

CONCERNING FEMININE AND FEMINITE APPROACHES TO ETHICS

BY

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Abstract

The feminine and the feminine approaches to ethics differ in their respective ontology, epistemology and political theory. Yet, advocates of both perspectives remain self-described ‘feminists’—persons committed to furthering the interests of women. In this thesis the differences between the feminine and feminine approaches are articulated and it is argued that the feminine approach, rather than the feminine, serves best to represent the interests of women. Further, the feminine approach is critiqued as being a perspective that is too focused on group specific political concerns to qualify as an ethic.

In support of the feminine approach, it is suggested that concerns and interests that are understood to be of particular interest to women are in fact matters that ought to be perceived as central concerns for the whole of society. The ontological and epistemological stance of the feminine approach to ethics is defined by the claim that women are enlightened in virtue of their distinct female experience. Based on this claim the feminine approach is enabled to develop an ‘ethic of care’—which not only serves as a critique of male bias in traditional moral theory but also provides an alternative standard by which to evaluate and determine what constitutes the moral act.

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Introduction

Having entered the public realm, women have challenged traditional ethical theory, developing two distinct approaches that constitute the generally accepted categories of feminine and feminist approaches to ethics. Betty Sichel defines these different approaches to ethical theory in the following passage:

“Feminine” at present refers to the search for women’s unique voice and most often, the advocacy of an ethic of care that includes nurturance, care, compassion, and networks of communication. “Feminist” refers to those theorists, whether liberal or radical or other orientation, who argue against patriarchal domination, for equal rights, a just and fair distribution of scarce resources, etc.¹

In response to the question as to which of the approaches better attends to the interests of women, I suggest that a feminine approach to ethics serves best to challenge the prevailing epistemic attitude, to include the moral reasoning of women in ethics, and to give women a voice in devising societal agreement. This is to be contrasted with the feminist approach to ethics, which I shall argue, remains primarily a politics that contributes to the devaluation of women and thereby commits future societies to the exclusion of the moral reasoning of

¹Betty A. Sichel, “Different Strains and Stands: Feminist Contributions to Ethical Theory,” *Newsletter on Feminism* 90, no. 2 (Winter 1991): 90.

women.

Thinkers advocating the 'feminist' approach to ethics and those supporting the 'feminine' approach are both properly understood as 'feminists' in a general sense. The term 'feminist' in this general sense holds a different meaning than it does when employed in reference to an approach to ethics. For this reason I will employ the term '*feminite*' when referring to 'feminist' approaches to ethics.

Chapter One

The Ontological and Epistemological Conditions for Feminine and Feminite Approaches to Ethics

Traditional theories of knowledge were constructed to attain the certainty of an *objective* truth. Feminist thinkers claim that such epistemologies are the result of an androcentric method that involves the excessive detachment of subject from object in the construction of knowledge. They argue that these epistemologies sacrifice too much for the sake of impartiality and thus fail to take into account epistemically relevant social factors—such as the sex of the knower.

Feminist thinkers are faced with the difficult task of developing a theory which can both attribute epistemic import to women's experience and retain an adequate measure of objectivity. There are, to be sure, some feminists who reject outright the notion of objectivity as a male construct designed to enslave women and who argue that the only cognitive paradigms that can accommodate the emancipation of women are those created and maintained exclusively by women.² Their views are separatist in orientation and are vulnerable to the charge of

²Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 3–4.

relativism insofar as they tend to advocate epistemic exclusivity based on gender and sexual orientation.

While most feminist thinkers consider the notion of an objective viewpoint and conventional epistemology overall to be epistemically oppressive for women, they maintain that women's ways of knowing ought to serve to critique mainstream epistemology from within.³

Lorraine Code explains in part how traditional epistemologies can be oppressive for women in the following passage:

Autonomy and rationality are not the gender neutral traits many philosophers have assumed. In short, dichotomously polarized terms are absolute and mutually exclusive opposites. Reason has no part of emotion, cognitive autonomy excludes all forms of dependence, both on other people and on the knower's own sensory, bodily apparatus. Entry into the domain of Reason requires a denial of epistemic value to affectivity in all of its forms, to cognitive interdependence, and to the particularities of experience, bodily existence, and practical activities.⁴

As regards the claim that feminists ought to critique mainstream epistemology from within, Code suggests that “. . . doing so avoids the pitfall of advocating a separate feminine epistemology, with its inevitable privatization, ghettoisation, and consequent devaluation.”⁵ Further,

³Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know: Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 122.

⁴Code, 120–121.

⁵Code, 122.

Code argues that traditional epistemologies are faced with many critical movements “[which] have aims that are consonant, to an extent, with feminist critical aims. Hence there is no conceptual value in rejecting them for their androcentric origins, only to reinvent them as though for the first time.”⁶

One of the central difficulties facing feminist thinkers involves conceptions of the female identity. These conceptions are various and tend to manifest crucial distinctions in feminist epistemic positions. In this chapter, I offer a critical evaluation of the most sustainable approaches to resolving the difficulties facing feminist epistemological theory. Further, I shall argue that the inclusion of women’s experience in the construction of knowledge can be provided for by an epistemic method rooted in intersubjectivity coupled with a feminine ontology.

In an attempt to articulate a feminine epistemic perspective, Lorraine Code advocates a “mitigated relativism” that is “constrained by objectivity and a commitment to realism . . . capable of taking subjectivity, accountability, and a range of perspectives seriously into account by refusing the tyranny of ideal objectivity, universality, and gender neutrality.”⁷ Code’s passage seems to be depicting an epistemic

⁶Code, 122.

⁷Code, 251.

position grounded on intersubjectivity—an epistemology which prescribes a construction of knowledge conditioned by the inclusion of a range of perspectives.

This sort of *social* construction of knowledge is characterized by a dialogue that produces an understanding enriched by the contribution of its participants. This could be illustrated by an *allegory of the elephant*, in which blind men consult one another to produce cooperatively an understanding of reality that involves the perspectives of all.

Intersubjectivity, which takes into account various perspectives, is of fundamental importance to Code's epistemic view. In her text, *What Can She Know?*, Code refers to intersubjectivity in relation to what she terms "feminine associations."⁸ While Code is hesitant to ascribe qualities to gender, she does imply that intersubjectivity (cooperative dialogue) is characteristically expressed by women.

The intersubjective nature of Code's social construction of knowledge fosters what she terms a "mitigated relativism." Code qualifies her conception, stating that ". . . posing the question 'Who is S?'—that is, 'Who is the knowing subject?'—does indeed count as a move in the direction of relativism, and my intention in posing it is to suggest

⁸Code, 121.

that the answer has epistemological import.”⁹

Having rejected the “ideal objectivity” of conventional epistemologies that seek to establish universal criteria to evaluate truth, Code advocates a relativism that “keeps open a range of interpretive possibilities.”¹⁰ While Code admits that “relativism may threaten to slide into subjectivism,” she maintains that the integrity of relativism is preserved by taking “many perspectives into account.”¹¹ In other words, Code proposes that epistemology be grounded on an ongoing intersubjective dialogue.

The critical difficulty with Code’s proposal is that it fails to describe the basis upon which *judgment* is made. While “many perspectives” can extend experience and understanding in the construction of knowledge, the knower is also required to make judgments and eventually decisions.

In rendering these judgments and decisions, the knower inevitably expresses the extent to which she is in either agreement or disagreement with the views of others. If, in dialogue concerning the construction of knowledge, “many perspectives” remain many, then the knowledge claims arising from such dialogue fall prey to subjectivism. Therefore,

⁹Code, 3.

¹⁰Code, 3.

¹¹Code, 3.

Code's mitigated relativism needs more than open dialogue to be differentiated from subjectivism.

Taking many perspectives into account surely does enhance the potential for understanding. Yet, the knower upon making a judgment is required to discard some perspectives while adopting and incorporating others into her own view. For most, this process is the way in which we come to know. The mere fact that knowledge is a social construct is contingent upon a *level of agreement*, just as language is dependent upon a *level of shared meaning*. This claim is not to suggest that the epistemic integrity of a perspective be supported by mere popularity, but rather that in the learning process, the knower inevitably comes to agree with some perspectives, just as she comes to disagree with others.

What Code's mitigated relativism describes is only a step in the learning process—a step that *precedes* judgment and decision in a social construction of knowledge. An intersubjective foundation, namely the taking into account of many perspectives for the construction of knowledge, can admit social factors such as gender, class, and race as epistemically relevant. However, without a level of agreement, there can be no social construction of knowledge; all that would otherwise exist is mere discussion, in which the differing perspectives of various individuals or groups never yield epistemic objectivity.

In Code's view, epistemology has a distinct political dynamic. She believes that "epistemic power is not readily won by 'underclass' persons."¹² Code's politicization of epistemology suggests that seeking agreement in a social construction of knowledge ought to be avoided, as it has the potential to result in the devaluation of the feminist perspective. In other words, Code's inclusion of a 'power' dynamic in the construction of knowledge suggests that she is wary of epistemology which seeks agreement, as this may amount to a silencing of the feminist voice. Code's notion of 'epistemic power' can be likened to political power, or economic power, her suggestion being that social constructions of knowledge can be disproportionately influenced by dominant groups.

While there is truth in the claim that political interest does infiltrate epistemologies, it is not at all clear that such corruption ought to be propagated by those seeking to construct social theories of knowledge. The question—who is S?—does have epistemic import in that the identity of S includes a distinct set of experiences that can serve to enhance understanding. The task facing those interested in social constructions of knowledge is to include such distinct experiences while refraining from politicizing epistemology—in other words, for women to contribute to epistemological discussion the distinctiveness of their

¹²Code, 185.

experience without being confined to the bias such experience may condition.

Complications involved with attempting to include distinct identity-forming experiences while refraining from politicizing epistemology hinge on the capacity to overcome bias. The knower must first recognize her own bias and the way in which it limits further understanding. In so doing, the knower is enabled to displace herself and adopt a different cognitive vantage-point. This displacement is to be of position and not identity; the knower is to view from the position *of* another, not *as* another (since the knower's adoption of an other's identity would constitute a loss of intersubjectivity).

In my view, the reflexivity required in coming to understand divergent perspectives is ultimately dependent upon the knower's *good will*. At its best, an expression of 'goodwill' amounts to the ability to think reflexively—to overcome bias, to hear, to understand, and to come to know. To deny humans this capacity is to deny outright social constructions of knowledge. Laura Sells makes this point from a political perspective. She reluctantly concedes that "if white feminists can and must think from [the perspectives of] the lives of women of colour, then we must also accept that men can think from women's lives—or else we

deny the possibility of revolution and change.”¹³

Further complications involved with asking the question—who is S?— have to do with possible responses to the question. Some feminists claim that if S is female, then S is essentially feminine and that women’s ways of knowing involve predominately female cognitive traits which ought to be valued in epistemic considerations. Others, such as Code, argue that such essentialist positions amount to a misrepresentation of the female identity, which contributes to the oppression and exploitation of women as caregivers in the private sphere. This disagreement among feminists illustrates that while most would agree that asking “who is S?” has epistemic import, there remains discord among feminists with regard to the identity of the ‘S’ that is to represent women.

Some feminist thinkers who attempt to revalue stereotypical feminine ways of knowing advocate incorporating women’s experiences into epistemologies that are associated with stereotypical masculine modes of thought.¹⁴ Such attempts can be understood as being constitutive of a feminine approach to epistemology, as they tend to ascribe to a feminine identity. In contrast, feminine approaches to

¹³Laura Sells, “Feminist Epistemology: Rethinking the Dualisms of Atomic Knowledge,” *Hypatia* vol. 8, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 207.

¹⁴Code, 55.

epistemology reject this feminine essentialism and maintain that feminists must remain mindful of the role of political power in the construction of theories of knowledge.

Code's epistemic position is illustrative of the feminine approach. She argues that female essentialism "underpins the doctrine of complementarity, of women's relegation and confinement to a 'private' realm and of their potential and often actual exploitation as caregivers and nurturers."¹⁵ Code critiques female essentialism as being based on unsupported empirical claims and cites studies of child-raising practices in support of her critique. She argues that what these studies show is that the gender associations upon which female essentialism is based are "derived from a statistically small segment of the population, whose way of life has a disproportionately large normative role in establishing social standards."¹⁶ While Code employs empirical evidence in support of her critique of appeals to female essentialism, she offers no empirical evidence in support of her notion that the experiences of 'S' are distinct, or that the gender identity of 'S' has epistemic import.

Either way, it does not much matter whether such gender associations can be supported by empirical evidence. The crucial point is

¹⁵Code, 54.

¹⁶Code, 55.

that there remain seemingly dichotomous cognitive traits exercised in the process of knowing. Feminists may need to make some of these associations in order to support the notion that gender has epistemic import. However, ultimately, what ought to be sought in the construction of knowledge is the inclusion of traits from both sides of the dichotomy. Which men or women exhibit which traits is really beside the point, that is, unless one's primary interest is political rather than epistemological.

Code maintains that attempts to accord more value to stereotypical feminine traits is a hazardous approach to epistemology, for it can potentially result in a furthering of women's subjugation.¹⁷ While Code is not opposed to attributing value to stereotypical female traits, she is reluctant to employ the celebration of such traits in building theory.

History is supportive of Code's criticism and modern societies are ever increasingly devaluing the feminine and thereby subjugating women. However, the fact that women's oppression *can be* related to the propagation of female essentialism in no way demonstrates the necessity of such a connection. To discredit the inclusion of female essentialism in epistemology on account of possible political implications is akin to discrediting mathematics because it is used in the formulas for creating weapons of mass destruction.

¹⁷Code, 54.

Code proposes that “a more playful interplay of differences could divert appeals to essentialism that seem to require distinctively feminine and distinctively masculine epistemological positions, incommensurable and immune to reciprocal critique and influence.”¹⁸ While Code’s “playful interplay of differences” remains somewhat ambiguous, her point—that female essentialism can result in the furthering of women’s subjugation—remains. The force of Code’s critique is political, rather than epistemological, and shall be treated in the section of this paper that deals with the various political implications of feminine ethical theory.

Code replaces traditional epistemology and the conception of a detached knower with a relational model, which she refers to as “second person knowing.”¹⁹ This ‘second person knowing’ is distinct from other versions, such as Sara Ruddick’s ‘maternal thinking’, in that it avoids appealing to any form of female essentialism. Code suggests that a ‘friendship model’ ought to be adopted as grounds for knowledge, in that it does not involve a ‘complex power differential’ as maternal thinking does:

Friendship is descriptively and evaluatively appropriate to

¹⁸Code, 54.

¹⁹Code, 104-5.

designate an exemplary, constitutive relationship with close, intimate, and wide political scope. Finally, and particularly noteworthy, is the careful, reciprocal, nonimperialistic nature of the knowing on which good friendship depends. This exemplary 'second person' way of knowing another person affords a preliminary model for a reconstructed subject-object relation that could displace ideal objectivity and move toward a reconstruction of cognitive activity and epistemic goals.²⁰

This reconstruction of the subject-object relation is not incompatible with the notion of a knower expressing a subjectivity that involves 'goodwill'. The difficulty with Code's proposed relational model for epistemology (in this context) is that it does not seem to advance the feminist epistemic agenda. Code's model in no way advantages feminists exclusively, nor does it describe concretely how the *particular* experiences of women are to be worked into an epistemology.

The adoption of Code's 'friendship model' could serve the interests of women, in the sense that it involves understanding that is brought about by a 'close' and 'intimate' relation which indirectly may introduce the subjective experiences of women. Yet, without 'friends' who can express a distinctly feminine view, the interests of many women are bound to be left out in the cold by this 'relation'. The employment of Code's relational ontology in a social construction of knowledge would need to include the perspectives of women who maintain a 'feminine

²⁰Code, 104-5.

ontology' in order for her epistemology to accommodate the experiences of women.

Whether a feminist epistemology is possible or even desirable remains an open question for Code. Like many feminist thinkers, Code's primary goal is to reconstruct epistemological discussion by purging the elements of theory conditioned by male bias. For this reason, feminine approaches such as Code's express more by way of critique than construct. In my estimation, the political dynamics of feminine approaches to epistemology are designed fundamentally to eliminate their very utility. In other words, if a 'successor epistemology' (one that accommodated feminine criticism and concern) could be envisioned, there would no longer be a need for a 'feminist epistemology'. To insist on such a 'feminist epistemology' would seem to require a basis in assumptions about the essence of women and of knowledge. Hence, it would risk replicating the exclusionary, hegemonic structures of the masculinist epistemology, in its various manifestations"²¹ However, unlike Code, many feminists of the feminine persuasion maintain that the female perspective is conditioned not only by nurture, but also by nature, and that there would always be a need for a representative female voice in epistemology.

²¹Code, 315.

Unlike feminine approaches to epistemology, feminine approaches do appeal to some form of female essentialism in constructing theory. Code characterizes feminine approaches to epistemology as being supported by the 'general thesis' that "women have an edge in the development and exercise of just those attributes that merit celebration as feminine: in care, sensitivity, responsiveness and responsibility, intuition and trust."²² Code goes on to claim that

there is no doubt that these traits are commonly represented as constitutive of femininity. Nor is there much doubt that a society that valued them might be a better society than one that denigrates and discourages them. But these very traits are as problematic, both theoretically and practically, as they are attractive.²³

Sara Ruddick offers an approach to epistemology and ethics that does, to an extent, appeal to female essentialism. She describes her perspective as a 'practicalist view'; she claims that 'thinking' is social and dependent upon 'practice'.²⁴ Ruddick maintains that "concepts are defined by shared aims and by rules or means for achieving those aims . . . and that individuals . . . make sense of their activities to themselves

²²Code, 17.

²³Code, 17.

²⁴Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 15.

by means of concepts and values that are developed socially.”²⁵

Ruddick couples this ‘practicalist view’ with a relational ontology based on a mother-child paradigm. Her claim is that the ‘maternal practice’ inspires a ‘thinking’ which is to be valued for the crucial role it plays in the physical and social development of children. While biological and cultural influences have historically conditioned women in such a way as to enable them to be ‘better’ at the maternal practice, Ruddick insists that the mothering practice need not remain the exclusive domain of women.

‘Mothers’ are defined by Ruddick as being any persons who “are committed to meeting demands that define maternal work.”²⁶ Maternal work is constituted by the meeting of three demands—namely, ‘preservation, growth, and social acceptability.’ For Ruddick, “to be a mother is to be committed to meeting these demands by works of preservative love, nurturance, and training.”²⁷

Ruddick’s project as a whole can be understood as an attempt to attribute value to the sort of connectedness that seems to be lacking in modern societies. Rejecting the excessive detachment of instrumental

²⁵Ruddick, 15.

²⁶Ruddick, 17.

²⁷Ruddick, 17.

reason, she argues for a cognitive method that emphasizes the relation between subject and object. In her view, the connectedness provided by 'caring practice' supports an epistemic superiority over other kinds of thinking.

In arguing for "the superiority of the rationality of care to the abstract masculine ways of knowing," Ruddick compares maternal thinking to thinking involved with military endeavours.²⁸ She claims that the "maternal practice" can be a "natural resource" for a politics of peace, because of the connectedness it offers. In her view, mothers can be a 'source of resistance' to military action by publicly refusing to endorse such actions.²⁹

Ruddick's 'maternal thinking' is founded upon on a universal recognition of the fact that children need care. Ruddick believes that those who assume this responsibility develop an enlightened perspective through practice, enabling them to identify properly the meaning and value in their lives:

The agents of maternal practice, acting in response to demands of their children, acquire a conceptual scheme—a vocabulary and logic of connections—through which they order and express the facts and values of their practice There is a unity of reflection, judgment, and emotion. This

²⁸Ruddick, 157.

²⁹Ruddick, 157.

unity I call “maternal thinking.”³⁰

The notion that ‘maternal practice’ can involve distinct experience which can epistemically privilege the practitioner is not difficult to concede. ‘Mothers’ surely do know their children well, and the merit of ways in which mothers come to know is evidenced by the survival of the human species. While maternal thinking may not lend support to advances in physics, it has direct relevance to what is deemed social knowledge. The closer relation of subject to object offered in Ruddick’s view can have an epistemic advantage over cognitive theories that emphasize a subject’s detachment. An emotive link between subject and object does not always serve to distort knowledge; on the contrary, it can and often does serve to focus it.

The suggestion that maternal thinking can epistemically privilege a knower is bothersome to some feminists, in that it appeals to stereotypical female cognitive traits. Ruddick’s claim that any person—male or female—can be a maternal thinker is for these feminists irrelevant; what is relevant is that the cognitive method described is associated with qualities stereotypical of women, as is the term ‘mother’. This association is viewed as negative by feminists who claim that

³⁰Sara Ruddick, “Maternal Thinking,” in Joyce Trebilcot, ed., *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984), 214.

persons employing maternal thinking are by definition excluded from the public sphere and have little power or influence on the society in which they live. For this reason, even though Ruddick leaves open the possibility that men are maternal thinkers, she is still considered to be appealing to female essentialism.

Feminists such as Code reject the mother-child relational ontology in favour of a friendship model, which avoids all appeals to female essentialism and thereby avoids subjugating the female perspective. The force of this point, I continue to stress, is political rather than epistemological. Accordingly, Ruddick contends that while maternal thinking may not be of direct service to all feminist goals, feminist politics can work to meet these goals alongside maternal thinking.

Another more potent criticism of Ruddick's proposal suggests that her epistemic model is limited in its applicability to a moral theory suitable only in the private sphere. Maternal thinking as described by Ruddick is a cognitive method inspired by way of the maternal practice.³¹ While this sort of thinking may epistemically privilege a knower in the private sphere, it is not at all evident that such ability can, or would, be developed by persons in the public sphere. An objection could be made by claiming that the public sphere involves a completely different set of

³¹Ruddick, 214.

criteria upon which judgments must be made.

Advocates of this sort of objection could suggest that the ways in which we come to know, in matters of international conflict for example, require instrumental reasoning, not second person knowing. This is not to suggest that maternal thinking is void of reason, but rather that it is primarily motivated by the existence of 'care'. It may be argued that Ruddick's proposal requires thinking from the standpoint of care in situations when persons simply do not care, or should not care. While mothers the world over may share a common desire for the safety and well-being of their own children, there are several accounts in history of mothers being willing to accept that the safety of their children required the destruction of others, including the children of others.

Having described some of the crucial difficulties facing both the feminine and feminine approaches to epistemology, I will now turn to consider which approach better accommodates the inclusion of women's experiences in the construction of knowledge. Prior to discussing the characteristic features of an epistemology which could encompass the experiences of women, it seems fitting that some conclusions be identified with regards to the question as to what it is about these experiences that qualifies them as distinctively female.

There are three possible conclusions from which a thinker could ground an approach in developing epistemic proposals intended to include the experiences of women. The first is that females come to know in a manner specific to their gender, a consequence of the dictates of biology. This view could accommodate 'exceptions to the rule' by claiming that such exceptions are simply biological aberrations, not unlike physical aberrations.

The second possible conclusion is that human cognitive traits or characteristics are androgynous and that both females and males are conditioned to develop and consequently exhibit cognitive styles socially associated with gender. 'Exceptions to the rule' under this view could be explained as a result of conditioning which did not conform to social norms.

The third possible conclusion makes the claim that while biology may to some extent, and with some consistency, determine cognitive style, conditioning also plays a role, which in many cases can serve to obliterate any biological difference. This sort of conclusion could account for 'exceptions to the rule' by employing explanations cited in association with both of the alternative conclusions.

The first conclusion underpins academic history, a history written for the most part by men. This sort of perspective is strongly critiqued

by most, if not all, modern-day feminist thinkers as a consequence of the unchallenged existence of male bias in the public sphere. The primary difficulty with maintaining the claim that biology dictates gender specific knowledge is that it is challenged by the great number of 'exceptions to the rule' with which it has to deal. Women have met with success in various fields traditionally associated with masculine modes of thought and continue to do so in ever increasing numbers. To refer to all such instances as 'aberrations' seems to place the whole notion of a norm defined by gender in jeopardy.

The second conclusion endorsed by most feminist thinkers, including Code and Ruddick, argues that gender-stereotyped modes of thought are the result of social conditioning. This position serves the feminist critique well, in that it provides explanatory support for the claim that traditional epistemologies are imbued with male bias. However, this view can be problematic for feminist theory. The worry is that if gender-stereotyped modes of thought are said to be the result of social conditioning, then further explanation is needed to account for differing modes of thought exhibited by men and women conditioned in the same manner.

Another problem facing feminist theory is political in nature and is mentioned only because of the attention many feminist thinkers pay to

such considerations while discussing epistemology. By associating cognitive traits or modes of thought with gender, feminists risk alienating the women who are said to exhibit the stereotyped masculine mode of thought. Wendy Hollway asks, "When women are agentic, take refuge in abstractions, appear incapable of empathy and revel in the use of power to undermine the rights of others, do we start to call them men?"³² Hollway makes reference to Margaret Thatcher as an example of just such a woman.³³

Though some feminists may point to individuals such as Margaret Thatcher as evidence in support of the notion that the essential core of human beings is androgynous, others could argue that the evidence suggests the very opposite. While Thatcher may exhibit a masculine mode of thought, it may be argued that she constitutes an 'exception to the rule', which supports the presumption that if the essential core of humans were truly androgynous, there would be many more such women. This perspective is further supported by the many instances in which women have introduced new ways of thinking, new styles, in fields traditionally dominated by men.

³²Wendy Hollway, *Subjectivity and Method in Psychology: Gender, Meaning, and Science*, (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 1989), 108.

³³Hollway, 108.

The third alternative conclusion—namely, the one that leads to an epistemology that includes the experiences of women—offers the most flexibility in dealing with ‘exceptions to the rule’. By avoiding exclusive commitment to either side of the nature/nurture dichotomy, both conditioning and biology can be employed to account for exceptions to the rule. Hence, Thatcher’s display of a masculine mode of thought can be understood as a consequent of conditioning, while the infrequency of such exceptions can be related to anomalies of biology. This perspective suggests that what qualifies the ‘experiences of women’ as distinctively female can be related to social conditioning, biology, or both.

In order to substantiate a feminist epistemology, the sexual identity and social conditioning that is said to contribute to the creation of ‘woman’ needs to be specified. While the process of defining such limitation is ‘politically charged’ and highly offensive to some feminists it must be dealt with. In so doing, feminists must refrain from politicizing epistemology.

If feminists want to support the idea that the sex of the knower is epistemically relevant, they must be able to explain why this is so. Feminist epistemology, if it is to persevere, needs a working definition of what—in terms of sexual identity and social conditioning—qualifies as ‘woman’. Without this base, feminist epistemology has no support, for it

cannot explain what it is about the sex of the knower that provides her with epistemic privilege.

The inclusion of women's experience in the construction of knowledge requires not a feminine but a feminine ontology. The identity of the knower representing the experiences of women must include certain qualities and traits shared by women. While I agree with Code's claim that 'female essentialism' may lead to the devaluation of the female perspective, I maintain that such considerations are best dealt with in political theory and not in theories of knowledge.

Feminist epistemology requires a distinctively female knower to support the notion that gender can epistemically privilege a knower. Of course, women who exhibit masculine modes of thought are still women, but their perspectives cannot be representative of knowers privileged in virtue of their belonging to the female gender. Thatcher's exhibition of a masculine mode of thought discounts her as a representative knower in an epistemology grounded on the premise that women are epistemically privileged on account of the uniqueness of their experiences. The reason is that women like Thatcher have been conditioned to think like men.

Ruddick's mother-child ontology is the sort of approach that can support a feminist epistemology. She provides a working definition of 'mothers' and describes how 'maternal thinking' can provide epistemic

privilege. While her approach³³ is not without its difficulties, it can preserve the female perspective in epistemology by providing an identity for the representative feminist knower.

Truths of physics and mathematics may be immune from affective social factors; yet there remain sought-after truths conditioned by this sort of influence. The way in which we come to know is coloured by our experience. For this reason, many social factors are epistemically relevant. This relevance is connected to the nature of our experience—the vantage-point from which we seek to understand the world around us is often constructed by social factors.

Yet our knowledge claims are not restricted to these socially-constructed vantage points. On the contrary, many persons are able to transcend bias. However, this development is not accomplished by obliterating the various conceptions of identity. Nor is it achieved by denying the existence of bias. It is accomplished rather by first recognizing bias and then overcoming it without denying identity.

The making of knowledge claims is an expression of a process of experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding.³⁴ Those who would dispute this may upon reflection realize that their very objections were

³⁴Bernard Lonergan, *A Study of Human Understanding: Insight*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1978), 375-383.

made employing this process. Experience constitutes an integral step in this process, one in which the understanding of others plays a crucial role. All knowledge is social at some level, and an absolutely private knowledge is as impossible, no less than an absolutely private language.

In offering a response to the question—who is S?—what must be realized is that as an individual S has many experiences and that her identity is comprised of various social factors. The knowledge claims that S makes are based on the inter-subjective experiences S has undergone. To develop an epistemology that can include ‘women’s experiences’, women need to be given a voice in epistemological discussion. This voice needs to be distinctive, identifiable, and is required to explain what it is about women’s experience that offers epistemic privilege.

Gender is one of many social factors which can be epistemically relevant; there are others, such as economic status, educational level, and race. A difficulty facing feminist theory revolves around questions about the validity of a feminist theory written, for the most part, by upper middle-class, white women. Some feminists are critical of such theory, claiming that it is not representative of the views and concerns of women who belong to underprivileged minority groups.

Individuals are not simply just men or just women; they also belong to certain age groups, economic classes, and races. All of these social factors play a role in conditioning the understanding from which knowledge claims are made. The pursuit of a social construction of knowledge which includes the experiences of women requires epistemic dialogue that involves distinct, representative knowers. In place of seeking knowledge through the detachment of a knower from the social factors that form identity, knowledge ought to be pursued through an inter-subjective dialogue that involves furthering understanding of individuals of disparate social identities.

Chapter Two

Feminine and Feminite Approaches to Ethics

The division among feminist thinkers over the issue of female essentialism extends to ethical theory. Feminists who appeal to a female essentialism in their moral epistemology advocate a *feminine* approach to ethics, while those who reject such appeals express a *feminite* approach. These two approaches are distinguished by their differing areas of emphasis: the feminite approach is characterized by a focus on political concerns, namely those regarding women's subjugation, while the feminine approach emphasizes the importance of identifying women's distinctive moral voice. Feminists of both persuasions share many of the same concerns, although there remain critically important differences in their perspectives.

Both approaches offer an explanation as to why thinking in terms of gender neutrality is not adequate in the construction of moral theory. However, only the feminine approach provides a clear account of how dialogue in moral theory is enriched with the inclusion of 'women's distinctive voice'. The feminite approach offers a concise critique of how male bias pervades traditional moral theory, but fails to explain how moral theory is benefitted by the inclusion of women's perspectives.

It is possible, after all, to concede that the exclusion of the female perspective in constructing moral theory is unjust and to question what, if anything, is to be altered in this construction by including the female perspective. In this chapter, I offer an analysis and evaluation of both approaches and contend that a feminine approach to ethics, which includes the 'experiences of women' in the creation of moral theory, is superior.

Rosemarie Tong describes feminine approaches to ethics as being ". . . always interested in issues of power—specifically, male domination and female subordination—and it always seeks to provide women with action guides that will lead to women's liberation from oppression, suppression, and repression."³⁵ This approach maintain that all moral theory is bound to remain inadequate without the establishment of political equality.

These feminists charge that traditional moral theory masks a pervasive male bias, which is extended when moral theory, employing gender-neutral terms, is applied to a patriarchal social reality. Feminists are critical of abstraction that employs a gender-neutral moral agent in the development of theory. Such abstractions are said to obscure a

³⁵Rosemarie Tong, *Feminine and Feminist Ethics* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1993), 184.

reality of social inequity that is conditioned by a power-differential based in part on gender.

Proponents of the feminine approach to ethics critique in several ways traditional moral theories, including deontological ethics, consequentialism and social contract theory. In her critique of Kantian deontological ethics, Susan Sherwin writes:

Deontological theories pay scant attention to the specific details of individuals' moral experiences and relationships. They admit that special obligations arise from specific relationships—for example, to friends and family—but little discussion is devoted to exploring the range or force of such duties.³⁶

This criticism posed by Sherwin basically claims that these deontological theories tend to emphasize abstracted universal principles by sacrificing the special duties and obligations that inform moral agents in decisions made on a more personal level. A further worry is that since women are more involved in these special duties and obligations, having been confined to the private sphere, the emphasis on grand universal principles propagates male bias.

Sherwin critiques consequentialism, claiming that

those who promote consequentialism in its traditional formulations still operate on an abstracted plane, . . . because ultimately, rightness of an action is calculated by

³⁶Susan Sherwin, *No Longer Patient: Feminist Ethics and Health Care* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 38.

appeal to the total amount of happiness and suffering created by an act, without regard to whose happiness or suffering is at issue.³⁷

Once again the feminine critique questions the validity of an abstraction that results in the elevation of—in this case—overall ‘happiness’ at the expense of “an individual’s relationship to the agent contemplating action.”³⁸ This critique is feminine in that it brings into question the distancing of moral agents from the social and political contexts in which patriarchy resides. In keeping with the proposals for relational ontology (discussed in the first chapter of this thesis), feminists seek to devise moral theory for *related* moral agents, not *autonomous* individuals.

Social contract theory, or contractarianism, can be understood as sharing features of both consequentialism and deontological ethics. Sherwin maintains that this traditional approach to ethics “shares with feminism a commitment to placing the discussion of moral judgments within an explicitly social context”³⁹ Nevertheless, feminists remain critical of the abstraction employed in the construction of social contract theory. Contractarianism is critiqued by Sherwin in the following

³⁷Sherwin, 39-40.

³⁸Sherwin, 40.

³⁹Sherwin, 41.

passage:

By refusing to distinguish between various differences among people, most contractarians proceed as if traits such as gender and race can be treated as being on a par with eye colour, they fail to identify the mechanisms that must be put in place in a currently oppressive society to achieve the equality they presume. Therefore, most feminists find none of the existing social contract theories adequate to address their political concerns.⁴⁰

Feminists apply this sort of criticism to social contract theories such as the one offered by Rawls in his *Theory of Justice*. Questioning his use of the 'veil of ignorance', feminists argue that this theoretical mechanism masks the identity of the beings in the original position, which in turn masks the oppressive power differentials found in society.⁴¹ The contracts resulting from this veil of ignorance are said to "perpetuate, rather than correct, the structures that maintain oppressive practices."⁴²

It is important to note that the criticisms of traditional approaches to ethics mentioned thus far are not the exclusive domain of feminists. Indeed, many thinkers are critical of these theories for much the same

⁴⁰Sherwin, 42.

⁴¹See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), Part One.

⁴²Susan Sherwin, *No Longer Patient: Feminist Ethics and Health Care* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 41–42.

reasons as are feminists. Rawls' veil of ignorance masks not only the gender identity of his beings, but the economic class to which they belong, as well as their educational level. The Rawlsian 'difference principle'—a theoretical mechanism intended to prevent increases in social inequity—does not discount the furthering of status differentials in terms of ratio. The methods of abstraction employed in the development of deontological, consequentialist, and contractarian theories can be critiqued not only for the ways in which they oppress women, but for how they contribute to all forms of social inequity.

The primary characteristic identifying feminine approaches to ethics is a critical focus on the political nature of women's oppression. Feminists who advocate a feminine approach to ethics share with those who support a feminine approach many of the same criticisms of traditional ethics. Issues of power, however, are not central to the former's analysis. Feminine approaches to ethics that criticize traditional ethics emphasize the fact that such theory fails to accommodate the moral experiences and intuitions of women.⁴³

While the feminine approach to ethics is critical of abstraction, which tends to mask oppressive power structures, the feminine approach suggests that the resultant theories lack the distinctively feminine

⁴³Sherwin, 42.

features of moral judgment. These feminists claim that 'women's distinctive voice' has a contribution to make to the development of moral theory, in virtue of the fact that this voice is cultivated by concrete human relations.

Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics employs a purely abstract process of reasoning to arrive at universal principles that inform the free moral agent. Kant believes that the resultant moral laws should be valued above personal feelings that may affect a moral agent in a particular circumstance. For most feminists, Kant's devaluation of "the role of sentiment" is understood to "be a mark of inadequacy in the theory itself."⁴⁴

Traditional approaches to ethics view moral judgment influenced by the emotions as biased and therefore distorted. They assume that the correctness of a judgment depends on the degree to which a moral agent can remain impartial. Kathleen Wallace challenges this view. She claims that

objectivity in morality has to do with identification and assessment of what is relevant to a moral verdict (and may include feelings, emotions, preferences, and the like). The key concept is relevance, not impartiality or perspectivelessness. "Impartiality" is a specific epistemological, moral, or legal value or standard. Whether it has anything to do with "objectivity" depends on the

⁴⁴Sherwin, 39.

context.⁴⁵

Wallace and feminists sharing her view seek to include feelings in moral deliberations, although they do not reject reason in arriving at moral decisions. Rather, they support a reconciliation between reason and emotion.

Most feminist theory is built upon a relational ontology, which includes a level of emotional attachment, whether 'friendship' or 'mothering'. Feelings in moral deliberation is of particular importance to feminists who advocate a feminine approach. They frequently describe their respective moral theories as an 'ethic of care'. One such thinker is Carol Gilligan, a prominent feminist best known for her methodological critique of Lawrence Kohlberg's stage theory of moral development.

Gilligan critiques Kohlberg, her mentor, claiming that what he describes as *human* moral development is actually *male* moral development. She argues that men and women arrive at moral judgment in distinctive ways and that women's moral development ought not to be evaluated under criteria designed for men:

My research suggests that men and women may speak different languages that they assume are the same, using similar words to encode disparate experiences of self and social relationships. Because these languages share an

⁴⁵Kathleen Wallace, "Reconstructing Judgment: Emotion and Moral Judgment." *Hypatia* vol. 8, no 3 (Summer 1993): 63.

overlapping moral vocabulary, they contain a propensity for systematic mistranslation, creating misunderstandings which impede communication and limit the potential for cooperation and care in relationships.⁴⁶

Gilligan's critique of Kohlberg's 'Heinz dilemma' can be understood as a general critique of traditional approaches to moral theory. The challenge that Gilligan poses to Kohlberg's interpretation of the 'Heinz dilemma' can also be posed to Kant who developed universal moral laws, to the consequentialist calculations of 'hedons,' and to the Rawlsian-type of original position in which persons hide behind a veil of ignorance.

Gilligan makes this criticism in her text *In a Different Voice*:

Hypothetical dilemmas, in the abstraction of their presentation, divest moral actors from the history and psychology of their individual lives and separate the moral problem from the social contingencies of its possible occurrence. In doing so, these dilemmas are useful for the distillation and refinement of objective principles of justice and for measuring the formal logic of equality and reciprocity. However, the reconstruction of the dilemma in its contextual particularity allows the understanding of cause and consequence which engages the compassion and tolerance repeatedly noted to distinguish the moral judgments of women.⁴⁷

Gilligan's argument is that these traditional approaches to ethics do not accommodate women's moral experience, and the methods of

⁴⁶Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 173.

⁴⁷Gilligan, 100.

abstraction employed in the creation of these theories tend to obscure injustices that can be found in 'contextual particularity'.

Nel Noddings offers a similar critique of traditional approaches, though her approach makes more explicit mention as to how feelings are included in moral deliberation:

Faced with a hypothetical moral dilemma, women often ask for more information. We want to know more, I think, in order to form a picture more nearly resembling real moral situations. Ideally, we need to talk to the participants, to see their eyes and facial expressions, to receive what they are feeling. Moral decisions are, after all, made in real situations; they are qualitatively different from the solution of geometry problems. Women can and do give reasons for their acts, but the reasons often point to feelings, needs, impressions, and a sense of personal ideal rather than to universal principles and their application.⁴⁸

In this passage, Noddings expresses the way in which traditional moral theory fails to take into account the experiences of women, that is, the way that women experience. Feelings and a sense of relatedness are most important in Noddings' view; she argues that reference to feelings in arriving at moral judgment can serve to enhance that judgment.

Thus far, I have set out the most crucial criticisms that feminists of both schools direct against traditional approaches to ethics. Both the feminine and the feminite approaches to ethics share many of the same

⁴⁸Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 2-3.

concerns and to converge along various theoretical lines. The distinction between feminine and feminist approaches to ethics is most readily made by delving into the theoretical constructs which the respective approaches have to offer. I shall begin by examining the constructive proposals offered by the feminist approach and then turn to a critical analysis of these proposals.

While thinkers who advocate a 'feminist ethic' offer a wide array of coherent criticisms of traditional moral theory, their constructive proposals for devising moral theory remain ambiguous. It is often quite difficult to identify exactly what 'constructive' proposals these feminist thinkers have to offer. My task now will be to interpret these ambiguities, beginning with an analysis of Susan Sherwin's thought.

Sherwin describes feminist ethics as being "characterized by its commitment to the feminist agenda of eliminating the subordination of women—and of other oppressed persons—in all of its manifestations."⁴⁹ Her description of feminist ethics begins with the assumption that the subordination of 'women' as a category of persons actually exists. While I am inclined to agree with most of her criticisms of traditional approaches to moral theory, I remain quite sceptical as to the accuracy

⁴⁹Susan Sherwin, *No longer Patient: Feminist Ethics and Health Care* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 54.

of her assumption.

Indeed, oppression exists and it takes many forms in society. However, many of these forms of oppression transcend gender. Oppression is as contingent and multifaceted as are individuals. Depending on the social context, female gender can be advantageous, disadvantageous, or irrelevant. Further complicating the features of oppression is the fact that persons are socially defined by criteria other than gender. Hence, while the female gender may be disadvantageous (in general) when it comes to certain careers, this disadvantage may be mitigated by economic background or educational level.

Sherwin seems unwilling to concede (at least in her definition of feminine ethics) that many women in Western society can and do behave as oppressors. Her definition unjustifiably employs the category of 'women', as if female economic and educational elites, along with those in ethnically and racially dominant groups, simply did not exist. Still, some upper-middle class women who oppress others are not immune from the oppression generated by men of equal or higher status. Individuals that can be identified as the victims of oppression in one context can be viewed as oppressors in another. For this reason, simply dividing society along gender lines does not change anyone's status. Nor does it lessen oppression. The women advantaged by this polemic

approach are in most cases advantaged to begin with, while those disadvantaged remain so.

A proposal for the elimination of this 'oppression' is provided by Sherwin as follows:

Feminist ethics includes exploration of actions that represent the escape from and overturning of the forces of oppression. This exploration involves searching for ways of empowering those who are now subordinate, through the creation of different relationships and new, nonoppressive social structures.⁵⁰

Unfortunately, I cannot find in Sherwin's *No Longer Patient* a description of this non-oppressive social structure. There is no denying that criticism plays a crucial role in developing moral theory, but 'constructive' proposals must be made at some point.

A further difficulty with Sherwin's perspective is that in her call for the 'overturning' of the forces of oppression she fails to explain what is to prevent the creation of new oppressors. What is to keep the 'empowered', formerly subordinate women from becoming oppressors in their own right? The empowerment of women entails that others will become subordinate, or at least disadvantaged relative to the social power of these women. Oppression is possible only through the acquisition of power by some relative to others in their environment.

⁵⁰Sherwin, 56.

Thus the empowerment of women necessarily entails that others, both men and women, will be oppressed by these newly-empowered women.

Examples of this 'new oppression' exist, and what is most frustrating is that such examples exist in academia. The philosopher Christina Hoff Sommers offers the following example:

The gender feminists' conviction, more ideological than scientific, that they belong to a radically insightful vanguard that compares favourably with the Copernicuses and Darwins of the past animates their revisionist theories of intellectual and artistic excellence and inspires their program to transform the knowledge base. Their exultation contrasts with the deep reluctance of most other academics to challenge the basic assumptions underlying feminist theories of knowledge and education. The confidence of the one and the trepidation of the other combine to make transformationism a powerfully effective movement that has so far proceeded unchecked in the academy.⁵¹

What Sommers' passage illustrates is how gender feminists can intimidate the very institution where freedom of thought and expression are supposed to be preserved. Sommer's text *Who Stole Feminism?* is filled with detailed and documented accounts of how certain feminist groups intimidate academicians. What remains to be seen is whether these newly-empowered women in academia can contribute to developing moral theory. While Sommers' perspective presents a well-substantiated argument illustrating the way in which gender

⁵¹Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism ?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 76.

feminists are prone to feminist bias, she undervalues the contribution some gender feminists make in articulating the distinctive moral experiences of women. Such contribution could only serve to better moral theory as it enhances society's understanding of the female perspective.

What concretely qualifies as a non-oppressive social structure is not found in Sherwin's work. I thereby conclude that, while Sherwin has some valid criticisms of traditional forms of moral theory, her own feminine ethic is at best a feminine critique of traditional moral theory and at worst a feminine politic portrayed as an ethic—one whose main purpose is the empowerment of women who share her views.

Sheila Mullett describes feminine ethics as theory which requires a complex alteration of consciousness. She describes "three dimensions to this perspective: 1) 'moral sensitivity'; 2) 'ontological shock'; and 3) 'praxis.'"⁵² The first dimension is described as an awakened moral sensitivity to the violence against women. For Mullett, this new-found awareness is a "consciousness of pain that is made possible, in part at least, by a new attitude towards the social arrangements which

⁵²Sheila Mullett, "Shifting Perspectives: A new approach to ethics," in Lorraine Code, ed., *Feminist Perspectives: Philosophical Essays on Method and Morals* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 114.

contribute to suffering.”⁵³

Mullett does not mention which ‘social arrangements’ in particular are responsible for the violence that women suffer. However, she does make explicit mention of rape, battering, child sexual abuse and incest. Since much of this sort of violence involves persons of close familial or marital relation, I think it is fair to assume that the institution of marriage is one of the social arrangements that Mullett believes to be responsible for contributing to women’s suffering. The fact that most abused women suffer at the hands of their husbands surely does count as a social fact that deserves moral attention and condemnation. However, to condemn the institution of marriage on account of this social fact is misguided, as marriage does not prescribe the abuse of one’s spouse.

While it is certainly a fact that a statistically significant number of married women experience violence at the hands of their partners, Mullett would need substantial argument to show how marriage by its very design as a ‘social arrangement contributes to women’s suffering’. The suspicion Mullett casts on social arrangements is characteristic of feminine ethics, as proponents of this perspective tend to view all social relations through issues of gender and power.

⁵³Mullett, 115.

Mullett labels the second dimension of her perspective 'ontological shock'. It involves a feminist consciousness with a dualistic perspective:

We see the situation as it is in the present, and as it is understood and interpreted within the existing social context, while, at the same time, viewing it in terms of a state of affairs not yet actual, in terms of possibility, in which what is given would be negated and radically transformed.⁵⁴

This second dimension to Mullett's feminist ethic is a way of looking at social arrangements as they are, a way of seeing these arrangements in a way which accommodates the feminist perspective. This way of viewing social reality is 'shocking' for the newly-awakened feminist consciousness, on account of the disparity between conventional social reality and the social reality sought by these feminists.

What this new 'radically transformed' social reality actually resembles is not described. Mullett does not make any concrete suggestions as to what sort of alternative social arrangements could accommodate her version of feminine ethics. Further, she does not offer any principles by which this new social structure is to be constructed. What Mullett does offer is a critique of how the prevailing system is responsible for the suffering of women. This critique is important in that

⁵⁴Mullett, 115.

it draws attention to the various forms of oppression faced by women. In so doing, Mullett's work contributes to future dialogue and theoretical developments.

The third dimension to this feminine ethical perspective, praxis, is a disclosure: "However dim and with however much shock, in a collective awareness. We shift from seeing the world as an individual moral agent to seeing it through the eyes of a 'we'."⁵⁵ What she defines as praxis is basically the formation of a feminist conception of woman as a category. Mullett's praxis is an expression of what feminists sharing her view understand to be a shared commonality among women, including those women who have yet to achieve a feminist consciousness.

What makes this third dimension of Mullett's perspective a true praxis is that it involves not only envisioning a new feminine reality within the confines of the existing social structure, but also an imperative to act out as if the desired system were already in place.⁵⁶ Yet again, Mullett fails to articulate what actions are entailed by this acting out, and consequently her 'alternative human world' remains unarticulated. While Mullett fails to devise constructive guidelines for defining a feminist ethics, she does offer a critical perspective describing

⁵⁵Mullett, 116.

⁵⁶Mullett, 116.

what a feminist ethics opposes. To search further for constructive proposals defining a feminine ethic, I turn now to Alison Jaggar's perspective.

Jaggar qualifies feminine ethics as theory which "seeks to identify and challenge all those ways, overt but more often and more perniciously covert, in which western ethics has excluded women or rationalized their subordination."⁵⁷ According to Jaggar the goal of feminine ethics is to "offer both practical guides to action and theoretical understandings of the nature of morality that do not, overtly or covertly, subordinate the interests of any woman or group of women to the interests of any other individual or group."⁵⁸ Jaggar furthers her definition of feminine ethics and its goals by specifying "minimum conditions of adequacy for any approach to ethics that purports to be feminist."⁵⁹

The first of these minimum conditions, Jaggar claims, is that approaches to ethics, to be counted as feminine, must provide action guides that serve to challenge the subordination of women. She also suggests that such an approach to ethics must be "an extension of

⁵⁷Alison M. Jaggar, "Feminist Ethics: Some Issues For The Nineties," in Susan Okin and Jane Mansbridge, eds., *Feminism: Schools of Thought in Politics* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1994), 357.

⁵⁸Jaggar, 357.

⁵⁹Jaggar, 357.

politics rather than a retreat from it.”⁶⁰ The emphasis Jaggar places on the political nature of feminine ethics is certainly not uncommon, in that most feminists who share her orientation offer similar conditions.

But this consistency in the feminine approach to ethics exposes a fundamental difficulty, one having to do with the fact that almost everyone in society is ‘subordinated’ in one sense or another. To view all such subordination through an gendered political lens is to distort social reality. Oppression, or unjust subordination of individuals or groups, is a multifaceted social problem that involves issues such as race, economic class, educational level, age, health, and ethnicity, to name but a few. An ethics focusing on just one of these social injustices obscures the relevance of other such problems.

Jaggar’s concerns are valid, and the oppression of women is certainly not void of political implication; nevertheless an exclusive or even primary focus on one particular form of oppression renders the moral theorist unaware or inattentive to other forms of oppression. Jaggar can counter this criticism, showing a concern with all forms of oppression, even if maintaining one problem at a time. This common sense sort of counter seems pragmatic and well-founded. Such a response, however, refuses to view social oppression as a multifaceted

⁶⁰Jaggar, 357.

problem. The scales of social justice are not a simple balance between genders. The scale is multi-dimensional, and striking a balance requires the theorist to weigh all sides of injustice. To tip the scales only in favor of one oppressed group upsets all others, thereby furthering oppression.

Feminists claim that a feminist ethics is not concerned only with the oppression of women, but also with the oppression of all subjugated and underprivileged groups. Of course, a question that remains as to why these thinkers label their approach a 'feminist' ethics. Many feminist theorists do express concern for the oppression of other groups. Nevertheless, their approach remains lacking, for it fails to represent all oppressed groups.

Jaggar's requirement of 'action guides'—that serve to empower women—are most fitting for a political movement which openly represents the interests of women. However, to demand that such a requirement be met by ethical theory is to jeopardize the founding role of ethics in society. If all other groups were to follow the lead offered by thinkers who advocate a feminist ethics, dialogue in moral theory would soon be filled with all forms of hyphenated ethics. The danger posed by the feminist approach to ethics is that it threatens to render moral theory indistinguishable from identity politics.

Jaggar's "second requirement for feminine ethics is that it should be equipped to handle moral issues in both the so-called public and private domains."⁶¹ This requirement serves to differentiate feminine ethics from those feminine approaches to ethics which offer moral theory distinguishable along the public/private divide. The difficulty with her suggestion is that it has the potential to limit the applicability of feminine ethics by discounting the role of emotion in moral deliberation. In other words, if Jaggar does away with the private/public dichotomy, she will have to explain how indifferent or 'uncaring' moral agents are to understand their duty or obligation to others.

The final requirement stipulated by Jaggar is that a "feminine ethics must take the moral experience of all women seriously, though not, of course, uncritically."⁶² This requirement serves to qualify feminine ethics as being critical of incongruent features of competing feminist perspectives without discounting such perspectives outright. Consequently, this requirement ensures wide ideological support for feminine ethics by refusing to dwell upon differentiation that would polemicize feminist perspectives.

⁶¹Jaggar, 358.

⁶²Jaggar, 358.

Feminine ethics, as proposed by Sherwin, Mullett, and Jaggar, are supportive of the empowerment of women by virtue of the criticism these respective theories offer on various forms of oppression that affect women. Unfortunately, these theories lack a base upon which to build a theoretical perspective that would serve to include women's experience in constructing moral theory, as they tend to reject all appeals to the 'distinctive voice of women'. While much of the criticism these feminists present is justifiable moral criticism, it fails to constitute a moral theory because it lacks constructive proposals.

Thinkers advocating a 'feminine ethics' fail to articulate how in 'positive terms' such an ethic is to be constructed. I therefore turn to the feminine approach to ethics as offered by the prominent feminist thinkers Carol Gilligan, Virginia Held, Nell Noddings, and Sara Ruddick. This approach will describe a way in which the moral experiences of women can be included in the development of ethical theory.

Gilligan's approach to moral theory is premised on her belief that distinct psychological differences exist between the sexes and that these differences ought not to be obscured in moral theory. Her conviction is highlighted in the following passage:

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.⁶³

Gilligan argues that accepting these differences and recognizing the worth of both sides of this dichotomy can serve only to enrich moral theory.⁶⁴ Gilligan, however, does not articulate what such a moral theory would resemble; it is not her task to do so. Her study is focused on an analysis of the respective psychological differences in moral development of males and females. Gilligan offers a basic characterization of women's moral experience which she refers to as an 'ethic of care'.

Gilligan's 'ethic of care' is rooted in a relational ontology, described as a "nonhierarchical vision of human connection."⁶⁵ According to Gilligan, in order to accommodate women's moral experience the ethical theorist must be able to interpret these experiences in terms familiar to women. She argues that "relationships, when cast in the image of hierarchy, appear inherently unstable and morally problematic, their

⁶³Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 22.

⁶⁴Gilligan, 23.

⁶⁵Gilligan, 62.

transposition into the image of web changes an order of inequality into a structure of interconnection.”⁶⁶

It is important to note that Gilligan does not view a focus on care to be the exclusive property of women; she readily admits that some men in her studies express an ethic of care. Nevertheless, Gilligan maintains that women mostly are predisposed to view moral deliberation by way of an ethic of care, while men tend to express an ‘ethic of justice’. In Gilligan’s estimation,

The moral imperative that emerges repeatedly in interviews with women is an injunction to care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate the “real and recognizable trouble” of this world. For men, the moral imperative appears rather as an injunction to respect the rights of others and thus to protect from interference the rights to life and self-fulfilment.⁶⁷

For Gilligan, an ethic of care amounts to an ability to tie together the concepts of ‘relationship and responsibility’.⁶⁸ In Gilligan’s view, the morally mature woman arrives at a moral judgment by considering which persons will be affected by her decision and how they will be affected. While Gilligan does not attempt to articulate constructive proposals at a theoretical level, she does offer a description of a general base upon

⁶⁶Gilligan, 62.

⁶⁷Gilligan, 100.

⁶⁸Gilligan, 173.

which an 'ethic of care' can be founded. This ethic of care is not defined simply in negative terms, such as describing it as an ethic that does not confine women's moral experience to Kohlberg's stage theory. Gilligan also provides a general characterization of the way in which women arrive at moral deliberation.

Some feminists are critical of Gilligan's approach, claiming that her correlation of empirical evidence with moral claims risks rendering 'women's distinctive voice' a product of biological determinism.⁶⁹ Such a view is problematic for feminists, who are wary of appealing to a female essentialism, as it could contribute to a further devaluation of women's perspectives in moral theory.

This criticism is somewhat misplaced, as Gilligan's view does not commit her to biological determinism in an absolute sense. Social conditioning as well as biological influence can be posited as factors contributing to Gilligan's empirical findings. Gilligan's view contributes constructive proposals that define the foundational constitution of an 'ethic of care', upon which thinkers such as Virginia Held attempt to further the 'ethic of care'.

⁶⁹Rosemarie Tong, *Feminine and Feminist Ethics* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1993), 94.

Held supports Gilligan's conclusions. She also maintains that "when one listens to the moral reasoning of women, one can discern ways of interpreting moral problems and of organizing possible responses to them that are different from any of the established moral approaches, including Kohlberg's."⁷⁰ Like most feminist thinkers, Held is critical of the abstraction expressed in traditional approaches to moral theory and suggests that women's concern with context serves to enlighten moral judgment.

Held argues that moral theory must recognize women's moral experience as distinct and seek to accommodate these diverse experiences in its construction. Irrespective of whether moral experience is conditioned by biology or by social factors, Held believes that "as long as women and men experience different problems and as long as differences of approach to moral problems are apparent, moral theory ought to reflect the experience of women as fully as it reflects the experience of men."⁷¹

While Held is critical of traditional approaches (sometimes referred to by feminists as 'ethics of justice'), she insists that in some contexts

⁷⁰Virginia Held, *Feminist Morality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 65.

⁷¹Held, 69.

this ethic is still worthwhile. Held suggests “a more pluralistic view of ethics, recognizing that we need a division of moral labour employing different moral approaches for different domains”⁷² In other words, while an ‘ethic of care’ may be of service in governing life in the private sphere, an ‘ethic of justice’ may better suit the public sphere.

Yet, this position does not necessarily entail an ‘ethic of care’ devoid of principles, nor an ‘ethic of justice’ without care.⁷³ In Held’s version of an ‘ethic of care’, the “fundamental social relation is that between mother or mothering person and child.”⁷⁴ This relation serves as a guide for moral judgment, providing the agent with an example of primary care. Held argues that the mothering person-child model is more suitable in contexts in which persons are neither of equal ability, nor power. The ‘autonomous man’ model is viewed to be inappropriate by Held in situations of inequality.

It certainly does not make sense to think of the mother-child relationship as bound by terms of some sort of contract. Clearly, an ‘ethic of justice’ can be unsuitable in governing intimate relations, just as an ‘ethic of care’ can be inappropriate in dealing with international

⁷²Held, 76.

⁷³Held, 76.

⁷⁴Held, 70.

conflicts. Once again, I stress that my position does not entail that the private sphere is to be governed by care without principles, or that the public sphere is to be void of care. Rather, I suggest that different approaches may be more suitable in different contexts. Held provides persuasive argument in support of a division of 'moral labor'; however, she fails to articulate what defines her 'ethics of care'.

Held proposes that familial relations ought to be based not on contract, but rather on care and concern; yet she does not offer any sort of description of this concern and care. This shortcoming is made more evident in the following passage:

The relation between mothering person and child, hardly understandable in contractual terms, is a more fundamental human relation and may be a more promising one on which to build our recommendations for the future than is any relation between rational contractors. We should look to the relation between mothering person and child for suggestions of how better to describe such society as we now have.⁷⁵

There can be no denying that a society which adopts a moral code developed by recommendations based upon the mother-child relational standard would be a caring society. For Held to articulate these recommendations, she would have to explain in concrete terms why persons would be willing to adopt a caring predisposition toward individuals with whom they share no relation. While persons in deeply

⁷⁵Held, 204.

caring relationships may not need a description of what mutual contractual obligations, assured cooperation between persons with no emotive attachment and no contract seems unlikely.

Nel Noddings's version of an 'ethic of care' shares many of the theoretical features exhibited in Held's view. Noddings describes her 'ethic of care' as relational and based primarily on care. Further, she maintains that women's moral experience is distinct and that it is not accommodated within traditional approaches to ethics.

What differentiates Noddings's approach from that of Held and Gilligan is an 'ethic of care' that is superior to an 'ethic of justice.' In *Caring*, she writes,

To say, "It is wrong to cause pain needlessly," contributes nothing by way of knowledge and can hardly be thought likely to change the attitude or behaviour of one who might ask, "Why is it wrong?" At the foundation of moral behaviour . . . is feeling or sentiment. But, further, there is commitment to remain open to that feeling, to remember it, and to put one's thinking in its service.⁷⁶

In response to Noddings's suggestion that emotion is of primary importance to moral theory, Held makes the following counter-claim:

Caring may be a weak defence against arbitrary decisions, and the person cared for may find the relation more satisfactory in various respects if both persons, but especially the person caring, are guided to some extent by

⁷⁶Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 92.

principles concerning obligations and rights.⁷⁷

Even if Noddings's notion of sentiment as the true foundation of morality is accepted, she would need to make further argument to establish justification for thinking this foundation to be of greater importance than constructive moral principles. For thinkers who believe motivation to be of moral significance, the notion of sentiment as the founding core of morality is not contentious.

To elevate the role of emotions in moral deliberations over and above the importance of principles is highly contentious, for it risks the dangers of relativism. To this charge Noddings replies:

The one caring, clearly, applies "right" and "wrong" most confidently to her own decisions. This does not . . . make her a relativist. The caring attitude that lies at the heart of all ethical behaviour is universal.⁷⁸

Noddings' understanding of caring presupposes an optimistic view of human relations. Indeed, she goes so far as to suggest that "the impulse to act in behalf of the present other is itself innate."⁷⁹ Noddings is unwilling to accept that persons are capable of executing excessively

⁷⁷Virginia Held, *Feminist Morality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 75.

⁷⁸Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminist Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 92.

⁷⁹Noddings, 83.

cruel acts while claiming that they care, or that persons can care for those in immediate relation, even while dealing unjustly with others.

Noddings' devaluation of the role of principles in moral deliberation is a problematic feature of her 'ethic of care'. However, she contributes to the task at hand, offering a greater description of 'constructive proposals' which shape an 'ethic of care'. These proposals are constructive in the sense that they are more clearly defined. Noddings qualifies her approach for arriving at moral judgment in the following passage:

. . . when I make a moral judgment I am doing more than simply expressing approval or disapproval. I am both expressing my own commitment to behave in a way compatible with caring and appealing to the hearer to consider what he is doing. . . I certainly mean to express my own commitment, and [to explain that] not only do I feel this way but that our family does, that our community does, that our culture does.⁸⁰

Noddings defines her 'ethics of care' as being an innate expression of care which is conditioned, in part, by social environment. Noddings maintains that the impulse to care is innate, but that this innate potential must be directed by those within the moral agent's social environment.

⁸⁰Noddings, 91.

In my view, such an ethic would encounter difficulty in situations where cares collide, and in relations devoid of care. Noddings' response to this sort of criticism is to suggest that "for one who feels nothing, directly or by remembrance, we must prescribe re-education or exile."⁸¹ While many persons may need re-education and some may deserve exile, Noddings must explain why persons are morally obligated to 'feel something' towards persons to whom they are simply indifferent.

Noddings comments: "I feel the moral 'I must' when I recognize that my response will either enhance or diminish my ethical ideal."⁸² Many persons, not only ones needing re-education or deserving exile, would find this explanation simply insufficient. To devise moral theory that is limited to instances in which persons *care* is to render it inapplicable to much of public life.

When measured against universalist moral theories, the various forms of an 'ethic of care' seem insufficient in terms of applicability. While many persons would concede that a more *caring* society is a better society, most persons understand such ambitions as utopian. Nevertheless, feminine approaches to ethics do offer a general base upon which to make demands for the inclusion of women's moral experience in

⁸¹Noddings, 92

⁸²Noddings, 83.

devising theory. Such a base is not found in feminine approaches to ethics, as these approaches remain primarily political and because they refuse to identify with any form of female essentialism.

The applicability of an ethic of care may be confined to moral deliberation within the private sphere; however, this fact does not discount the plausibility of such an ethic providing an important conditioning influence on moral agents in the public sphere. In other words, individuals raised in a caring environment may be capable of greater 'care' in a moral deliberation when it is also primarily guided by the principles of an ethic of justice. I am suggesting that a *comprehensive* moral theory would accommodate both an ethics of care and an ethics of justice.

Chapter Three

A reconciliation of 'ethics of care' and 'ethics of justice'

Feminists of the feminine persuasion are provided with a strong base upon which to argue for the inclusion of emotional considerations in moral judgment. This base is constituted by the claim that women, either by nature, nurture, or both, have a greater capacity to understand, identify with, and participate in the act of 'caring.'

In keeping with a relational ontology, as well as epistemic proposals that suggest the incorporation of the distinctive experiences of women, feminine approaches to ethics emphasize the role of emotion in moral deliberation. The way in which traditional ethics tend to elevate the role of 'impartial reason' in arriving at moral decisions is critiqued by most feminists as a distortion of judgment. An alternative feminist perspective takes the reason/emotion dichotomy as artificial, and claims that both human capacities ought to be employed in moral deliberation.⁸³ I support this view, seeing both emotion and reason as components of moral judgment, serving as the ground for a reconciliation between the 'ethics of care' and the 'ethics of justice'.

⁸³Kathleen Wallace, "Reconstructing Judgment: Emotion and Moral Judgment," *Hypatia* vol. 8, no.3 (Summer 1993): 60.

The various forms of traditional moral theory—deontological ethics, utilitarianism, and contractarianism—all emphasize the role of ‘impartial reason’ as a heuristic means of arriving at moral judgment. Impartial reason is employed by these theories as a basis for a calculation of the utility of an act for society, for an application of the terms describing a universal categorical imperative, and for a description of the basis upon which contractual terms are to be devised. The role of impartial reason in these theories is certainly not without its merit, and it does in many instances accord with an intuitive sense of ‘fairness’.

The application of impartial reason in moral judgment cannot be discounted, since without it, neither principles, law, nor theory can be developed. To discount impartial reason altogether in moral deliberation would render judgment an inconsistent and arbitrary expression of sentiment. The feminist critique of the employment of impartial reason in moral deliberation does not seek to exclude it entirely, but rather attempts to expose the way in which traditional approaches have been prejudiced against the function of emotion in moral judgement.

Diana Tietjens Meyers describes the objective of feminist criticism as follows:

[It is]not to find reasons to repudiate impartial reason but rather to argue that it is best viewed as part of a repertory of reflective capacities that also includes empathy-based reflection and dissident speech and that each of these

capacities makes a distinctive contribution to moral reflection.⁸⁴

Feminists such as Meyers seek to form new conceptualizations of moral judgment that can accommodate the 'impartiality' of reason as well as the informed selectivity of emotion. By using the phrase 'informed selectivity', I mean to describe the way in which emotion can serve to provide the moral agent with criteria—other than impartiality—upon which to base a decision. In arriving at moral judgment emotion can offer epistemic privilege by discriminating between what is—and what is not—relevant in considering emotions.

The controversy regarding the roles of reason and emotion in moral deliberation constitutes an epistemic problem. Some feminists, namely those who advocate a feminine approach to ethics, attempt to establish the inclusion of emotive considerations in moral judgment and theory. Most feminists are supportive of such attempts, especially feminists of the feminine persuasion because their perspective is founded on the premise that the distinct (subjective and often emotional) experiences of women offer epistemic privilege. These feminists argue that women possess an enlightened view in moral matters by virtue of the fact that their lives, for various reasons, are characterized by their capacity to

⁸⁴Diana Tietjens Meyers, "Moral Reflection: Beyond Impartial Reason." *Hypatia* vol. 8, no 3 (Summer 1993):23.

'care' for others.

Kathleen Wallace offers the following argument in support of the role of emotion in moral deliberation:

Objectivity in morality has to do with identification and assessment of what is relevant to a moral (or legal) "verdict" (and may include feelings, emotions, preferences, and the like). The key concept is *relevance*, not impartiality or perspectivelessness. "Impartiality" is a specific epistemological, moral, or legal value or standard. Whether it has anything to do with "objectivity" depends on the context. It may, in some contexts, identify what is relevant, but in others it may not and may even obscure what is relevant. Feeling and emotion select and may be "objective." What matters is what and how they select, not that they are selective. Of course, this approach to "objectivity" will not guarantee the correctness of an emotional judgment; it would just allow it a fair hearing.⁸⁵

In her argument Wallace suggests that 'relevance' is the key to understanding how emotion serves in moral deliberation. Her point is strong: relevance is a good criterion by which to gauge whether or not some factor ought to be included in the search to 'know'. While feelings may be entirely irrelevant to matters concerning the physical laws of nature, it would seem intuitively correct to accommodate 'feelings' in both societal laws and social conventions, since human subjects are sentient beings whose feelings are of direct relevance in moral deliberation.

⁸⁵Kathleen Wallace, "Reconstructing Judgment: Emotion and Moral Judgment." *Hypatia* vol. 8, no.3 (Summer 1993): 63.

Some may argue that the question of whether an act is morally good or right has nothing to do with how someone feels. In the case of deontological ethics, it is argued that 'impartial reason' is to inform us as to which duties we are to fulfill, regardless of any emotional dictates. Wallace's counter to this sort of criticism is to claim that she does not seek to discount duties or moral prescriptives informed by way of impartial reason, but rather maintains that "excluding feeling or sympathy as judicative defines judgment too narrowly."⁸⁶

Wallace argues for a reconceptualization of judgment, in which judgments are understood to be made by the 'self'—an *individual*, rather than that individual's faculty of reason or emotion alone.⁸⁷ She denies outright the reason/emotion dichotomy in the process of judging. Judgment, for Wallace, is not even necessarily cognitive; it can be asserted through action that is primarily expressed by emotion.⁸⁸ Wallace contends that "a failure to be explicit about principles is not by definition a greater moral failure than a failure to feel in certain ways."⁸⁹

⁸⁶Wallace, 66.

⁸⁷Wallace, 69.

⁸⁸Wallace, 70.

⁸⁹Wallace, 67.

Emotions are not without cognitive content, and much cognitive activity involves emotions. While the emotion/reason dichotomy may be well-founded in relation to physical pleasures and abstract reasoning, the dichotomy is not so evident in moral deliberation. Thinkers such as Wallace are expected to be able to articulate the manner in which moral judgments -- which involve both reason and emotion -- are to be validated and justified.⁹⁰

Wallace concedes that her position does not live up to the above criterion, but suggests that her perspective opens dialogue which could move toward the construction of an adequate moral theory.⁹¹ While such dialogue can contribute to the creation of an 'adequate moral theory', thinkers such as Wallace may find themselves unable to articulate how emotion can function in an 'objective' way. To attempt to 'justify' or 'validate' moral judgments that involve emotion may be difficult for the same reasons that is difficult to explain to others the shade of green one describes as *olive*.

Diana Tietjens Meyers takes a position on this matter similar to Wallace's. She describes a moral deliberator "as a self that draws on empathic and dissident capacities, as well as on impartial rational

⁹⁰Wallace, 76.

⁹¹Wallace, 76.

ones.”⁹² Critical of the Rawlsian-type of ‘unidimensional rational deliberator’, Meyers advocates moral judgments that do not ‘calcify into absolute principles’ and which enhances the possibility of moral reform.⁹³ Meyers adds the following:

By replacing the monistic moral subject with a complex moral subject capable of empathy-based reflection and dissident speech, we can capture a uniqueness in the distinctive blend of an individual’s moral capacities and resources. Though it is necessary, of course, to set parameters of toleration for individuality, it is a mistake to seek a universal moral calculus. Not only is moral reflection messier, it is also more vital and more fascinating than many philosophers have heretofore thought.⁹⁵

In Meyers’ view, the moral subject is able to make moral judgments employing both the capacities to reason and to empathize is better equipped than is the moral deliberator, who depends on impartial reason alone. The underlying epistemic claim in Meyers’ perspective is that the capacity to empathize—to perceive another’s emotion—offers insight in determining the moral worth of an act.

The task for feminists supportive of Meyers is to substantiate the emotional component in moral deliberation without appealing to female

⁹²Diana Tietjens Meyers, “Moral Reflection: Beyond Impartial Reason.” *Hypatia* vol.8, no 3 (Summer 1993): 41.

⁹³Meyers, 41.

⁹⁵Meyers, 41.

essentialism. To do otherwise is to be vulnerable to the charge that men are able to recognize the crucial role that emotion plays in moral judgment and that the development of an 'adequate moral theory' does not necessitate the inclusion of women's experience as such. In other words, a sound moral theory, one that accounts adequately for emotion can be devised in gender-neutral terms. Most feminists oppose the development of moral theory in gender-neutral terms. Their worry is that gender-neutrality in moral theory results in a failure to attend to the unique forms of oppression faced by women and that such neutrality masks a pervasive male bias.

A further difficulty with Meyers' perspective is that it lacks a description of the way in which moral judgments—arrived at by employing the capacity to empathize—can be evaluated. Like Wallace, Meyers needs to explain how one is to empathize in the *right* way. Wallace and Meyers may have produced persuasive argument in support of the inclusion of emotion in devising moral theory, but they have not provided a description of what would constitute an 'adequate moral theory'.

The underlying epistemic claim found in the 'feminine' argument is that the gender of the knower is epistemically relevant—that women by virtue of their gender (and all of the qualities it entails) have a special

insight into morality. Feminists who refuse to appeal to this sort of feminine essentialism need to explain how the feminist perspective offers epistemic insight not found in traditional forms of moral theory.

The problematic involved in appealing, or failing to appeal, to a female essentialism is crucial, for it identifies the fundamental difference between the feminine and the feminine approach to ethics. While the feminine meets theoretical difficulty in the task of defining her ontological and epistemological stance, the feminine approach is hampered by political criticism. This political criticism suggests that advocating a female essentialism at any theoretical level inevitably contributes to the oppression of women.

As noted in Chapter One of this thesis, Lorraine Code argues that idealizing feminine traits on an epistemic level is hazardous, in that it can limit women's knowledge to matters related to the feminine. Code suggests that this limitation and categorization of women's knowledge serves to devalue the perspectives of women, by unjustifiably defining women's knowledge claims as features of a relatively unimportant private sphere.

Joan Ringelheim makes a similar criticism: stating, "If we glorify the feminine from a presumably feminine perspective, how do we avoid

valorizing oppression in order to criticize and organize against it?"⁹⁶ Yet another example of this sort of politically-oriented criticism is made by Claudia Card, who asks whether "in articulating the ethic of care[,] is Gilligan picking up on something in women's voices genuinely analogous to what Nietzsche heard, or thought he heard, in Christianity —something he identified as a slave morality?"⁹⁷

These criticisms of the feminine approach to ethics suggest is that attributing characteristics or qualities stereotypically associated with the 'feminine' threatens to further women's oppression expressed and exhibited precisely in characteristics. These qualities -- sometimes referred to as 'womanly virtues' -- are suspect for thinkers who perceive them as ideals of patriarchal social conditioning, designed for the sole purpose of facilitating subservience.

While feminists critical of the feminine approach do not consider the capacity to 'care' to be intrinsically harmful, they do warn against establishing 'feminine' traits as ideal. The feminine worry is that valorizing 'womanly virtues' risks the condemnation of women who do

⁹⁶Joan Ringelheim, "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconstruction of Research." *Signs* vol. 10, no. 3 (Winter 1985): 759.

⁹⁷Claudia Card, *Virtues and moral luck*. Working Series 1, no. 4, Institute for Legal Studies, University of Wisconsin, Madison Law School. 1985. 11.

not meet this standard. Thus, for example, women who decide not to have children are depicted as uncaring, selfish, not womanly, and immoral.

Joy Kroeger-Mappes refers to this inequity as the 'double bind.'⁹⁸ Women are expected to adhere to both the ethic of rights as well as the ethic of care—while men, for the most part, are expected to adhere only to the ethic of rights. To put it simply, Mappes correctly identifies the fact that our society does not expect men to 'care'.

The historical and ongoing oppression of women needs to be a primary moral/social concern. The fact that women have endured all forms of abuse and exploitation condemns society as a whole, and the institutions upon which society is built. This oppression is particularly repugnant when one considers that women which have done the most for others in terms of self-sacrifice while suffering oppression to the greatest extent.

I am in complete agreement with the feminist assertion that the oppression of women is a moral concern. The moral experiences of women have epistemic import and ought to be accommodated by moral theory. Nevertheless, I maintain that the founding of a moral perspective

⁹⁸Joy Kroeger-Mappes, "The Ethic of Care vis-a-vis the Ethic of Rights: A Problem for Contemporary Moral Theory." *Hypatia* vol. 9, no.3 (Summer 1994). 124.

on any form of social oppression distorts moral judgment. The difficulty with the feminite—as opposed to the feminine— approach to ethics is that it mistakenly introduces political interest and strategies into the realm of epistemology and moral theory.

Code is correct in her claim that epistemology can have a political dynamic; the history of science is marked with various examples of how political interests have impeded the acquisition of knowledge. However, in no way does this support Code's critique of female essentialism as hazardous for epistemology. A social devaluation of the role of emotion in coming to 'know' does not discount the validity of such a notion. Nor should it.

Ringelheim's point—which questions how the feminine is to be valorized without in turn valorizing the oppression out of which it has been defined—simply illustrates the difficulty in articulating a feminine approach to ethics. The danger to which she refers exists, but it does not constitute justification for a rejection of an appeal to female essentialism. Claudia Card's association of female essentialism with Nietzsche's 'slave morality' is illustrative of how viewing moral theory exclusively through a political lens can distort a perspective. There are many parallels that can be drawn between 'female humility' and 'Christian humility,' but this is really beside the point.

The fact that making a moral judgment can divest an individual of social status is not relevant in assessing the moral worth of a judgment. Such judgment may constitute bad business or bad politics, even though it can be a good moral judgment. Christian prescriptions regarding forgiveness may disadvantage the faithful economically or politically, but this situation does not affect the moral worth of such teachings.

The challenge facing advocates of 'feminine ethics' rests on whether they can present a sustainable argument that incorporates both moral and political theory. All political theories (and movements) make reference and are in a way connected to some moral theory. Many of the concerns that find their way into moral theory are often quite politically-charged. For this reason, it is difficult at times to keep political interest out of issues moral theory.

Specific political interests tend to manifest bias (expressed by whatever group defines itself in relation to that interest). I contend that such bias obscures moral judgment because of its focus on simply one form of injustice. Thinkers who concern themselves with moral theory are required to speak to, and for, all of those within their community. Moral theory must be concerned with *social* justice—that is justice for all members of society.

A politics, on the other hand, is free to endorse a specific group and present argument aimed at empowering such a group. The bias inherent in political movements is explicit and the primary duty of leaders is to establish and ensure the special interests of their constituency. This situation does not entail that the rights of others are to be intentionally violated by these leaders. Nevertheless, when the rights of others oppose the rights or privileges of their group most political leaders ultimately serve their own group.

Political and moral *theory* -- as opposed to politics as *activity* -- is required to be impartial. These theories are to devise social structure provide all citizens with an equal measure of justice. On a theoretical level, it is not possible to devise a social structure that empowers one group without disadvantaging another. Attempts to compensate for social inequity can result only in complicating an already complex problem as the identity of those oppressed is in continual flux. For instance, the historical oppression of women changes with time. This sort of change cannot be accounted for by a feminist politic which generalizes the category of 'women'.

The feminine approach to ethics is merely politics. Refusing to define the founding tenets of a corresponding ontology or epistemology, feminine approaches to ethics amount to critical proposals designed to

expose male bias in traditional moral theory. Some of these proposals are potentially constructive, in that they inspire new dialogue which may eventuate in promising alternative perspectives. However, due to the fundamental political focus that emphasizes the 'empowerment of women', the feminine approach to ethics remains a political movement, one that is willing to sacrifice 'social justice' in situations where it may collide with feminine goals of empowerment.

The feminine approach faces a different set of difficulties. Its crucial challenge is to its applicability to, or at least establish some form of connection with, the public sphere. Most ethical theorists will concede that intimate relations are not suitably dealt with under the prescriptions offered by the 'ethics of rights/justice'. Conversely, the feminine approach to ethics, with its emphasis on a relational ontology and a 'caring' moral agent, does seem suitable for the private sphere.

The true challenge facing the 'ethic of care' comes from critics who, while willing to accept the viability of an ethic of care serving the private sphere, nonetheless maintain that such an ethic is inapplicable in the public sphere. These critics simply do not believe that *care* can be *legislated*. The claim they make is not that 'care' does not exist in the public sphere, but rather that care in the public sphere tends to be confined within sub-social categories such as race, class, religion, and

ethnicity. Of course, there are exceptions to this general rule—enlightened individuals are capable of recognizing commonality within a diverse society and exhibit a corresponding positive sentiment. However, history would suggest that social tolerance is contingent upon an abundance of goods (i.e. standard of living).

While a moral agent may depend on ‘an ethic of care’ for moral deliberation within the private sphere, there would undoubtedly be times when an ethic of justice would have to be invoked within that same sphere. As Virginia Held suggests in the following passage,

Justice is badly needed in the family as well as in the state: in a more equitable division of labor between women and men in the household, in the protection of vulnerable family members and respect for their individuality. In the practice of caring for children or the elderly, justice requires us to avoid paternalistic and maternalistic domination.⁹⁹

‘Care’ without rules or principles can be exploitive and oppressive, even in the *private* sphere.

This inclusion of moral judgment guided by an ethic of justice in the *private* sphere is neither a new nor contentious idea. Most thinkers would readily concede that an ethic of care and an ethic of justice can be reconciled within the private sphere. Yet, the difficulties of devising a way in which the same could be done in the *public* sphere remain.

⁹⁹Virginia Held, “Symposium On Care and Justice: The Meshing of Care and Justice.” *Hypatia* vol.10, no.2 (Spring 1995): 129.

Jean P. Rumsey suggests that “the perspective of both justice and care are independently necessary for an adequate understanding of moral experience, in ‘private’ as well as ‘public’ contexts.”¹⁰⁰ Rumsey contends that the justice/care dichotomy can be avoided by learning how to “employ both orientations to inform practice ... to forward ideals of justice through caring work.”¹⁰¹

While the position Rumsey takes is appealing, it is in need of further articulation. Like other feminists who seek to reconcile care with justice, Rumsey assumes that care already exists. This is a relatively safe assumption since care exists in the private realm but yet not so in the public. Before arguing in support for reconciling care and justice, Rumsey must establish the existence of care in the public sphere.

The various versions of an ‘ethic of care’ discussed in this thesis are all based ontologically on some form of intimate relation, be it mother-child, marital, or friendship-based. All of these relations are primarily defined within the private sphere. Rumsey’s perspective entails taking the conception of care conceived of in the private sphere and applying it to the public. I am not at odds with such ambition, but I

¹⁰⁰Jean P. Rumsey, “Justice, Care, and Questionable Dichotomies.” *Hypatia* vol. 12, no.1 (Winter 1997): 100.

¹⁰¹Rumsey, 108, 110.

do maintain that care discussed in a public contexts needs to be qualified—that is, it must be ontologically-based.

To understand how care is facilitated in the public sphere several distinctions need to be made. Care can be grouped in three general ways, which I refer to as primal, relational, and abstracted. 'Primal care' is evidenced in the care expressed by most mothers towards their infants. It seems obvious that this form of care is a manifestation of nature, for without it, the human species would not have survived. Primal care does not owe its existence to social conditioning and is readily found expressed in the private sphere.

While this basic form of care primarily belongs to the private sphere, it is of vital importance to the public sphere. Historically, women have contributed to all societies by extending care and guidance to their children. In this way, women have indirectly introduced the ethic of care to the public sphere. The value of this social contribution is crucial, for the child benefitted by this care is more likely to follow the prescriptions of an ethic of justice in the public sphere, and more importantly, such a child is more inclined to extend care to others in this sphere. In contrast, children who have not received familial care, but instead, endured cruelty, are far more likely to violate prescriptions of justice and are less likely to care for others. Evidence in support of these factual claims can

be recognized in the diverse experiences of life. While some may contest these claims and cite instances that constitute an exception to the general rule, the precepts of common sense support these conclusions.

The value of primal care in the public sphere is immeasurable, even though it goes unnoticed and unappreciated for the most part. Individuals enter the public sphere with the capacity to empathize, due largely to this contribution made by women. Primal care is thus extended into the public sphere and can be understood to serve as a foundation for an ethic of justice.

The second form of care is categorized as 'relational care' -- a care found among relatives and friends. Relational care is founded within the private sphere and is also transferred into the public sphere to an extent. Extended networks of relatives and friends contribute to a sense of community. Much like primal care, relational care serves as a foundation for an ethic of justice in the public sphere in virtue of its contribution to the development of a communal sentiment.

In addition to the migration of persons capable of care or empathy in the public sphere (via the ethic of care in the private sphere), there remains a need for social mechanisms which can propagate and maintain care within the public sphere -- a formidable challenge for societies constituted by disparate identities and values. The third form of

care is intended to compensate for the challenge that difference presents. I refer to this form of care as an 'abstracted care.' It is defined by the capacity of individuals to identify with and adopt a caring predisposition towards persons with whom they share no intimate relation.

This abstracted care is primarily motivated by a sense of community, expressed in varying degrees among individuals, as well as within entire communities themselves. While some enlightened individuals can feel abstracted care, not only for other persons, but also for other species, many persons lack this sensibility. Abstracted care is further psychologically limited by its dependency upon a relatively high standard of living. Such care tends to be minimized when persons are faced with the ravages of poverty.

Another challenge facing abstracted care is the economic, religious, and political divisions found within societies. Individuals who identify with those groupings tend to view their respective interests as opposed in many instances. The resulting social tensions further entrench the differences amongst these groups and serve to limit the capacity to care within the boundaries of these sub-social affiliations.

If care is to be reconciled with justice within the public sphere, it must be developed in the form of abstracted care. Primal and relational care may produce 'good' citizens, but abstracted care is needed to form a

sense of community. Without a sense of community, the public sphere is destined to adopt an ethic of 'non-interference' at best, and some form of totalitarianism at worst. For some, 'non-interference' may seem 'fair', but for others, it is tantamount to, for instance, one having the right to starve without state or individual interference. I contend that 'justice' does not equate with non-interference and that social cohesion is dependent, both, upon the empathetic capacities of individuals and the state, or community.

The categorization of care as primal, relational, and abstracted provides a clearer illustration of the way in which care supports justice in the public sphere, externally as well as internally. However, it is important to note that the reconciliation of the care and justice perspectives is primarily dependent upon abstracted care. Unless a society expresses an adequate degree of commonality in the form of identity and values, care cannot exist. While abstracted care has the potential to be extended internationally, it is limited in this same manner.

The public reconciliation of the care and justice perspectives requires the existence of all three forms of care. The underlying contention is simply that an ethic of justice is an inadequate moral theory on its own; the *application* of the justice perspective requires both

the existence of persons capable of empathy and a sense of community.

This reconciliation is not an integration of two distinct principle-based theories. Rather, it is the application of principles supported by a discriminating emotive content. Or, conversely it can be understood as being social sentiment guided by principles of justice. In Rumsey's words, justice and care are "different orientations revealing different aspects of moral reality, as independent orientations, both necessary in order to understand complex dimensions of moral experience."¹⁰²

The role that care plays in this reconciliation is difficult to define. Nevertheless, it can be identified by simply evaluating whether persons within a society have an empathetic capacity and whether care is expressed by way of a sense of community. The difficulty of articulating an 'ethic of care' has to do with the subjective nature of sentiment. While 'care' defies articulation in principled terms, it can be described in such ontological terms as "mother-child", or "friendship-based care". In other words, while principles cannot account for care, its origin can be described by identifying the relations which foster care.

¹⁰²Jean P. Rumsey, "Justice, Care, and Questionable Dichotomies." *Hypatia* vol. 12, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 101.

By advocating the inclusion of emotive criteria in considering moral judgement, the feminine approaches to ethics provide a basis for a reconciliation between justice and care. The distinctive moral experiences of women described by the feminine approach are ontologically and epistemologically based on some form of care. In this way, the feminine approach introduces the ethic of care into the public sphere by way of transference from the private. This transference supports the inclusion of the distinctive moral experiences of women in moral theory. While this still situation does not provide grounds for abstracted care—necessary for the propagation and maintenance of a sense of community—such care is dependent upon other factors, which I shall note in the conclusion of this thesis.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

If we accept the notion that experience is of vital importance in the process of coming to know, then we must concede that the sex of the knower (and in particular, the distinctive moral experience of women) has epistemological import. The feminine approach to ethics is grounded on the claim that women's moral experience is distinctive. From this perspective, I have argued that these distinctive experiences entail a female capacity (natural, or conditioned) to care/empathize with others. This capacity is described as a consequence of a relational ontology from which originates the 'ethic of care'.

The inclusion of women's moral experience in the development of moral theory is best served by the 'ethic of care', in virtue of the fact that it provides an articulation of the distinctiveness of the female voice. In describing this distinctiveness, the ethic of care lends a strong epistemological and ontological base upon which feminists can construct their case for the representation of women's voice in moral theory.

In contrast, the feminine approach to ethics does not provide a strong epistemic and ontological base, the result of which is a reluctance to appeal to any form of female essentialism. The feminine approach

introduces a valuable criticism of traditional forms of moral theory and describes the way in which gender bias has infiltrated theory. However, as a result of an emphasis on political concerns, feminine approaches to ethics do not articulate the requisite epistemic or ontological stance.

The feminine approach to ethics can also be understood to serve feminist concerns in regards to the challenge of including women's distinctive voice in devising societal agreement. The history of oppression describes a *specific* group of women that has been exploited and subjugated, and all proposed remedies to this social malaise must take such specificity into account. Social identity is multifaceted—several divisive factors serve to define identity. For this reason, theory intended to rid society of particular forms of oppression must be sensitive to all social factors defining identity.

The inclusion of women's moral experience in devising moral theory (via the ethic of care) can be understood as a counter to the specific forms of oppression faced by many women. However, in order to translate moral theory into the moral practice of a society, a level of shared values must exist. The theory must be based on some commonly shared tenets and it must identify what counts as virtue.

Historically, virtue has been associated with gender. While such associations may be supported to an extent by biological determinism,

human adaptability ought not to be undervalued. Virtue need not be associated with gender—courage is not the exclusive property of the male sex. The feminine approach to ethics, with its emphasis on the ‘caring’ capacity, has been critiqued by some feminists as being supportive of a conception of ‘woman’ that entails adoption of virtues of *subjugation*.

While I can appreciate the feminine political concern in regard to the subjugation of women, I contend that virtues are to be defined without reference to questions of empowerment. In other words, whatever quality a society identifies as virtuous ought to be perceived as positive, regardless of whether such a quality benefits the individual politically or economically. Virtue is social by definition, and as such it cannot be exhibited outside of a social context.

The discussion of virtue is problematic, especially in regard to gender associations, for there seems to be two alternative sets of virtues, one of which is empowering, while the other is conducive to exploitation. Virtues belonging to both of these idealized alternative sets are seldom found expressed by concrete individuals. The set of virtues traditionally associated with men can be described as those possessed by ‘autonomous, economic man’, while the other set are historically referred to as ‘womanly virtues’. The feminine approach to ethics correctly identifies the gender traits associated with these virtues, as traits that

originate in and propagate male bias in moral theory. The male influence has dominated the development of moral theory. Consequently, traditional forms of ethics tend to promote the rational and autonomous over and above the caring and relational.

I maintain that women and men ought to be encouraged to exhibit virtues belonging to either set. However, I do not believe society benefits when it conditions individuals to develop *only* the 'autonomous man' set of virtues. A society devoid of what has been traditionally referred to as 'womanly virtues' is truncated and immature. The feminine approach to ethics rejects the association of 'womanly virtues' with female gender, and tends to promote the virtues of autonomous man as necessary qualities for the empowerment of women. Consequently, more women today are conditioned to exhibit the virtues of rational, economic man, while fewer women and virtually no men are being encouraged to exhibit the so-called 'womanly virtues'.

Without feminists who advocate a feminine approach to ethics, the 'womanly virtues' would be further discounted and the common understanding of family would be lost. The social fabric is torn by an emphasis on personal development and empowerment over and above and at the expense of communitarian values. In practical terms, the end result of such a social pattern amounts to a definition of virtue qualified

by economic class. While the economic elite (both male and female representatives) are to be conditioned to exhibit the virtues of autonomous, economic man, others, namely women of lower economic status, will be *paid* to express the 'womanly virtues'.

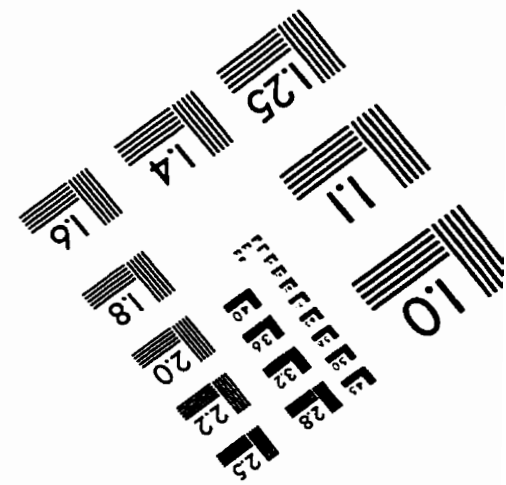
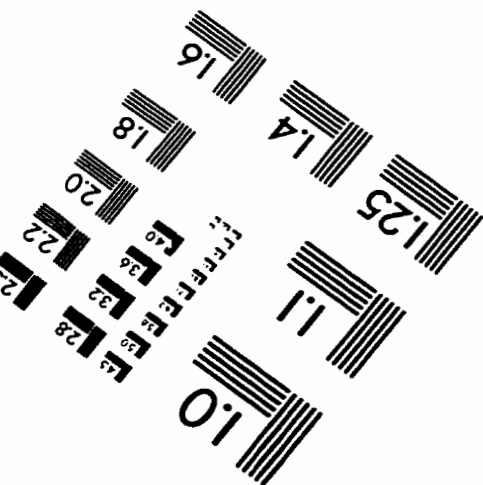
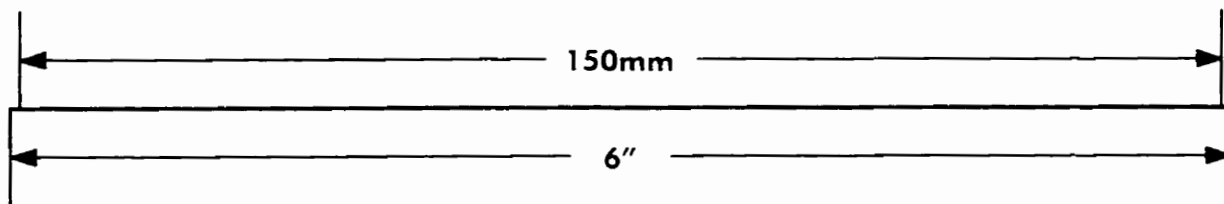
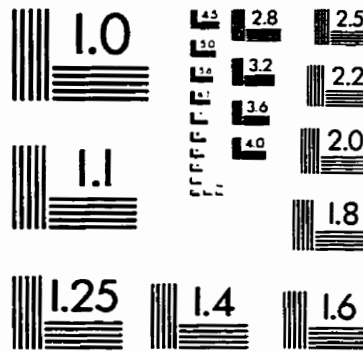
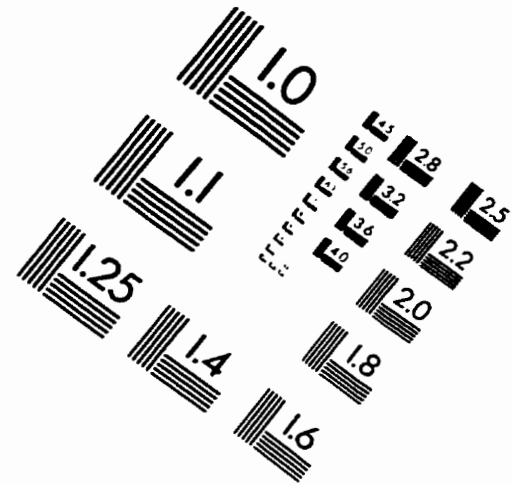
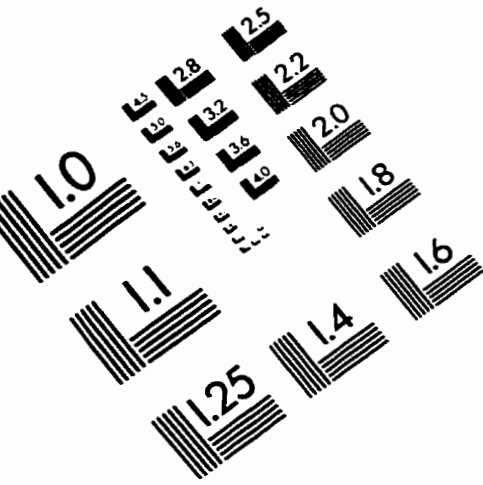
The feminine approach to ethics counters the continued devaluation of the social virtues exhibited by the exploited and subjugated women of our society. Proponents of the ethic of care contribute the distinctive voice of women to moral dialogue and thereby provide an epistemic and ontological stance upon which the interests of women can be represented in moral theory.

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IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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