

Feminist Moral Inquiry: The Role of Experience

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When I first read *Science and the Theory of Value* many years ago, I was surprised and pleased to discover how much closer my own developing views were to Peter Caws' than to most of the other work in ethics I was reading. I shared what I took to be his views that:

- 1) Science and ethics are different but analogous.
- 2) Both can make progress. Thus we should not accept comparisons suggesting that while science marches forward piling up knowledge, ethics can only offer the venting of feelings, or reportage on attitudes whether justified or not.
- 3) Both science and ethics are based on experience.
- 4) Ethics is distinctively normative, it is not itself science.

I shared these views then (if I have interpreted his views correctly) and still do. But I have found it amazingly difficult in the years since to convey these positions on ethics clearly and to argue for them convincingly.

When I argue that ethics is based on *experience*, listeners conclude that I am an ethical naturalist who thinks ethics and science are both empirical. But I am definitely not an ethical naturalist, since I think ethics is distinctively normative not descriptive. It addresses questions about what we ought to do and be, not what is in fact the case, though the latter findings are certainly relevant to our moral evaluations. But as I argue the non-naturalist case, listeners then do not see how ethics can be connected to *experience*, and they conclude I must be an intuitionist or rationalist about ethics. But I would not describe myself this way.

As I see it, experience is not just the sensory perception of the empiricists. It includes *moral* experience. And then moral theory can in a meaningful way be tested against such experience, and can be built upon it.

Moral experience is the experience of consciously choosing to act, or to refrain from acting, on grounds by which we are trying conscientiously to be guided. Moral experience is the experience of accepting or rejecting moral positions for what we take to be good moral reasons or well-founded moral intuitions or on the basis of what we take to be justifiable moral feelings. Moral experience is the experience of approving or disapproving of actions or states of affairs of which we are aware and of evaluating the feelings we have and the relationships we are in.

Moral experience, as I understand it, includes the sort of judgment we arrive at independently of moral theory. It includes the sort of choices we make about how to act, arrived at independently of general moral judgments to which we think we are committed. Sometimes we already have moral theories or general judgments recommending how we ought to act, and we act in accordance with them and judge that we acted rightly. Or, if we fail to act in accordance with them, we judge that we acted wrongly, out of weakness of will perhaps, but we maintain our belief in the theory or judgment. At other times, we choose to act because that particular act seems right to us regardless of any moral theory or abstract generality, and sometimes we continue to suppose the particular act was morally justified. This may then require us to revise our moral beliefs because the act we judge right conflicts with what a theory we previously thought satisfactory would recommend. Rather than suppose the act must be wrong because the theory said it would be, we might justifiably retain the judgment arrived at in the moral experience of acting, and we might revise or reject the theory. And if this is part of a sincerely pursued process of trying to develop a coherent network of moral beliefs by which to be guided, it need not be thought of as rationalization, but rather as part of an appropriate internal dialogue aiming to continually improve one's moral understanding. And of course the dialogue should not just be internal, but part of a shared and ongoing discourse with others, who can bring their often very different experience to enhance the process.

The extent of the independence experience can have from theory should be understood in relative terms. Yes, empirical observations are theory-laden, and yes, moral experience will be colored by the moral theory we already favor. But just as empirical findings can be relatively independent from a hypothesis being tested, so can moral experience and practice bring us up short and make us reexamine our moral assumptions.

Moral inquiry, then, is not just theory based on thought. It is practice, felt about, acted in, lived with, and reflected on.

An example might be the way we work out our views on assisted suicide. Some of us might start out thinking it is wrong in all cases because in principle people should never intentionally contribute to the death of others when neither they, their family, their nation nor the like is threatened. But then they might experience (directly or vicariously, through the experience of a close friend or relative, or through a movie or novel perhaps) the extreme pain and hopelessness of a terminally ill person. And they might conclude that, when there is virtually not chance of the pain abating, prolonging life against the will of the ill person is unjustified. Persons changing their views on a moral issue like this might easily be moved not only by new empirical findings, but also by new moral experience, and thus by new evaluations of the relevant factors and their relative importance.

When I first developed my own views on how moral inquiry should be conducted, I did not think of these matters in feminist terms. I had barely heard of feminism, nor had I read anything written from a feminist point of view. This was before there was anything like feminist philosophy. But in retrospect I could see how well the insights offered by feminists could be meshed with the views I was developing. I found my views on moral experience entirely compatible with and strengthened by a feminist view of experience.

Experience is a central category of feminist thought. It is not the constricted experience of mere empirical observation, as various giants in the history of modern philosophy and as analytic philosophy tend to construe it. Feminist experience is the experience with which art, literature and science deal. It is the lived experience of feeling as well as thought, of acting as well as receiving impressions, and of connectedness to other persons as well as self. Time and time again, feminist inquiry begins here and returns to the experience of women so inadequately reflected in the thought taken as standard, which we can now so often recognize as constructed from points of view privileged in terms of gender as well as race, class and culture.

It is experience to which feminists constantly return. As Catharine Stimpson observed, “The trust in women’s experience in North American feminist writing has been as common and as pervasive as city noise” (Stimpson, 181). And Catherine MacKinnon wrote of feminism that “its project is to uncover and claim as valid the experience of women” (MacKinnon, 116).

It is from experience that we adopt our critical stance toward what has been claimed as “knowledge” in societies dominated by male, white and Western elites. It is with experience that we confront and protest existing institutions and distributions of power. It is with experience that we trace suggested patterns for the future. And, I believe, it is moral experience to which we are now subjecting traditional moral theories and our own proposals for how we ought to live. And by now, for feminists, it is not the experience of what can be thought of as women as such from which we learn and by which we test our moral views. It is the experience of actual women – white, African-American, Latina, women around the world, impoverished women, lesbian women, feminist men and others.

One of the central implications of the reliance on women’s experience has been the view that the concept of the liberal individual (the autonomous, rational, self-sufficient individual agent on which so much dominant moral theory is built) is seriously deficient.

Many feminist political theorists fault liberal individualism for neglecting the social structures within which persons develop and for ignoring the relations between

persons that are so much of what an actual person is. For instance, family ties, membership in groups and social connections are part of what constitute a person as who she is. To see only abstract liberal agents or discrete individuals as the units of moral thought, as in social contract theory, rational choice theory, Kantian moral theory, and utilitarianism, is seen as deficient, a denial of the interdependence that characterizes human life and a denial of history.

Understanding the embeddedness of persons in social and historical contexts helps us to see that we should not merely supplement the traditional concept of an abstract, rational, liberal individual, historically thought of as male, with a concept of an abstract essential liberal woman, as some feminists at first tended to do. We are never simply women-as-such, but always also white, black, or brown, privileged or poor, heterosexual or lesbian, and so on. The perspectives of feminists of color and of non-Western feminists have contributed greatly to reconceptualizations of identity, personhood, the self, and thus of morality, politics, and society (Collins; Hoagland; Narayan; Spelman; Williams).

Much feminist thought also differs from liberal individualism in attending to particular others and relations between particular persons rather than only to either individuals or universal moral norms (Benhabib; Held, 1993). The moral theory built on liberal individualism recognizes the individual self or ego on the one hand, and the universal all or everyone on the other. The individual's pursuit of his interests is to be restrained by the universal norms to which all other human beings could agree, for instance. But between the individual self and all others, standard liberal moral theory is virtually silent. It has little to say about the moral issues of such intermediate regions as family relations, friendship or group identity. Feminists, in contrast, especially pay attention to the moral claims of particular others enmeshed with the self in particular relations, and to selves moved by empathy, attachments and human concern (Clement).

Traditional Marxists and communitarians have also seen the person as social rather than as the abstract individual of the liberal tradition. Like their liberal confreres, they sometimes dispute there is anything distinctive in the feminist critique. But feminists respond that, although they may have been influenced by Marxist or communitarian arguments, their critique of liberal individualism is often different from non-feminist ones (Ferguson; Fraser; Jaggar; MacKenzie and Stoljar; Sargent). It centers on an appreciation of women's experiences in relations, often relations of caring, between actual persons. It sees the gender structure as central to these relations, and sees persons as relational in a different way than as the outcome of the relations of economic production emphasized by Marx or of the communal relations, traditionally patriarchal, emphasized by communitarians. And many feminists believe their view of the person as relational is not likely to be lost. Jean Keller writes that "the insight

that the moral agent is an ‘encumbered self,’ who is always embedded in relations with flesh and blood others and is partly constituted by these relations, is here to stay” (Keller, p. 152).

Women’s experiences have been neglected by non-feminist theorists from liberals to Marxists to communitarians (Jaggar; Okin 1979, 1989). Feminist thought, in contrast, takes women’s experiences as worthy of trust and central to its project. Many feminists believe that what women do, feel and think in contexts of responsibility for and interdependence with others, such as dealing with the moral issues of caring for children and others who are not independent and self-sufficient, is especially relevant for moral and political thought (Held, 1993; Kittay; Ruddick; Tronto; Walker). They reject as biased ideology the longstanding and dominant traditional view that the experience of women in the household is of little relevance to morality because it is determined by “nature” or biology while the life of man in the *polis* transcends these.

Brian Barry has characterized liberalism as “the vision of society as made up of independent, autonomous units who co-operate only when the terms of co-operation are such as to make it further the ends of each of the parties” (Barry, p. 166). This model was put forward most starkly by Hobbes, but it has continued in modified form through the present. Another form of liberalism is more Kantian and less egoistic, but no less individualistic. It sees us cooperating on the basis of rational principles to which we could agree as free and equal but mutually disinterested individuals. In the various forms of the liberal view, society should rest on a social contract, and appropriate moral relations between persons are contractual.

From the perspective of many women’s experiences, this model of persons and societies is unsatisfactory, normatively as well as descriptively. It imagines an independent rational agent who only interacts with others to further his own interests or on the basis of a voluntary choice to do so, yet persons are embedded in social relations that are often involuntary throughout their lives. None of us can choose our parents, for instance. And we recognize many sources of moral responsibility other than our own interests, voluntarily pursued, or than abstract rational principles. Society is deeply non-contractual. We need views of the moral and political which reflect these understandings.

The economic system political power allows or supports is a political and moral issue. And as feminists have made clear, the gender structure of every society that renders women subordinate in such a wide range of ways is fundamentally a political and moral issue. For understanding such issues, the model of the liberal individual, with its assumptions of independence and free choice whether or not to enter into social relations, is inadequate. Utilitarianism makes its recommendations from an

impartial perspective, but it still can only calculate benefits and burdens to individuals; it cannot evaluate social ties as any adequate morality should.

Some defenders of liberal individualism, including feminist defenders, criticize the feminist critique as I have presented it as resting on the claim that, for instance, workers and women are not in fact self-sufficient, whereas the liberal argument is normative (Hampton). They interpret the social contract tradition of political theory as asking: if we would be free and equal and independent, what political arrangements would we freely agree to? The liberal argument is that its principles would be justified because they would be based on a normatively persuasive procedure for arriving at them. But this argument against the feminist critique misses what is as important as its claims that the liberal model is unrealistic. The feminist critique is also a normative critique of individualism as a moral ideal. Many feminists do not think of relations with others as mere encumbrances to be free from in order to arrive at what has normative value, nor as mere preferences to be pursued or not as the liberal individual wishes. These feminists value interdependence and recognize how limited independence is. They value autonomy, but as relational (Clement; Mackenzie and Stoljar). They hold that relations between people – relations of caring, trust, friendship, and the like -- have value and can be evaluated morally, not just described empirically (Held, 1993). Like communitarians, they may argue that until there is a certain kind of attachment between persons, there will not be a society within which to bring about the respect for rights which both liberals and feminists value.

Moreover, feminists may argue that making the assumptions of liberal individualism tends to undermine interdependence and to promote as an empirical reality the very assumption that is asserted as being merely procedural and normative. “Liberal morality,” Annette Baier writes, “may unfit people to be anything other than what its justifying theories suppose them to be, ones who have no interest in each others’ interests” (Baier, p. 29).

Interesting empirical support is being found for this claim. A number of studies show that studying economics, with its “repeated and intensive exposure to a model whose unequivocal prediction” is that people will make their decisions on the basis of self-interest, causes economics students to be less cooperative and more inclined to free-ride than others (Frank et al, p. 61).

It is plausible to suppose, then, as feminists often do, that a society guided by liberal individualism, with its assumptions that individuals only do or should engage with others when it is in their interest to do so, or on a contractual basis, will itself promote a society of atomistic individuals who take no interest in each others’ well-being for these others’ sakes. As long as the pains or deprivations of these others pose no threat

to the individual in question, or present no need for contractual agreements, the liberal individual has no motive—of empathy or caring—to concern himself with these others. Such a society will be a disintegrating society, lacking the trust needed for a society to flourish. It will lose the solidarity that holds a society together, and it will certainly fail to develop adequate appreciations of how best to bring up its children, deal with its social problems, or safeguard its environment or the globe for the sake of future generations (Held, 1984).

In place of liberal individualism, and the moral theories built on it, a focus on experience has led many feminists to examine the concerns and implications of *caring*: caring for children, caring for the ill or infirm, caring about the feelings of others, and understanding how to care for human beings, including ourselves, enmeshed as we are in human relationships, often not of our own choosing, and finally, also, caring about the globe. The caring so central here is partly emotional. It involves feelings and requires high degrees of empathy to discern what morality recommends in our caring activities.

Feminists often insist on the importance of the emotions in moral understanding (Noddings; Gilligan; Walker). We value emotion not only in the way traditional moral theories do—as feelings to be cultivated to help us carry out the dictates of reason or as preferences setting goals toward which utilitarian calculations will recommend rational means. Although such theorists as Mill and Rawls applaud the cultivation of certain appropriate feelings, they value these feelings for their assistance in carrying out the requirements of morality, not in helping us understand what these requirements are. And although utilitarianism and rational choice theory recognize the emotions as giving us the desires whose satisfaction we should seek to satisfy, emotions are to be discounted in calculating how we morally ought to act so as to maximize the satisfaction of these desires among all those affected.

Many feminists argue, in contrast, that the emotions have an important function in developing moral understanding itself, in helping us decide what the recommendations of morality themselves ought to be. Feelings, they say, should be respected by morality rather than dismissed as lacking in impartiality. Yes, there are morally harmful emotions, such as prejudice, hatred, desire for revenge, blind egotism, and so forth. But to rid moral epistemology of harmful emotions by banishing all emotion is misguided. Such emotions as empathy, concern for others, hopefulness, and indignation in the face of cruelty—all these may be crucial in developing appropriate moral positions. An appropriate moral epistemology should employ appropriate feelings as well as appropriate reasoning

The ethics of care was initially developed with an emphasis on the experience of women in activities such as caring for children, taking care of the ill or the elderly, or

cultivating ties of friendship and personal affection. It was realized that moral issues abound in these domains, about which standard moral theory had almost nothing to say (Gilligan; Noddings; Ruddick). Care ethics has by now developed far beyond its original formulations, and there is an extensive and diverse literature on this alternative moral approach (Card, 1991, 1999; Held, 1995; Tong).

Dominant moral theories such as Kantian ethics and utilitarianism are universalistic and rationalistic. Although much has been written about the differences between them, from a feminist perspective their similarities are more pronounced than what divides them. Both rely on a single, ultimate universal principle – the Categorical Imperative or the Principle of Utility. Both are rationalistic in their moral epistemologies and both employ a conception of the person as a rational, independent, liberal individual.

In Margaret Walker's estimation, these are "theoretical-juridical" accounts of morality; they repeatedly invoke the image of "a fraternity of independent peers invoking laws to deliver verdicts with authority" (Walker, p. 1). In Fiona Robinson's evaluation, dominant moral theories give primacy to values such as autonomy, independence, non-interference, self-determination, fairness, and rights, and involve a "systematic devaluing of notions of interdependence, relatedness, and positive involvement" in the lives of others (Robinson, p. 10).

These dominant moral theories that have both supported and reflected liberal political theory have either ignored altogether the experiences of women in caring activities or they have dismissed them as irrelevant. Caring for children has been seen as "natural" or instinctive behavior not "governed" by morality, or family life has been thought of as a personal preference individuals may or may not choose to pursue. Walker shows how the theoretical-juridical accounts of morality are put forward as appropriate for "the" moral agent, or as recommendations for how "we" ought to act. But these canonical forms of moral judgment are the judgments of someone resembling "a judge, manager, bureaucrat, or gamesman..." (Walker, p. 21). They represent in abstract and idealized forms the judgments of dominant persons in an established social order, not the moral experiences of women caring for children or aged parents, ill-paid minority service workers in a hospital, or the members of colonized groups relying on communal ties for their survival.

To feminists, the experience of women is of the utmost relevance, to morality and political theory as well as to other endeavors. Women's experience does not merely count when women enter the "public" realms symbolically if not now exclusively designated as male. And the experience of marginalized and subordinate groups is as relevant as those who occupy positions of privilege. Perhaps it is more relevant, since privilege can so easily distort one's views of society and morality. Women's

experiences of caretaking and cultivating social ties are being taken by feminist theorists as highly important for understanding not only the morality of family life, but public life as well. The ethics of care gives expression to women's experience of empathy, mutual trust and the emotions helpful to morality. This experience is part of and can be more of men's experience also, but it has not been reflected in dominant moral theories.

The ethics of care appreciates the ties we have with particular others and the actual relationships that partly constitute our identity. Although we often seek to reshape these ties, to distance ourselves from some persons and groups and to develop new ties with others, the autonomy we seek is a capacity to reshape our relationships, not to be the unencumbered abstract individual self of liberal political and moral theory (Clement; Mackenzie and Stoljar; Meyers). Those who sincerely care for others act for particular others and for the actual relationship between them, not for their own individual interests and not out of duty to a universal law for all rational beings, or for the greatest benefit of the greatest number.

Universal rules of impartiality often seem inapplicable or inappropriate in contexts of family and friendship (Friedman). Certainly, however, we need moral theory to evaluate relations between persons and the actions of relational persons in what have been thought of as personal contexts. Virtue theory has often been thought to offer more promising approaches for these contexts; Aristotle and Hume are frequently invoked. But virtue theory, like liberal morality, may be tainted by its patriarchal and individualistic past. The Man of Virtue concerned for his dispositions, like The Man of Reason dissected by feminist critiques (Lloyd), may still bear little resemblance to the woman or service-worker engaged in affectionate care. The ethics of care that does speak for persons in relations should not be thought of as valuing a mere preference or an extra that impartial rules can permit while retaining priority, but as a challenge to universalistic morality itself.

The dominant moral theories claim to offer moral guidance for all moral problems; if their rules do not apply to certain kinds of issues, they are overlooked or not seen as moral issues. However, as Susan Mendus writes, to apply moral rules to love and friendship is to use a "deformed model" for these contexts (Mendus). We should not, however, conclude that these contexts are "beyond" or "outside" morality. We should find morality that illuminates and gives guidance for them, as the ethics of care tries to do. In contrast to the rationalist epistemologies of dominant moral theories, the ethics of care values the emotions, not only in carrying out the dictates of reason but in helping us understand what we ought to do. Empathy, sensitivity and openness to narrative nuance may be better guides to what morality requires in specific actual circumstances than are rational principles or calculations.

The ethics of care is needed most clearly in contexts such as family and friendship. But it should not be thought of as limited to these. Some feminists would like to see it displace entirely the dominant ethics of justice and rights or universal rules. Most others seek an appropriate integration of justice and care, liberal rights and empathetic concern. No advocate of the ethics of care seems willing to see it as a moral outlook less valuable than the dominant ones (Clement). To imagine the concerns of care ethicists as concerns to be merely added on to the dominant theories is unsatisfactory. To confine the ethics of care to the private sphere while holding it unsuitable for public life is also to be rejected. But how the ethics of care and liberal political theory are to be meshed remains to be seen.

Most who defend the ethics of care recognize that care alone cannot adequately handle many questions of justice and rights. For instance, members of a privileged group may feel compassion towards and even care for members of a group they consider unfortunate, but fail to recognize that the latter deserve respect for their rights -- including rights to such basic necessities as food, shelter, and health care -- not paternalistic charity. Yet care may be the wider framework within which we should develop civil society and schemes of rights. Without some degree of caring, persons will be indifferent to the fate of others, including violations of their rights. And in the process of respecting persons' rights, such as the right to basic necessities, policies expressing care for all members of a community will be superior to those that grudgingly issue an allotment to the unfit.

Many feminists argue for the relevance of care for the political domain (Held, 1993, 1995; Kittay; Ruddick; Tronto). Elevating care to a concern as important as the traditional concerns of liberal individuals might require a deep restructuring of society. Arrangements for the upbringing and health, education and development of children would move to the center of public attention, rather than left to the vagaries of the market or the inadequacies of arbitrary local or charitable support. Caring for the elderly would be seen as a public concern, not a burden for individual adult children, usually women (Harrington). Considerations of how culture could enlighten and enrich human life would replace the current abandonment of culture to the dictates of economic gain that now determine how culture is produced and distributed (Schiller). Economic activity would be socially supported to serve human well-being rather than to merely increase the economic power of the economically powerful.

The ethics of care builds trust and mutual responsiveness to need on both the personal and wider social level. Within social relations in which we care enough about each other to respect each other's rights, we may agree for limited purposes to imagine each other as liberal individuals, and to adopt liberal policies to maximize individual benefits. But we should not lose sight of the restricted and artificial aspects of such

conceptions. The ethics of care offers a view of both the more immediate and the more distant human relations on which satisfactory societies can be built.

Note: Some parts of this paper are based on Virginia Held, [Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) and on Virginia Held, "Feminism and Political Theory," in Robert L. Simon, ed. [Blackwell Guide to Social and Political Philosophy](#) (forthcoming).

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