Feminism and the Ethics of Care

Women & Moral Equality

Philosophers (like pretty much everyone else) are largely captive to the assumptions of their society and to their place in history. So, no great surprise: Women have been marginalized in the history of philosophy.

Aristotle: Women are ‘incomplete’ men, since they do not produce semen. Accordingly, they are of instrumental value only.

Kant: Women lack a principled sense of justice and, so, lack ‘civil personality’—they should be subject to their husbands.

…etc.
In view of this, it has required a major social and political struggle to establish the moral equality of men and women.

As it happens, moral philosophy has itself played an important role in this struggle.

E.g.: John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (1869)

In the context of politics, this typically has been understood in terms of achieving women’s freedom. But the idea of freedom can itself be given different interpretations…

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Two Main Variants of Feminism

- **Liberal Feminism**: Freedom $\rightarrow$ Remove external constraints so as to achieve equality between men and women.

  (E.g., End discriminatory laws and hiring practices, possibly also pro-active solutions such as affirmative action)

- **“Radical” or Difference Feminism**: Freedom $\rightarrow$ Remove internalized beliefs, attitudes and stereotypes that make women less willing or able to empower themselves, to be themselves. In its most extreme form: separatism.
A Related Story in the History of Ethics

- You may have noticed that most of the theories that we have so far considered in the course aim to articulate principles that can be used to justify moral rules (e.g., the principle of utility, the CI).

  I.e., according to theories of this sort, the point of moral theory is to provide general (ideally, universal) reasons, for classifying actions as either morally right or wrong.

- To those who accept this sort of view, this may suggest a (descriptive) account of moral development…

Kohlberg’s Theory

- **Lawrence Kohlberg** (1927-87) developed an account of stages of moral development (similar to Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development).

  - Kohlberg: Moral development can be assessed by analyzing a subject’s reactions to ‘moral dilemmas’.

    Assuming it fully develops at all (some of us may get ‘stuck’ along the way), the capacity for moral reasoning develops in stages…
Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development

1. **Obedience and Punishment Orientation** – How can I avoid punishment? Obey authority.

2. **Self-Interest Orientation** – What’s in it for me? Make fair deals with others.

3. **Interpersonal Accord and Conformity** – What’s my social role? Be a ‘good boy’/‘good girl’.

4. **Social-Order Maintaining Orientation** – Law and order morality. Do what the group requires of you.

Post-Conventional Stages

5. **Social Contract Orientation** – Uphold the rights and values recognized by your society, i.e., rights and principles arrived at by a fair, rational process of decision-making.

6. **Universal Ethical Principles** – Principled independent conscience. Do what’s right because it is your duty, because it is right in light of universal principles of justice. You should disobey rules that universal principles show to be unjust.
An Example: “Heinz’s Dilemma”

H’s wife will likely die without drug X. The pharmacist wants $2000 for X (yet it costs only $200 to make). H can raise only $1000 and proposes to the pharmacist that he pay the rest later. The pharmacist refuses. H now considers stealing X. Should he do it?

- An actual dilemma, note: Theft (presumably) is wrong, but so (presumably) is allowing your spouse to die.
- So what should H do…?

Jake (male, age 11): Steal it. ‘A human life is worth more than $1000’ (principle). The pharmacist will live to see another day, but H’s wife may not.

Amy (female, age 11): ‘They should talk it out.’ There are other possible resolutions besides stealing. Also, if H goes to jail for stealing, he won’t be able to look after his wife in the future.

- Jake seems to be operating at level 5 or 6; Amy seems to operating level 3 or 4. So, Jake is more morally developed than Amy…?
Gilligan’s Objection

- Carol Gilligan (1936–) argues that Kohlberg’s account is androcentric—it unjustifiably privileges a characteristically male view of morality and moral reasoning.

- Men may be oriented toward impersonal principles in moral decision-making. But women, by contrast, are oriented toward the specifics, the context, of interpersonal relationships and responsibilities.

  Women’s characteristic moral orientation, says Gilligan, is “taking care” of others…

Is This (Descriptively) True?

- Maybe. But the difference in moral reasoning between men and women can’t be that great. (At least some men seem to be reasonably caring; at least some women seem strongly attached to abstract principles.)

- Perhaps differences could be explained by evolutionary psychology. Caring for people and managing interpersonal relationships seem to have fairly clear connections with female reproductive/nurturing roles.

  Males and females pursue different reproductive strategies, it might be adaptive to select for ‘caring’ traits in females; less so for males.
Ethics of Care (EC): Normative Implications

- In short, ethical theory ought not to privilege a ‘male’ paradigm to the exclusion of a possibly equally valuable ‘female’ paradigm.

- Notice also: The EC view can explain some intuitive objections to theories we’ve already looked at:

  U, e.g., requires us to adopt the perspective of the “disinterested benevolent spectator,” to treat strangers and family and friends in the same way.

  This seems, well, … cold, it seems uncaring. (Imagine U parenting à la Singer)

- Care ethicists: Parents don’t simply have duties toward their children, they love them. Children don’t need simply to be ‘treated fairly’, they need to be loved and cared for.

- Yet an EC perspective seems to imply that we care only about beings with whom we have an interactive emotional connection.

  Nel Noddings: The caring relation exists only if the ‘one-caring’ can interact with the ‘cared-for’. At a minimum, care must be personally acknowledged (i.e., in a one-to-one emotional relation).
Possibly Less Welcome
Normative Implications

- **Non-Human Animals**: Most human societies observe a fairly strict normative distinction between ‘pets’ and ‘livestock’ (though, famously, where the line is drawn differs from culture to culture).

  An EC perspective neatly explains this: I have an interactive emotional relation with my ‘companion animals’, so of course I treat them well and would never think of eating them. But I may have no emotional relationship with livestock.

- **U Vegetarian objection**: So all other non-pet animals have *no* moral standing!?!?

- **Disadvantaged Others**: Similarly, many people reckon that it is somehow more ethically important to provide for people with whom we have a personal relationship than for people who we may never meet.

  Yet again: I have an interactive emotional relationship with friends and family (and, note, disability is not necessarily a bar to this), so I have a responsibility to care for them. But I do not have a similar relationship with ‘everyone’.

- **Peter Singer exclaims**: So others are *less morally valuable* than your friends and family?!?!
Implications for Ethical Theory

- ‘Modern’ ethical theories (U, Kant, SCT, others) have been preoccupied with general, abstract rules and principles.

- ‘Care’, by contrast, does not pick out any general, abstract rule. It depends on particulars—particular contexts, relationships, and emotional attachments.

An ethics of care doesn’t specify rules. Instead it specifies what sort of person one ought to be.

I.e., it tells us what virtues (character traits, capacities) ethical people ought to have…