. The problem is more [one of] how to handle the anxiety and worry which students already feel." Though care and emotions toward others, both nearby and distant, is emphasized in models of global citizenship for living together and sustaining the planet, ESD research suggests that students need problem-solving skills to understand sustainability challenges and realize the need to work effectively with others, given the scale of challenges. Developing the right emotions, about others or the planet, is not crucial. Cognitive skills are required to empower people to help others (today and in the future) through attentiveness, responsiveness, and respect — rather than due to affect, whose link to complex systemic problem solving for social justice is debatable.


5. Ibid., 3.
6. Ibid., 144.
7. Ibid., 87.
12. Ibid., 145.
13. Ibid., 146.
14. I am indebted to the anonymous reviewers for the Philosophy of Education Society annual conference for assisting to clarify the views discussed in this paragraph and the next.
24. Kant’s views across texts are well analyzed in Blum, *Friendship, Altruism, and Morality*.
29. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 403. Similarly, Noddings casts her ideal of relational caring as having both emotional and rational aspects.
32. Noddings, “Two Concepts of Caring.”


35. Noddings, *Starting at Home*.


37. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*.


43. Michael F. Maniates, “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?” *Global Environmental Politics* 1, no. 3 (2001).

44. Paul Wapner, “Toward a Meaningful Ecological Politics,” *Tikkun* 11, no. 3.

45. Maniates, “Individualization.” 44.


47. Ibid., 132.


49. Fein, Sykes, and Yencken, *Young People and the Environment*. 