CHAPTER 11

Feminism and the Ethics of Care

But it is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally, this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail.

VIRGINIA WOOLF, *A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN* (1929)

11.1. Do Women and Men Think Differently about Ethics?

The idea that women and men think differently has traditionally been used to justify discrimination against women. Aristotle said that women are not as rational as men, and so they are naturally ruled by men. Immanuel Kant agreed, adding that women "lack civil personality" and should have no voice in public life. Jean-Jacques Rousseau tried to put a good face on this by emphasizing that women and men merely possess different virtues; but, of course, it turned out that men's virtues fit them for leadership, whereas women's virtues fit them for home and hearth.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s denied that women and men differ psychologically. The conception of men as rational and women as emotional was dismissed as a mere stereotype. Nature makes no mental or moral distinction between the sexes, it was said; and when there seem to be differences, it is only because women have been conditioned by an oppressive system to behave in "feminine" ways.

These days, however, most feminists believe that women do think differently than men. But, they add, women's ways of thinking are not inferior to men's, nor do the differences justify

any kind of prejudice. On the contrary, female ways of thinking yield insights that have been missed in male-dominated areas. Thus, by attending to the distinctive approach of women, we can make progress in subjects that were stalled. Ethics is said to be a leading candidate for this treatment.

Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development. Consider the following problem, devised by the educational psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–1987). Heinz's wife was near death, and her only hope was a drug that had been discovered by a pharmacist who was now selling it for an outrageously high price. The drug cost $200 to make, and the pharmacist was selling it for $2,000. Heinz could raise only half of that. The pharmacist said that half wasn't enough, and when Heinz promised to pay the rest later, the pharmacist still refused. In desperation, Heinz considered stealing the drug. Would that be wrong?

This problem, known as "Heinz's Dilemma," was used by Kohlberg in studying the moral development of children. Kohlberg interviewed children of various ages, presenting them with a series of dilemmas and asking them questions designed to reveal their thinking. Analyzing their responses, Kohlberg concluded that there are six stages of moral development. In these stages, the child or adult conceives of "right" in terms of

> obeying authority and avoiding punishment (stage 1);
>
> satisfying one's own desires and letting others do the same, through fair exchanges (stage 2);
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> cultivating one's relationships and performing the duties of one's social roles (stage 3);
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> obeying the law and maintaining the welfare of the group (stage 4);
>
> upholding the basic rights and values of one's society (stage 5);
>
> abiding by abstract, universal moral principles (stage 6).

So, if all goes well, we begin life with a self-centered desire to avoid punishment, and we end life with a set of abstract moral principles. Kohlberg, however, believed that only a small minority of adults make it to stage 5.

Heinz's Dilemma was presented to an 11-year-old boy named Jake, who thought it was obvious that Heinz should steal the drug. Jake explained:

> For one thing, a human life is worth more than money, and if the druggist only makes $1,000, he is still going to live, but if Heinz doesn't steal the drug, his wife is going to die.
>
> *(Why is life worth more than money?)*
>
> Because the druggist can get a thousand dollars later from rich people with cancer, but Heinz can't get his wife again.
>
> *(Why not?)*
>
> Because people are all different and so you couldn't get Heinz's wife again.

But Amy, also 11, saw the matter differently. Should Heinz steal the drug? Compared to Jake, Amy seems hesitant and evasive:

> Well, I don't think so. I think there might be other ways besides stealing it, like if he could borrow the money or make a loan or something, but he really shouldn't steal the drug—but his wife shouldn't die either. . . . If he stole the drug, he might save his wife then, but if he did, he might have to go to jail, and then his wife might get sicker again, and he couldn't get more of the drug, and it might not be good. So, they should really just talk it out and find some other way to make the money.

The interviewer asks Amy further questions, but she will not budge; she refuses to accept the terms in which the problem is posed. Instead, she recasts the issue as a conflict between Heinz and the pharmacist that must be resolved by further discussions.

In terms of Kohlberg's stages, Jake seems to have advanced beyond Amy. Amy's response is typical of people operating at stage 3, where personal relationships are paramount—Heinz and the pharmacist must work things out between them. Jake, on the other hand, appeals to impersonal principles—"a human life is worth more than money." Jake seems to be operating at one of the later stages.

Gilligan's Objection. Kohlberg began studying moral development in the 1950s. Back then, psychologists almost always

studied behavior rather than thought processes, and psychological researchers were thought of as men in white coats who watched rats run through mazes. Kohlberg's humanistic, cognitive approach pursued knowledge in a more appealing way. However, his central idea was flawed. It is legitimate to study how people think at different ages—if children think differently at ages 5, 10, and 15, that is certainly worth knowing about. It is also worthwhile to identify the best ways of thinking. But these projects are different. One involves observing how children, in fact, think; the other involves assessing ways of thinking as better or worse. Different kinds of evidence are relevant to each investigation, and there is no reason to assume in advance that the results will match. Contrary to the opinion of older people, it *could* turn out that age does not bring wisdom.

Kohlberg's theory has also been criticized from a feminist perspective. In 1982, Carol Gilligan wrote a book called *In a Different Voice,* in which she objects to what Kohlberg says about Jake and Amy. The two children think differently, she says, but Amy's way of thinking is not inferior. When confronted with Heinz's Dilemma, Amy responds to the personal aspects of the situation, as females typically do, whereas Jake, thinking like a male, sees only "a conflict between life and property that can be resolved by a logical deduction." Jake's response will be judged "at a higher level" only if one assumes, as Kohlberg does, that an ethic of principle is superior to an ethic of intimacy and caring. But why should we assume that? Admittedly, most moral philosophers have favored an ethic of principle, but that may be because most moral philosophers have been men.

The "male way of thinking"—the appeal to impersonal principles—abstracts away the details that give each situation its special flavor. Women, Gilligan says, find it harder to ignore those details. Amy worries, "If [Heinz] stole the drug, he might save his wife then, but if he did, he might have to go to jail, and then his wife might get sicker again, and he couldn't get more of the drug." Jake, who reduces the situation to "a human life is worth more than money," ignores all this.

Gilligan suggests that women's basic moral orientation is one of caring: "taking care" of others in a personal way, not just being concerned for humanity in general. This explains why Amy's response seems, at first, confused and uncertain. Sensitivity to the needs of others leads women to "attend to voices

other than their own and to include in their judgment other points of view." Thus, Amy could not simply reject the pharmacist's point of view; rather, she wanted to talk to him and try to accommodate him. According to Gilligan, "Women's moral weakness, manifest in an apparent diffusion and confusion of judgment, is thus inseparable from women's moral strength, an overriding concern with relationships and responsibilities."

Other feminists have taken these ideas and molded them into a distinctive view of ethics. Virginia Held (1929–) sums up the central idea: "Caring, empathy, feeling with others, being sensitive to each other's feelings, all may be better guides to what morality requires in actual contexts than may abstract rules of reason, or rational calculation, or at least they may be necessary components of an adequate morality."

Before discussing this idea, we may pause to consider how "feminine" it really is. *Do* women and men think differently about ethics? And if they do, why do they?

Is It True That Women and Men Think Differently? Since Gilligan's book appeared, psychologists have conducted hundreds of studies on gender, the emotions, and morality. These studies reveal some differences between women and men. Women tend to score higher than men on tests that measure empathy. Also, brain scans reveal that women have a lower tendency than men to enjoy seeing people punished who have treated them unfairly—perhaps because women empathize even with those who have wronged them. Finally, women seem to care more about close personal relationships, whereas men care more about larger networks of shallow relationships. As Roy Baumeister put it, "Women specialize in the narrow sphere of intimate relationships. Men specialize in the larger group."

Women and men probably do think differently about ethics. These differences, however, cannot be very great. It is not as though women make judgments that are incomprehensible to men, or vice versa. Men can understand the value of caring relationships, even if they have to be reminded sometimes; and they can agree with Amy that the happiest solution to Heinz's Dilemma would be for the two men to work it out. For their part, women will hardly disagree that human life is worth more than money. And when we look at individuals, we find that some men are especially caring, while some women rely heavily

on abstract principles. Plainly, the two sexes do not inhabit different moral universes. One scholarly article reviewed 180 studies and found that women are only slightly more care-oriented than men, and men are only slightly more justice-oriented than women. Even this watered-down conclusion, however, invites the question: Why should women be, on average, more caring than men?

There seem to be two possibilities. First, we might look for a social explanation. Perhaps women care more because of the social roles they occupy. Traditionally, women have been expected to do the housework and take care of the kids. Even if this expectation is sexist, the fact remains that women have often performed these functions. And it is easy to see how taking care of a family could lead one to adopt an ethic of care. Thus, the care perspective could be part of the psychological conditioning that girls receive.

On the other hand, we might seek a genetic explanation. Some differences between males and females show up at a very early age. One-year-old girls will spend more time looking at a film of a face than a film of cars, whereas one-year-old boys prefer the cars. Even one-day-old girls, but not one-day-old boys, will spend more time looking at a friendly face than looking at a mechanical object of the same size. This suggests that females might naturally be more social than males. If this were true, why would it be true?

Charles Darwin's theory of evolution might provide some insight. We may think of the Darwinian "struggle for survival" as a competition to get the maximum number of one's genes into the next generation. Traits that help accomplish this will be preserved in future generations, while traits that work against this goal will tend to disappear. In the 1970s, researchers in the field of Evolutionary Psychology began applying these ideas to human psychology. The idea is that people today have the emotions and behavioral tendencies that enabled their ancestors to survive and reproduce in the distant past.

From this point of view, the key difference between males and females is that men can father thousands of children, while women can give birth only once every nine and a half months, until menopause. This means that males and females have different reproductive strategies. For men, the optimum strategy is to impregnate as many women as possible. Having done that,

the man cannot devote much time to any particular child. For women, the optimum strategy is to invest heavily in each child and to have sex only with those men who are willing to stick around. This creates a tension between men and women, and it might explain why the sexes have evolved different attitudes. It explains, notoriously, why men have a greater sex drive than women. It also explains why women might be more attracted than men to the values of the nuclear family—in particular, to the value of caring.

This kind of explanation is often misunderstood. The point is not that people consciously calculate how to propagate their genes; no one does that. Nor is the point that people *should* calculate in this way; from an ethical point of view, they should not. The point is just to explain what we observe.

11.2. Implications for Moral Judgment

Not all female philosophers are feminists, and not all feminists embrace the ethics of care. Nonetheless, the ethics of care is closely identified with modern feminist philosophy. As Annette Baier (1929–) puts it, "'Care' is the new buzzword."

One way of understanding an ethical view is to ask what difference it would make in practice. Does an ethic of care have different implications than a "male" approach to ethics? Here are three examples.

Family and Friends. Traditional theories of obligation are notoriously ill-suited to describing life among family and friends. Those theories take the notion of *what we should do* as morally fundamental. But, as Baier observes, when we try to construe "being a loving parent" as a duty, we encounter problems. A loving parent is motivated by love, not by duty. If parents care for their children only because they feel it is their duty, the children will sense it and realize they are unloved.

Moreover, the ideas of equality and impartiality that pervade theories of obligation seem deeply antagonistic to the values of love and friendship. John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) said that a moral agent must be "as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator." But that is not the standpoint of a parent or friend. We do not regard our family and friends merely as members of the great crowd of humanity; we think of them as special.

The ethics of care, on the other hand, is perfectly suited to describe such relations. The ethics of care does not take "obligation" or "duty" as fundamental; nor does it require that we impartially promote the interests of everyone alike. Instead, it begins with a conception of moral life as a network of relationships with specific people, and it sees "living well" as caring for those people, attending to their needs, and maintaining their trust.

These outlooks lead to different judgments about what we may do. May I devote my time and resources to caring for my friends and family, even if this means ignoring the needs of other people? From an impartial point of view, our duty is to promote the interests of everyone alike. But few of us accept that view. The ethics of care affirms the priority that we naturally give to our family and friends, and so it seems more plausible than an ethic of principle. Of course, it is not surprising that the ethics of care appears to do a good job of explaining the nature of our moral relations with friends and family. After all, those relationships are its primary inspiration.

Children with HIV. Around the world, about 2.5 million children under the age of 15 have HIV, the virus that can cause AIDS. Right now only one-fourth of those children get decent medical care, while only half of pregnant women who have HIV are taking steps to protect their unborn children from the virus. Organizations such as UNICEF work to improve these numbers, but they never have enough money. By contributing to their work, we could save lives.

A traditional ethic of principle, such as Utilitarianism, would conclude from this that we have a substantial duty to support UNICEF. The reasoning is straightforward: Almost all of us spend money on luxuries. Luxuries are not as important as protecting children from AIDS. Therefore, we should give at least some of our money to UNICEF. Of course, this argument would become complicated if we tried to fill in all the details. But the basic idea is clear enough.

One might think that an ethic of care would reach a similar conclusion—after all, shouldn't we care for those disadvantaged children? But that misses the point. An ethic of care focuses on small-scale, personal relationships. If there is no such relationship, "caring" cannot take place. Nel Noddings (1929–) explains that the caring relation can exist only if the

"cared-for" can interact with the "one-caring." At a minimum, the cared-for must be able to receive and acknowledge the care in a personal, one-to-one encounter. Otherwise, there is no obligation: "We are not obliged to act as one-caring if there is no possibility of completion in the other." Thus, Noddings concludes that we have no obligation to help "the needy in the far regions of the earth."

Many feminists regard Noddings's view as too extreme. Making personal relationships the whole of ethics, as she does, seems as wrong-headed as ignoring them altogether. A better approach might be to say that the ethical life includes both caring relationships *and* a benevolent concern for people generally. Our obligation to support UNICEF might then be seen as arising from our obligations of benevolence. If we take this approach, we may interpret the ethics of care as *supplementing* traditional theories rather than replacing them. Annette Baier seems to have this in mind when she writes that, eventually, "women theorists will need to connect their ethics of love with what has been the men theorists' preoccupation, namely, obligation."

Animals. Do we have obligations to nonhuman animals? Should we, for example, refrain from eating them? One argument from an ethic of principle says that how we raise animals for food causes them great suffering, and so we should nourish ourselves without the cruelty. Since the modern animal rights movement began in the 1970s, this sort of argument has persuaded many people to become vegetarians.

Noddings suggests that this is a good issue "to test the basic notions on which an ethic of caring rests." What are those basic notions? First, such an ethic appeals to intuition and feeling rather than to principle. This leads to a different conclusion about vegetarianism, for most people do not feel that eating meat is wrong or that the suffering of livestock is important. Noddings observes that our emotional responses to humans are different from our responses to animals.

A second "basic notion on which an ethic of caring rests" is the primacy of personal relationships. These relationships, as we have noted, always involve the cared-for interacting with the one-caring. Noddings believes that people do have this sort of relationship with their pets:

> When one is familiar with a particular animal family, one comes to recognize its characteristic form of address. Cats, for example, lift their heads and stretch toward the one they are addressing. . . . When I enter my kitchen in the morning and my cat greets me from her favorite spot on the counter, I understand her request. This is the spot where she sits and "speaks" in her squeaky attempt to communicate her desire for a dish of milk.

A relationship is established, and the attitude of care must be summoned. But one has no such relationship with the cow in the slaughterhouse, and so, Noddings concludes, we have no obligation not to eat it.

What are we to make of this? If we use this issue "to test the basic notions on which an ethic of caring rests," does the ethic pass or fail the test? The opposing arguments are impressive. First, intuition and feeling are not reliable guides—at one time, people's intuitions told them that slavery was acceptable and that the subordination of women to men was God's plan. And second, whether the animal is in a position to respond "personally" to you may have a lot to do with the satisfaction you get from helping, but it has nothing to do with the animal's needs. Similarly, whether a faraway child would suffer from being HIV+ has nothing to do with whether she can thank you personally for helping her avoid infection. These arguments, of course, appeal to principles that are said to be typical of male reasoning. Therefore, if the ethic of care is taken to be the whole of morality, such arguments will be ignored. On the other hand, if caring is only one part of morality, the arguments from principle will have considerable force. Livestock might come within the sphere of moral concern, not because of our caring relation with them, but for other reasons.

11.3. Implications for Ethical Theory

It is easy to see the influence of men's experience in the ethical theories they have created. Historically, men have dominated public life, where relationships are often impersonal and contractual. In politics and business, relationships can even be adversarial when interests collide. So we negotiate; we bargain and make deals. Moreover, in public life our decisions may affect large numbers of people we do not know. So we may try

to calculate which decisions will have the best overall outcome for the most people. And what do men's theories emphasize? Impersonal duty, contracts, the balancing of competing interests, and the calculation of costs and benefits.

Little wonder, then, that feminists accuse moral philosophy of having a male bias. The concerns of private life are almost wholly absent, and the "different voice" of which Carol Gilligan speaks is silent. A moral theory tailored to women's concerns would look very different. In the small-scale world of friends and family, bargaining and calculating play a much smaller role, while love and caring dominate. Once this point is made, there is no denying that morality must find a place for it.

Private life, however, is not easy to accommodate within the traditional theories. As we noted, "being a loving parent" is not about calculating how one should behave. The same might be said about being a loyal friend or a dependable coworker. To be loving, loyal, and dependable is to be *a certain kind of person,* which is very different from impartially "doing your duty."

The contrast between "being a certain kind of person" and "doing your duty" lies at the heart of a larger conflict between two kinds of ethical theory. Virtue Ethics sees being a moral person as having certain traits of character: being kind, generous, courageous, just, prudent, and so on. Theories of obligation, on the other hand, emphasize impartial duty: They portray the moral agent as someone who listens to reason, figures out the right thing to do, and does it. One of the chief arguments for Virtue Ethics is that it seems well suited to accommodate the values of both public and private life. The two spheres simply require different virtues. Public life requires justice and beneficence, while private life requires love and caring.

The ethics of care, therefore, may be best understood as one part of the ethics of virtue. Many feminist philosophers view it in this light. Although Virtue Ethics is not an exclusively feminist project, it is so closely tied to feminist ideas that Annette Baier dubs its male promoters "honorary women." The verdict on the ethics of care may depend, ultimately, on the viability of a broader theory of the virtues.