

We have been looking at the conflicts of caring, and we have seen that conflict may arise between the perceived need of one person and the desire of another; between what the cared-for wants and what we see as his best interest; between the wants of the cared-for and the welfare of persons yet unknown. We may even find ourselves in conflict between two persons for whom we care and whose interests and beliefs are incompatible. Sometimes, the conflict cannot be resolved and must simply be lived. A host of examples comes to mind. Consider parents during a civil war whose sons choose opposite sides; they are, themselves, neutral. Consider the woman who lives next door to a known Mafia mobster. She knows what the man is in the larger world, what effects his activities have on unknown, potential cared-fors. But she has also seen his tenderness to his own children, his respectability in neighborhood matters, his kindness as a neighbor. And then someone comes to the door and asks for information that she can give. What should she do? The answer is by no means clear to me. Many of us would, in great relief, turn to a principle, but I am not going to suggest that. I am not suggesting, either, that we embrace a code of family or tribe to which we adhere rigidly; such a move would, clearly, be even less consonant with caring than an adherence to principle in a larger world. Nor am I suggesting that crimes not be reported when they involve persons we know and care for. I am suggesting, rather, that rules cannot guide us infallibly in situations of conflict, and I am suggesting strongly that we have no ethical responsibility to cooperate with law or government when it attempts to involve us in unethical procedures. Spying, infiltration, entrapment, betrayal are all anathema to one-caring, and she cannot justify them on the basis of principle. The suggestion that she should participate in such activities is met by a firm, "This I will not do," delivered not in obedience to a principle but in faithfulness to the fundamental relatedness that induces caring.

Is the one-caring, then, a capricious and unprincipled character who is swayed this way and that by intensity, proximity, and the conditions of the moment? As our picture unfolds more completely, we shall see that moral life based on caring is coherent, although it may defy description in terms of systematic consistency. It is swayed, but not determined, by intensity, proximity, and temporal conditions. The one-caring is dependable, not capricious. Her principles are guides to behavior, and she sees clearly that their function is largely to simplify situations, to prevent hundreds of similar questions from arising. She sees, also, that they may be of little use if a serious question actually arises.