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What Men Want to Know About the Ethics of Women
William L. Blizek

With the publication in 1982 of Carol Gilligan’s book, *In A Different Voice*, at least some people began to ask whether or not there are moral differences between women and men. The very prospect of moral differences between the sexes seems preposterous, of course, just because morality is generally regarded as something that applies at least to all members of the species. Nevertheless, Gilligan noticed that developmental differences between women and men seemed to generate a corresponding difference in moral perspective. That is, when faced with moral problems, women talk about these problems in a significantly different way than do men. Women ask different questions, raise different issues, and give different reasons for why we should behave in one way rather than another. Women speak about moral problems, to use Gilligan’s title, *in a different voice*.

Whether we accept the conclusion that women have a different perspective on moral problems will depend in part upon the evidence. Gilligan has provided some evidence in the voices of the women she has interviewed for her studies. Further formal research will confirm or disconfirm the conclusion. We can, of course, seek our own evidence by listening carefully to women as they talk about moral problems.

But the issue is not just a matter of evidence. It is also a matter of meaning. What does it mean to say that women have a different perspective on moral problems? Can we give meaning to such a claim within our usual understanding of morality? Or, will we be required to change how we view the very nature of morality in order to make sense of this conclusion? It is the question of meaning that I wish to address in the following remarks.

Before turning to our consideration of meaning, however, I must identify a second conclusion drawn by Carol Gilligan. The moral perspective of women, while different from that of men, is not inferior to the perspective of men. One of the most prominent accounts of moral development, that of Lawrence Kohlberg, shows that the moral development of women is inferior to that of men. That is, as measured by Kohlberg’s standards, women generally reach only the third stage of his six-stage sequence. “At this stage morality is conceived in interpersonal terms and goodness is equated with helping and pleasing others.” This stage is very different from the highest stage of moral development, where relationships are subordinated to universal principles of justice.

Gilligan’s response to Kohlberg has been to argue that there is
nothing wrong with women, but rather that something is wrong with a standard of moral development that makes roughly one half of the species inferior to the other half. The only way to say that the moral perspective of women is inferior to that of men is to adopt the perspective of men as the standard of the entire species. But, as long as adopting the perspective of men is arbitrary, the claim that women are morally inferior is also arbitrary.

Whatever meaning we can give Gilligan's conclusion about the difference in moral perspective will also have to take into account the claim that the perspective of women is not inferior to that of men. These two conclusions taken together set the stage for understanding the nature of morality by raising the issue of relativism. If the perspective of women is different from but equal to that of men, we are faced with a fundamental relativism in ethics. While the ethics of women may be relativistic in some respects, the question of special concern here is whether the very nature of ethics is relativistic. If we believe that ethics is not fundamentally relative in nature, then we will be faced with the task of showing that the ethics of women is superior to the ethics of men, since Gilligan claims they are not inferior and equality generates relativism. My own suspicion is that we can show the ethics of women to be superior to traditional masculine ethics, given a particular interpretation of the ethics of women and given a particular understanding of how to justify one ethical theory over others.

Before turning to the meaning of Gilligan's claims, let me say why I refer to the questions of meaning as "what men want to know about the ethics of women." First, in my experiences, the questions of meaning are the questions that men, but not women, actually do ask about the suggestion that women have a different ethic from men. I would qualify my claim by saying that men in general simply are not interested in the question at all. So the men who ask questions of meaning are philosophers who have spent much of their lives asking just this kind of question. Women in general, by contrast, do find the suggestion of a different moral perspective interesting. But the questions that women ask, including women who are philosophers, are questions of a more concrete nature. What do women actually say about particular moral problems and how does what they say differ from what men say? There is, I would note, a remarkable excitement and enthusiasm among women when they discover that other women are speaking in the same voice as they themselves and that it is acceptable to speak in this voice.

Second, the questions of meaning which I intend to examine have an abstract or theoretical character about them, rather than a concrete, immediate, and practical character. This difference in character matches roughly a distinction that is often made between women and men regarding intuition and logic. This commonly perceived differ-
ence is mirrored in the kinds of questions that men and women actually do ask about the ethics of women. Men are seen as logical and therefore as formal in their approach to the world. Women are commonly seen as intuitive and therefore as contextual in their approach.

It may be said that the questions of meaning are the wrong questions to ask about the ethics of women. That is, by answering these questions we will get the wrong picture of the ethics of women, or at least a misleading picture. I do believe that we must be careful in asking the questions of meaning, careful not to distort the voice of women. But I also believe that this is only one way to understand the ethics of women, although I would claim that it is a requirement for a complete understanding. I also see the questions of meaning as valuable to our understanding because I think that our understanding of anything is enhanced by a dialectic between the formal and the concrete, the immediate and the abstract, the theoretical and the practical.

1

The task before us is a large one and I propose to narrow its scope by focusing upon three possible interpretations of Gilligan’s claims. The first interpretation is this: to say that women have a different perspective on moral problems means that women have different values from men. Since their values are different, women will talk about moral problems differently—take into account features of the problem that men would ignore, emphasize different aspects of the problem, and so on. This difference in values can be established by empirical research. Its source may be either biological or cultural (or some combination of these). What counts is that women do value different things than men value. And, the fact that women value different things does not in any way make them inferior to men. We can not introduce some larger framework or standard of comparison that makes the values of women inferior.

The result of this difference in values is not only that women speak differently about moral problems, but also that women must be treated differently in moral situations. The same set of circumstances will call for women to be treated differently. If, for example, we adopt happiness as our moral standard, then in the same set of circumstances we will be required to treat a woman differently because different things will bring happiness to a woman than to a man. (I am assuming here that achieving or obtaining what you value brings happiness.)

This interpretation seems to me to be very much like the case in which I ask myself how I should treat each of my daughters. One enjoys playing the piano, the other enjoys playing the violin. Neither enjoyment is inferior to the other. In some variety of circumstances this difference in value will determine a different treatment for each child as the appropriate moral choice. And this seems to be very
much like the first interpretation of Gilligan’s claims. Women want different things, value different things, in the context of a moral problem, and we will be required to treat women differently in order that what they value is achieved. The only difference between the case of women and the case of the children is that in the former case the difference in values is not an individual matter but rather a matter of gender.

So far we have discussed this interpretation in the abstract. But, consider what Gilligan suggests as a significant difference between women and men—the value of relationship. Women value being in relationship in a way that men do not. This is because women define themselves as connected with other persons. They see themselves as belonging to a network of relationships. Men, however, identify themselves as independent or autonomous. Separation and individuation are more important to the development of a masculine identity than the attachment and connection which are crucial to being a woman.7

However one might articulate this difference in detail, roughly speaking, women find being in relationship valuable in a way that men do not and this value will need to be taken into account in the resolution of moral problems. Since relationship is not a value for men, men will find it difficult to give relationship its due in their moral deliberations. It is not just the case that women will identify relationship as an important ingredient in moral problems, but also that men must take this value into consideration if they are to resolve moral problems correctly. Women cannot be treated as though they were independent and separated persons without violating their values and treating them wrongly. Nor can we treat men as though they valued relationship without violating the value they place on independence and autonomy. My hope here is to have given an example of a significant and recognizable difference in values that would determine different outcomes of our moral deliberations.

We are now in a position to evaluate this interpretation of Gilligan’s claims. First, it does seem to meet the criterion of difference in perspective and no inferiority. To say that women have different values than men do is to establish a different perspective on moral problems. And, unless there is some convincing reason for claiming the contrary, the fact that women value relationship in a way that men value autonomy or independence does not make women inferior to men, nor does it make the value of relationship inferior to the value of autonomy.8

Second, this interpretation tells us that ethics is a relative matter but not at the fundamental level of moral theory. That is, we must treat women differently than we treat men, but this is because women are different from men and not because women have a different ethical standard or theory than men have. The moral standard of happi-
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ness, for example, is not different for women than for men on this interpretation. It is just the case that women will achieve happiness in different ways than men do—ways that involve relationship rather than autonomy. This kind of relativism is like the relativism that occurs when I arrange violin lessons for one daughter and piano lessons for the other. This is the relativism of context and contextual relativism enters all of our moral deliberations, regardless of moral standard, unless we adopt a moral standard that has no concern for consequences.

Third, if I am correct about the relativism suggested by the first interpretation, we may be required to abandon ethical theories which are not consequentialist in nature. That is, any moral standard which insists that $X$ is the right thing to do regardless of consequences or context, will discriminate against women (or men) or, at least, may do so. Any absolute morality will be rejected because it is not able to accommodate the variety of moral situations which we face—or it does accommodate them, but by doing great harm to some persons. Under the right circumstances those to whom great harm will come will be women. This problem is not the result of women having different values from men, it is a problem that results from different persons having different values. But the relativism suggested by Gilligan's claims (at least our first interpretation of them) raises in a similar way this problem for absolute moral standards.

Fourth, the relativism suggested by this interpretation does not affect consequentialist moral theories. That is, any number of consequentialist theories can accommodate the difference in values between women and men suggested by the first interpretation. This means that the discovery of different values will not change our account of the nature of moral theory—at least consequentialist theory.

While this interpretation will not change our understanding of moral theory, except to point out a deficiency in absolute moral standards, we cannot ignore its impact on moral practice. It seems to me that men in their moral deliberations regularly ignore or undervalue the importance of relationship to women. The right action is different when relationship is seen as important and women will be seen as acting wrongly for emphasizing relationship and will be disvalued for acting wrongly. If we are to treat others correctly, from the perspective of any moral theory, we will be required to understand others well. Understanding women fully (a prerequisite for correct moral judgments) will require recognizing the value that they place upon, for example, relationship.9

Finally, the first interpretation depends upon there actually being a difference between the values of women and men. My suspicion is that at some very fundamental level women and men share a common set of values. Roughly speaking these values include some combination of relationship and autonomy. It may be appropriate to talk of
these as ideal values, that is, values which when adopted or implemented generate a healthy and happy existence for the individual person. "Wouldn't it be better," we might ask, "if women were less dependent and men more connected?" This kind of value is not conducive to empirical research and may be ignored in the effort to collect data that we can use to demonstrate our conclusions. This in no way diminishes the values that people perceive themselves to have and the importance of those values in our moral deliberations. But how people are at the moment is not the full picture of our human nature and our understanding of morality.

II

We can now turn to a second interpretation of Gilligan's claims. According to this interpretation, to say that women have a different perspective on moral problems means that women have insights into moral problems that men do not have. On this interpretation, contrary to the first, women and men may have the same values, but differences between women and men give women an ability to see features of moral situations that men cannot see or, at least, do not often recognize.

What Gilligan suggests as a possible difference is the ability of women to recognize the needs of others or an ability to empathize with others. Quoting from Nancy Chadorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Gilligan claims that girls emerge from their early experiences of individuation and relationship "with a basis for 'empathy' built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not." And, "Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another's needs or feelings as one's own."10

At this point permit me to propose a further difference between women and men as they discuss moral problems. This difference may be seen as separate from empathy, but it might also be seen as a further explanation of empathy. When I listen to women and men talk about moral issues in ordinary discourse it seems to me that women recognize a special need of others—the need to be valued. Women seem to distinguish between what a person does and what a person is. Men seem to equate what someone is with what he or she does.

In much of the literature on parenting we are told to say to our children: "I like you, but I do not like your behavior or I do not like the way you are treating me." Since women do more parenting than men do, it may well be that this distinction is more accessible to women than men and not just because of the literature on parenting.11 Even in moral philosophy we distinguish between judgments of action and judgments regarding persons. But it seems to me that in the workaday world of men this is a distinction which is lost. It may even be
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that, when asked, men can distinguish without difficulty between persons and their actions. But, in practice it seems to me that men treat others as objects in the larger scheme of things, as instruments in achieving the "bottom line."1

I propose this difference in ability (not just to see a difference but also to act on it) because it seems compatible with the talk of Gilligan, Chodorow, and others regarding differences between women and men and because it seems to me to be a vital distinction. The quality of all of our lives would be enhanced greatly if persons regularly valued us as persons even if they disvalued our behavior and its consequences.

While this interpretation is something more than the first (women have an ability to empathize that men do not) it is also compatible with the first. That is, at one level women may have different values from men (relationship vs. autonomy) and yet share with men a basic value (e.g., happiness). And, with regard to happiness, women may be better able to recognize what makes others happy. The second interpretation can stand, of course, on its own, but it can also be combined with the first. The possibility of combining these two interpretations suggests to me that the issues we are examining are extremely complex and will not lend themselves to easy answers.

I have considered the "ability-to-empathize" interpretation because it is a common interpretation. That is, the men to whom I speak want to say: "Yes, women see things men do not and therefore it will be important for us to listen to women if we are to make correct moral decisions because correct decisions will require all of the relevant information. But, this really doesn't have anything to do with moral theory. Suppose that we are all utilitarians, seeking the greatest happiness of the greatest number. All that this talk about a different voice means is that women are better utilitarians than men because they see consequences that men do not. This may be very important, but it does not change at all our understanding of morality nor does it cause us to adopt a different moral theory." Now, I do not want to diminish the importance of the second interpretation, but I do want to say that it can be used to avoid other possibilities and it can be used to diminish the value of this different voice—"it's just utilitarianism."

We are now in a position to evaluate the ability-to-empathize interpretation. First, it does meet the criteria established by Gilligan's claims. The ability to see different features of moral problems does give women a different perspective on moral problems. As well, there is nothing in this difference to suggest that women are inferior or that their perspective is inferior. It is difficult to imagine how seeing more clearly could generate inferiority. Indeed, other things being equal the added insights that women bring to moral problems gives them a superiority over men.

Second, this interpretation does not generate relativism at a fundamental level. That is, if women have different insights into moral
problems this difference is compatible with women and men having the same moral standard or theory. The problem of relativism becomes problematic if the ethics of women are incompatible with the ethics of men but neither ethics is inferior to the other. This problem does not arise for the second interpretation. This means that the second interpretation will not challenge the absolute rule theories that the first interpretation did challenge.

Finally, the ability-to-empathize interpretation does offer us a special skill, a skill required of us if we are to make correct moral judgments (not by accident). To be moral persons will mean at least developing this skill. If this skill is the ability in practice to distinguish between persons and their actions, then it seems to me to be a very significant contribution to our practice of morality. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that this ability may be the most important element in our becoming moral persons.

III

We can now turn to our third interpretation. On this interpretation, to say that women have a different perspective on moral problems means that women subscribe to a different moral theory or standard. This does not mean that women consciously examine moral theories and choose one that is different from the one chosen by men, but rather that the way in which women talk about moral problems suggests a different moral theory, different from traditional deontological and utilitarian moral theories.

But in addition, if we are to meet the criterion established by Gilligan, we must show that the moral theory suggested by the voice of women is not inferior to traditional deontological and utilitarian standards. The ethics of women cannot be subsumed under traditional masculine ethics, giving the ethics of men veto power over the ethics of women in cases of conflict. It is here that the problem of relativism arises at the fundamental level of moral theory, rather than moral practice. Before turning to the problem of relativism, however, permit me to briefly describe the ethical theory suggested by the way in which women talk about moral problems and to contrast it with traditional ethical theories.

I like to refer to the ethics of women, following Nel Noddings, as an ethic of caring. That is, in any particular situation, the right action is the one that meets the needs of others. Meeting the needs of others is, of course, often associated with the image of women in our culture. As well, meeting the needs of others finds a significant place in the ethical tradition of Christianity, an ethics of love or agape.

But, there is more to an ethic of caring than just meeting the needs of others. The needs of others must be met in the right way, i.e., with the right attitude. One way to describe this attitude is to say that one
must meet the needs of others without expecting something in return. This is what we commonly think of as unselfishness. We can also say that we must meet the needs of others because we want to and not because we are obligated to. This way of putting things indicates that meeting our obligations is one of the things that we do for ourselves and not for others. Finally, to meet the needs of others in the right way means to do so without hurting ourselves. This way of putting things indicates the peculiar character of unselfishness—being unselfish does not mean sacrificing oneself for others, but rather being the kind of person that can meet the needs of others without that effort being a sacrifice of oneself. Indeed, being unselfish is better seen as an expression of oneself than a sacrifice of oneself.

If I understand Gilligan’s description of the three stages of moral development in women correctly, the first stage is the stage of survival in which women act selfishly. The second stage is that of pleasing others. In this stage women meet the needs of others, but they do so by sacrificing some part of themselves. The third and optimal stage is the one in which women meet the needs of others without doing damage to themselves. (One of Gilligan’s complaints is just that when women try to move from stage two to stage three, they are often accused of being selfish and discouraged from making moral progress.) These stages of moral development, as described by Gilligan, seem to me to support the notion that caring means meeting the needs of others with the correct attitude.

An ethic of caring, then, is one in which the right action is the one that meets the needs of others with the correct attitude, i.e., without harming ourselves. In one sense this is a consequentialist moral theory, because right action is determined by consequences. But, as a consequentialist theory it is different from other consequentialist theories in its recognition of the consequences of our attitudes, consequences both for ourselves and for others.

The attitude that we adopt toward others is often, as far as I can tell, more important than whatever else we may do for them. We have all had experiences in which someone has done something for us but we feel that he or she expects something in return (usually something unstated) or that he or she feels sorry for us or feels superior to us in some way. In these cases we are disvalued, and being disvalued is an especially painful experience. In some cases our being disvalued is obvious, but in other cases it is quite subtle and in some cases it is accomplished in the name of our own good. As a species, having value is one of the requirements of our existence, wherever we derive that value. To lose value, or to be disvalued, is painful because it is an attack on our very being.

The attitudes we adopt are as important for ourselves as for others. It may be that the only way to meet the needs of someone else without hurting ourselves is to change our attitude. If I see myself as hav-
ing to do X with you and you need to do Y with me, then I cannot meet your need without harming myself. But, I can meet your need without harming myself if I can come to see myself as not having to do X. Our attitudes and how they effect our place in the world is a significant theme of much existential literature and I believe that existential thinkers have something to offer us in understanding this component of caring.

Given this brief account of attitudes and their consequences, it seems to me that the ethics of women is an ethic of character. What we are as persons is as important to our ethical behavior as our judgments regarding consequences of our actions. Indeed, I think that what we are as persons will play an important part in determining what consequences we recognize and how much weight or value is given to various consequences. If we are not able to live in a world where X is a consequence of our action, then we are likely to deny X as a consequence of our action or to minimize the importance of X.

For the ethics of women, factors like courage and wisdom become as important as justice and utility. Without courage and wisdom we will simply construct justice or utility to suit our own needs. Talk of courage and wisdom reminds us of the ethics of ancient Greece—the ethics of virtue. If the ethics of women is like the ethics of ancient Greece, then making something of oneself (becoming virtuous) will be as important in our understanding of moral problems as any of the other moral deliberations we may make.

IV

Permit me here to contrast the ethics of women with traditional deontological moral theories where the rule or principle determines right action independently of the consequences of our action. For the ethics of women, "a principle never takes precedence over a person." That is, the needs of persons are always more important than the following of a rule or the application of a principle. This is, of course, just why women were seen as morally inferior to men on Kohlberg's scale of moral development. The ethics of women are interpersonal rather than principled.

One problem with an ethical theory that does not rely on a rule or principle is that it seems to be susceptible to relativism. That is, if we must appeal to the needs of others in deciding what the right action is, what will be right one day will be wrong the next, or what will be right for one person will be wrong for another. The only way that we can be sure about what is right is to establish a rule or principle that tells us in all cases what is right. By contrast, the ethics of women seem wishy washy, unclear, uncertain.

We will examine the question of relativism later, but permit me to expand briefly here upon the person/principle distinction. It seems to
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me that if principles cannot take precedence over the needs of persons, then we could also say with some confidence that institutions cannot take precedence over persons. That is, according to the ethics of women we do not act rightly when we promote the institution at the expense of any individual. The school cannot be more important than the student. The law cannot be more important than the people it serves. The bottom line of business cannot be profit, it must be people. Indeed, women would be unlikely to promote institutions as a way of relating to other persons, given the moral perspective of caring.

Of special interest here is the institution of religion. That is, if women are not likely to promote institutions, then one of the things that follows from this is that women are not likely to promote religion as an institution. That women have less interest in religion is suggested by Nel Noddings. "Just as the educator," Noddings says, "who is properly fascinated with her subject matter will put it aside temporarily for the sake of the student and his ethical development, so must the religious leader put aside the objects, and territories, and possessions he cherishes for the sake of the living other."15 And elsewhere she claims, "Only if the church allows and promotes unlimited freedom of caring can it be an instrument of ethicality."16 I point this out because women who seem to agree with the view that women must resist institutions when they take precedence over persons balk at the notion that religion could be one of those institutions. Little examination of history is needed, however, to show that the institution of religion does not necessarily require caring behavior.

If institutions are suspect from the perspective of caring, I would suppose that movements will also be suspect. If this is true, then the perspective of women will not permit the women's movement to take precedence over persons. I point this out because it seems to me that many women find the doctrine or the ideas or the principles or the politics of the women's movement to be more important than persons.

We can now contrast the ethics of women to utilitarian moral theories. This difference seems more difficult to identify than the difference between caring and principle. Both caring and utilitarianism are consequentialist theories, and if we claim that the needs of others are to be met because greater happiness will result, the ethics of women may appear to be a sophisticated version of utilitarianism. Is there a difference between the ethics of women and utilitarianism?

In order to show that these are different theories, it seems to me that we would need to show that at least in some cases the right action for one theory will be different from the right action of the other.
Since both of these theories are contextualist in nature, it is difficult to contrast them in any simple way, but as an example that may be useful let us consider the question of abortion. How would a woman decide whether or not to have an abortion? Actually it might be easier to deal with the issue from the perspective of an observer and ask "Would I advise a woman to have or not have an abortion?"

Before turning to the difference between an ethic of caring and utilitarianism, let me note that the question regarding abortion will not be determined by a principle. That is, one cannot appeal to a principle concerning the right to life, because principles cannot take precedence over persons. This is true even if we consider the fetus to be a person. Neither the right to life of the mother nor the right to life of the fetus can decide the issue because other factors, the needs of persons, must be taken into account and may determine a different outcome. Principles (including rights) cannot take precedence over persons for an ethic of caring.

Returning to the issue of caring and utility, it seems to me that in some cases an ethic of caring will say that having an abortion will be the right action for a woman and that in these same circumstances an ethic of utility will claim that having an abortion is wrong. We can imagine, I think, a variety of cases and circumstances in which the happiness we might reasonably predict for the life of the child will be greater than the unhappiness of the mother. In such cases, on the grounds of utility, we will conclude that it is wrong for the woman to have an abortion. In some situations with the same utility values (the happiness of the child is greater than the unhappiness of the mother), it seems to me that an ethic of caring would conclude that having an abortion is the right thing to do. How can we understand this conclusion?

One way to understand the conclusion that abortion is right even where the greater happiness would be achieved by the opposite action is by saying that the present takes priority over the future—the actual takes precedence over the potential. The "living other," to use Nel Noddings's phrase, is to take precedence over the "potential other." This difference (present/future) is not a matter of there being something more certain about the present as opposed to the future, as suggested by Bentham's calculus. The present takes precedence over the future, not as a matter of utility, but in spite of utility. Since the priority of the present is not a matter of utility, the conclusion drawn by the theory will not be utilitarian, even if decisions also include some considerations of utility.

Another way to explain why an ethic of caring would answer the question of abortion differently than an ethic of utility is to say that it is unfair to inflict unhappiness on the mother in order to generate the greater happiness of the child. In other words, an ethic of caring would include considerations of justice which are not a part of utilit-
arian theory. This is not to say that an ethic of caring is an ethic of justice. For the reasons described above an ethic of caring is incompatible with a theory which uses a principle, even a principle of justice, to determine rightness and wrongness. But an ethic of caring may include considerations of justice (as well as considerations of utility).

Since women are not proposing moral theories—their talk suggests a different theory—it is difficult to say which of these explanations would be accepted by women. But, this way of describing an ethical theory (as including elements of justice and elements of utility) reminds me of William Frankena's mixed deontological theory.\(^\text{19}\) According to Frankena, on some occasions duty will take precedence over consequences and on other occasions consequences will outweigh duty. But we do not have any theoretical way of deciding when to give priority to duty or to happiness. We will be required, on Frankena's view, to recognize when one consideration overrides the other and vice versa. This sounds to me a lot like an intuitionist moral theory, one in which the right action is determined by recognizing what is right in any given situation, even if justice and utility must be considered prior to the recognition of what is right. Since this brief account of Frankena's theory parallels the remarks above about the ethics of women, it might be that we would want to characterize the ethics of women in a similar fashion.

Before we turn to another way of distinguishing the ethics of caring from both an ethics of principle and an ethics of utility—moral rationalism—permit me to make another suggestion regarding the distinction between caring and utility. Returning to the question of abortion, it seems to me that if a woman asked "What should I do?" my response from the perspective of an ethics of caring would be "Do your best to meet the needs of others." In this case the primary needs would be those of the child. The right thing to do is to do what you are able to do. Likewise it would be wrong to do more than you are able. We will have to consider carefully what "being able" means, but at this point it seems to me that roughly speaking we can understand this different perspective. "Do what you can." "Do your best." Is there anything more that we can ask of others (or even ourselves)?

On this view the right thing to do is what you are able to do. The wrong thing to do is either less than you are able or more than you are able. But what do we mean by "being able?" Again roughly speaking, because I do not know how to be very precise about these matters, it seems to me that "to do more than one is able" means "to do something that is harmful to oneself."\(^\text{20}\) This is, I think a repeat of the description of unselfishness or genuine caring given above. Another way to put this is to say that "being able" means "being able without resentment," where resentment is the sign that one has been harmed or that one feels himself or herself to have been harmed. My vision here is that it is important to treat others without resentment (with-
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out feeling that we have been harmed) because our feelings of resentment have a very serious negative effect on others. Our attitudes, I contend, generate some of the most important consequences for those with whom we interact. Resentment generates alienation and fear and these consequences may be far more important in the grand scheme of our humanity than any of the other consequences of our behaviors.

If "doing more than one is able" means generating harm to oneself or generating resentment, what does it mean to say that someone has done less than she or he is able? One way of describing "doing less" is in terms of our freedom. We are always free to act differently. But freedom is important to our present and future behavior and it does not apply to the past, except in some abstract sense. This is why Freud said that our past behavior is always determined, but that we cannot predict future behavior. The abstract case can also be put in the following terms. "If I had been stronger, or less afraid, or knew more about myself, I could have acted differently." We might term this "being able under ideal circumstances." But, since we do not live in an ideal world, what can we say about the concrete or practical situation?

It seems to me that we will be required to say that no one can do less than his or her best. Everyone is always doing what he or she is able to do, no matter how differently they might act in an ideal world and no matter how much we would like them to act differently. In the practical sense, in the concrete situation, everyone is always acting rightly. The vision suggested by this talk is surely antithetical to our usual understanding of morality. It suggests a radical departure from traditional moral theories. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that the ethics of women goes beyond morality, beyond rightness and wrongness. If we could show this to be the case, I would conclude that there are considerations about behavior that are more important than moral considerations.

This does not mean that ethics, deciding what we should do, will be without focus. We will have to ask questions about the needs of others—both at a general level and at the level of specific individuals in specific contexts. We will want to know something about the happiness and unhappiness that might follow from our choice. We may also ask about whether our action is fair or just. But the needs of others will not alone determine what action is right. What we are able to do will also play an integral role in determining what is right or wrong. We might go so far as to say that ethics is not only a matter of right and wrong, but also a matter of ability. Or, to say this in another way, what is right or wrong will be determined in part by strength and weakness. Ethics will be a matter of character. At least, we will not be able to understand the nature of ethics fully without considering the character of the individual.

This way of talking about ethics reminds me of Nietzsche. We
might call it (an ethic of caring) an ethic that goes beyond right and wrong. The issues of ethics are not issues of deciding what is right or wrong, although we have some guidelines for what consequences we would like to see. The issues of ethics are those of the extent to which we can (or others can) contribute to the desirable consequences. 

Rightness, then, is doing what you are able. Everyone who has done his or her best has done what is right, has done all that we can expect of him or her, even if the consequences are not as desirable as those achieved by someone else. This way of talking about things ensures that persons have intrinsic value; i.e., they are not just valued for what they contribute to the fulfillment of our desires (even if our desires are sometimes for the happiness of others). And, at least, the questions of ethics include how I can become stronger, less afraid, wiser, and so on and how I can help others become stronger, wiser, less afraid, etc.

Finally, one other way to distinguish an ethic of caring from an ethic of utility is to note that an ethic of utility is an ethic of obligation while an ethic of caring is an ethic without obligation. This way of putting things sounds odd because we think of ethics as having to do with obligation, as telling us what our obligations are. Why should I act in one way rather than another? Because I ought to (or I have an obligation to act in a particular way). We ought to do what is right just because it is right. But the talk about caring suggests that we act as we do because we want to, and not because we have to, not because it is right. Acting “rightly” for an ethic of caring means doing what is “right” because one wants to and not because one is obligated to so act. Insofar as we can make sense of this distinction between acting out of obligation and acting out of desire, it seems to me to be a distinction which separates an ethic of caring from an ethic of utility.

Indeed, it shows that an ethic of caring is radically different from an ethic of utility.23

One thing that this distinction points out is that the life of someone who adopts an ethic of caring will be quite different from the life of someone who focuses upon obligation, duty, rights, etc. That is, life is experienced as very different from the perspective of caring. Life feels different from the perspective of caring. Indeed, I would suggest that one would find the life of caring attractive just because of the damage that is done to us by living a life of obligation, justice, duty, or even a life in which everything is structured around rights. Duty, rights, and justice are often mechanisms for controlling other people and when these notions are applied to us we feel controlled. It may be that talk about caring is designed to overcome the disadvantages to us of structuring our lives in accordance with traditional moral views.24

My hope is to have offered some descriptions which will help us to recognize a difference between an ethic of caring and an ethic of utility. My sense of this difference is that it is a radical one, so radical, in
fact, that it causes us to talk about the nature of ethics in two very different ways. If an ethic of caring will count as an ethic at all, then the nature of ethics will be very different from the nature of ethics where ethics is limited to the traditional moral theories. In order to support the idea that there are two quite different ways of talking about the nature of ethics, one of which is suggested by the way in which women talk about moral problems, permit me now to turn to a further distinguishing characteristic.

VI

There is another way to distinguish an ethic of caring from both an ethic of utility and an ethic of principle. The ethics of both utility and principle are examples of formal rationalism. An ethic of caring is not. What distinguishes caring from utility or principle is the notion of reason that governs each ethic.

Let me begin by examining the nature of formal rationality. Historically speaking, formal rationality arises with the advent of modern philosophy and science, with Descartes and Newton. Its use has continued through the period of positivism and into the present age of technology and the computer. Formal rationality is characterized by the existence of one demonstrably correct answer to any of our questions. If we adopt formal rationality, then we can prove things—beyond a shadow of a doubt. There is a hierarchy of rules or principles to which we can appeal in cases of dispute, rules or principles which will settle the issue. Formal rationality avoids the problems of relativism and may have arisen in response to the “anything goes” relativism of the previous ages. Mathematics, logic, and the computer serve as models for formal rationality. Indeed, Descartes envisioned himself as constructing a geometry of knowledge. If our ideas are not susceptible to such organization and calculation, then they will not count as knowledge and our claims will be labeled irrational.

Now, both utilitarianism and an ethic of principles or justice are dependent upon the notion of formal rationality. That is, both utility and justice are efforts to provide a moral theory which meets the requirements of formal rationality. Both kinds of theory are designed to provide a mechanism by which we can arrive at a correct answer to the question of how we should behave, an answer which can be demonstrated or proven to anyone who understands the hierarchy and calculations of each moral theory. The methods of utility and justice are very much like that of the digital computer. That is, they decide between one choice or another until all of the calculations have been made. If the rules are followed at each step (if the procedure is carried out correctly), we can be assured that our answer is correct.

By contrast, an ethic of caring does not depend upon the notion of
formal rationality. We cannot arrive at an answer by following a set of rules. In some cases one feature will be the determining factor and in other cases some other features will carry the day. What tells us which feature will be the determining factor or which features will receive what weights, will be a matter of what we often call "judgment." That is, from within a given situation, we will recognize immediately the values involved and which features will determine the right action. We cannot predict the outcome in advance, nor can we discover the outcome by following rules of procedure. We cannot prove our conclusions, we can only recognize them.

Now, the picture of rationality I have sketched very briefly, what I will call "informal rationality," is generally taken to be a picture of irrationality, but this is only because we are so used to describing rationality in terms of formal rationality. If, however, we can utilize a notion of informal rationality, then we can distinguish one moral theory from its competitors on the basis of the kind of rationality which underlies the moral theory. We will have different moral theories with their accompanying notions of rationality rather than rational moral theories versus those that are irrational. We may also decide that one notion of rationality is better than another and thereby provide support for selecting one moral theory over others.

There is, of course, much to be said regarding the nature of rationality. On behalf of informal rationality, however, let me just say that what we have discovered recently about the way the brain works suggests that the notion of informal rationality more accurately reflects the way in which we actually do think, not only about moral problems, but about the world around us. The brain does not work like a digital computer (or, where it does its application is severely limited). The brain seems to carry out the function we commonly call "judgment," a function we are not able to program the computer to carry out. How the brain does this, we do not know, but we do know that the brain does generate order without recourse to rules. We can say, then, on behalf of informal rationality, that it better describes the way in which the human brain actually does work.

I have been trying to distinguish an ethic of caring from ethical theories based on utility or justice. In this section I have tried to show that an ethic of utility or justice is based upon a notion of formal rationality and that an ethic of caring is a different kind of theory because it is founded upon a notion of informal rationality. If this distinction makes sense, then the disadvantage of moral theories based upon formal rationality is that they are limited in their scope of application, just as formal rationality is itself limited in its scope. We can force, of course, the application of formal theories, but this practice will not do justice to our experience. If we turn to theories that cover a wider range of cases, however, we face a different disadvantage. That is, the flexibility we achieve in an ethic of caring, the very flexibility
which enables us to cover a wider range of experience. It is subject to abuse. If we recognize the values of a situation in determining right and wrong, different people can claim to recognize different values and the tools of proof which might otherwise be used to settle issues of right and wrong are no longer available to us. This brings us once again to the question of relativism.

VII

Much remains to be said about the issues we have considered so far, but we must now turn to the question of relativism. This issue was raised originally by Carol Gilligan's claim that the perspective of women is not inferior to that of men. It is an issue that has continued to surface throughout our discussion. At this point we are considering the possibility that the way in which women talk about moral problems suggests a different moral theory (an ethic of caring) from traditional theories of principle or justice and utility. If an ethic of caring is not inferior to an ethic of principle or an ethic of utility, then it may be equal to or superior to such ethics. We must now consider each of these possibilities.

If an ethic of caring is equal to an ethic of justice, for example, then an ethic of caring may tell us that X is the right thing to do and an ethic of justice may tell us that X is the wrong thing to do and both theories will be correct. X will be both right and wrong. And this is the basic problem of relativism. Whether we do X or not will be relative to the moral theory we have adopted and we do not have any good reasons for adopting an ethic of justice over an ethic of caring or vice versa.

Here we have relativism at the most fundamental level. We have no good reason for choosing one moral theory over another, and yet one moral theory tells us X is right and another tells us X is wrong. How will we know what to do? The answer is that we will not know what to do. We will not have any good reason for choosing X or for avoiding X. Since adopting moral theories is arbitrary, making moral decisions based on those moral theories will also be arbitrary. This seems to me to make the business of ethics irrational, even if we utilize a broader notion of rationality than is common.

The response to relativism that I sometimes hear is that we need both an ethic of caring and an ethic of, for example, justice. We will simply recognize that an ethic of caring better suits a particular situation than an ethic of justice or vice versa. But this response misses the point that an ethic of caring is different from an ethic of justice (or utility). That is, an ethic of caring already says that considerations of justice will sometimes outweigh considerations of happiness and vice versa. Indeed, this is just where relativism does enter our moral considerations. But an ethic of justice says that considerations of justice
will always decide what is right or wrong. There is a conflict between an ethic of caring and an ethic of justice. The choice here is not between justice and happiness (that choice resides within an ethic of caring) but between an ethic that includes both considerations of justice and happiness and an ethic that includes only considerations of justice or an ethic that includes only considerations of happiness.

At the level of moral theory (given that one theory includes features of the other two), then, to say that an ethic of caring is equal to an ethic of justice is to generate a fundamental relativism, a relativism that makes it impossible to decide how we should behave. If caring is equal to justice, then ethics will be a matter of choosing and commitment in the existential tradition, rather than a matter of reason. The relativism within an ethic of caring, by contrast, does offer a mechanism for deciding what we should do—the recognition of values. This mechanism may not always give us easy answers, but it is available within an ethic of caring as it is not for settling disputes between an ethic of caring and an ethic of justice. This is a very significant consequence of saying that the ethical perspective of women is not inferior to that of men where this means that an ethic of caring is equal to an ethic of justice. But since this consequence is a negative one, that is, it prevents us from having reasons for choosing actions as right or wrong, we will be well served to explore the other alternative, that an ethic of caring is superior to an ethic of justice or an ethic of utility.

It seems to me that ethical theories have a purpose. Like knowledge in general, ethical theories have survival value. Given the capacity of the human species to imagine many alternative behaviors, we need a way of arranging our choices in some order. Otherwise we will be overwhelmed by the possibilities available to us. The order we give our choices may be the strict hierarchy of a principle of justice or the loose arrangement suggested by an ethic of caring. But the purpose of moral theories is to give order to our alternative behaviors and this order has survival value.

If this is a plausible account of moral theories, then we can say that one moral theory will be better than another if its survival value is greater. Given that moral theories have a purpose, the best moral theory will be the one that best fulfills its purpose. We now have a standard by which to judge moral theories, a mechanism by which to select one moral theory over others.

Now, if we adopt this standard for measuring moral theories, it seems to me that we can make a case in favor of an ethic of caring over an ethic of justice or an ethic of utility. That is, we can argue that an ethic of caring has greater survival value than other moral theories. In so doing we will be able to avoid the fundamental relativism that accompanies the equality of caring and justice or utility.

The case in favor of an ethic of caring rests primarily upon its flexibility. That is, since an ethic of caring can utilize both considerations.
of justice and of utility it has the advantage of telling us how to behave in a wider range of cases than either an ethic of only justice or only utility. Since the range of our experiences does not lend itself to only justice or only utility, if we are to have order among our alternative behaviors, we will have to find some other theory and an ethic of caring does seem to be available in those cases to which the application of justice or utility seems forced or arbitrary. This is, indeed, how we generally view deontological and consequentialist theories. Both theories have difficulties and we continually revise them in order to resolve these difficulties. And those revisions are often designed to accommodate features recognized by the other kind of theory. Accommodating elements of both theories is exactly what an ethic of caring does.

There is a qualification to the view that an ethic of caring has greater survival value than other moral theories. We must consider this qualification in order to see the complete picture regarding the superiority of an ethic of caring. An ethic of caring is not for everyone. That is, at some stages of development, individual members of the species are unable to cope with a wide range of experience. Individuals will require simplification rather than complexity. Children need rules and guidelines rather than more possibilities. Basically, utilizing an ethic of caring is only for those who have reached a stage of development that enables them to deal with the real world—the world of complexity and ambiguity.

What this qualification suggests is that it is an important part of ethics to help people develop the skills that are required for living in a complex world. We return to the notion of strength that is so important to the notion of caring. Here we have another consideration in making moral decisions—how our behavior effects the maturity of others. The idea of virtue becomes as important as the idea of rightness within the general framework of moral considerations.

VIII

I have examined three possible interpretations of Carol Gilligan's claims that women have a different perspective on moral problems and that this perspective is not inferior to the perspective of men. It seems to me that the third interpretation is clearly the most significant for moral theory, although the other interpretations offer important insights into our understanding of how we ought to behave. The third interpretation is that the way in which women talk about moral problems suggests a different moral theory, one that is different from traditional deontological theories or utilitarian theories. I have tried to make a case for there being a different theory.

Additionally, if this ethical theory (an ethic of caring) is not inferior to traditional moral theories then it must be equal to or better
than traditional moral theories. If an ethic of caring is only equal to traditional moral theories, then we will be involved in a fundamental relativism that prevents us from having reasons for acting in one way rather than another. The alternative is that an ethic of caring is better than traditional moral theories because it is a theory that applies to a greater range of our experience. This flexibility gives an ethic of caring greater survival value than other moral theories. But, survival depends not only upon a moral theory but also upon being able to utilize that theory. What we need to encourage in our behavior, then, is not only an ethic of caring but also the kind of person, whether in ourselves or others, that can utilize an ethic of caring.

Notes


2 Throughout this paper I follow the assumption of Gilligan and others that the different voice of women is not strictly limited to women. Carol Gilligan says: "The different voice I describe is characterized not by gender but theme. Its association with women is an empirical observation, and it is primarily through women's voices that I trace its development. But this association is not absolute, and the contrasts between male and female voices are presented here to highlight a distinction between two modes of thought and to focus a problem of interpretation rather than to represent a generalization about either sex." Gilligan, p. 2.


4 Gilligan, p. 18.

5 Kohlberg's study was done with eighty-four male subjects, Gilligan, p. 18.

6 One might be able to give reasons for selecting the male perspective over the perspective of women, but Kohlberg does not give such reasons. This issue will be examined again later.

7 See pages 7-9 of Gilligan's *In A Different Voice*. In these pages Gilligan refers to the work of Nancy Chodorow as it pertains to relationship. Also see Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978. There is another way of viewing the issue of relationship and that is to say that men and women are equally interested in relationship (rather than women being more interested than men) but that the nature of relationship is different for each. Men are seen as defining relationships in terms of contracts, giving relationships a formal character, while women see relationships as informal (personal!). If this other way of viewing relationship is correct, however, it seems to me that what I want to say at this point in the paper can still be said, but it will have to be translated into the language of the new way of viewing relationship.

8 One might introduce an argument regarding the happiness that results from autonomy rather than dependence, but without such an argument we have no reason to believe that women or their values are inferior. Indeed, we might respond to the argument above by showing that more happiness results from relationship than from separateness.
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9 The same can be said for children where children are quite unlike male adults.


11 Women may draw this distinction on the basis of their experiences without ever having read any of the popular books on parenting.

12 This matches the distinction considered earlier between relationship as personal or informal and relationship as formal or contractarian. See Note 7.

13 See Nel Noddings, Caring: A Feminine Approach To Ethics And Moral Education, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984. The perspective I am describing here is also called an ethic of response. I have no quarrel with that description.

14 It may be that the key here is that there are two notions of "unselfishness," one notion in which unselfishness means sacrifice and one in which it means expression. The first notion (sacrifice) is a very popular one, but it seems to me that this notion of unselfishness is often used to manipulate others. The second notion (expression) seems much less likely to be used to manipulate others and therefore has an advantage over the first.

15 Noddings, p. 185.

16 Noddings, p. 117.

17 It may be unfair to have an either/or result, but I think that the example will be helpful and I do not know how to explore all of the alternatives in the space permitted.

18 We do not want to make the difficulty of calculation a factor here. If we calculate precisely and correctly that the happiness of the life of the child will be greater than the unhappiness of the mother, we still want to say that on an ethic of caring the woman should have an abortion.


20 There are many things, it seems to me, that are very important but about which we cannot be very precise. The trend of modern thought, however, following the pattern of modern science, is to say that if we cannot be precise about something that it cannot be very important. This trend seems to me to be exemplified in the case of the computer. "If we cannot put it on the computer it cannot be very important. Whatever we can put on the computer must be very important." I want to resist this trend as much as possible. By the way, the fact that we cannot speak precisely about something does not mean that anything we say about it is correct. That is, imprecision does not generate relativism. (This is one of the major themes of the ethics of women, as I understand this perspective.)

21 This seems to me to be one of the themes in Bernard Williams' recent book, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1985.

22 This seems to me to introduce an element of relativism, but does not suggest that anything goes.
It also demonstrates a radical difference between an ethic of caring and an ethic of duty or justice or principle. That is, what has been said about the distinction between an ethic of caring and an ethic of utility can be said about the distinction between an ethic of caring and any deontological theory.

One might, I suppose, argue that this is a version of rule utilitarianism. That is, at any given moment we may not bring about the greatest happiness, but overall we will do so.

Some philosophers have spoken out against formal rationality, including Nietzsche, Hegel, Sartre, Dewey, and Wittgenstein.

For an extensive discussion of this issue see Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.


I intend to be following in ethics what my colleague Gonzalo Munevar claims applies to knowledge in general. See Radical Knowledge.

We can make, of course, any ethic work in every case by merely insisting that the answer it gives is the correct one. But in many instances the answer a theory gives us does not seem appropriate to the situation, for example, when acting justly causes great unhappiness for everyone involved.