



Beyond Gender Difference to a Theory of Care

Author(s): Joan C. Tronto

Source: *Signs*, Vol. 12, No. 4, Within and Without: Women, Gender, and Theory (Summer, 1987), pp. 644-663

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174207>

Accessed: 05-08-2015 02:59 UTC

## REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

[http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174207?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174207?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Signs*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# BEYOND GENDER DIFFERENCE TO A THEORY OF CARE

JOAN C. TRONTO

The work of Carol Gilligan and her associates, which describes “an ethic of care” that complements an understanding of morality as concerned with justice, has been cited frequently as proof of the existence of a “women’s morality.”<sup>1</sup> Gilligan has asserted from the first that she does not regard the

The research for this paper was conducted with support from a Scholar’s Incentive Award from the City University of New York and with the aid of the research facilities office of the Library of Congress. I am grateful to these institutions for their support. Earlier drafts of this paper were read at the University of Minnesota in May 1985, at Hunter College in October 1985, and at the seminar on “Feminist Ways of Knowing” held at Douglass College in October 1985. I wish to thank the many listeners who raised questions on these occasions. Special thanks are due Mary Dietz and Annmarie Levins, who commented on earlier drafts of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> See Carol Gilligan, “In a Different Voice: Women’s Conceptions of Self and of Morality,” *Harvard Educational Review* 47, no. 4 (November 1977): 481–517, “Woman’s Place in Man’s Life Cycle,” *Harvard Educational Review* 49, no. 4 (November 1979): 431–46, “Justice and Responsibility: Thinking about Real Dilemmas of Moral Conflict and Choice,” in *Toward Moral and Religious Maturity: The First International Conference on Moral and Religious Development* (Morristown, N.J.: Silver Burdett Co., 1980), *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), “Do the Social Sciences Have an Adequate Theory of Moral Development?” in *Social Science as Moral Inquiry*, ed. Norma Haan, Robert N. Bellah, Paul Rabinow, and William M. Sullivan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 33–51, and “Reply” in “On *In a Different Voice*: An Interdisciplinary Forum,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and*

[*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1987, vol. 12, no. 4]  
© 1987 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. 0097-9740/87/1204-0003\$01.00

ethic of care as a category of gender difference.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, her work is widely understood as showing that women are different from men, as evidenced in the *Signs* forum on *In a Different Voice*. For example, Linda K. Kerber wrote, "But by emphasizing the biological basis of distinctive behavior . . . Gilligan permits her readers to conclude that women's alleged affinity for 'relationships of care' is both biologically natural and a good thing." Catherine G. Greeno and Eleanor E. Maccoby wrongly assert, "The fact remains, however, that Gilligan claims that the views expressed by women in her book represent a *different* voice—different, that is, from men." Zella Luria also notes that the book seems to belie Gilligan's later assertions that she is not calling for distinctive psychologies for men and women. Carol Stack seems to accept Gilligan's work as representing "a female model of moral development."<sup>3</sup>

Gilligan's point is a subtle one. On the one hand, she wants to say her argument goes no further than the claim that the moral domain must be extended to include justice and care. On the other hand, she also notes that "the focus on care . . . is characteristically a female phenomenon in the advantaged populations that have been studied."<sup>4</sup>

In considering the issue of gender difference and morality, I shall use Gilligan's theory as the primary way to understand the nature of "women's morality." Although other writers might also be identified with women's morality,<sup>5</sup> none has been so widely read and so widely interpreted as an

---

*Society* 11, no. 2 (Winter 1986): 324–33. Among collaborative works and works by associates, see Carol Gilligan and Mary Field Belensky, "A naturalistic Study of Abortion Decisions," *New Directions for Child development* 7 (1980): 69–90; Carol Gilligan, Sharry Langdale, and Nona Lyons. "The Contribution of Women's Thought to Development Theory: The Elimination of Sex Bias in Moral Development Research and Education" (Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education, 1982); Susan Pollak and Carol Gilligan, "Images of Violence in Thematic Apperception Test Stories," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 42, no. 1 (January 1982): 159–67, "Differing about Differences: The Incidence and Interpretation of Violent Fantasies in Women and Men," *ibid.* 45, no. 5 (November 1983): 1172–75, and "Killing the Messenger," *ibid.* 48, no. 2 (February 1985): 374–75; Nona Lyons, "Two Perspectives: On Self, Relationships, and Morality," *Harvard Educational Review* 53, no. 2 (May 1983): 125–45; and John M. Murphy and Carol Gilligan, "Moral Development in Late Adolescence and Adulthood: A Critique and Reconstruction of Kohlberg's Theory," *Human Development* 23, no. 2 (1980): 77–104.

<sup>2</sup> Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 2, and "Reply," 327.

<sup>3</sup> See "On *In a Different Voice*: An Interdisciplinary Forum," in *Signs* 11, no. 2 (Winter 1986): Linda K. Kerber, "Some Cautionary Words for Historians," 304–10, esp. 309; Catherine G. Greeno and Eleanor E. Maccoby, "How Different Is the 'Different Voice'?" 310–16, esp. 315; Zella Luria, "A Methodological Critique," 316–21, esp. 318; and Carol B. Stack, "The Culture of Gender: Women and Men of Color," 321–24, esp. 324.

<sup>4</sup> Gilligan, "Reply," 330.

<sup>5</sup> Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984); Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1980): 342–67, "Preservative Love and Military Destruction: Some Reflections on Mothering and Peace," in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*,

advocate of this concept as Gilligan.<sup>6</sup> I do not mean to misrepresent Gilligan's work. The equation of Gilligan's work with women's morality is a cultural phenomenon, and not of Gilligan's making. Nonetheless, the contemporary discussion about Gilligan's work sets the context for discussions of women and morality.

This essay argues that although an ethic of care could be an important intellectual concern for feminists, the debate around this concern should be centered not in discussions of gender difference but in discourse about the ethic's adequacy as a moral theory. My argument is threefold. The equation of "care" with "female" is questionable because the evidence to support the link between gender difference and different moral perspectives is inadequate. It is a strategically dangerous position for feminists because the simple assertion of gender difference in a social context that identifies the male as normal contains an implication of the inferiority of the distinctly female. It is philosophically stultifying because, if feminists think of the ethic of care as categorized by gender difference, they are likely to become trapped trying to defend women's morality rather than looking critically at the philosophical promises and problems of an ethic of care.

### A critique of the gender-difference perspective

Carol Gilligan originally devised her ethic of care when she sought to address problems she saw in Lawrence Kohlberg's psychology of moral development.<sup>7</sup> Her argument provides a psychological and developmental account of why women's moral statements are often expressed in terms of caring, but her approach leaves many questions unexplored.<sup>8</sup> In suggesting that an ethic of care is gender related, Gilligan precludes the possibility

---

ed. Joyce Trebilcock (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), 231–62, and "Pacifying the Forces: Drafting Women in the Interests of Peace," *Signs* 8, no. 3 (Spring 1983): 471–89.

<sup>6</sup> See as evidence the *Ms.* article in which Gilligan is proclaimed the magazine's "Woman of the Year": Lindsay Van Gelder, "Carol Gilligan: Leader for a Different Kind of Future," *Ms.* 12, no. 7 (January 1984): 37–40, 101. A quick perusal of the entries in the *Social Science Citation Index* will reveal how widely, and in what diverse scholarly fields, Gilligan's work is being cited. In her survey of developments in psychology of women for 1983–84, Sarah B. Watstein noted, "The very name *Gilligan* has become a buzzword in both academic and feminist circles" (Watstein, "Psychology," in *The Women's Annual, Number 4: 1983–1984*, ed. Sarah M. Pritchard [Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1984], 167–86, esp. 178).

<sup>7</sup> See Lawrence Kohlberg, with Charles Levine and Alexandra Hewer, "The Current Formulation of the Theory," in *Essays in Moral Development*, vol. 2, *The Psychology of Moral Development: The Nature and Validity of Moral Stages* by Lawrence Kohlberg (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 212–319. One extensive bibliography is James S. Leming, *Foundations of Moral Education: An Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Gilligan herself noted the way in which theories are confined by the questions they seek to address. See her "Do the Social Sciences Have an Adequate Theory of Moral Development?" (n. 1 above), 36.

that care is an ethic created in modern society by the condition of subordination. If the ethic of care is separated from a concern with gender, a much broader range of options emerges. These are options that question the place of caring in society and moral life, as well as questioning the adequacy of Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental model.<sup>9</sup>

Lawrence Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental theory is today the most widely accepted theory of moral development.<sup>10</sup> According to this theory, individuals develop morally as their cognitive abilities to understand the nature of moral relations deepen. Kohlberg claims that the process of moral development proceeds through set, hierarchically arranged stages that correspond to different levels of moral reasoning.

An associate of Kohlberg's, Gilligan was disturbed by an early finding that girls generally were at lower stages of moral development than boys.<sup>11</sup> This finding led her to examine Kohlberg's work for possible gender bias. She discovered that, in general, men and women follow different paths to moral development, that there exists a morally "different voice" from the one that Kohlberg identified as definitive of mature moral judgment.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Linda J. Nicholson made a similar point when she warned against overgeneralizing gender differences in "Women, Morality and History," *Social Research* 50, no. 3 (Autumn 1983): 514-36, esp. 515.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., William M. Kurtines and Jacob L. Gewirtz, eds., *Morality, Moral Behavior, and Moral Development* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (n. 1 above), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Some scholars have challenged Gilligan's claim of gender difference. John M. Broughton, reviewing the interviews, found both men and women exhibiting both modes of moral expression. See his "Women's Rationality and Men's Virtues: A Critique of Gender Dualism in Gilligan's Theory of Moral Development," *Social Research* 50, no. 3 (Autumn 1983): 597-642. Debra Nails also believes that Gilligan has exaggerated the extent of gender difference in her findings. See her "Social-Scientific Sexism: Gilligan's Mismeasure of Man," *ibid.*, 643-64. Cynthia J. Benton et al., "Is Hostility Linked with Affiliation among Males and with Achievement among Females? A Critique of Pollak and Gilligan," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45, no. 5 (November 1983): 1167-71, report a failed attempt to replicate Gilligan's findings about violence. Other methodological criticisms are raised by Greeno and Maccoby, and Luria (both n. 3 above). Judy Auerbach, Linda Blum, Vicki Smith, and Christine Williams observe that since Gilligan leaves out considerations such as class and religion, "Gilligan attributes all the differences she does encounter to gender" ("On Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*," *Feminist Studies* 11, no. 1 [1985]: 149-61, esp. 157). Kohlberg's own position on gender difference has changed since his initial finding: he now finds no significant gender difference. His challenge to Gilligan's finding rests on Lawrence J. Walker's extensive review of the literature (Walker, "Sex Differences in the Development of Moral Reasoning: A Critical Review," *Child Development* 55, no. 3 [June 1984]: 677-91; also cited by Greeno and Maccoby, and Luria). Most studies in Walker's review reported no gender differences; those that did find differences found them among women who have been more isolated from "role-taking" opportunities in society, which is how Kohlberg has always explained gender difference (see Lawrence Kohlberg with Charles Levine and Alexandra Hewer, "Synopsis and Detailed Replies to Critics," in Kohlberg [n. 7 above], 345-61, esp. 347). Insofar as Walker reviewed "justice-reasoning" tests, Gilligan is willing to concede that there are no

Fully elaborated, Gilligan described this “different voice” as expressing an ethic of care that is different from the ethic of justice that stands at the pinnacle of Kohlberg’s moral hierarchy. As Gilligan explained the ethic of care: “In this conception, the moral problem arises from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights and requires for its resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract. This conception of morality as concerned with the activity of care centers moral development around the understanding of responsibility and relationships, just as the conception of morality as fairness ties moral development to the understanding of rights and rules.”<sup>13</sup>

In this passage, Gilligan identifies three fundamental characteristics that differentiate the ethic of care from the ethic of justice. First, the ethic of care revolves around different moral concepts than Kohlberg’s ethic of justice, that is, responsibility and relationships rather than rights and rules. Second, this morality is tied to concrete circumstances rather than being formal and abstract. Third, this morality is best expressed not as a set of principles but as an activity, the “activity of care.” In Gilligan’s different voice, morality is not grounded in universal, abstract principles but in the daily experiences and moral problems of real people in their everyday lives.

Gilligan and her associates found this ethic of care to be gender related. Research by Nona Lyons tied the two different moral perspectives to two notions of the self: those who viewed the self as “separated” from others and therefore “objective” were more likely to voice a morality of justice, while those who viewed the self as “connected” to others were more likely to express a morality of care. Since men are usually “separate/objective” in their self/other perceptions, and women more often view themselves in terms of a “connected” self, the difference between justice and care is gender related. Further, men usually express themselves only in the moral voice of justice, though women are more likely to use both forms of moral expression.<sup>14</sup>

Lyons and Gilligan do not attempt to explain *why* the males and females they interviewed developed different notions of the self. One possibility is that caring “is the constitutive activity through which women achieve their femininity and against which masculinity takes shape.” Such psychological theories of gender difference provide the strongest evidence for thinking of

---

gender differences, but, since justice reasoning is only one part of morality, his finding does not address the issue of gender difference in moral reasoning. See Gilligan’s “Reply” (n. 1 above), 328. It is perhaps interesting to note that this dispute follows a pattern that should be familiar to social scientists: different methodologies tend to produce different results. Here two groups of investigators are looking at related but different phenomena. Each group claims, using its method, that the findings of the other group are invalid.

<sup>13</sup> Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 19.

<sup>14</sup> See Lyons (n. 1 above).

an ethic of care as an intrinsically female characteristic.<sup>15</sup> Yet Gilligan's own work hints at another possible explanation of the origins of caring. In her description of women in the abortion study she and Mary Belenky conducted, Gilligan wrote:

What begins to emerge is a sense of vulnerability that impedes these women from taking a stand, what George Eliot regards as the girl's "susceptibility" to adverse judgment of others, which stems from her lack of power and consequent inability to do something in the world. . . . The women's reluctance to judge stems . . . from their uncertainty about their right to make moral statements or, perhaps, the price for them that such judgment seems to entail. . . .

When women feel excluded from direct participation in society, they see themselves as subject to a consensus or judgment made and enforced by the men on whose protection and support they depend and by whose names they are known. . . . The conflict between self and other thus constitutes the central moral problem for women. . . . The conflict between compassion and autonomy, between virtue and power. . . .<sup>16</sup>

This passage suggests that whatever psychological dimensions there might be to explain women's moral differences, there may also be a social cause: women's different moral expression might be a function of their subordinate or tentative social position. Alternatively, the psychological causes may be intermediate causes, resting in turn on the social conditions of secondary status. These possibilities suggest that Gilligan's work may be vulnerable to the same kind of criticism that she raised against Kohlberg. Gilligan's samples may lead her to draw a wrong conclusion about the nature of the moral voice that she has identified. For if moral difference is a function of social position rather than gender, then the morality Gilligan has identified with women might be better identified with subordinate or minority status.

There is little doubt that class status affects the level of justice reasoning.<sup>17</sup> A study that compared moral cognitive-development levels of

<sup>15</sup> Hilary Graham, "Caring: A Labour of Love," in *A Labour of Love: Women, Work and Caring*, ed. Janet Finch and Dulcie Groves (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 13–30, esp. 17. Graham draws this conclusion from her examination of the works of Karen Horney, Jean Baker Miller, and Nancy Chodorow. Greeno and Maccoby also review the basis for psychological gender differences.

<sup>16</sup> Gilligan, "In a Different Voice: Women's Conceptions of Self and of Morality" (n. 1 above), 486, 487, and 490. For further support of this finding, see Gail Golding and Toni Laidlaw, "Women and Moral Development: A Need to Care," *Interchange* 10, no. 2 (1979–80): 95–103, esp. 102.

<sup>17</sup> Anne Colby, Lawrence Kohlberg, J. Gibbs, and M. Lieberman, "A Longitudinal Study of Moral Judgment," *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* 48, nos. 1–2 (1983): 1–96, esp. 70.



whites, blacks, and Chicanos discovered that white children were ahead of the minority children.<sup>18</sup> Would a study of these groups indicate that, as Gilligan found to be true for women, their moral views were not underdeveloped but simply not captured by Kohlberg's categories?<sup>19</sup>

To my knowledge, no one has examined minority group members using Gilligan's methodology to see if they fit the morality of care better than they fit Kohlberg's categories. Gilligan's abortion study, like Kohlberg's work, is limited in that it focuses solely on the privileged.<sup>20</sup> Yet circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that the moral views of minority group members in the United States are much more likely to be characterized by an ethic of care than by an ethic of justice. For example, Robert Coles's discussions with Chicano, Eskimo, and Indian children revealed frequent criticisms of Anglos for their inattention to proper moral concerns and for their lack of care for others and for the earth.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in his depiction of core black culture, John Langston Gwaltney reveals that blacks frequently express similar moral concerns.<sup>22</sup> Core black culture, according to Gwaltney, emphasizes basic respect for others, a commitment to honesty, generosity motivated by the knowledge that you might need help someday, and respect for the choices of others. In the case histories that Gwaltney recorded, one person after another invoked these virtues and contrasted

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Cortese, "A Comparative Analysis of Cognition and Moral Judgment in Chicano, Black, and Anglo Children" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, San Francisco, September 1982), and "Moral Development in Chicano and Anglo Children," *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Science* 4, no. 3 (September 1982): 353-66.

<sup>19</sup> In asking this question I certainly do not mean to imply that the type of moral reasoning found among privileged American women should be substituted for the morality found among privileged American men as a universal model for moral development. Kohlberg's work has often been criticized for being an ideological embodiment of liberal values. See, e.g., Edmund V. Sullivan, *Kohlberg's Structuralism: A Critical Appraisal*, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Monograph Series 15 (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1977). However, if we knew *why* privileged women, lower-class children, and minority group members differ from privileged males in Kohlberg's model, we would know a great deal more about the limits of this model as well as about the psychosocial origins of care itself. See Stack (n. 3 above), 321-24.

<sup>20</sup> The abortion sample consisted of interviews conducted with women from various social and ethnic backgrounds, but no analysis of this material has been done from the standpoint of racial or class differences. See Gilligan and Belenky (n. 1 above). The other sample that has been used to generate most of the findings of Gilligan and her associates was that used for the longitudinal study by Murphy and Gilligan (n. 1 above). Those subjects were initially chosen because they took a course in moral development at college. Thus, the sample is already limited by the opportunity, interest, and ability of individuals who go to college. I know of no analysis that considers the racial, ethnic, and class composition of these samples. For a related criticism of the samples, see Luria (n.3 above).

<sup>21</sup> Robert Coles, *Eskimos, Chicanos, Indians* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1977).

<sup>22</sup> John Langston Gwaltney, *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America* (New York: Random House, 1980).



them to the views of the white majority, who were characterized as greedy, cheap, and self-involved, and as people who lie when it proves advantageous. Is this morality less coherent because it is not expressed abstractly? As Gwaltney succinctly put it, "Black Americans are, of course, capable of the same kind of abstract thinking that is practiced by all human cultures, but sane people in a conquest environment are necessarily preoccupied with the realities of social existence."<sup>23</sup>

Gerald Gregory Jackson also has identified characteristics of West African and Afro-American patterns of thought that are closely reminiscent of Gilligan's different voice, except that they are part of a large, coherent account of the place of humans in the cosmos. In contrast to the "analytical, logical, cognitive, rational, step by step" thinking of Europeans and Euro-Americans, African thought relies on "syncretistic reasoning, intuitive, holistic, affective" patterns of thought in which "comprehension [comes] through sympathy."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Wade W. Nobles relates this different, connected pattern of thought to the fact that black Americans do not seem to have the same self-concept as whites. Nobles characterizes this view of the self, which stresses "a sense of 'cooperation,' 'interdependence,' and 'collective responsibility,'" as the "extended self." The parallel to Lyons's argument is striking.<sup>25</sup>

The possibility of a social and not just a psychological cause for Gilligan's different voice greatly broadens the implications of and possible interpretations of research on an ethic of care. One possible implication is that Kohlberg's theory of proper moral development is correct, so that the failure of women and minority groups to develop properly is just a reflection of a regrettably unequal social order. According to this explanation, social forces retard the moral development of women and minorities. A

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., xxix.

<sup>24</sup> Gerald Gregory Jackson, "Black Psychology as an Emerging Point of View," cited by Anne C. Richards in *Sourcebook on the Teaching of Black Psychology*, comp. and ed. Reginald L. Jones (n.p.: Association of Black Psychologists, 1978), 2:175-77. See also Jackson's "Black Psychology: An Avenue to the Study of Afro-Americans," *Journal of Black Studies* 12, no. 3 (March 1982): 241-60.

<sup>25</sup> Wade W. Nobles, "Extended Self: Rethinking the So-called Negro Self-Concept," *Journal of Black Psychology* 2, no. 2 (February 1976): 15-24, esp. 19. Incidentally, we can raise the same questions about the origins of care among black Americans as we can among women. Jackson and Nobles provide a cultural explanation that describes blacks as morally different from whites because of their African roots; this idea parallels the notion that women care because culturally that is what being a woman is about. Other authors have suggested a more positional cause: Janet D. Ockerman suggests that social subordination produces the psychological response of greater group solidarity in *Self-Esteem and Social Anchorage of Adolescent White, Black and Mexican-American Students* (Palo Alto, Calif.: R and E Research Associates, 1979). V. H. Zimmerman explains the different tasks for psychological development that black women face as a result of racial discrimination in "The Black Woman Growing Up," in *The Woman Patient*, vol. 2, *Concepts of Femininity and the Life Cycle*, ed. Carol C. Nadelson and Malkah T. Notman (New York: Plenum Publishing Corp., 1982), 77-92.

second interpretation rejects the view of women and minorities as passively affected by society. One could claim that women and minorities proudly cling to their moral views, even if they are considered “lesser” moral views by the society, as a way of asserting their distinctiveness.

A third possibility differs from the previous two in its rejection of the assumption that from the start Kohlberg’s justice reasoning is somehow superior to an ethic of care. By stressing the positive qualities of an ethic of care, this approach would turn Kohlberg’s “naturalistic”<sup>26</sup> moral psychology on its head. While white women and minority men and women occupy vastly different positions in the social order, they disproportionately occupy the caretaking roles in our society. Thus, these groups, in terms of having an ethic of care, are advantaged by their social roles. It may be that, in order for an ethic of care to develop, individuals need to experience caring for others and being cared for by others. From this perspective, the daily experience of caring provides these groups with the opportunity to develop this moral sense. The dearth of caretaking experiences makes privileged males morally deprived. Their experiences mislead them to think that moral beliefs can be expressed in abstract, universalistic terms as if they were purely cognitive questions, like mathematical formulae.<sup>27</sup> This interpretation fits best with Lyons’s finding that women, more often than men, are capable of using both types of moral reasoning.

### Is women’s morality inferior?

Even if an ethic of care could primarily be understood as a gender difference, however, the unsituated fact of moral difference between men and women is dangerous because it ignores the broader intellectual context within which “facts” about gender difference are generally received. Despite decades of questioning, we still live in a society where “man” stands for human and where the norm is equated with the male.<sup>28</sup> Gender difference, therefore, is a concept that concerns deviation from the nor-

<sup>26</sup> See Lawrence Kohlberg, “From Is to Ought: How to Commit the Naturalistic Fallacy and Get Away with It in the Study of Moral Development,” in *Essays in Moral Development*, vol. 1, *The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice*, by Lawrence Kohlberg (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 101–89. The essay was originally published in 1971.

<sup>27</sup> “Justice ‘operations’ of reciprocity and equality in interaction parallel logical operations of relations of equality and reciprocity in the nonmoral cognitive domain” (see Kohlberg, “The Current Formulation of the Theory” [n. 7 above], 306).

<sup>28</sup> See Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (n. 1 above), chap. 1. See also Nicholson (n. 9 above); and the Introduction by Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka, eds., to *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Method and Philosophy of Science* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1983).

mal. Given the conservative nature of our perceptions of knowledge,<sup>29</sup> evidence of a gender difference in and of itself is not likely to lead to the widespread questioning of established categories, such as Kohlberg's.<sup>30</sup> Instead, it is likely to lead to the denigration of the "deviation" associated with the female.

Kohlberg's response to Gilligan is instructive. He has decided that although Gilligan has identified a morally different voice, this voice is of limited application.<sup>31</sup> Kohlberg distinguishes "two senses of the word *moral*":

The first sense of the word *moral* corresponds to . . . "the moral point of view" [that] stresses attributes of impartiality, universalizability, and the effort and willingness to come to agreement or consensus with other human beings in general about what is right. It is this notion of a "moral point of view" which is most clearly embodied psychologically in the Kohlberg stage model of justice reasoning.

There is a second sense of the word *moral*, which is captured by Gilligan's focus upon the elements of caring and responsibility, most vividly evident in relations of special obligation to family and friends.<sup>32</sup>

Kohlberg's example of the second type of moral concern is a woman's description of her decision to divorce.<sup>33</sup> Although Kohlberg does not deny

<sup>29</sup> See the description of "normal science" in Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). Knowledge is conservative in that we tend to conceive new knowledge in existing frameworks; unless knowledge contains a challenge to the context in which it will likely be placed, it reinforces existing perceptions. Since gender differences are currently perceived in terms of a male norm, we can expect that newly identified gender differences will be perceived in the same way. Of course, Lorraine B. Code is correct when she writes, "To assert a difference . . . is not, inevitably, to evaluate. That is an additional step: one which no epistemically responsible person, male or female, should take without careful consideration. This is a fundamental cognitive imperative" (Code, "Responsibility and the Epistemic Community: Women's Place," *Social Research* 50, no. 3 [Autumn 1983]: 537-54, esp. 546-47). But the worlds of power and knowledge are intertwined; we do not live in a world that adheres to Code's ideal of the epistemically responsible community.

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Benjamine R. Barber, "Beyond the Feminist Mystique," *New Republic* (July 11, 1983), 26-32. An argument similar to mine is made by Nails (n. 12 above).

<sup>31</sup> Kohlberg, in "Synopsis and Detailed Replies to Critics" (n. 12 above), denies that his stages of moral development do reflect a gender difference. Kohlberg believes that Gilligan's most important contribution is her identification of "responsibility" as a separate moral dimension. See Lawrence Kohlberg, "A Reply to Owen Flanagan and Some Comments on the Puka-Goodpaster Exchange," *Ethics* 92, no. 3 (1982): 513-28, esp. 513.

<sup>32</sup> Kohlberg, "The Current Formulation of the Theory," 229.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 230-31.

that such decisions involve moral choice, he believes it is clear that these concerns are parochial and private rather than universal and socially significant. If we accept Kohlberg's explanation that there are two different types of moral concerns, and if the two are connected to gender, the pattern is a familiar one: what is male is important, broad, and public; what is female is narrow, special, and insignificant. Feminist scholars have stressed the need to reject a simplistic evaluation of the "public/private split," with its implicit devaluation of the female.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, then, the concept of women's morality should be disassociated from the private because the public and the private are not separate-but-equal moral realms.<sup>35</sup>

The contours of public morality in large part determine the shape of private morality. Indeed, it is in the public realm that the boundaries of the private are drawn. To use Kohlberg's example, if the universal, consensual norms of society did not permit divorce, then the woman who expressed her personal moral dilemma about divorce would have faced no moral dilemma at all; the boundaries about what would be right and wrong would already be fixed, and she would know that choosing divorce would be wrong.

This last point raises a troublesome possibility. Perhaps women's morality is just a collection of "moral leftovers," of questions that gain significance only because they are left somewhat open-ended by the commandments and boundaries of public morality. Gilligan has noted that the ethic of care is a relational ethic, that it is tied to who one is, to what position one occupies in society. Such concerns have been considered of a secondary importance in the moral life of any community. In other words, the requirements of justice have traditionally set the boundaries of care.

As long as women's morality is viewed as different and more particular than mainstream moral thought, it inevitably will be treated as a secondary form of moral thinking. This is true because, as the etymology suggests, that which is private is deprived in at least one sense: insofar as the boundaries of the private (in this case, private morality as expressed by care) are set by the categories and definitions of the public (in this case, public morality, i.e., the ethic of justice), that which is relegated to the

<sup>34</sup> See M. Rosaldo, "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-cultural Understanding," *Signs* 5, no. 3 (Spring 1980): 389–417. Linda Imray and Audrey Middleton suggest that the problem is not in the public/private dichotomy itself but in our failure to understand that what is essential in the public/private split is not "activity" or "sphere" but power (Imray and Middleton, "Public and Private: Marking the Boundaries," in *The Public and the Private*, ed. Eva Gamarnikow, David H. J. Morgan, June Purvis, and Daphne Taylorson [London: Heinemann, 1983], 12–27).

<sup>35</sup> A different perspective on the problem of public/private life is presented in Jean Bethke Elshtain's "Antigone's Daughters," *Democracy* 2, no. 2 (April 1982): 46–59. For a response to Elshtain, see Mary G. Dietz, "Citizenship with a Feminist Face: The Problem with Maternal Thinking," *Political Theory* 13, no. 1 (February 1985): 19–37.

private is not judged on its own terms. Private morality is not perceived as independent of the “more important” public realm. It is by nature dependent and secondary.

Thinkers who advocate a women’s morality have almost always assumed that it is a necessary corrective, not an alternative, to prevailing moral views.<sup>36</sup> By so doing, they have made it relatively easy for critics to dismiss women’s morality as secondary and irrelevant to broader moral and political concerns.<sup>37</sup> To argue that women’s morality is a corrective to prevailing modes of morality is to make a functionalist argument. To the extent that women’s moral difference is viewed as functional to the improvement of the morality of society as a whole, it remains secondary.<sup>38</sup> If, armed with Gilligan’s findings and similar work, the best feminists can do is to claim that letting women assert their morality in more important parts of public life will improve life,<sup>39</sup> or that public life is unimportant and women should cultivate morality in the domestic realm,<sup>40</sup> then they are doomed to failure. Such arguments, all of which take the form “we can be useful to

<sup>36</sup> Carol Gilligan, in “Do the Social Sciences Have an Adequate Theory of Moral Development?” (n. 1 above), seems to suggest that care is such a complementary moral theory.

<sup>37</sup> A good example of this phenomenon is the fate of Jane Addams. Addams was enormously popular for her good works during the first two decades of this century. When the United States entered World War I, though, and she continued to maintain a steadfast belief that moral values, including pacifism, should guide political action, she was vilified as a traitor. Although Addams was honored with the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1931, her reputation and political influence never recovered their prewar levels. See Allen F. Davis, *American Heroine: The Life and Legend of Jane Addams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). An argument similar to the one I make here is found in Emily Stoper and Roberta Ann Johnson, “The Weaker Sex and the Better Half: The Idea of Women’s Moral Superiority in the American Feminist Movement,” *Polity* 10, no. 2 (Winter 1977): 192–217. I should note that my criticism of the misuse of this argument is not directed against Carol Gilligan herself. Auerbach, Blum, Smith, and Williams (n. 12 above) raise a different objection to the political implications of Gilligan’s work. While I have emphasized how the women’s morality argument can be turned to conservative purposes (a point they make on 159), they also assert that “the problem with [Gilligan’s] book is not that its politics are bad, but that it lacks a politics altogether” (160). Gilligan hinted at a response to this criticism when she alluded to the need for both moralities to play a part in “public as well as private life” (“Reply” [n. 1 above], 326). Yet she has not made clear what that interaction might mean.

<sup>38</sup> Several authors have made arguments similar to this one. See especially James C. Walker, “In a Diffident Voice: Cryptoseparatist Analysis of Female Moral Development,” *Social Research* 50, no. 3 (Autumn 1983): 665–95; Judith Stacey, “The New Conservative Feminism,” *Feminist Studies* 9, no. 3 (Fall 1983): 559–83. My use of the language of functionalism is inspired here by my reading of Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978).

<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., Alice Rossi, “Beyond the Gender Gap: Women’s Bid for Political Power,” *Social Science Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (December 1983): 718–33, esp. 731; and Katherine E. Kleeman’s pamphlet, *Learning to Lead: Public Leadership Education Programs for Women* (n.p.: Public Leadership Education Network, 1984), 3: “Psychologist Carol Gilligan provides us with additional justification for bringing more women into public life.”

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., Susan Tenenbaum, “Women through the Prism of Political Thought,” *Polity* 15, no. 1 (Fall 1982): 90–102.

you,” ignore the fact that privileged men are the adjudicators of what is useful, of what is important, and, therefore, of what stands most in need of correction. Rather than presenting an alternative moral theory, then, privatized women’s morality is a supplemental moral theory. And when and how that different moral voice gets heard is beyond the power of the “different” to decide. In this way, as has happened before, women’s moral voice, the ethic of care, is easily dismissed.

In arguing that there is a strategic problem with women’s morality, I do not mean to imply that strategy overshadows truth. If women were morally different from men, then strategy would not allow us to dismiss this fact. Yet the facts are not so simple, and it is thus legitimate to see if the direction in which the facts are likely to lead requires that we place them in a different intellectual context. I have tried to show that the consequences of a simplistic embrace of the ethic of care as specifically women’s morality are potentially harmful. This is not to say that an ethic of care is morally undesirable but that its premises must be understood within the context of moral theory, rather than as the given facts of a gender-based psychological theory.

### A contextual theory of care

If an ethic of care is to be taken seriously as a moral position, then its advocates need to explore the assumptions on which such a moral position is founded. Unless the full social and philosophical context for an ethic of care is specified, the ethic of care can be dismissed as a parochial concern of some misguided women. In making this claim, I differ from some recent feminist theorists who have eschewed full-scale theory construction and have instead focused on the practical implications of an ethic of care. Several writers, for example, have focused on the question of peace as exemplary of the way in which care can inform our treatment of a crucial political issue.<sup>41</sup> Their approach, however, ignores the context in which questions of war and peace appear. Out of the context of any broader political and social theory, the question of peace can easily be dismissed for failing to consider other values (e.g., defense or honor), which others may view as broader or more important.<sup>42</sup> Only when care is assessed in its

<sup>41</sup> See Sara Ruddick, “Preservative Love and Military Destruction,” and “Pacifying the Forces” (both n. 5 above). Jean Elshtain often seems to support a similar position, but in her most recent essays, she is critical of a simplistic “beautiful souls” argument on the part of women. Nevertheless, she has not yet provided any full theoretical alternative to naive pacifism except to demur about statism. See Elshtain, “On Beautiful Souls, Just Warriors and Feminist Consciousness,” in *Women and Men’s Wars*, ed. Judith Stiehm (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1983), 341–49, and “Reflections on War and Political Discourse: Realism, Just War, and Feminism in a Nuclear Age,” *Political Theory* 13, no. 1 (February 1985): 39–57.

<sup>42</sup> Consider, e.g., how ephemeral the tremendous wave of interwar pacifism proved to be. See Peter Brock, *Twentieth Century Pacifism* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1970).



relative importance to other values can it begin to serve as a critical standpoint from which to evaluate public life. Such an assessment will require a full-fledged moral and political theory of care.

In addition to defining the concept of care, I suggest three sets of concerns that begin to address "care" at the theoretical level.<sup>43</sup>

### *The metaethical question*

One reason why, from the standpoint of an ethic of justice, care seems to be such an inadequate moral position is that an ethic of care necessarily rests on a different set of premises about what a good moral theory is. As Alasdair MacIntyre noted, the prevailing contemporary notion of what counts as a moral theory is derived from Kant.<sup>44</sup> According to this view, a moral theory consists of a set of moral principles rationally chosen after consideration of competing principles. William Frankena refers to this as "the moral point of view": it is universalizable, impartial, and concerned with describing what is right, and we would expect chosen moral principles to embody these standard notions of morality.<sup>45</sup>

An alternative model for moral theories is contextual metaethical theory.<sup>46</sup> Such theories consist of presumptions about the nature of morality that are different from Kantian-inspired metaethics. In any contextual moral theory, morality must be situated concretely, that is, for particular

<sup>43</sup> Noddings (n. 5 above) distinguishes between the "one-caring" and the "cared-for." Caring, she claims, is not of itself a virtue but rather the occasion for the exercise of virtues.

<sup>44</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 190. Indeed, Gilligan has been criticized for not presenting a Kantian form of ethical theory. See Gertrud Nunner-Winkler, "Two Moralities? A Critical Discussion of an Ethic of Care and Responsibility versus an Ethic of Rights and Justice," in Kurtines and Gewirtz, eds. (n. 10 above), 348–61. For a critique of Kant that follows some of the directions found in an ethic of care, see Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Kant, Politics, and Persons: The Implications of His Moral Philosophy," *Polity* 14, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 205–21.

<sup>45</sup> See William Frankena, *Ethics*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973). Kohlberg recites Frankena's argument in the quotation cited by n. 32 above.

<sup>46</sup> Contextual moral theories can be teleological, deontological, axiological, or aretaic. The common theme in contextual moral theories is that they eschew a formal and absolute resolution of moral questions. The reader may suspect that I am coining a new phrase only to weaken the position of my opponents. After all, even Kohlberg believes that his theory is situation specific and not universalistic. Indeed, perhaps only the Kantian perfect duties can be described as an unqualifiedly nonsituated morality. If that is the case, then my argument for introducing contextual morality grows stronger because it requires that moral philosophers drop the convenient fiction that their work stops once they have clarified the moral rules. Contextual moral theories involve a shift of the essential moral questions away from the question, What are the best principles? to the question, How will individuals best be equipped to act morally? Many moral philosophers are beginning to claim the need to return to a contextual ethical theory. A good recent collection of essays that shows both the diversity and core concerns of this emerging perspective can be found in Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas, eds., *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).



actors in a particular society. It cannot be understood by the recitation of abstract principles. By this account, morality is embedded in the norms of a given society. Furthermore, contextual moral theory directs attention away from the morality of single acts to the broader moral capacities of actors. To be moral is to possess a moral character, or, as Aristotle put it, virtue is a disposition.<sup>47</sup> Thus, morality cannot be determined by posing hypothetical moral dilemmas or by asserting moral principles. Rather, one's moral imagination, character, and actions must respond to the complexity of a given situation. Among prominent examples of contextual morality, I would include Aristotle's moral theory, the "moral sentiments" views of the Scottish Enlightenment, and some contemporary writers on morality.<sup>48</sup>

As a result of a starting concern with character, any contextual moral theory must embody a complex portrait of the self. Theories that are suspicious of nonrational moral motives often explain moral action as the result of rising above selfish passions. Noncontextual moral philosophers rely on rational tests to check self-interested inclinations. Hence the rational and the moral become identified.<sup>49</sup> In contrast, advocates of contextual moral theories often stress moral sensitivity and moral imagination as keys to understanding mature moral life. Rather than positing some ideal rational human being, contextual morality stands or falls on its ability to describe the ways in which individuals progress morally to exhibit concern for others.

As a fully developed moral theory, the ethic of care will take the form of a contextual moral theory. Perhaps the most important characteristic of an ethic of care is that within it, moral situations are defined not in terms of rights and responsibilities but in terms of relationships of care. The morally mature person understands the balance between caring for the self and caring for others.<sup>50</sup> The perspective of care requires that conflict be worked out without damage to the continuing relationships. Moral problems can be expressed in terms of accommodating the needs of the self and of others, of balancing competition and cooperation, and of maintaining the social web of relations in which one finds oneself.

<sup>47</sup> Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson and H. Tredennick (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), 91–92 (1103a14–b25).

<sup>48</sup> Among traditional moral theorists, I have in mind especially David Hume and Adam Smith. Among contemporary moral philosophers, a succinct statement of a contextual moral position can be found in John Kekes, "Moral Sensitivity," *Philosophy* 59, no. 227 (1984): 3–19.

<sup>49</sup> John Rawls's description of the "original position" in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971) is probably the best-known example of this approach. Lawrence Kohlberg's description of reciprocity ultimately hinges on an application of rationality as well. See his "Justice as Reversibility: The Claim to Moral Adequacy of a Highest Stage of Moral Judgement," in *Essays in Moral Development* (n. 26 above), 1:190–226; esp. 198.

<sup>50</sup> Gilligan describes the stages of care in "Do the Social Sciences Have an Adequate Theory of Moral Development?" (n. 1 above), 41–45.

Quite obviously, if such caretaking is the quintessential moral task, the context within which conflicting demands occur will be an important factor in determining the morally correct act. To resort to abstract, universal principles is to go outside of the web of relationships. Thus, despite Kohlberg's dismissal of care as secondary to and dependent on justice reasoning, from a different metaethical perspective, care may set the boundaries of when justice concerns are appropriate.<sup>51</sup>

If feminists recognize a moral tradition that is non-Kantian, they will be able to ground an ethic of care more securely in philosophical theory. Yet there are some serious problems with all contextual moralities, and specifically with an ethic of care. Consequently, as the following analysis will show, an ethic of care requires more elaboration before feminists can decide whether to embrace it as the appropriate moral theory for feminism.

### *Conventionalism and the limits of care*

Universalistic moral theories presume that they apply to all cases; contextual moral theories must specify when and how they apply.<sup>52</sup> Advocates of an ethic of care face, as Gilligan puts it, "the moral problem of inclusion that hinges on the capacity to assume responsibility for care."<sup>53</sup> It is easy to imagine that there will be some people or concerns about which we do not care. However, we might ask if our lack of care frees us from moral responsibility.<sup>54</sup>

This question arises because we do not care for everyone equally. We care more for those who are emotionally, physically, and even culturally

<sup>51</sup> This inversion of Kohlberg's position is recommended to us by the logical requirements of making an ethic of care into a full-fledged moral theory. How the caring person would know when to invoke the more remote criteria of justice is obviously a crucial question.

<sup>52</sup> "We have been told nothing about morality until we are told what features of situations context-sensitive people pick out as morally salient, what weightings they put on these different features, and so on" (Owen Flanagan and Jonathan Adler, "Impartiality and Particularity," *Social Research* 50, no. 3 [Autumn 1983]: 576–96, esp. 591–92). A similar point is made by Jonathan Dancy, "Ethical Particularism and Morally Relevant Properties," *Mind* 92, no. 368 (1983): 530–47.

<sup>53</sup> Gilligan, "Do the Social Sciences Have an Adequate Theory of Moral Development?" 44. Aristotle insisted that to try to extend the bounds of familial love to everyone simply destroys family bonds (*The Politics of Aristotle*, trans. E. Barker [New York: Oxford University Press, 1946], 47; 1262b [2.4.8]).

<sup>54</sup> Thus, David Hume understood justice, an artificial passion, as a necessary complement to the natural passion, benevolence. Hume argued that if benevolence were sufficiently strong, there would be no need of justice. Yet the limited range of benevolence made it an insufficient basis for moral life in human society. See David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), bk. 3, pt. 2, 494–95.

closer to us.<sup>55</sup> Thus, an ethic of care could become a defense of caring only for one's own family, friends, group, nation. From this perspective, caring could become a justification for any set of conventional relationships. Any advocate of an ethic of care will need to address the questions, What are the appropriate boundaries of our caring? and more important, How far should the boundaries of caring be expanded?

Furthermore, in focusing on the preservation of existing relationships, the perspective of care has a conservative quality. If the preservation of a web of relationships is the starting premise of an ethic of care, then there is little basis for critical reflection on whether those relationships are good, healthy, or worthy of preservation. Surely, as we judge our own relationships, we are likely to favor them and relationships like them. It is from such unreflective tastes, though, that hatreds of difference can grow. One of the reasons why impartiality is such an appealing universal moral characteristic is that in theory it can prevent the kind of special pleading in which we all otherwise engage. Yet it may be possible to avoid the need for special pleading while at the same time stopping short of universal moral principles; if so, an ethic of care might be viable.<sup>56</sup>

The possibility that an ethic of care might lead to the reinforcement of existing social patterns also raises the question of relativism. It is difficult to imagine how an ethic of care could avoid the charge that it would embody different moral positions in different societies and at different times. Philosophers do not agree about the seriousness of this type of relativism, however, and contextual moral theories may entail only a milder form of relativism, one that Dorothy Emmet calls "soft relativism." Viewed from the perspective of "soft relativism," cultural variation in certain moral principles does not preclude the discussion of moral issues across cultures.<sup>57</sup> The only way an ethic of care could entirely bypass the charge of relativism would be to posit some caring relationship, for example, the relationship of parent and child, as universal. This path, however, seems fraught with even greater difficulties for feminist scholars and prejudices in an unacceptably narrow way who "caretakers" should be.

Insofar as the difficulty with justice reasoning is that it ignores the

<sup>55</sup> This point was illustrated graphically by the Scottish Enlightenment thinker Francis Hutcheson, who drew an analogy between the relative strength of our closest and furthest emotional ties and the ties of gravity (*Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* [1726] in *Collected Works of Francis Hutcheson*, ed. Bernhard Fabian [Hildesheim, West Germany: George Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1971], 1:198–99). Perhaps some individuals, the saints among us, can resist the greater pull of those closest to us. A provocative account of moral saints is Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *Journal of Philosophy* 89, no. 8 (August 1982): 419–39.

<sup>56</sup> Peter Winch, "The Universalizability of Moral Judgments," in his *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 151–70.

<sup>57</sup> See Dorothy Emmet, *Rules, Roles and Relations* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966), chap. 5, esp. 91–92.

importance of context, the expansion of a care ethic suggests a much more adequate moral theory. Yet, how to make sure that the web of relationships is spun widely enough so that some are not beyond its reach remains a central question. Whatever the weaknesses of Kantian universalism, its premise of the equal moral worth and dignity of all humans is attractive because it avoids this problem.

Past contextual moral theories usually have addressed the issue by resorting to some abstract impartial observer. This solution is also inadequate, however, since the impartial observer usually places the same limitations on caring as do conventional moral thinkers.<sup>58</sup> The only other way to resolve this problem is to specify how social institutions might be arranged to expand these conventional understandings of the boundaries of care. Thus, the legitimacy of an ethic of care will depend on the adequacy of the social and political theory of which it is a part.

### *Politics and care*

In the final analysis, successful advocacy of an ethic of care requires the exposition of a social and political theory that is compatible with the broadest levels of care. All moral theories fit better with some rather than other social and political institutions. Proponents of an ethic of care must specify which social and political institutions they understand to be the context for moral actors. It perhaps should give us pause that some of the most compelling visions of polities of care are utopian.<sup>59</sup>

Among the questions a convincing theory of care needs to address are the myriad questions crucial to any social and political theory. Where does caring come from? Is it learned in the family? If so, does an ethic of care mandate something about the need for, or the nature of, families? Who determines who can be a member of the caring society? What should be the role of the market in a caring society? Who should bear the responsibility for education? How much inequality is acceptable before individuals become indifferent to those who are too different in status? How well do current institutions and theories support the ethic of care?

<sup>58</sup> For example, Adam Smith posited the existence of an "impartial spectator" in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 3.1.2, 110. Richard Brandt is a recent moral philosopher who advocated an "ideal observer" theory, but he has since repudiated it because it provided no way to prevent the ideal observer from invoking what would seem to him to be harmless preferences that might seriously constrict others' choices. (He uses as one example the preference against homosexuality.) See Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1979), 225–28.

<sup>59</sup> Consider Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland*, introduction by Ann J. Lane (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979); Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1976). Lee Cullen Khanna draws a parallel between Gilligan's ethic of care and Piercy's novel; see her "Frontiers of Imagination: Feminist Worlds," *Women's Studies International Forum* 7, no. 2 (1984): 97–102.

Finally, we need to think about how an ethic of care might be situated in the context of existing political and social theory. An ethic of care constitutes a view of self, relationships, and social order that may be incompatible with the emphasis on individual rights that is so predominant in Western, liberal, democratic societies. Yet, as it is currently formulated by political theorists, the debate between advocates of rights and advocates of community does not offer a clear alternative to feminists who might advocate an ethic of care. As onerous as rights may seem when viewed from the standpoint of our desires for connected, extended selves, they do serve at least somewhat to protect oppressed individuals. While current yearnings for greater community seem to manifest a view of the self that would allow for more caring, there is nothing inherent in community that keeps it from being oppressive toward women and others.<sup>60</sup> Unless feminists assume responsibility for situating the ethic of care in the context of the rights/community discussions, the end result may be that caring can be used to justify positions that feminists would find unacceptable.<sup>61</sup>

### Toward a theory of care

I have suggested that feminists should no longer celebrate an ethic of care as a factor of gender difference that points to women's superiority but that they must now begin the arduous task of constructing a full theory of care. Taken together, the arguments in this article suggest that the direction for future feminist moral thinking must be broader and more theoretical. In order to demonstrate this final claim let me consider a less drastic response to the question, What might the ethic of care mean?

One could assert that an ethic of care is just a set of sensibilities that every morally mature person should develop, alongside the sensibilities of justice morality. Rather than rethinking the nature of moral philosophy, then, we need to change the educational or familial institutions that are responsible for making the differences between justice and care gender

<sup>60</sup> See, e.g., Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). It seems doubtful that Sandel's vision holds any more promise for women than Rawls's theory that feminists need to be somewhat suspicious of invocations of community. See Brian Barry, review of Sandel, in *Ethics* 94, no. 3 (April 1984): 523–25; and Amy Gutmann, "Communitarian Critics of Liberalism," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 308–21.

<sup>61</sup> Consider the argument made by John Hardwig, "Should Women Think in Terms of Rights?" *Ethics* 94, no. 3 (April 1984): 441–55. Hardwig answers this question negatively; among his reasons is that "rights" imply a particular atomistic view of the self. To use rights arguments, he claims, is to adopt this understanding of the self. Women would have to surrender their sense of their connected, female nature if they used rights arguments. Hence, they should not. Alas, Hardwig does not explain how women can convince men who do think in terms of rights to take them seriously.

specific. We should endorse the development of two equal moralities for everyone and leave it to individuals to decide when to apply either morality.

There are two problems with this alternative. First, such a response ignores the evidence about the origins of the current gender differences. Whether the cause of the gender difference in morality is a psychological artifact of femininity, a cultural product of caretaking activity, or a positional result of social subordination, it is difficult to imagine how any of these causes or some combination of them could affect all individuals equally.

In the second place, expressing such an ideal ignores the tendency, in reality, to accommodate two desirable moralities by falling back into a rigid gender division. If there are two desirable moralities and two genders, what is wrong with viewing one as predominantly male and one as predominantly female? Having separate but, supposedly, equal spheres allows the two different moralities to flourish and delineates their boundaries clearly.

The most promising alternative, I have suggested, is to face squarely the difficult task of discussing the ethic of care in terms of moral and political theory. This task would include looking critically at the notion of a women's morality advanced by interpretations of research on morality and gender differences and by situating such interpretations in the context of research on morality and class, racial, and ethnic differences as well. It would also mean recognizing the limitations of a gender-specific moral theory in our culture. Finally, it would entail exploring the promises, as well as the problems, involved in thinking about the ethic of care as an alternative moral theory, rather than simply as a complement to traditional moral theories based on justice reasoning.

Although this task will be a difficult one, there is much to gain from it. Attentive to the place of caring both in concrete daily experience and in our patterns of moral thought, we might be better prepared to forge a society in which care can flourish.

*Department of Political Science  
Hunter College of the City University of New York*