

**ETHICAL THEORY:  
A CONCISE ANTHOLOGY**

EDITED BY

HEIMIR GEIRSSON

MARGARET R. HOLMGREN



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We might wonder why anyone would think of virtue ethics as "female" ethics. After all, Aristotle, who initially developed virtue ethics, was a male—and a notoriously male-centric thinker. He modelled his theory on the Greek society of his day which was indisputably highly male-oriented. During the eighth and ninth centuries, the Vikings terrorized the seashores of northern Europe. Judging from Nordic poems and stories, their moral outlook is best described as that of virtue ethics. Still, no one would be likely to claim that the Vikings adopted "female" ethics. And when virtue ethics was resurrected to some extent during the late nineteenth century, it was by Friedrich Nietzsche, another male who (like Aristotle) did not think very highly of women.

We should perhaps also note that some psychological research after Gilligan has revealed that the division between "male" and "female" moral outlooks is not empirically rigid. It is not the case that there are distinct male ethics and female ethics. Instead there are different moral outlooks that people of either gender might accept when they are morally mature. It may be more common for females to accept the ethics of care that Gilligan attributes to females and it may be more common for males to accept the rule-based model that she attributes to males. However, there are no sharp divisions on these models on the basis of gender that can be used to *define* these models. This later research helps to explain the seemingly contradictory fact that the main advocates of virtue ethics have been males, as well as the fact that the moral outlook of some male-dominated cultures is still best described in terms of virtue ethics.

Even if there is not a sharp division between male and female ethics, feminist perspectives have for the most part agreed in questioning the universality of ethical theories and the universal validity of moral principles. Gender aside, different genuinely "mature" people can have different moral outlooks and different approaches to resolving moral issues. Most feminists argue that no single rule-based moral theory can claim to be the "right" theory, and that no single moral theory can claim to be universal.

Further, feminist ethics has changed how we look at moral autonomy. Ethical theories that emphasize moral rules and abstract reasoning have typically emphasized the notion that a moral agent is separate from others and that making moral decisions requires a certain degree of impartiality. According to these theories, one cannot get too caught up in special relationships, for this might taint the reasoning process. Against this position, feminist ethics has argued that a morally responsible person is one who recognizes that she is entangled in a network of relations with other people and who orients her moral deliberations with a view to maintaining these relations.

## 18.

SELECTION FROM *IN A DIFFERENT VOICE*

CAROL GILLIGAN

*Carol Gilligan is professor of education at Harvard University and an author of numerous articles and books on moral psychology. In the selection below, Gilligan argues that there has been a male bias in research into moral psychology. In particular, Lawrence Kohlberg's six stages of moral development emphasize a rule-oriented perspective, a perspective that views women's moralized as morally deficient because of their tendency to emphasize caring and interpersonal relations.*

In the second act of *The Cherry Orchard*, Lopalin, a young merchant, describes his life of hard work and success. Failing to convince Madame Ranevskaya to cut down the cherry orchard to save her estate, he will go on in the next act to buy it himself. He is the self-made man who, in purchasing the estate where his father and grandfather were slaves, seeks to eradicate the "awkward, unhappy life" of the past, replacing the cherry orchard with summer cottages where coming generations "will see a new life." In elaborating this developmental vision, he reveals the image of man that underlies and supports his activity: "At times when I can't go to sleep, I think: Lord, thou gawest us immense forests, unbounded fields and the widest horizons, and living in the midst of them we should indeed be giants"—at which point, Madame Ranevskaya interrupts him, saying, "You feel the need for giants—They are good only in fairy tales, anywhere else they only frighten us."

Conceptions of the human life cycle represent attempts to order and make coherent the unfolding experiences and perceptions, the changing wishes and realities of everyday life. But the nature of such conceptions depends in part on the position of the observer. The brief excerpt from Chekhov's play suggests that when the observer is a woman, the perspective may be of a different sort. Different judgments of the image of man as giant imply different ideas about human development, different ways of imagining the human condition, different notions of what is of value in life.

At a time when efforts are being made to eradicate discrimination between the sexes in the search for social equality and justice, the differences between the sexes are being rediscovered in the social sciences. This discovery occurs when theories formerly considered to be sexually neutral in their scientific objectivity are found instead to reflect a consistent observa-

tional and evaluative bias. Then the presumed neutrality of science, like that of language itself, gives way to the recognition that the categories of knowledge are human constructions. The fascination with point of view that has informed the fiction of the twentieth century and the corresponding recognition of the relativity of judgment infuse our scientific understanding as well when we begin to notice how accustomed we have become to seeing life through men's eyes.

A recent discovery of this sort pertains to the apparently innocent classic *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk and E.B. White. The Supreme Court ruling on the subject of discrimination in classroom texts led one teacher of English to notice that the elementary rules of English usage were being taught through examples which counterposed the birth of Napoleon, the writings of Coleridge, and statements such as "He was an interesting talker. A man who had traveled all over the world and lived in half a dozen countries," with "Well, Susan, this is a fine mess you are in" or, less drastically, "He saw a woman, accompanied by two children, walking slowly down the road."

Psychological theorists have fallen as innocently as Strunk and White into the same observational bias. Implicitly adopting the male life as the norm, they have tried to fashion women out of a masculine cloth. It all goes back, of course, to Adam and Eve—a story which shows, among other things, that if you make woman out of a man, you are bound to get into trouble. In the life cycle, as in the Garden of Eden, the woman has been the deviant.

The penchant of developmental theorists to project a masculine image, and one that appears frightening to women, goes back at least to Freud who built his theory of psychosexual development around the experiences of the male child that culminate in the Oedipus complex. In the 1920s, Freud struggled to resolve the contradictions posed for his theory by the differences in female anatomy and the different configuration of the young girl's early family relationships. After trying to fit women into his masculine conception, seeing them as envying that which they missed, he came instead to acknowledge, in the strength and persistence of women's pre-Oedipal attachments to their mothers, a developmental difference. He considered this difference in women's development to be responsible for what he saw as women's developmental failure.

Having tied the formation of the superego or conscience to castration anxiety, Freud considered women to be deprived by nature of the impetus for a clear-cut Oedipal resolution. Consequently, women's superego—the heir to the Oedipus complex—was compromised: it was never "so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men." From this observation of difference, that "for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men," Freud concluded that

women "show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgements by feelings of affection or hostility."

Thus a problem in theory became cast as a problem in women's development, and the problem in women's development was located in their experience of relationships. Nancy Chodorow, attempting to account for "the reproduction within each generation of certain general and nearly universal differences that characterize masculine and feminine personality and roles," attributes these differences between the sexes not to anatomy but rather to "the fact that women, universally, are largely responsible for early child care." Because this early social environment differs for and is experienced differently by male and female children, basic sex differences recur in personality development. As a result, "in any given society, feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does."

In her analysis, Chodorow relies primarily on Robert Stoller's studies which indicate that gender identity, the unchanging core of personality formation, is "with rare exception firmly and irreversibly established for both sexes by the time a child is around three." Given that for both sexes the primary caretaker in the first three years of life is typically female, the interpersonal dynamics of gender identity formation are different for boys and girls. Female identity formation takes place in a context of ongoing relationship since "mothers tend to experience their daughters as more like, and continuous with, themselves." Correspondingly, girls, in identifying themselves as female, experience themselves as like their mothers, thus fusing the experience of attachment with the process of identity formation. In contrast, "mothers experience their sons as a male opposite," and boys, in defining themselves as masculine, separate their mothers from themselves, thus curtailing "their primary love and sense of empathic tie." Consequently, male development entails a "more emphatic individuation and a more defensive firming of experienced ego boundaries." For boys, but not girls, "issues of differentiation have become intertwined with sexual issues."

Writing against the masculine bias of psychoanalytic theory, Chodorow argues that the existence of sex differences in the early experiences of individuation and relationship "does not mean that women have 'weaker' ego boundaries than men or are more prone to psychosis." It means instead that "girls emerge from this period with a basis for 'empathy' built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not." Chodorow thus replaces Freud's negative and derivative description of female psychology with a positive and direct account of her own: "Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another's needs or feelings as one's own (or of thinking that one is so experiencing another's needs and feelings). Furthermore, girls do

not define themselves in terms of the denial of preoedipal relational modes to the same extent as do boys. Therefore, regression to these modes tends not to feel as much a basic threat to their ego. From very early, then, because they are patented by a person of the same gender ... girls come to experience themselves as less differentiated than boys, as more continuous with and related to the external object-world, and as differently oriented to their inner object-world as well."

Consequently, relationships, and particularly issues of dependency, are experienced differently by women and men. For boys and men, separation and individuation are critically tied to gender identity since separation from the mother is essential for the development of masculinity. For girls and women, issues of femininity or feminine identity do not depend on the achievement of separation from the mother or on the progress of individuation. Since masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment, male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender identity is threatened by separation. Thus males tend to have difficulty with relationships, while females tend to have problems with individuation. The quality of embeddedness in social interaction and personal relationships that characterizes women's lives in contrast to men's, however, becomes not only a descriptive difference but also a developmental liability when the milestones of childhood and adolescent development in the psychological literature are markers of increasing separation. Women's failure to separate then becomes by definition a failure to develop.

The sex differences in personality formation that Chodorow describes in early childhood appear during the middle childhood years in studies of children's games. Children's games are considered by George Herbert Mead and Jean Piaget as the crucible of social development during the school years. In games, children learn to take the role of the other and come to see themselves through another's eyes. In games, they learn respect for rules and come to understand the ways rules can be made and changed.

Janet Lever, considering the peer group to be the agent of socialization during the elementary school years and play to be a major activity of socialization at that time, set out to discover whether there are sex differences in the games that children play. Studying 181 fifth-grade, white, middle-class children, ages ten and eleven, she observed the organization and structure of their playtime activities. She watched the children as they played at school during recess and in physical education class, and in addition kept diaries of their accounts as to how they spent their out-of-school time. From this study, Lever reports sex differences: boys play out of doors more often than girls do; boys play more often in large and age-heterogeneous groups; they play competitive games more often, and their games last longer than girls' games. The last is in some ways the most interesting finding: Boys'

games appeared to last longer not only because they required a higher level of skill and were thus less likely to become boring, but also because, when disputes arose in the course of a game, boys were able to resolve the disputes more effectively than girls: "During the course of this study, boys were seen quarrelling all the time, but not once was a game terminated because of a quarrel and no game was interrupted for more than seven minutes. In the gravest debates, the final word was always, to 'repeat the play,' generally followed by a chorus of 'cheater's proof.'" In fact, it seemed that the boys enjoyed the legal debates as much as they did the game itself, and even marginal players of lesser size or skill participated equally in these recurrent squabbles. In contrast, the eruption of disputes among girls tended to end the game.

Thus Lever extends and corroborates the observations of Piaget in his study of the rules of the game, where he finds boys becoming through childhood increasingly fascinated with the legal elaboration of rules and the development of fair procedures for adjudicating conflicts, a fascination that, he notes, does not hold for girls. Girls, Piaget observes, have a more "pragmatic" attitude toward rules, "regarding a rule as good as long as the game repaid it."

Girls are more tolerant in their attitudes toward rules, more willing to make exceptions, and more easily reconciled to innovations. As a result, the legal sense, which Piaget considers essential to moral development, "is far less developed in little girls than in boys."

The bias that leads Piaget to equate male development with child development also colors Lever's work. The assumption that shapes her discussion of results is that the male model is the better one since it fits the requirements for modern corporate success. In contrast, the sensitivity and care for the feelings of others that girls develop through their play have little market value and can even impede professional success. Lever implies that, given the realities of adult life, if a girl does not want to be left dependent on men, she will have to learn to play like a boy.

To Piaget's argument that children learn the respect for rules necessary for moral development by playing rule-bound games, Lawrence Kohlberg adds that these lessons are most effectively learned through the opportunities for role-taking that arise in the course of resolving disputes. Consequently, the moral lessons inherent in girls' play appear to be fewer than in boys.' Traditional girls' games like jump rope and hopscotch are turn-taking games, where competition is indirect since one person's success does not necessarily signify another's failure. Consequently, disputes requiring adjudication are less likely to occur. In fact, most of the girls whom Lever interviewed claimed that when a quarrel broke out, they ended the game. Rather than elaborating a system of rules for resolving disputes, girls subordinated the continuation of the game to the continuation of relationships.

Lever concludes that from the games they play, boys learn both the independence and the organizational skills necessary for coordinating the activities of large and diverse groups of people. By participating in controlled and socially approved competitive situations, they learn to deal with competition in a relatively forthright manner—to play with their enemies and to compete with their friends—all in accordance with the rules of the game. In contrast, girls' play tends to occur in smaller, more intimate groups, often the best-friend dyad, and in private places. This play replicates the social pattern of primary human relationships in that its organization is more cooperative. Thus, it points less, in Mead's terms, toward learning to take the role of "the generalized other," less toward the abstraction of human relationships. But it fosters the development of the empathy and sensitivity necessary for taking the role of "the particular other" and points more toward knowing the other as different from the self.

The sex differences in personality formation in early childhood that Chodorow derives from her analysis of the mother-child relationship are thus extended by Lever's observations of sex differences in the play activities of middle childhood. Together these accounts suggest that boys and girls arrive at puberty with a different interpersonal orientation and a different range of social experiences....

"It is obvious," Virginia Woolf says, "that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex." Yet, she adds, "it is the masculine values that prevail." As a result, women come to question the normality of their feelings and to alter their judgments in deference to the opinion of others. In the nineteenth-century novels written by women, Woolf sees at work "a mind which was slightly pulled from the straight and made to alter its clear vision in deference to external authority." The same deference to the values and opinions of others can be seen in the judgments of twentieth-century women. The difficulty women experience in finding or speaking publicly in their own voices emerges repeatedly in the form of qualification and self-doubt, but also in intimations of a divided judgment, a public assessment and private assessment which are fundamentally at odds.

Yet the deference and confusion that Woolf criticizes in women derive from the values she sees as their strength. Women's deference is rooted not only in their social subordination but also in the substance of their moral concern. Sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care lead women to attend to voices other than their own and to include in their judgment other points of view. 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. The reluctance to judge may itself be indicative of the care and concern for others that infuse the psychology of women's develop-

ment and are responsible for what is generally seen as problematic in its nature.

Thus women not only define themselves in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care. Women's place in man's life cycle has been that of nurturer, caretaker, and helpmate; the weaver of those networks of relationships on which she in turn relies. But while women have thus taken care of men, men have, in their theories of psychological development, as in their economic arrangements, tended to assume or devalue that care. When the focus on individuation and individual achievement extends into adulthood and maturity is equated with personal autonomy, concern with relationships appears as a weakness of women rather than as a human strength.

The discrepancy between womanhood and adulthood is nowhere more evident than in the studies on sex-role stereotypes reported by Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, and Rosenkrantz. The repeated finding of these studies is that the qualities deemed necessary for adulthood—the capacity for autonomous thinking, clear decision-making, and responsible action—are those associated with masculinity and considered undesirable as attributes of the feminine self. The stereotypes suggest a splitting of love and work that relegates expressive capacities to women while placing instrumental abilities in the masculine domain. Yet looked at from a different perspective, these stereotypes reflect a conception of adulthood that is itself out of balance, favoring the separateness of the individual self over connection to others, and leaning more toward an autonomous life of work than toward the interdependence of love and care.

The discovery now being celebrated by men in mid-life of the importance of intimacy, relationships, and care is something that women have known from the beginning. However, because that knowledge in women has been considered "intuitive" or "instinctive," a function of anatomy coupled with destiny, psychologists have neglected to describe its development. In my research, I have found that women's moral development centers on the elaboration of that knowledge and thus delineates a critical line of psychological development in the lives of both of the sexes. The subject of moral development not only provides the final illustration of the reiterative pattern in the observation and assessment of sex differences in the literature on human development, but also indicates more particularly why the nature and significance of women's development has been for so long obscured and shrouded in mystery.

The criticism that Freud makes of women's sense of justice, seeing it as compromised in its refusal of blind impartiality, reappears not only in the work of Piaget but also in that of Kohlberg. While in Piaget's account of the moral judgment of the child, girls are an aside, a curiosity to whom he devotes four brief entries in an index that omits "boys" altogether because

"the child" is assumed to be male, in the research from which Kohlberg derives his theory, females simply do not exist. Kohlberg's six stages that describe the development of moral judgment from childhood to adulthood are based empirically on a study of eighty-four boys whose development Kohlberg has followed for a period of over twenty years. Although Kohlberg claims universality for his stage sequence, those groups not included in his original sample rarely reach his higher stages.

Prominent among those who thus appear to be deficient in moral development when measured by Kohlberg's scale are women, whose judgments seem to exemplify the third stage of his six-stage sequence. At this stage morality is conceived in interpersonal terms and goodness is equated with helping and pleasing others. This conception of goodness is considered by Kohlberg and Kramer to be functional in the lives of mature women insofar as their lives take place in the home. Kohlberg and Kramer imply that only if women enter the traditional arena of male activity will they recognize the inadequacy of this moral perspective and progress like men toward higher stages where relationships are subordinated to rules (stage four) and rules to universal principles of justice (stages five and six).

Yet herein lies a paradox, for the very traits that traditionally have defined the "goodness" of women, their care for and sensitivity to the needs of others, are those that mark them as deficient in moral development. In this version of moral development, however, the conception of maturity is derived from the study of men's lives and reflects the importance of individuation in their development. Piaget, challenging the common impression that a developmental theory is built like a pyramid from its base in infancy, points out that a conception of development instead hangs from its vertex of maturity, the point toward which progress is traced. Thus, a change in the definition of maturity does not simply alter the description of the highest stage but recasts the understanding of development, changing the entire account.

When one begins with the study of women and derives developmental constructs from their lives, the outline of a moral conception different from that described by Freud, Piaget, or Kohlberg begins to emerge and informs a different description of development. 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.

This different construction of the moral problem by women may be seen as the critical reason for their failure to develop within the constraints of

Kohlberg's system. Regarding all constructions of responsibility as evidence of a conventional moral understanding, Kohlberg defines the highest stages of moral development as deriving from a reflective understanding of human rights. That the morality of rights differs from the morality of responsibility in its emphasis on separation rather than connection, in its consideration of the individual rather than the relationship as primary, is illustrated by two responses to interview questions about the nature of morality. The first comes from a twenty-five-year-old man, one of the participants in Kohlberg's study:

*[What does the word morality mean to you?] Nobody in the world knows the answer. I think it is recognizing the right of the individual, the rights of other individuals, not interfering with those rights. Act as fairly as you would have them treat you. I think it is basically to preserve the human being's right to existence. I think that is the most important. Secondly, the human being's right to do as he pleases, again without interfering with somebody else's rights.*

*[How have your views on morality changed since the last interview?] I think I am more aware of an individual's rights now. I used to be looking at it strictly from my point of view, just for me. Now I think I am more aware of what the individual has a right to.*

Kohlberg cites this man's response as illustrative of the principled conception of human rights that exemplifies his fifth and sixth stages. Commenting on the response, Kohlberg says: "Moving to a perspective outside of that of his society, he identifies morality with justice (fairness, rights, the Golden Rule), with recognition of the rights of others as these are defined naturally or intrinsically. The human being's right to do as he pleases without interfering with somebody else's rights is a formula defining rights prior to social legislation."

The second response comes from a woman who participated in the rights and responsibilities study. She also was twenty-five and, at the time, a third-year law student:

*[Is there really some correct solution to moral problems, or is everybody's opinion equally right?] No, I don't think everybody's opinion is equally right. I think that in some situations there may be opinions that are equally valid, and one could conscientiously adopt one of several courses of action. But there are other situations in which I think there are right and wrong answers, that sort of inhere in the nature of existence, of all individuals here who need to live with each other to live. We need to depend on each other, and hopefully it is not only a physical need but a need of fulfillment in ourselves, that a person's life is enriched by cooperating with other people*

and striving to live in harmony with everybody else, and to that end, there are right and wrong, there are things which promote that end and that move away from it, and in that way it is possible to choose in certain cases among different courses of action that obviously promote or harm that goal.

[Is there a time in the past when you would have thought about these things differently?] Oh, yeah, I think that I went through a time when I thought that things were pretty relative, that I can't tell you what to do and you can't tell me what to do, because you've got your conscience and I've got mine.

[When was that?] When I was in high school. I guess that it just sort of dawned on me that my own ideas changed, and because my own judgment changed, I felt I couldn't judge another person's judgment. But now I think even when it is only the person himself who is going to be affected, I say it is wrong to the extent it doesn't cohere with what I know about human nature and what I know about you, and just from what I think is true about the operation of the universe, I could say I think you are making a mistake.

[What led you to change, do you think?] Just seeing more of life, just recognizing that there are an awful lot of things that are common among people. There are certain things that you come to learn promote a better life and better relationships and more personal fulfillment than other things that in general tend to do the opposite, and the things that promote these things, you would call morally right.

This response also represents a personal reconstruction of morality following a period of questioning and doubt, but the reconstruction of moral understanding is based not on the primacy and universality of individual rights, but rather on what she describes as a "very strong sense of being responsible to the world." Within this construction, the moral dilemma changes from how to exercise one's rights without interfering with the rights of others to how "to lead a moral life which includes obligations to myself and my family and people in general." The problem then becomes one of limiting responsibilities without abandoning moral concern. When asked to describe herself, this woman says that she values "having other people that I am tied to, and also having people that I am responsible to. I have a very strong sense of being responsible to the world, that I can't just live for my enjoyment, but just the fact of being in the world gives me an obligation to do what I can to make the world a better place to live in, no matter how small a scale that may be on." Thus while Kohlberg's subject worries about people interfering with each other's rights, this woman worries about "the possibility of omission, of your not helping others when you could help them."

The issue that this woman raises is addressed by Jane Loevinger's fifth "autonomous" stage of ego development, where autonomy, placed in the con-

text of relationships, is defined as modulating an excessive sense of responsibility through the recognition that other people have responsibility for their own destiny. The autonomous stage in Loevinger's account witnesses a relinquishing of moral dichotomies and their replacement with "a feeling for the complexity and multifaceted character of real people and real situations." Whereas the rights conception of morality that informs Kohlberg's principled level (stages five and six) is geared to arriving at an objectively fair or just resolution to moral dilemmas upon which all rational persons could agree, the responsibility conception focuses instead on the limitations of any particular resolution and describes the conflicts that remain.

Thus it becomes clear why a morality of rights and noninterference may appear frightening to women in its potential justification of indifference and unconcern. At the same time, it becomes clear why, from a male perspective, a morality of responsibility appears inconclusive and diffuse, given its insistent contextual relativism. Women's moral judgments thus elucidate the pattern observed in the description of the developmental differences between the sexes, but they also provide an alternative conception of maturity by which these differences can be assessed and their implications traced. The psychology of women that has consistently been described as distinctive in its greater orientation toward relationships and interdependence implies a more contextual mode of judgment and a different moral understanding. Given the differences in women's conceptions of self and morality, women bring to the life cycle a different point of view and order human experience in terms of different priorities.

The myth of Demeter and Persephone, which McClelland cites as exemplifying the feminine attitude toward power, was associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries celebrated in ancient Greece for over two thousand years. As told in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, the story of Persephone indicates the strengths of interdependence, building up resources and giving, that McClelland found in his research on power motivation to characterize the mature feminine style. Although, McClelland says, "it is fashionable to conclude that no one knows what went on in the Mysteries, it is known that they were probably the most important religious ceremonies, even partly on the historical record, which were organized by and for women, especially at the onset before men by means of the cult of Dionysis began to take them over." Thus McClelland regards the myth as "a special presentation of feminine psychology." It is, as well, a life-cycle story par excellence.

Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, while playing in a meadow with her girlfriends, sees a beautiful narcissus which she runs to pick. As she does so, the earth opens and she is snatched away by Hades, who takes her to his underworld kingdom. Demeter, goddess of the earth, so mourns the loss of her daughter that she refuses to allow anything to grow. The crops that sus-

tain life on earth shrivel up, killing men and animals alike, until Zeus takes pity on man's suffering and persuades his brother to return Persephone to her mother. But before she leaves, Persephone eats some pomegranate seeds, which ensures that she will spend part of every year with Hades in the underworld.

The elusive mystery of women's development lies in its recognition of the continuing importance of attachment in the human life cycle. Woman's place in man's life cycle is to protect this recognition while the developmental liability intones the celebration of separation, autonomy, individuation, and natural rights. The myth of Persephone speaks directly to the distortion in this view by reminding us that narcissism leads to death, that the fertility of the earth is in some mysterious way tied to the continuation of the mother-daughter relationship, and that the life cycle itself arises from an alternation between the world of women and that of men. Only when life-cycle theorists divide their attention and begin to live with women as they have lived with men will their vision encompass the experience of both sexes and their theories become correspondingly more fertile.

## 19.

## WOMEN AND CARING



NEL NODDINGS

*Nel Noddings is a visiting professor of philosophy at Columbia University Teachers College. She specializes in ethics, feminist philosophy, and philosophy of education, and is the author of Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education, from which this selection is taken. Noddings gives some examples of the typical differences between masculine and feminine approaches to ethics, and explicates the feminine approach which is based on caring in specific interpersonal relationships. She suggests that instead of regarding women as typically occupying an inferior stage of moral development, we can develop a powerful and coherent approach to ethics based on the type of caring that is so familiar to women.*

Women often define themselves as both persons and moral agents in terms of their capacity to care. When we move from natural caring to an ethic of caring, we shall consider the deep psychological structures that may be responsible for this mode of definition. Here I wish to concentrate on the caring itself—on particular examples of feminine courage in relating and remaining related and on the typical differences between men and women in their search for the ethical in human relationships.

We may find the sorts of examples and contrasts we seek in legend, Biblical accounts, biography, and fiction. I shall do no more than sample the possibilities here. The legend of Ceres, for example, can be interpreted beautifully to illustrate the attitude and conflicts of one-caring.<sup>1</sup> Recall that Ceres was the goddess who cared for the earth. It was she who made the fields fertile and watched over the maturation and harvest of crops. She had a daughter, Proserpine, whom she dearly loved. One day, Pluto, god of the underworld, crazed by love from Cupid's arrow, snatched Proserpine from her play and abducted her to his underground kingdom. Ceres searched the world for her daughter without success and was grief-stricken. Next something happens in the legend that is especially instructive for the one-caring: Ceres, in all her misery, is approached by an old man, Celeus, and his little girl. They respond to her grief and invite her to visit their cottage; indeed, they respond by weeping with her. Ceres is moved by this show of compassion and accompanies them. Here is a concrete illustration of the power of the cared-for in con-



tributing to the caring relation. Ceres knows that she is the one-caring, that she has the power to confer good or ill on these passersby. But, in her misery, she needs the active response of the cared-for to maintain herself as one-caring. Typical of one-caring who would be one-caring, she answers Celesus by saying: "Lead on, ... I cannot resist that appeal."<sup>2</sup>

Arriving at the cottage, Ceres finds a little boy very ill, probably dying. She is received, however, by the child's mother, Metanira, and moved to pity, Ceres cures the child with a kiss. Later, when Ceres tries to make the child immortal by tempering his body in flaming ashes, Metanira snatches the child fearfully from her. Ceres chides the mother for depriving her son of immortality but, still, she assures Metanira that he will nevertheless be "great and useful." The boy, Triptolemus, will someday reach humankind the secrets of agriculture as revealed to him by Ceres. Here, then, is a second facet of the ideal for one-caring: The cared-for shall be blessed not with riches, luck, and power but with the great gift of *usefulness*. The conversation between Ceres and Triptolemus and Metanira afraid to risk her son in the flames is illustrative, again, of the feminine striving for an attainable ideal. It stands in bold contrast to the story we shall consider next—that of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son to divine command.

Eventually, Ceres finds the place where Proserpine was swallowed up by the earth, but she mistakenly supposes that the earth itself did this terrible thing. She is stricken by a double grief. Not only has she lost her beloved Proserpine but another cared-for, her fruitful earth, has turned against her. Now Ceres does not fly into a destructive rage and visit the earth with lightning, fire and flood. She merely ceases to care; she withdraws as one-caring, and the earth dries up in mud and weeds and brambles. Ceres, the one-caring, has nothing to sustain her in caring. Here, we see foreshadowed the power of the cared-for in maintaining the caring relationship.

Finally, Ceres learns the truth and entreats Jove to intercede on her behalf with Pluto. As you may recall, Pluto, in fear of losing his kingdom entirely, agrees to return Proserpine but induces her to eat some pomegranate seeds so that she will be unable to spend more than half of each year with her mother. When Proserpine returns each spring, Ceres bestows great fruitfulness on the earth and, when she leaves each fall, Ceres is overcome by grief and allows winter to settle on the earth.

This story is widely understood as an allegory of the seasons, of sleeping grain and awakening fruitfulness, but it may be interpreted also as a fable of caring and being cared-for.<sup>3</sup> It illustrates the vulnerability of the one-caring, her reception of the proximate stranger, her generosity upon being herself received, and the munificent displacement of motivation that occurs when she is sustained as one-caring.

Now, someone is sure to point out that, in contrast to the legend of one-caring as the pinnacle of feminine sensibility, feminine skull-duggery lies at

the root of the problem described in the legend.<sup>4</sup> It was, after all, Venus who prompted her son, Cupid, to shoot Pluto with the arrow of love. I am not denying the reality of this dark side of feminine character,<sup>5</sup> but I am rejecting it in my quest for the ethical. I am not, after all, suggesting a will to power but rather a commitment to care as the guide to an ethical ideal.

This commitment to care and to define oneself in terms of the capacity to care represent a feminine alternative to Kohlberg's "stage six" morality.<sup>6</sup> At stage six, the moral thinker transcends particular moral principles by appealing to a highest principle—one that allows a rearrangement of the hierarchy in order to give proper place-value to human love, loyalty, and the relief of suffering. But women, as one-caring, are not so much concerned with the rearrangement of priorities among principles; they are concerned, rather, with maintaining and enhancing caring. They do not abstract away from the concrete situation those elements that allow a formulation of deductive argument; rather, they remain in the situation as sensitive, receptive, and responsive agents. As a result of this caring orientation, they are perceived by Kohlberg as "being stuck" at stage three—that stage in which the moral agent wants to be a "good boy or girl." The desire to be good, however, to be one-caring in response to these cared-for here and now, provides a sound and lovely alternative foundation for ethical behavior. Like Ceres, the one-caring will not turn from the real human beings who address her. Her caring is the foundation of—and not a mere manifestation of—her morality.

In contrast to the story of Ceres, who could not abandon her child even for the sake of her beloved Earth, we may consider Abraham. In obedience to God, Abraham traveled with his son, Isaac, to Moriah, there to offer him as a sacrifice: "And they came to the place which God had told him of, and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son."<sup>7</sup>

Kierkegaard interprets Abraham's action as supra-ethical, that is, as the action of an individual who is justified by his connection to God, the absolute. For him, as for us, the individual is higher than the universal, but for him that "higher" status is derived from "absolute duty toward God." Hence a paradox is produced. Out of duty to God, we may be required to do to our neighbor what is ethically forbidden. The ethical is, for Kierkegaard, the universal, and the individual directly obedient to God is superior to the universal. He says: "In the story of Abraham we find such a paradox. His relation to Isaac, ethically expressed, is this, that the father should love the son. This ethical relation is reduced to a relative position in contrast with the absolute relation to God."<sup>8</sup>

But for the mother, for us, this is horrendous. Our relation to our children is not governed first by the ethical but by natural caring. We love not because

Why then, if we are to love but because our natural relatedness gives natural birth to love. It is this love, this natural caring, that makes the ethical possible. For us, then, Abraham's decision is not only ethically unjustified but it is also the violation of the supraethical—of caring. The one-caring can only show the his act—"You would kill your own son!"—and refuse him forgiveness. Abraham's obdurance fled for protection under the skirts of an unseeable God. Under the gaze of an abstract and untouchable God, he would destroy this touchable child whose real eyes were turned upon him in trust, and love, and fear. I suspect no woman could have written upon him in trust, *Fear and Trembling*, but perhaps I should speak only for myself on that. The one-caring, male or female, does not seek security in abstractions cast either as principles or entities. She remains responsible here and now for this caring-for and in this situation and for the foreseeable futures projected by herself and the cared-for.

Now, of course, the scholar may argue that I have interpreted the story too literally, and even that Kierkegaard did so in an agony of faith against ethical reason. He will point out that, on another interpretation, God used Abraham and Isaac to teach His people that human sacrifice was unacceptable to Him and, henceforth, forbidden. This interpretation will not satisfy the mother. The mother in Abraham's position would respond to the fear and trust of her child—not to the voice of abstraction. The Mother-as-God would not use a parent and child so fearfully and painfully to teach a welcome lesson to her other children. The Mother-God must respond caringly to Abraham as caring-for and to Isaac as cared-for, and she must preserve Abraham as one-caring in relation to Isaac.

Everything that is built on this sacrificial impulse is anathema to woman. Here, says woman, is my child. I will not sacrifice him for God, or for the greatest good, or for these ten others. Let us find some other way. The devotion to "something beyond" that is revealed in traditional, masculine ethics is often devotion to deity, but sometimes it is devotion to principle. Recall the story of Manlius, a Roman commander who laid down harsh laws for the conduct of his legions. One of the first to disobey a rule about leaving camp to engage in individual combat was his own son. In compliance with the rules, Manlius ordered the execution of his son. A principle had been violated; for this violation, X must be executed. That "X" was replaced by "my son" gave Manlius no release from obedience to the principle. Why, then, did he not think concretely before establishing the rule? Why do men so often lay out their own clear paths to tragedy? The one-caring would want to think carefully about the establishment of rules and even more carefully about the prescription of penalties. Indeed, she would prefer to establish a climate of cooperative "we-ness" so that rules and penalties might be kept to a minimum. For her, the hypothetical is filled with real persons, and, thus, her rules are tempered a priori with thoughts of those in her inner circle. A stranger might,

then, be spared death because she would not visit death upon her own child. She does not, in whatever personal agony, inflict death upon her child in devotion to either principle or abstract entity.

History, legend, and biography might profitably be reinterpreted in light of feminine experience. Both men and women may participate in the "feminine" as I am developing it, but women have suffered acutely from its lack of application. They have felt and suffered and held fast, but they have—as a result—been accused of deficiency in abstract reasoning, of capricious behavior, of emotional reaction. Even in parenting, perhaps especially in parenting, the typical differences between concrete and abstract, between here-and-now and here-and-after, between flesh-and-blood and spirit, stand out in life and literature. In Robert Frost's "Home Burial," the conflict between man and woman in the loss of their child is dramatic. He tries to relieve his grief by speaking of ordinary things; she is convinced because of this that he feels no grief. He makes matters worse by saying:

What was it brought you up to think it the thing  
To take your mother-loss of a first child  
So inconsolably—in the face of love.  
You'd think his memory might be satisfied—<sup>9</sup>

What is the man doing here? He is not callous, and he has not escaped suffering, but he has not met his wife on the level of feeling. He accuses her of thinking "it the thing" to grieve deeply; he speaks of "mother-loss" and "first child," but he avoids the child's name and any concrete reference to him. He speaks of "his memory" but not of the small, warm body his wife nurtured. It is this difference in language and direction of reference that forms the difference between an ethic of caring and an ethic of principle.

Examples appear in real life as well as in poetry and fiction. Pearl Buck describes the difference in her own parents.

The fascinating thing about Andrew and Carrie was that from the two of them we always got entirely different stories about the same incident. They never saw the same things or felt the same way about anything, and it was as though they had not gone to the same place or seen the same people.<sup>10</sup>

Andrew was spirit—all heaven and abstraction; Carrie was completely human. He was a preacher, a missionary in China, and cared for the souls of his parishioners. Carrie cared for them as persons, ministering to their bodies and earthly minds. She had no preconceived notion of what her children should be; she did not cast them in the image of a catechism-produced God. Rather, she loved their warm bodies, cherished their laughter and childish pranks, nurtured their earthly courage and compassion for each other. The

greatest joy in her life came through her children, and her greatest suffering was incurred by their loss. When Andrew was seventy years old, some time after Carrie had died, he wrote the story of his life. The record fit into twenty-five pages. His daughter remarks:

It was the story of his soul, his unchanging soul. Once he mentioned the fact of his marriage to Carrie, his wife. Once he listed the children he had had with her, but in the listing he forgot entirely a little son who lived to be five years old and was Carrie's favorite child, and he made no comment on any of them.<sup>11</sup>

Yet all of her life Carrie was made to feel spiritually inferior to her husband and, as she lay near death, he expressed concern about her soul!

Today we are asked to believe that women's "lack of experience in the world" keeps them at an inferior stage in moral development. I am suggesting, to the contrary, that a powerful and coherent ethic and, indeed, a different sort of world may be built on the natural caring so familiar to women.

### Circles and Chains

We find ourselves at the center of concentric circles of caring. In the inner, intimate circle, we care because we love. In particularly trying situations we may act out of ethical sense even here. After all, sometimes we are tired, the other has behaved abominably, and our love is frayed. Then we remind ourselves of the other's location in our system of circles: He is (was) my friend; she is my child; he is my father. The engrossment remains, although its color changes, and we may vacillate between the once natural caring for other to growing concern for ourselves.

As we move outward in the circles, we encounter those for whom we have personal regard. Here, as in the more intimate circles, we are guided in what we do by at least three considerations: how we feel, what the other expects of us, and what the situational relationship requires of us. Persons in these circles do not, in the usual course of events, require from us what our families naturally demand, and the situations in which we find ourselves have, usually, their own rules of conduct. We are comfortable in these circles if we are in compliance with the rules of the game. Again, these rules do not compel us, but they have an instrumental force that is easily recognized. I listen with a certain ready appreciation to colleagues, and I respond in a polite, acceptable fashion. But I must not forget that the rules are only aids to smooth passage through unproblematic events. They protect and insulate me. They are a reflection of someone's sense of relatedness institutionalized in our culture. But they do not put me in touch; they do not guarantee the

relation itself. Thus rules will not be decisive for us in critical situations, but they will be acknowledged as economies of a sort. As such they will be even less important than the "illuminative maxims" described by Joseph Fletcher.<sup>12</sup> For us, the destructive role of rules and principles must be clarified and acknowledged.

Beyond the circles of proximate others are those I have not yet encountered. Some of these are linked to the inner circle by personal or formal relations. Out there is a young man who will be my daughter's husband; I am prepared to acknowledge the transitivity of my love. He enters my life with potential love. Out there, also, are future students; they are linked formally to those I already care for and they, too, enter my life potentially cared-for. Chains of caring are established, some linking unknown individuals to those already anchored in the inner circles and some forming whole new circles of potential caring. I am "prepared to care" through recognition of these chains.

But what of the stranger, one who comes to me without the bonds established in my chains of caring? Is there any sense in which I can be prepared to care for him? I can remain receptive. As in the beginning, I may recognize the internal "I must," that natural imperative that arises as I receive the other, but this becomes more and more difficult as my world grows more complex. I may be bombarded with stimuli that arouse the "I must," and I learn to reduce the load. As we have seen, a standard fashion of controlling what comes in is to rely on situational rules. These protect me. What, under normal circumstances, I must do for a colleague is different from what I must do for my child. I may come to rely almost completely on external rules and, if I do, I become detached from the very heart of morality: the sensibility that calls forth caring. In an important sense, the stranger has an enormous claim on me, because I do not know where he fits, what requests he has a formal right to make, or what personal needs he will pass on to me. I can meet him only in a state of wary anticipation and rusty grace, for my original innocent grace is gone and, aware of my finiteness, I fear a request I cannot meet without hardship. Indeed, the caring person, one who in this way is prepared to care, dreads the proximate stranger, for she cannot easily reject the claim he has on her. She would prefer that the stray cat not appear at the back door—or the stray teenager at the front. But if either presents himself, he must be received not by formula but as individual.

The strain on one who would care can be great. Literature is filled with descriptions of encounters of this sort: the legitimate dread of the one-caring and the ultimate acceptance or rejection of the internal "I must." One thinks of John Steinbeck's Carl Tiffin and Mr. Gianno in *The Red Pony*.<sup>13</sup> In defiance of a loud and insistent "I must," Tiffin diminishes his ethical ideal and turns the old man away. In contrast, Robert Frost has the farm wife,

Mary, express the one-caring as she accepts the "hired man" into her home:

Yes, what else but home? It all depends on what you mean by home.  
Of course he's nothing to us, any more  
Than was the hound that came a stranger to us  
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail.  
Home is the place where, when you have to go there,  
They have to take you in.<sup>14</sup>

Both imperatives expressed here, the "have to's" of the one-caring and the cared-for, are internal imperatives. An observer can see alternatives clearly, but the "I must" suggests itself as binding upon the one in whom it occurs. We are both free and bound in our circles and chains.

#### Notes

1. Carol Gilligan cites D. McClelland as interpreting the myth as a description of the feminine attitude toward power. See Gilligan, "Woman's Place in Man's Life Cycle," *Harvard Educational Review* 49 (1979), 445.
2. Thomas Bulfinch, *Mythology: The Age of Fable* (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1962), p. 86.
3. The legend of Ceres has been variously interpreted. The ancient myth clearly referred to the conferral of special gifts on young males by creative and powerful female figures. In this sense, we find a long-standing tradition for the interpretation of Ceres as one-caring, bestowing the gifts of competence and usefulness on her protégés. See Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955). On p. 321, Neumann states: "This investiture is not an 'agricultural' rite, although in the earliest primordial age it was probably bound up with such a rite. In the mysteries at least, it has a far more profound significance. It is the investiture of the male with his chthonic and spiritual fecundating function, which is transmitted to him by woman."
4. See the account in Bulfinch, *Mythology: The Age of Fable*.
5. For a fascinating account of the dark and light in feminine thinking and legend, see M. Esther Harding, *Woman's Mysteries* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1971).
6. See Lawrence Kohlberg and R. Kramer, "Continuities and Discontinuities in Childhood and Moral Development," *Human Development* (1969), 93-120.
7. Genesis 22: 9, 10.
8. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, transl. Walter Lowrie (Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 71.
9. Robert Frost, "Home Burial," in *The Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1949), p. 71.

10. Pearl S. Buck, *Fighting Angel* (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1964), p. 38.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
12. Joseph Fletcher, *Situational Ethics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966).
13. John Steinbeck, *The Red Pony* (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1945).
14. Robert Frost, "The Death of the Hired Man," *The Complete Poems of Robert Frost*, p. 53.