

A dark, starry night sky with a green aurora borealis over a mountain range. The mountains are dark and silhouetted against the sky. The text "Feminist Ethics" is written in white, sans-serif font across the middle of the image.

Feminist Ethics

Various Thinkers on Women

- ▶ Aristotle: "as regards to the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject".
- ▶ Neo- Confucian sayings:
 - ▶ " Man is honored for strength; a woman is beautiful on account of her gentleness."
 - ▶ "Women are to be led and to follow others."

Various Thinkers on Women

- ▶ Kant: “There are sciences which require a sharp mind, much reflection, and profundity. These are for the male sex. On the other hand there are sciences that require wit and a kind of feeling, and these are proper for women.”

Various Thinkers on Women

- ▶ Rousseau said, “Women do wrong to complain of the inequality of man-made laws; this inequality is not of man’s making, or at any rate it is not the result of mere prejudice, but of reason.”

Various Thinkers on Women

- ▶ Bentham the feminist:
 - ▶ “When both sexes are meant to be intended, employ not the word man– but the word person”
 - ▶ “Why exclude the whole female sex from all participation in the constitutive power? Because the prepossession against their admission is at present too general, and too intense, to afford any chance in favour of a proposal for their admission”.

Various Thinkers on Women

- ▶ Mill the feminist: “I consider it presumption in anyone to pretend to decide what women are or are not, can or cannot be, by natural constitution. They have always hitherto been kept . . . in so unnatural a state . . . if women’s nature were left to choose its direction as freely as men’s, and if no artificial bent were attempted to be given to it except that required by the conditions of human society, and given to both sexes alike, there would be any material difference, or perhaps any difference at all, in the character and capacities which would unfold themselves.”

▶ — John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*

Why Feminists Ethics?

- ▶ The most prominent authors and supporters of the ethical theories that we have considered so far have one thing in common. They are all men.
- ▶ Most of them lived in societies that systematically discriminated against women.
- ▶ These thinkers are bound to reflect some of the common assumptions of their times.

Why Feminists Ethics?

- ▶ What do you think?
- ▶ Can we separate a philosophical or ethical system, and its principals from the prejudicial beliefs and thoughts of its founders?
- ▶ If Aristotle believed women were inferior, might his philosophy still be correct? Or do we need to start over?

Why Feminists Ethics?

- ▶ Feminist ethics seeks to remedy the fact that past thinkers were sexist and the fact that female voices were ignored.
- ▶ Feminist ethics is not a single theory or even a singular general approach but it can be defined by four central claims:

Feminists Ethics

1. Women are the moral equals of men; views that justify the subordination of women are mistaken.

2. The experiences of women deserve our respect and are vital to a full and accurate understanding of morality.

Feminists Ethics

3. Traits that have traditionally been associated with women— empathy, sympathy, caring, altruism, mercy, compassion—are at least as morally important as traits traditionally considered masculine, such as competitiveness, independence, demanding one's fair share, a readiness to resort to violence, and the insistence on personal honor.

Feminists Ethics

4. Ways of moral reasoning that emphasize cooperation, flexibility, openness to competing ideas, and a connectedness to family and friends, are often superior to what traditionally have been thought of as masculine ways of reasoning: emphasizing impartiality, abstraction, and strict adherence to rules.

Two cautionary notes

- ▶ First, feminist ethics does not argue that every woman is compassionate and caring, or that every man is aggressive and competitive.
- ▶ These are generalizations that hold only to some extent and allow for many exceptions.

Two cautionary notes

- ▶ Second, when we speak of traditionally masculine and feminine traits, we mean just that. These are features that our cultures have long associated with men and with women, respectively.
- ▶ But there is no claim that such traits are innate.
 - ▶ Many characteristics we associate with certain groups are a by-product of social influences.
 - ▶ Stereotypes often fail to have any basis in biological fact; rather, they often result from cultural conditioning.

Development of a Feminist Ethics

- ▶ Feminist ethics really came into its own in the 1980s. Before that, scattered writings by feminist philosophers had been appearing for at least two centuries.
- ▶ But in 1982, Harvard psychologist Carol Gilligan published the book “In a Different Voice.” This book launched a new movement in philosophical thinking.

Development of a Feminist Ethics

- ▶ Gilligan argued that women think and experience the world differently from men.
- ▶ This was not news—psychologists had long agreed on this point. The difference, though, was that Gilligan rejected the mainstream views that saw women's thinking as inferior to that of men.

Before Gilligan

- ▶ One of the most influential models of moral thinking in the 1970s was put forth by Lawrence Kohlberg, a teacher and colleague of Gilligan's.
- ▶ Kohlberg defended the idea that there are six stages of moral development.
 - ▶ At the earliest stage, as children, we see moral rules only as potential threats, and we behave well only out of fear of punishment.
 - ▶ As we grow, we view morality (at Kohlberg's third stage) as depending on our social roles and on our relations. Moral demands come from these roles and relationships; the point of morality is to reinforce them.
 - ▶ Ultimately, at the sixth and highest stage, we think of morality as requiring obedience to abstract rules of impartial justice. These rules require us to see our situation dispassionately. They assign everyone equal importance. These rules are universal, and do not depend on, or refer to, the particulars of our character or our situation.

Kohlberg's stages

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Carol Gilligan's Critique

- ▶ Gilligan noted that many women fare poorly on Kohlberg's scale—they never advance beyond the third stage which emphasizes social roles and relationships as the basis for moral decision making.
- ▶ She argued that women brought an attitude of care and sympathy to their decision making, an attention to the concrete particulars of the cases with which they were confronted.
- ▶ She argued that women rarely appealed to abstract moral principles.

Carol Gilligan's Critique

- ▶ Gilligan further argued that often women did not regard “justice” as all-important. Rather, they were partial to certain people— family members, friends—rather than seeking to give everyone the same degree of concern.
- ▶ In deciding what to do, women sought compromise where possible, and did not necessarily regard moral rules as absolute.

Gilligan's Critique

- ▶ Gilligan argued that women often tried to “split the difference” in cases of conflict and showed greater respect for views that differed from their own than men.
- ▶ They were inclined to voice their views with hesitation and humility, rather than with great confidence and assurance.
- ▶ She didn't see women as not achieving the highest levels of ethics. Rather she saw Kohlberg's model as flawed.

Gilligan's Argument

- ▶ Gilligan did not argue that all women thought in these ways. Nor did she claim that women, by nature, were attracted to these ways of thinking.
- ▶ She believed that she identified a very strong tendency among the women she studied to react to cases of moral conflict in way very different from that of the men she interviewed and argued that this was not evidence of the moral immaturity of these women.
- ▶ She believed this indicated the failure of Kohlberg's six-stage model which emphasized rules-based moral reasoning over other kinds.

Gilligan's Argument

- ▶ Gilligan is a psychologist, not a moral philosopher. So she saw herself as being a descriptivist rather than a prescriptivist. She wasn't making a normative argument but rather an empirical one.
- ▶ Others took up challenging the prevailing ethical wisdom on a number of fronts.

A blurred office desk scene. In the center, a laptop is open. To its left is a white mug with a black lid. In the foreground, a pair of glasses rests on a stack of papers. To the right of the glasses is a black pen. The background is out of focus, showing what appears to be a window with blinds. The text "Break time" is overlaid in white on the left side of the image.

Break time

A new perspective

- ▶ The Ethical systems we talked about so far emphasized personal freedom, decision-making and autonomy.
- ▶ But what happens when someone does not have control over important aspects of their life or has dependence and connectedness to others?
- ▶ These are all features of the moral life highlighted by feminist ethics.

A new perspective

- ▶ Feminists ethics concerns what we ought to do with our lives when constrained by (1) the choices we can realistically make and (2) recognizing that those we care about are more important to us than others.
- ▶ Once we really appreciate how connected we are to others and that we value some more than others, the moral philosophies that are based on ideals of self-interest or full autonomy may become less appealing.

The Ethics of Care

- ▶ Standard ethical theories see morality as primarily about the pursuit of self-interest (egoism), doing justice (Kantianism), seeking mutual benefit (contractarianism), or impartial benevolence (utilitarianism).
- ▶ Many feminists point to care—especially a mother's care—as the best model of moral relations to base an ethical system on.
- ▶ This maternal model has generated is called an **ethic of care**.

What do you think?

- ▶ Do family and mother child relationships operate under any of the ethical systems we have discussed so far?
- ▶ Is universalizing aspects of that familiar relationship something we should aim for?

Ethics of Care Differs from Other Ethical Theories

- ▶ Mothers often sacrifice their own interests in order to advance those of their children.
- ▶ Unlike Kantianism, an ethics of care does not place supreme importance on justice or rule following. Matters of justice are not entirely absent from parent-child relations, but they are certainly not the primary focus.
- ▶ Parents don't care for their kids because of some sort of categorical imperative.

Ethics of Care Differs from Other Ethical Theories

- ▶ Contractarian theories see the authors of the moral law as indifferent to the needs of others, willing to make sacrifices for them only if there is a reasonable chance of being compensated in return.
 - ▶ Good parents don't see things that way. A mother's care is not conditional on her child's obedience to a set of mutually beneficial rules. The rational pursuit of self-interest is not the ultimate goal.
- ▶ And contrary to utilitarian demands for impartial benevolence, loving parents are much more concerned about their own children than about other people's kids.

Ethics of Care

- ▶ Care is an emotion, or a network of reinforcing emotions that involve some combination of sympathy, empathy, sensitivity, and love. Relevant thoughts and feelings focus on the wants and needs of those being cared for.
- ▶ Care helps us know what others need—parents often understand what their own child needs much better than anyone else. And care helps to motivate us to tend to those needs, even when we are exhausted, begrudging, or angry.

Ethics of Care

- ▶ Feminist philosophers argue that care and its associated emotions are central to our motivation to act morally.
- ▶ Those who defend an ethics of care sometimes see themselves as working within a virtue ethics tradition.
- ▶ So if your mom asks you to call your grandmother and you do so begrudgingly, you've done the right thing, but in the wrong manner and are therefore not acting "virtuously"—not displaying an appropriate level of care.

Ethics of Care and Universal Morality

- ▶ Most traditional ethical theories offer us one supreme moral rule that determines the morality of all actions.
- ▶ Thus, who you are, and the context you are acting in does not matter for most ethical theories.
- ▶ Feminist ethics rejects this picture and argue that there is no universal morality: no formula for determining moral duties *ex ante*.
- ▶ Instead, morality is complicated and messy.

FILOSOFIX

Philosophy animates

Ethics of Care and Universal Morality

- ▶ Feminist philosophers say that while there is often a right thing to do, we can't know what it is simply by rule following.
- ▶ Rather, because moral obligations are often relationship dependent they can conflict with one another.

Ethics of Care and Universal Morality

- ▶ Suppose you lie to your spouse so that you don't hurt his feelings? Is lying right or wrong in that case?
- ▶ Suppose you are a doctor lying to a patient
- ▶ Suppose a friend is lying to another friend?
- ▶ Should the sole determination of the wrongness of a lie be a utilitarian calculus?
- ▶ Is it always wrong as Kant argues?
- ▶ Or do your obligations to tell the truth depend on the nature of your relationship and the context of the lie?

Ethics of Care and Universal Morality

- ▶ One reason philosophers have argued for universal ethical systems is because the more general and abstract the rule, the less likely it is to include bias.
- ▶ A rule that applies only to certain people or to certain situations may incorporate subjective prejudices instead of treating human beings as equals.

Ethics of Care and Universal Morality

- ▶ Feminists argue that these ethical systems do not reflect reality. We do favor our loved ones.
- ▶ Feminist ethicists resist the push to base ethical systems on single general rules.
- ▶ They argue life is more complicated than that.
- ▶ So a duty of care ethics rejects Rawls's attempt to strip away all concrete, particular knowledge of who we are when determining the principles of justice and reject the utilitarian emphasis on impartiality.

Ethics of Care

- ▶ An ethic of care seeks to replace values of competition with values of cooperation.
- ▶ A healthy mother-child relationship is not a competitive one. It does not set the interests of parents against their children. It is marked by kindness and a willingness to sacrifice for one another.
- ▶ This is in many ways is similar to Eastern collectivists values or Confucian emphasis on an individual's role in society.

Challenges for Feminist Ethics

1. While certain ethical systems may be overly abstract and universal, deemphasizing our moral duties to those we don't know can also be a bad thing.
2. A clearer explanation of the role of sympathy, empathy and emotions is needed before an ethical system that acknowledges them can be applied.

Challenges for Feminist Ethics

3. Allowing feelings to play a role in decision-making appears to be inviting prejudice or bias into decision-making.
4. Acknowledging that ethical rules depend on relationships and circumstances is also acknowledging that there are no clear rules to follow.

Challenges for Feminist Ethics

5. Emphasizing cooperation can lead to complacency with a bad or authoritarian regime. Sometimes fighting the system is the only way to change it for the better.
6. Although there is room to incorporate feelings and relationships into ethical systems, wholly eliminating claims of universal rights does not seem to be an ideal route to justice.

Mountain Terrorist Exercise

You are in a remote mountain village. A group of terrorists has lined up 20 people from the village; they plan on shooting them for collaborating with the enemy. Since you are not from the village, you will not be killed. Taking advantage of your position, you plead with the terrorists not to carry out their plan. Finally, you convince the leader that it is not necessary to kill all 20. He takes a gun, empties it of all its bullets except one, and then hands it to you. He has decided to kill only one villager to set an example to the rest. As an honored guest and outsider, you will decide who will be killed, and you will carry out the deed. The terrorists conclude with a warning; if you refuse to kill the villager, then they will revert back to the original plan of killing all 20. And if you try any “funny business,” they will kill the 20 villagers and then kill you. What should you do?