

Woman-Centered Ethics

gender, ontology, society and power

-Presented by Howard Leznoff

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Some Challenges, Problems, Limitations:

Gender Binarism: For many contemporary feminist ethicists, the traditional "male/female" gender binary is problematic -- reductive and oppressive-- given the full range of gender identities and the social orders and power inequities attached to those. Therefore a "woman-centred ethics" in and of itself is reductive.

Theories of Intersectionality: Identity is "multiply situated", and gender oppression is one form of subjugation among many. A distinctly "woman-centred" ethics is incomplete to the extent that it ignores oppression based on other factors such as race, class, non-binary sexuality, ableism, etc. (Some early 20th suffragettes, for example, fought for the franchise for white women, but ignored or were hostile to extending the vote to black men and women.)

"Presented by Howard Leznoff": Some obvious limitations here. Even conceiving of myself as a struggling feminist "ally", I identify as male and recognize the limits of transcending that gender-subjectivity.

WOMEN-CENTRED ETHICS AS METAETHICS:

Metaethics steps back from normative or applied ethics to examine the **origins, bases and fundamental nature** of ethical systems and judgements.

Where do ethics come from and what is their essential nature?

Is their source transcendental agency, evolutionary biology, social construction and convention, brute power, and so on...?

Are ethical systems and judgements metaphysically objective, culturally relative, personally subjective?

By exercising which faculties do human beings become "ethical": reason, moral sentiment/empathy, spirituality, intuition, narrative sensibility, wu wei?

Woman-centered ethics foreground these notable features:

- the political/social oppression and subjugation of women
- challenges to the idea that traditional ethical systems are "neutral" rather than gendered
- affirm, assert the value of women's experiences and modes of moral engagement, and challenge theories that undervalue women as mature moral agents (Freud, Kohlberg)
- challenge traditionally "male" understandings of selfhood
- assert that traditional and male-centred ethics both misconstrue and privilege traditionally-conceived "male" faculties like reason (at the expense of other faculties)

Some Big Recurring Questions for Woman-Centered Ethics

1. **Separatism:** One premise of woman-centered ethics is that men and women have, historically at the very least, **experienced the world differently**, and have been impacted differently by not only systems of power but by systems of thought, including ethics.

Generally, how accurate is it to conceive of psychologies, approaches, predispositions or ontologies that might be termed more or less "masculine" or "feminine"?

Big Question 2:

2. **Essentialism:** If experience (generally) and ethics (more specifically) are differently gendered, to what extent are those differences grounded in **biology**, neurology, **psychology**, culture and **social conditioning**, the dynamics and structures of **power ...?**

And what are the normative implications of the answers to these questions?

Traditional “Masculine” Ethical Virtues	Traditional “Feminine” Ethical Virtues
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● logic, reason, judgement (the mind) ● independence, separation ● objectivity, removal of self from the issue ● autonomy, separation, self-assertion /aggression as self-actualisation (as leadership, power, dominance) ● legalism, rules, “contracts” as “justice” ● abstraction, universals that transcend particulars ● <u>Domain, sphere of influence</u>: “public life”: politics, economics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● emotion, nurturing, caring (the body) ● interdependence, connection ● subjectivity, empathy, involvement of self in issue ● interdependence, relationships, the self in relational context, (“the ethics of care”, "relational ethics") ● flexibility, personalization, intuition ● the concrete, particular and situational ● <u>Domain, sphere of influence</u>: “private life”: the interpersonal, the domestic, child-rearing

The differing attributes and approaches noted above are traditionally/culturally “gender associated”; they are not, according to most theorists who explore them, *exclusive to either gender*.

Reason and Emotion and Early Feminist Thinkers

The stereotype: "Rational Man" and "Emotional Woman"

Enlightenment early feminist thinkers, embraced the "age of reason" and challenged the social position ascribed to them -- and its ontological assumptions.

A central concern for these thinkers was the question of the social structures and "education" that overall discouraged the **development of the reason** in women --and encouraged traits that reinforced subordination. Under these social constructs, **emotion** was associated **with triviality and weakness**.



“My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like **rational creatures**, instead of flattering their *fascinating* graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone... I wish to persuade women to endeavour to **acquire strength, both mind and body**, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of **weakness**...”

— Mary Wollstonecraft, from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792)

An Ontology Of Emotions:

"...those that are most agitated by their passions are not those who know them best."
-Rene Descartes

"Emotions vary so much in a number of dimensions --transparency, intensity, behavioural expression, object-directedness, and susceptibility to rational assessment --as to cast doubt on the assumption that they have anything in common." (Stanford, Emotions /Archived 2013)

Still, philosophers and thinkers have posited several theories including the **physiological, evolutionary, behaviouralist, perceptual, cognitive and anthropological.**

The Ontology of Emotion, some features and approaches

The Physiological: Many emotions are grounded in **the body's immediate and involuntary physiological reactions**. We see something grotesque that "turns our stomach" or we suddenly encounter something unfamiliar that "startles" us. These are essentially hard-wired biological reactions.

The Evolutionary (related to the above): These emotions are "universal, are driven by the basic needs of organisms such as **mating, defence or avoidance of predators, and social affiliation**. All complex mammals require swift, relatively stereotyped responses to these challenges".

Ontology of Emotion

"I can't help how I feel."

Perceptual Theories:

- a) raise the question of the **validity** of emotional reactions. Can emotional reactions be "right or wrong"?
- b) posit that we each build up an "**emotional repertoire**", a set of emotional filters and responses available to us that affect the way we experience --both perceive and respond to-- situations. These are grounded in **narratives**, stories about the world and ourselves in it.

If I was told as a child that "ants are homicidal" or that "boys who cry are sissies and worthy of contempt", or that "left-handed people are evil and dangerous" my reactions to encounters with (or stories of) ants or crying boys or lefties would shaped by these narratives.

The Ontology of Emotion

Related to perceptual theories, stories we've internalized of ourselves in the world, is the distinction between **"transient mental states"** and **"mental emotions"**.

Transient mental states are temporary emotions anchored to a specific situation, circumstance or stimulus.

Mental dispositions refer a person's general propensity to feel or perceive or react to situations in directed ways: For example, we might say that Mr. Johnson, by disposition, is generally an "anxious" or "envious" or "easy-going" person.

The bases for mental dispositions can be some combo of the biological/neurological, the biographical-psychological, and/or the sociological, socially-constructed.

Ontology of Emotion

Cognitive Theories:

- a) Emotions are "intentional", have an object. "We cannot be angry without being angry *at something/someone* and often we have made judgments about those objects."
- b) Some emotions are grounded in "awareness, judgements, beliefs". *Grief*, for example, is based on a "judgement" that the thing lost is "valuable"; *pride* that an accomplishment is worth achieving
- c) Some emotions are based on **ethical judgement**; "outrage" or "indignation" or "resentment", for examples are preceded by "moral judgement".

Unlike the **baser more instinctual** emotions --being startled, feeling sexual desire, being disgusted vomit--, some emotions are grounded in thought, ideas, cognition, and/or judgement. (Solomon, "The Nature of Emotion")

"The Ethics of Care/ 'Feminine' Ethics" dominated the debate among feminist ethicists during the late 70's, 80's and 90's

propounded most notably by Carol Gillian (b. 1936) and Nel Noddings (b. 1929)

"Ethics of care is a feminist approach to ethics. It challenges traditional moral theories as male centric and problematic to the extent they omit or downplay values and virtues usually culturally associated with women or with roles that are often cast as **'feminine'**." (Laura D'Olimpio, Ethics)

The Self and The Ethics of Care:

"Gilligan's research suggests that 'separation and individuation are critically tied to gender identity'..."

Further, the development of masculinity typically involves valuing **autonomy, rights, disconnection from others, and independence**, while seeing other persons and intimate relationships as dangers or obstacles to pursuing those values. This perspective is referred to as the “**perspective of justice**” (Held 1995; Blum 1988).

Women, in Gilligan's studies, were as likely to express the perspective of justice as they were to express a perspective that **valued intimacy, responsibility, relationships, and caring for others**, while seeing **autonomy** as “the illusory and dangerous quest” (Gilligan 1982, 48), in tension with the values of attachment. This perspective is known as the **perspective of 'care'** ” (Friedman 1991; Driver 2005). (Norlock)

Ethics: Whose Voice?

"In both these approaches to ethics [utilitarian and deontological], reason is given priority; emotion is ignored. But the “other voice” Gilligan heard in her research.. was one which, on the contrary, emphasised the importance of **feeling** in moral decision-making, **In particular, it emphasised the importance of care and the presence of relationship in ethical decision-making.**" (Palmer)

Ontology of Emotion, some conclusions

"An acceptable philosophical theory of emotions should be able to account at least for the following nine characteristics.

Emotions are typically conscious phenomena; yet

- they typically involve more pervasive bodily manifestations than other conscious states
- they vary along a number of dimensions: intensity, type and range of intentional objects
- they are reputed to be antagonists of rationality but also
- they play an indispensable role in determining the quality of life
- they contribute crucially to defining our ends and priorities
- they play a crucial role in the regulation of social life
- they protect us from an excessively slavish devotion to narrow conceptions of rationality
- they have a central place in moral education and the moral life

Anna Julia Cooper: Scholar, Feminist, Activist (1858-1963)



... women are more quiet. They don't feel called to mount a barrel and harangue by the hour every time they imagine they have produced an idea.

— Anna Julia Cooper —

"...In place of these assumptions they have instead embraced the **ontological assumption** that the **more connected the self is** to others, the **better the self is**; and the **epistemological assumption** that the more **particular, concrete, partial and emotional knowledge** is, the more likely it represents the world as it truly is. Thus it is not surprising that "communal woman" rather than "autonomous man" appears in almost every women-centred approach to ethics." (Stanford, 2009)

Nussbaum argues that emotions are a centerpiece of moral philosophy and that any substantive theory of ethics necessitates a substantive understanding of the emotions.

“A lot is at stake in the decision to view emotions... as intelligent responses to the perception of value. If emotions are suffused with intelligence and discernment, and if they contain in themselves an awareness of value or importance, they cannot, for example, easily be sidelined in accounts of ethical judgment, as so often they have been in the history of philosophy.

Instead of viewing morality as a system of principles to be grasped by the detached intellect, and emotions as motivations that either support or subvert our choice to act according to principle, we will have to consider emotions as part and parcel of the system of ethical reasoning. We cannot plausibly omit them, once we acknowledge that emotions include in their content judgments that can be true or false, and good or bad guides to ethical choice. We will have to grapple with the messy material of grief and love, anger and fear, and the role these tumultuous experiences play in thought about the good and the just.”

- Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*

[...]

“A and B, struggling with a moral decision, are two different persons with different factual histories, different projects and aspirations and different ideals. It may indeed be right, morally right, for A to do X and B to do not-X. We may, that is, connect right and wrong to the ethical ideal. This does not cast us into relativism, because the ideal contains at its heart a component that is universal: Maintenance of the caring relation” -- Noddings, Nel (1982) *Caring* (California University Press) p.85-6

<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/users/philosophy/awaymave/401/feminist.htm>

However, perhaps the most salient difference between men and women in emotional behavior, dwarfing any measurable differences in cognitive and emotion processing parameters, is the discrepancy in aggression ([Björkqvist et al., 1994](#); [Wrangham and Peterson, 1996](#)). For example, 82.4% of violent crimes are committed by males, and theft is the only crime where women constitute a substantial proportion of offenders (31.1%; Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Uniform Crime Report, 1998).

<https://academic.oup.com/cercor/article/12/9/998/383221>

After correcting for cranial volume, men and women had identical volumes of amygdala and hippocampus, as well as dorsal prefrontal cortex. However, women had larger orbital frontal cortices than men, resulting in highly significant difference in the ratio of orbital gray to amygdala volume ($P = 0.002$). The larger volume of cortex devoted to emotional modulation may relate to behavioral evidence for sex differences in emotion processing.

Gilligan argues that Kohlberg wrongly prioritizes a “morality of rights” and independence from others as better than, rather than merely different from, a “morality of responsibility” and intimate relationships with others ." (Norlock)

Emphasis on rationality.

"Both utilitarianism and Kantianism either implicitly or explicitly deny any place to feelings in making moral decisions. Bentham was proud of the “objectivity” of his account – a moral calculation is something any rational person could make and come to the same conclusion about. Similarly, Kant utterly rejected the inclusion of feelings in making moral decisions – in fact for Kant their inclusion undermines anything ethical that might be involved....