ETHICS: TOWARDS A FEMINIST APPROACH

Susan Sherwin

En appliquant une perspective féministe à l'étude traditionnellement masculine de l'éthique, le besoin d'une démarche toute à fait différente dans le domaine devient très évident. Deux théories patriarcales dominent encore la pensée des moralistes contemporains – l'utilitarisme, et la théorie de Kant. Les deux se basent sur des idées abstraites; elles ne parviennent pas à intégrer ce que nous ressentons l'une pour l'autre, avec les contextes sociaux dans lesquels nous fonctionnons. Dans son livre influent In A Different Voice, *Carol Gilligan – féministe et éducatrice américaine – fait la distinction entre* l'éthique des droits *du mâle et* l'éthique des soins *de la femelle. Dans cet article, Susan Sherwin examine la perspective de Gilligan en relation avec notre approche du raisonnement moral.*

Ethics, or moral theory, is the field of study concerned with identifying and explaining moral obligations. The most widely-accepted theories all reflect a distinct male bias. Because they do not address the moral experience of women they are not acceptable in their current form. A new sort of moral theory is necessary, one which offers guidance in the many difficult cases we all encounter in which our moral intuitions cannot be relied upon. Feminist thought offers promise as a source for developing an alternative to patriarchal moral theories.

To understand the masculinist bias of the traditional theories, I will examine the two major theories that retain a dominant position among contemporary moral philosophers: Utilitarianism and Kantianism. In spite of their widely-discussed differences, they share some significant similarities. Both take the same methodological principle as fundamental – a principle which is disturbing to women. Both take their task to be evaluating action according to the most abstract principle available. They assume that actions can be judged formally, apart from the many details of their context, as if the action could be done equally by any agent. In its most simplified form, Utilitarianism tells us always to act in ways that produce the greatest benefit and least harm. Kantian theory tells us to act in accordance with rules we can will to be universal, and specifically to refrain from treating persons merely as means or objects. Neither theory tells us to think about the relationship we have with the person concerned and our related feelings; rather, both agree that this would be improper (although for Utilitarians, it may be of indirect significance).

Such a purely abstract approach clearly has some important advantages, for it stresses the importance of counting equally the interests of every person. It seeks a clear and unbiased decision-making procedure for resolving moral questions, a goal which seems central to our intuitions about justice and fairness. In practice, however, these theories have done little to assure women of fair treatment: it was Kant, after all, who added "Of course, I exclude women, children and idiots," in his *Principles of Justice*. Nor does the abstract approach allow room for the feelings that attach to decision-making. In directing our moral concerns to the common humanity of each person, these theories require us to disregard the *special* concern we have for those we care deeply about. Theories such as these, which view persons in terms of their most abstract properties without accounting for their social relations, promote a world view in which people are thought of as isolated, independent, inter-changeable atoms. Social interaction is seen as the bumping of one atom against another, and is treated as an aberration in need of explanation.

What is missing from this approach is a sense of recognition and caring for other persons. Personal and emotional bonds ought to be recognized as morally significant from a moral point of view. Further, those qualities which are valued in the standard theories need to be re-interpreted to reflect the social context in which they occur. Autonomy, for example, should not be equated with independence and freedom from social responsibility. It should be seen as a mode of conduct within relationships and within a community.

In her book on moral reasoning, *In a Different Voice*, psychologist Carol Gilligan has identified two different kinds of reasoning which subjects use when confronted with a moral dilemma.[1] One approach is described as *an ethics of rights*. Moral dilemmas are aproached as problems in logic to be addressed by the most abstract, general principle available. The self, and hence any person, is defined through separation, to be evaluated by some abstract criterion of perfection. Within this model, autonomy is of paramount value; it is defined in terms of the individual's separation from, rather than connection with others. Morality involves those obligations on the self that limit one's freedom and aggression, and the hard questions have to do with the conflicts of rights which occur when two isolated person/atoms happen to touch up against one another.

It is this conception that the Kantian and Utilitarian moral theories presume. Both are explicitly impersonal: they regard persons solely in terms of some abstract common property (either their sentience or their rationality). Both reflect a deeply individualistic world view in which the major moral problems are viewed as arising from conflicts of interest between persons presumed to be equal in status, power, and responsibility.

But Gilligan also identifies a different approach to moral decision-making, *an ethics of care* in which one looks at relationships when making moral decisions. Connections among people are perceived as important. Whether or not there is a contract for reciprocity, moral duties require us not to hurt others and to exercise care. Those who appeal to an ethics of care think in terms of *responsibilities* rather than *rights* in making moral decisions. Moral dilemmas, viewed as conflicts of responsibilities, require detailed knowledge of the social context.

Gilligan found that there were clear gender differences in moral reasoning. Males tend to appeal to an ethics of rights, while females employ an ethics of care. As Virginia Woolf said in *A Room of One's Own*, "It is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex." She added, "it is the masculine values that

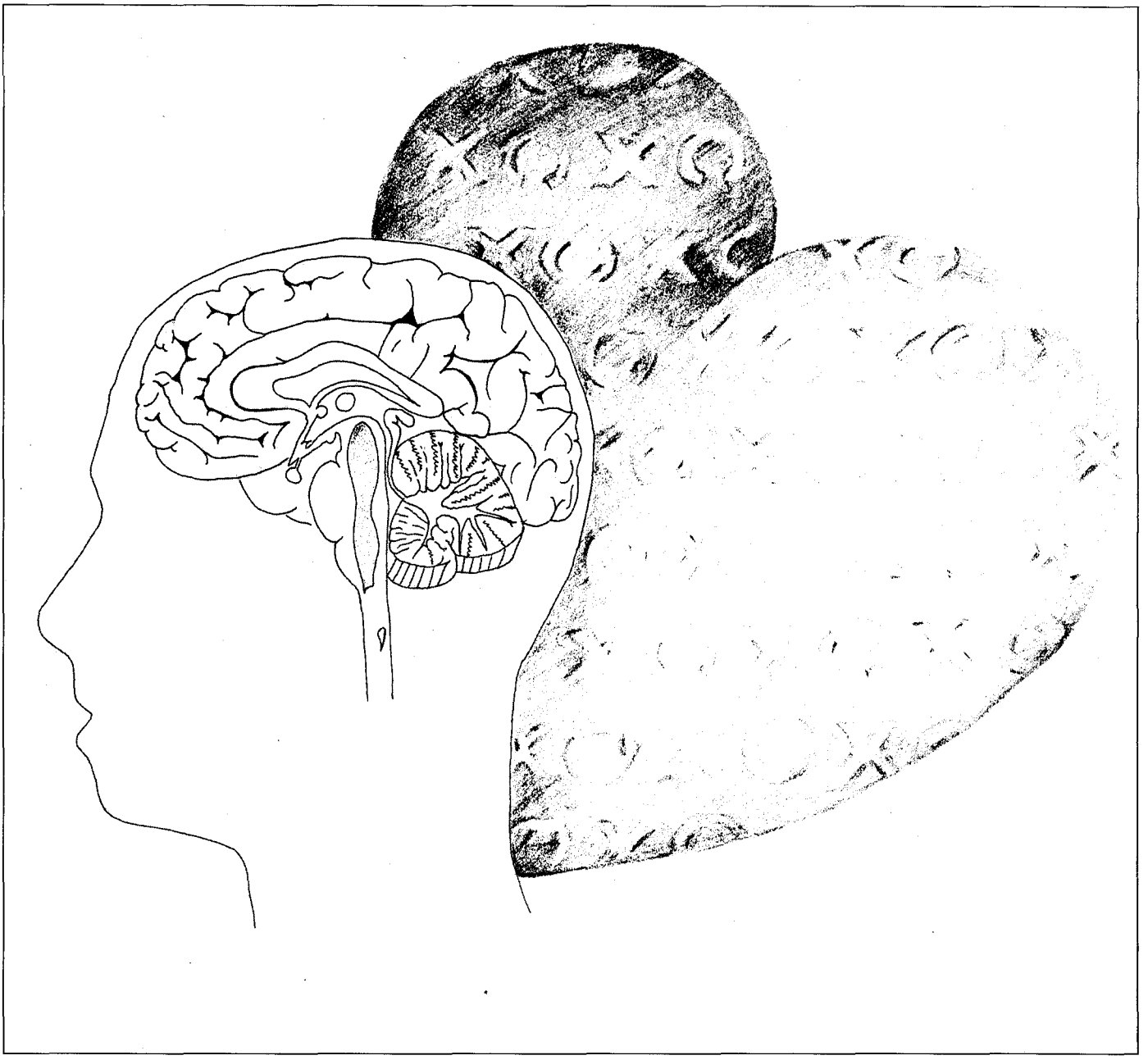

Illustration: Jane Northey

prevail." The development of moral theory reflects that ethics has been the domain of male philosophers: it has refused to include discussion of an ethics of care.

Surely it is time for women to reclaim moral theory. We must consider what sort of theory we need to account for our moral intuitions and to give guidance on the hard cases as we perceive them – those cases in which we perceive a conflict of responsibilities. We need a moral theory that includes the social context, relations, and loyalties which shape our responsibilities. The theory should acknowledge duties which derive from emotions, for love, friendship, shared oppression, and even hate are all grounds for one's behaving differently towards different persons – a fact that an ethics of rights is hard pressed to explain.

Under an ethics of rights, morality is an instrument for distancing oneself from others and limiting the claims others can make on one. In an ethics of care, differences between persons are assumed and our responsibility to each other depends upon particular features. Dependence and interdependence are accepted as features of a connected society. Such relationships are not always a product of contract or choice, and in most cases they are not expected to be permanent; it is recognized that persons do go through periods of dependency and those who can be responsible to them are responsible whether they choose to be or not. Moral and social theory should reflect the fact that persons are not all equal in their moral responsibilities or capacities.

What will such a moral theory say? We can get some indication by looking at the alternative values underlying feminist critiques of existing social patterns.

Common to all feminist writing is a critique of patriarchy, that is, of a society based on male domination. Contrary to popular belief, most feminists are not interested in simply reordering the prevailing dominant/subordinate power structure of society. Human beings are inherently social, relationships are part of the very conception of a person, and rationality is not defined purely in terms

of self-interest. Most feminists thinkers reject the political conception that identifies a "private sphere" in which individuals act independently according to their private preference: all persons are interconnected and there is no such thing as a purely private act.

From this perspective, *collective* actions are primary. Ethics, then, must begin with a social moral theory. Only then will we be in a position to think about what the individual's personal responsibility might be. Such a theory will acknowledge our personal relationships and will allow individuals to make moral decisons as women intuitively do, by taking seriously the bonds of personal concern people have for others. It will give explicit value to the virtues of women – those associated with nurturing and care – and to co-operation and avoidance of vicious competition (where having the other person lose is an essential requirement to satisfaction). The values central to an ethics of rights will have a place, but not an overriding force. Freedom, justice, and rationality will still be valued. The analytic, heirarchical structures that underlie relations based on power and domination will be counterbalanced by a concern with holistic, democratic, integrated collective structures. Mutuality and an avoidance of harm will be valued as highly as self-interest.

An ethics devised with female moral intuitions in mind will not only include different values and re-order some of the older ones: it will also reflect a different methodology. The paradigm for moral decision making will involve a "thought experiment" that places the decision-maker as close as possible to the interests at stake, so that the concerns of those affected can be genuinely *felt*, not merely summoned in some abstract, remote fashion. The traditional feminine virtue of altruism or concern for others is to be balanced by a respect for one's own interests: responsibility to self is also acknowledged as significant. We must guard against the vice of self-sacrifice which women traditionally have been encouraged to develop.

Though the ethics of care will be developed through a recognition of women's experience in moral decision-making situations, it is not meant to be an ethics solely for the use of women. It is my belief that it is the most promising direction to pursue in developing a general theory of ethics for all persons.

[1]Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

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