Philosophy and Feminist Thinking

Jean Grimshaw

Senior Lecturer in Philosophy and Cultural Studies
Bristol Polytechnic

---

7   The Idea of a Female Ethic

In a paper called *Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes*, (1977), Freud wrote as follows:

I cannot evade the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men. Their superego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men. Characteristics which critics of every epoch have brought up against women – that they show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgements by feelings of affection or hostility – all these would be amply accounted for by the modification in the formation of the superego which we have inferred above [p.342]

Freud is here suggesting two things: that women's approach to ethical problems is typically different from that of men, and that this difference is somehow related to more general differences in female psychic development.

This passage has caused anger among many women; here is yet another man saying that women are overemotional, implying that they are inferior to men. But a considerable amount of recent feminist work has argued, however, that Freud is *half* right. He is right to suggest that women typically approach ethical or moral problems in a way different from men, and he is right to see this as related to the different psychic development and experience of women (even if the particular account he gives of that development is problematic). But what is wrong is his assumption of the deficiency of women. Woman have been measured against male norms and found wanting, but what is needed is a

critique of those very norms; and this for two reasons: not only because justice is not done to women if they are simply seen as deficient, but because the inexorable and impersonal nature of the male ethic of which Freud wrote leads to a dangerous and damaging sense of human priorities.

In this chapter and the next I want to look at the idea that women typically think differently about moral or ethical problems from men. First, I shall look at some claims that this is so, and at the sorts of evidence and arguments on which they are based. Second, I shall discuss some ways in which such differences have been described (one common way, for example, of characterising differences between male and female moral reasoning is to suggest that men tend to see ethical problems 'abstractly' in terms of rules and principles, whereas women think more concretely and contextually). Finally, I mentioned in Chapter 1 the importance of the question of women's mothering in much recent feminist theory; in a great deal of feminist writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, women's mothering was often seen mainly as a problem and a burden. Since then, however, it has not only been recognised that motherhood is not *just* a burden; it has been argued that a distinctively female 'ethic' may arise from women's experience of mothering and of being mothered themselves by women. In some cases, female ethical thinking has been largely *identified* with what is seen as 'maternal thinking'. So I want to discuss the question (which is by no means a new one, but which has been given a new lease of life in some recent feminist theory) of the association of women with 'caring' values in general, and with the exemplification of these in the task of mothering in particular.

THE EVIDENCE

There is plenty of evidence that women are *believed* to be psychologically different from men. In Chapter 3, for example, I referred to the *Hite Report on Male Sexuality* (1981b). Most of the men who responded to the questionnaires on which the report was based saw

masculinity as involving qualities such as being self-assured, in control, autonomous, and so forth, whereas they saw femininity as involving qualities such as being helpful, loving, sweet, nurturing, supportive. Some further interesting evidence was provided by an experiment done by Broverman *et al.* (1970). The experiment involved first constructing a list of bipolar items, such as 'not at all aggressive/very aggressive', on which a high agreement could be obtained as to which typically characterised men and women. Broverman and others then conducted an experiment in which they asked seventy-nine clinically trained psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers, both male and female, to judge, on a list of such bipolar items, which qualities they would consider evidence of 'mental health'. One group was asked to do this for 'adults' (gender unspecified). Another was asked to do it for males, and a third for females. The results were interesting: there was a significant correlation between the items thought to characterise *male* mental health, and those thought to characterise *adult* mental health (gender unspecified). But there was very little correlation between 'female' and 'adult' (in other words, you cannot be *both* a mentally healthy female *and* a mentally healthy adult!)

Broverman and others do not discuss in detail the particular items that are seen as masculine and feminine – they simply see the problem as one of 'sex-role stereotypes'. But there are some interesting features of the list of 'feminine' items. First, and perhaps unsurprisingly, women are seen as much less ambitious, competitive, independent, objective and so forth. Second, many of the feminine items are described in an implicitly *pejorative* way. Here are some examples, with the feminine side given first:

1. Very sneaky/very direct
2. Very uncomfortable about being aggressive/not at all uncomfortable about being aggressive
3. Unable to separate feelings from ideas/easily able to separate feelings from ideas
4. Very easily influenced/not very easily influenced.

In many of the items, females are made to appear confused, ambivalent, uncertain, dependent, *unable* to do things,

uncomfortable and anxious, and so forth. Some female qualities are positively valued, but the dominant impression given by the list is that if a characteristic is ascribed to women, there is a tendency for it to be described in a pejorative way.

Now the sort of evidence provided by Hite and Broverman is evidence about *beliefs* about men and women, and it cannot be taken incautiously as evidence that men and women actually do differ in these ways. I have discussed before the problems that there are with hasty assertions about the psychology of masculinity or femininity. Attempts have been made, however, to ground ideas of male and female psychological differences in approach to ethical problems by empirical research that does not start out with any assumptions that females are inferior; and I want now to outline an example of such research.

In her book *In a Different Voice: Women's Conception of Self and Morality* (1982), Carol Gilligan argues that much developmental psychology, and many accounts of the development of moral reasoning, see the ways in which males typically develop as 'more developed', and the ways in which women develop as deviant or deficient. I have already noted the way in which this happens in Freud; Gilligan argues that the same is true of the work of others such as Piaget, Erikson and Kohlberg.[1] I will explain this by giving an example of the research she undertook.

A common method that has been used in studying the development of children is that of asking them questions or posing them problems, and trying to categorise the answers they give in a way that, it is hoped, will shed light on norms of development. Piaget used this sort of method in his studies of the nature of children's thinking and intellectual development, and proposed a theory of a sequence of *stages* of development. Kohlberg used a similar method to try and understand the way in which children developed a capacity to reason about moral problems. Similarly, one of Gilligan's methods was to interview children in depth and discuss with them the way in which they would try to resolve a moral dilemma.

One of the interviews she describes was with two children,

both eleven years old – pseudonyms Jake and Amy. Both Jake and Amy were presented with a problem that had been used by Kohlberg in his research. The problem is this: a man called Heinz has a wife who is dying, but he cannot afford the drug she needs. Should he steal the drug in order to save his wife's life?

Jake is clear that Heinz *should* steal the drug; his answer revolves around a resolution of the rules governing life and property. In the course of the interview, he describes the dilemma as a 'sort of math problem with humans', a problem which needs solving by a logical working out of the priorities that should be given to certain rules. Amy's answer can appear evasive. Here are two of her comments. Asked if Heinz should steal the drug, she says:

> Well, I don't think so. I think there might be other ways besides stealing it, like if he could borrow the money or make a loan or something, but he really shouldn't steal the drug – but his wife shouldn't die either... If he stole the drug, he might save his wife then, but if he did, he might have to go to jail, and then his wife might get sicker again, and he couldn't get more of the drug, and it might not be good. So they should really just talk it out and find some other way to make the money. [p.28]

Amy also suggests that Heinz should talk to the druggist – she finds the puzzle to lie in his failure to respond; and she suggests that if Heinz and the druggist talked it out long enough, they could find some solution other than stealing.

Amy, Gilligan argues, sees the actors in the dilemma 'arrayed not as opponents in a contest of rights, but as members of a network of relationships on whose continuation they all depend' (p.30). Both children, she says, 'recognise the need for agreement, but see it as mediated in different ways – he impersonally through systems of logic and law, she personally through communication in relationships' (p.29). Jake sees a conflict between life and property, Amy a failure or fracture of human relationships.

Gilligan also shows how the children responded to a question about the way to resolve conflicts between responsibility to others and responsibility to oneself. Jake immediately answers that 'you go about one-fourth to the

others and three-fourths to yourself' (p.35). His answers show, Gilligan suggests, that he begins by taking for granted his responsibility for himself, but, recognising that you have to 'live with others', he looks for rules that will limit interference and minimise hurt. Amy, on the other hand, begins by taking for granted what Gilligan calls 'a premise of connection' – that relationships involve responsibility and care for others – and she then considers the extent to which care or responsibility for oneself can be fitted into this.

Kohlberg's account of the moral development of children, Gilligan argues, would see Jake as being at a 'higher' stage than Amy. Moral maturity is equated largely with the ability to bring logic to bear on moral dilemmas, to have a principled sense of justice, to be able to differentiate morality from law, and to be able to discuss and resolve a conflict of principles. But Amy sees things that Jake does not. She sees more clearly than Jake the *problems* that are created by *any* choice, the fracture of human relationships that may have led to a dilemma like that of Heinz, and the inadequacy of any solution that is not based on improved communication and understanding. Gilligan argues that Kohlberg's theory is partial; there is a need to 'restore the missing text of women's development', to include the perspectives of both the sexes. But Gilligan does not, I think conceive of this task as a purely *additive* one. Throughout the book she suggests that the differences of approach between men and women raise common or typical *problems* which are different for each sex. Women, she suggests, tend to be so orientated towards a conception of responsibility to others and the primacy of relationships with others in their lives, that they can have real problems in developing a conception of their *own* rights or needs, or of responsibilities towards themselves. She conducted a series of interviews with a number of young women who were considering having an abortion after an unplanned or unwanted pregnancy, and shows how difficult many of them found it to feel that it was 'legitimate' to consider their own desires and interests at all. Men, on the other hand, she argues, may feel threatened by intimacy with others; they may find it less easy to feel a sense of connection to others, less easy to

understand or negotiate problems of communication in relationships. The problem, therefore, as Gilligan sees it, is how to resolve the dilemma of retaining a clear sense of one's own identity and interests and needs while at the same time seeing these as necessarily embedded in relationships with others.

The sort of evidence Gilligan offers clearly needs treating with caution (and she herself, I am sure, would be the first to agree). It doesn't, for example license inferences about particular individuals; it doesn't claim anything about 'all men' or 'all women'. It would be easy to find examples of children who responded differently to Jake and Amy, of women who have great difficulties in relating to other people, or of men who are self-effacing and have difficulty in asserting their own needs or rights. Gilligan is simply claiming that women *more commonly* have certain approaches to moral dilemmas than men do. Now, I think there may be some problems about how such differences are *described,* and I shall return to these later. But in any case, it is important to note that it is not simply a question of the characteristics of individuals. Gilligan's research was conducted at the individual level, but of course, she is not talking just about characteristics that individuals may or may not possess, but about *norms* as to how people should behave or how they should develop. Such norms may be written into institutions; people may be expected to behave in certain ways, or behave as if they thought or felt certain things, even if the relationship between these norms and how they do actually feel is tenuous. Soldiers, for example, may be expected in some circumstances to behave as if 'enemies' were not human beings, to suppress any emotional recognition of the human suffering they may be causing and any critical awareness of ideologies which see napalm, for example, as a legitimate means to 'freedom'. Business men may be expected to give total priority in their lives to a ruthless pursuit of personal advancement. But not all soldiers or business men are happy with these norms (the sorts of emotional anguish and personality disturbances experienced, for example, by many Vietnam war veterans, is evidence of that).

Gilligan does not discuss the way in which moral or behavioural norms may penetrate institutions, sometimes despite the ambivalence or even anguish of the individuals who are required to obey those norms; she sees them as leading primarily to problems in *personal* development.[2] What a number of feminist writers have argued, however, is that while male norms have indeed been personally damaging to women and men (and doubly so to women since what is female is so often regarded as inferior), it is not merely at the personal or interpersonal level that the damage has been done. It has been argued that male conceptions of morality have permeated human social life and institutions in a way that leads to a distorted and dangerous sense of human priorities; to a morality, in fact, that may be seen as underlying such things as militarism.

The idea of a 'female ethic', therefore, incorporates a number of strands. It incorporates a belief that there are common differences of approach between men and women towards moral problems and ethical reasoning. It offers certain ways of *describing* those differences. And it suggests not merely that women's ethical approaches and priorities are commonly *different* from those of men (and should not be devalued merely because they are different), but that male approaches and priorities are, as such, humanly damaging and dangerous. It is sometimes suggested that this amounts to seeing women as ethically 'superior' to men; but I think this misrepresents the issue. There are indeed some feminist accounts of men which see them as vicious or violent 'by nature', but those accounts of a female ethic that I shall look at do not all suppose this, nor do they suppose that women as individuals are inherently morally superior to or purer in heart than men. They suppose, rather, that female life and experience creates the possibility for women more easily than for men of perceiving the dangerous and ruinous and inhuman nature of ideologies and actions that have led to so much destruction.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE MORALITY

Earlier I talked about the difficulties in supposing that there is a 'male point of view' in philosophy, and of the many different forms that 'masculinism' in philosophy has taken. There are similar problems with the idea that women as such have a point of view, or a distinctive approach to ethical problems or anything else. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that the idea of a 'female ethic' might be grounded in considerations such as the following.

Agnes Heller (1980) has argued that the very fact that women have been so largely *excluded* from broader sociopolitical activity, and restricted to the world of household or family, has meant that there are *more* similarities, historically, between the lives of women than between the lives of men. Women have tended to live, as it were, on a smaller scale, occupied not so much with bold deeds or great causes or 'world historical events', but with the dailiness of a life spent in the detailed tasks of managing a small community and meeting daily needs. So, suggests Heller, 'Within the framework of their small world, women had to learn how to manage a community. It was a painstaking but peaceful occupation which required enormous tact, a great ability to smooth away conflicts, as well as devotion and sympathy' (p.210). Women have of course often supported their men in the bold deeds and great causes, but it is arguable that they, more than men, have tended to have a profound scepticism and ambivalence about the sacrifice of human lives and loves and the daily fabric of human life to the causes in the name of which men have fought and despoiled and oppressed others.

The conditions of women's lives, and the conceptions they have had of the work that was theirs, have of course varied (and do vary) enormously; thus the idea, for example, of an intimate family life whose rationale was emotional rather than economic production postdates capitalism. And women's exclusion from 'public' life and dependence on men has worked to their disadvantage, to say the least. So too has their concern for 'emotional maintenance' and the preservation of relationships. Commonly, I think, women

feel not only an imperative to maintain relationships, but that the whole responsibility for doing this lies on their shoulders. They are therefore especially prone to guilt, and to a form of concern for relationships with others which can lead, for example, to the feeling that 'not upsetting people' must always be given priority, and that it can *never* be right to do something which will fracture a relationship or break a connection. They are prone, too, to the feeling that they should never put their own needs or desires before those of others, or prone to the sort of self-sacrifice that can damage those who receive it as well as those who give it.

Despite the dangers of 'false universalism',and despite the frequent oppression that has resulted from the confining of women to a life often bound more than that of men by the practical details of daily care for human life, the idea of a 'female ethic' suggests, I think two things. It suggests that the priorities accorded to the concerns and demands of those spheres of life which have commonly been seen as especially female need re-evaluating. And it suggests that perhaps women's lives often provide a space for these questions about human priorities more readily than the lives of men. In particular, they provide space for questioning the sorts of priorities that see human lives as easily dispensable in the service of some abstract idea or great cause; that see care for others or a life devoted to serving others as relatively unimportant; or that see the tasks of maintaining human life and sustaining intimate connections as sharply distinct from and inferior to the concerns of the 'public' world.

The particular conception of the public/private split that is still influential today has its origins in the decline and eventual demise of economically productive labour in the home after the Industrial Revolution, and the consequent sharp demarcation between the world of home and family, and the world of work and public life. Ross Poole (1985) argues that a certain conception of rationality and of morality can be seen as related to the development of a capitalist market economy. In the ideology of such an economy, individuals are seen as pursuing their own separate ends and as motivated by the pursuit of private gains. The form of 'rationality' associated with this is the

instrumental rationality of efficiency, of seeking efficient means of achieving given ends; and underlying this conception of rationality is the assumption of a pervasive self-interest. The morality associated with this form of rationality is that which seeks simply to contain individuals' self-seeking, to provide a framework of legal and moral rules which will ensure that the whole system does not break down through the untrammelled egoism of such self-seeking. Thus laws are instituted governing such things as property and contracts, imposing constraints on the liberty of one individual to 'interfere' with another, and protecting individual rights and freedoms against such encroachments.

As a consequence of individuals pursuing their own essentially self-directed goals, however, the wants of others will also supposedly be satisfied, by the way in which the market tends to maximise the quantity of goods produced by given amounts of human productive activity. This 'invisible hand' (the unintended consequences of the pursuit of individual self-interest) will be undermined unless individuals, in their public life, avoid certain kinds of altruistic behaviour. Thus:

> if participants in market transactions were moved by the circumstances of those with whom they were bargaining, they would not enforce the competitive price; if employers were moved by the plight of their unproductive employees, they would not introduce more efficient methods of production; if entrepreneurs were more sensitive to the feelings and aspirations of their debtors, they would not enforce bankruptcies, and so on. [p.18]

Furthermore, in public or productive life, relationships can only be conceptualised as means to pre-given ends. So, 'within these structures, it is impossible to conceive of activity which is genuinely other-directed, i.e. which takes the well-being of another as the goal of one's activity' (p.18). Set against this conception of the public sphere is that of the private one of the intimacies of home and family. This is construed as the polar opposite of the world of impersonal instrumental rationality and self-interest. It is personal, particularistic, based on emotion and on care and nurturance for others. Each aspect of social life is defined by

what it excludes. The public sphere thus excludes emotion, except insofar as this is transformed into rational self-interest. The private sphere of domestic life excludes reason, except insofar as this is represented by males who also figure in market relations.

And, as is already clear, this distinction between public and private also marks a distinction of gender. So the public sphere is seen as paradigmatically the province of males and the private one that of females. Hence:

> If male individuality seeks ends which essentially pertain to self (and perhaps to those represented by self), women must take the interests of others as a sufficient basis for action. But not, of course, all others; only those within the same private sphere (husband, child). Even the structure of motivation is different. What moves men to action are emotions which have been transformed by the requirements of reason into channels of efficiency and consistency; feminine emotions, devoid of reason, are everywhere infected by excess and particularity, hence the lack of proper regard for what is due to impersonal and unknown others; the lack of a sense of justice, which has – notoriously – been supposed to be characteristic of women [p.22]

Now, as Poole acknowledges, the above is a highly schematic account of an ideology, and it is very important not to assume that it corresponds in any clear way to social reality. Thus, for example, this picture ignores the fact that women have always undertaken wage-labour in large numbers, that the particular account of the 'private' sphere that it gives may be class-based, and so on. Nevertheless, I think he is right that the conceptions he outlines are recognisable and influential. I want, however, to consider here the way in which this ideology may have affected feminist thinking.

THE IDEA OF FEMALE VIRTUE

These conceptions of the public and private generate conceptions of value and of morality which are in tension with each other. Usually, the private has been subordinated to the public; concerns seen as female have been regarded as inferior, as trivial or less important. In males, at least,

private values or concerns were (and often still are) supposed to lose out in the case of a conflict. Not many male spheres of work look very kindly on the intrusion of 'personal' considerations into work efficiency. And women tend to be doubly caught; they are often criticised, for example, for taking time off work for looking after sick children; but they are *also* often criticised for being at work in the first place.

But the realm of the private was also necessary for refuge from the harshness of the public sphere. And along with the subordination has gone an idealisation of the private sphere and a sentimental account of the virtues of women which are its anchor. This is clearest in the Victorian middle-class ideal of the family. At the centre of the family was the saintly (and asexual) mother, who was both to be protected from the harsh and corrupt realities of the male public world and also to be the guardian of moral purity.

Now this ideal was very evident *both* in arguments for *and* against female suffrage. A common argument against giving women the vote was that they were too pure to be allowed to be contaminated by having anything to do with politics. Here is a typical anti-suffragist argument, quoted by Jean Elshtain (1981).

> Man assumed the direction of government and war, women of the domestic and family affairs and the care and training of the child...It has been so from the beginning, and it will continue to be so to the end, because it is in conformity to nature and its laws, and is sustained and confirmed by the experience and reason of six thousand years...The domestic altar is a sacred flame where woman is the high and officiating priestess...To keep her in that condition of purity, it is necessary that she should be separated from the exercise of suffrage and from all those stern and contaminating and demoralizing duties that devolve upon the hardier sex – man. [p.232]

It is interesting, however, how often arguments *for* women's suffrage were couched in similar terms. They simply stood the anti-suffragist argument on its head. The purity of women, instead of being an argument *against* women having the vote, became an argument *for* them having it; since, it was suggested, it was only the purity of women that could purify politics. Here, for example, is what Elizabeth Cady Stanton said (again, quoted in Elshtain):

The male element is a destructive force, stern, selfish, aggrandizing, loving war, violence, conquest, acquisition, breeding in the material and moral world alike discord, disorder, disease and death. See what a record of blood and cruelty the pages of history reveal...The male element has held high carnival thus far, it has fairly run riot from the beginning, overpowering the feminine element everywhere...The need of this hour is not territory, gold mines, railroads or specie payments, but a new evangel of womanhood, to exalt purity, virtue, morality, true religion, to lift man up into the higher realms of thought and action. [p.232]

This supposes that an idealised feminine virtue can simply be mapped onto the public world and magically transform it. Elshtain writes that such arguments really seem to presuppose the end of politics; if virtue rules, then what is right will be unambiguous and clear and all dissension will disappear under its guidance.

Cady Stanton's view of feminine virtue and purity simply mirrors the sharp division between the harsh and immoral public world and the uncontaminated world of domesticity and its associated view of men as corrupt and females as pure. What it does not do is challenge these polarisations in any way. It supposes that women can remain quite unchanged, and it does not ask whether women's powerlessness and dependence might not have led to distortions in the idea of female virtue which both worked against women's interests and misrepresented any particular capacities or insights that they might have. It also supposes that men are 'naturally' corrupt; both the suffragist and the anti-suffragist argument see the role of women as saving the world from the corruption of men, although they differ as to how this is to be achieved.

It is possible to find echoes and reiterations of these sorts of arguments in a fair amount of feminist writing. The idea of 'natural' male propensities to violence is found, for example, in Susan Brownmiller's view (1975) that the basic reason men rape is because they have the biological capacity to do so. A belief in the intrinsic purity of women is often associated with a representation of woman as victim. Thus in the work of Mary Daly (1979), as I have already shown, a stress on what she sees as the utter degradation and 'robotitude' of women under patriarchy is linked with a

belief in the intrinsic 'virtue' of women and harmony among women, if only the conditioning inflicted by patriarchy can be undone.

There are also echoes of these suffragist arguments in some anti-feminist writing and thinking. Robyn Rowlands (1984) has collected together a number of essays both by women who have an allegiance to feminism and by women who reject it. Among those who reject it there is often a striking similarity of theme. They feel that feminism has denigrated the importance of motherhood and the 'traditional' labour of women in the home, and that in so doing it has simply aped the aggressive and competitive strivings of men. They tend to see contemporary feminism as something invented by a clique of dissatisfied and frustrated women who have sought success outside the home in compensation for their failures in it, and have then tried to force their cold and 'lifeless' vision onto other women. The issue of 'life' is central, and all of them bitterly oppose abortion as symptomatic of what they see as the feminist denial of life. Valerie Riches, for example, says that feminists see a pregnant woman as a failure of technology rather than as a symbol of life and health. And she says, 'I could have given my heart to a feminist movement concerned with the cultural growth of the characteristics most deeply associated with womanhood; tenderness not aggression, people not things, love not hate, spirituality not materialism. But women's liberation fosters the aggressive values of men' (p.150). This is a view of women's values and women's purity which is very similar indeed to that of Cady Stanton. And Robyn Rowland also points out the existence of a strong feeling among many women who oppose feminism that men *are* naturally wilful and corrupt, and that only home and family, and the associated male responsibilities, can keep men on the rails. Sexual freedom, abortion, even equal rights will tend to undermine those very things that have kept male aggression or philandering under control.

I have suggested that it is reasonable to suppose that women commonly do tend to have concerns and priorities which differ from those of men, and that these may arise

from the particular concern of women with the physical and emotional care of others in the intimate context of domestic life. I have also suggested that this may provide space, may make it easier for women to question in certain ways the common concerns and priorities of men. But ideas of a female ethic have also to be located, as Ross Poole points out, in the context of a conception of a sharp dichotomy between private and public worlds, and an associated sharp polarisation of male and female qualities. Male concerns are thus depicted as universal, general, impersonal; female ones as particular. Males are seen as egoistic, females as caring: males are seen as rational, females as emotional.

The conceptions of the idea of a female ethic that I shall discuss do not all assume a doctrine of intrinsic female virtue or purity. But I think that sometimes, in their description of what they see as the particular qualities of female ethical thinking, they may tend to lapse into a recapitulation of precisely those dichotomies and polarisations that I have just mentioned. And insofar as they do so, I believe there is also a danger of *misdescribing* what they set out to characterise.

Insofar as there are distinctively female concerns or priorities, they have been developed in a context of dependence and often associated with powerlessness. I believe it is wrong to present a conception of woman *merely* as victim; nevertheless I think it is crucial to recognise the way in which women are sometimes disabled and oppressed by the very qualities which are also in a way their strength. Furthermore, insofar as these female concerns have been associated particularly with intimate personal relations, questions have to be asked about how values or priorities associated with these concerns can be translated, as it were, into a wider context. Sometimes these questions are not asked. Thus, in an article proposing the struggle to establish a 'matriarchy', Shanklin and Love (1984) suggest that in a 'matriarchy' all relationships will be modelled on the nurturant relationship between mother and child. But quite apart from the problems in supposing that the maternal relationship forms a model for all others, to say that all relationships should be 'nurturant' simply raises the problem of how it is possible for care or nurturance to inform

relationships that are not personal or intimate ones, and what it could mean to talk of 'nurturance' when one is faced with broad problems of social policy and organisation. Even if it is important that social policy or movements for social change should be informed in some way by ethical priorities that can be seen as anchored in the 'personal', such an informing is dependent on a *transforming*, and on a challenging of the sharp distinction between a public and a private ethic.

With these questions in mind, I now want to look in more detail at some particular characterisations of a 'female ethic'. Three main themes seem to me to recur constantly, in one form or another, in the discussions of this that I have encountered.

1. A critique of 'abstraction', and a belief that female thinking *is* (and moral thinking in general *should be*) more contextualised, less bound to abstract rules, more 'concrete'.
2. A stress on the values of empathy, nurturance or caring, which, again, are seen as qualities that women both value more and tend more commonly to display.
3. A critique of the idea that notions of *choice* or *will* are central to morality, and of a sharp distinction between fact and value; a stress, instead, on the idea of the *demands* of a situation, which are discovered through a process of *attention* to it and require an appropriate response.

In my discussion I shall refer to the work of a number of feminist writers. I shall not, however, aim to provide an exhaustive discussion of everything they say. I am trying, rather, to present an analysis of some important common themes and directions. Similarly, while I shall refer sometimes to the history of moral philosophy, I am not aiming at a comprehensive discussion even of those aspects which I shall mention. My aim is simply to locate feminist debate where relevant in the context of debates in moral philosophy from which it both derives inspiration and has and needs a critical relationship. Some of these debates are quite long-standing ones; discussion and critique of the fact/value split, for example, or debate about the notion that

one's moral principles are fundamentally a matter for choice or decision. But some of the reasons for entering into these debates, or believing them to be important, are distinctively feminist. So I shall now look in detail at these three main themes, and show why they have been thought to be central to feminist thinking. In the remaining part of this chapter, I shall look at the critique of abstraction and at the notion of 'caring'. In the next chapter I shall discuss the idea of 'maternal thinking' as a paradigm of female moral thinking, and the relationship this has been seen to have to a critique of some conceptions of morality.

THE CRITIQUE OF ABSTRACTION

The word 'abstract' quite often has a pejorative sense in feminist writing, but it is a word which can mean many things. Sara Ruddick (1984) gives the following account of it: 'Abstraction refers to a cluster of interrelated dispositions to simplify, dissociate, generalise and sharply define. Its opposition, which I call 'concreteness', respects complexity, connection, particularity and ambiguity' (p.249). But this account is still extremely broad and vague. And I think, in fact, that the opposition between 'abstract' and 'concrete' has been used in two main ways, which it is useful to distinguish and discuss separately. These two uses are as follows.

1. To make an abstract moral judgement is to apply to a situation a rule or principle which is seen as applying to all other situations of that sort. To judge concretely, on the other hand, is to concentrate on the particularity or uniqueness of a situation and judge on that basis (and to be sceptical about the value of general rules). It is to judge contextually. To look at a person or situation abstractly is to 'abstract' – that is, discount or think away – the unique or particular features of that person or situation and see it as coming under some general concept or category. To judge concretely is to refuse to discount such unique or particular features.

2. To look at a situation abstractly is to make a judgement about a situation, or take a course of action on the basis of such a judgement, without considering the 'human consequences' of that course of action, the specific and detailed effects which that course of action might have on other human beings. Or it is to make a judgement which is 'distanced' in some way from the actual or potential experienced reality which would be the consequences of a course of action. Concreteness requires that one experience or vividly imagine such consequences, either to oneself or to others, and judge on the basis of that awareness.

Rules and Principles

A critique of the idea of a morality based on rules and principles is clearly expressed by Nel Noddings in her book *Caring: a Feminine approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984). Noddings argues two main things: first, that a morality based on rules and principles is in itself inadequate, and second, that it does not capture what is distinctive or typical about female moral thinking.

She points out that it has been supposed in a great deal of moral philosophy that to act morally is to apply a general rule or principle to a situation and act accordingly. The moral task is then, as it were, to abstract the 'local detail' from a situation and see it as falling under such a rule or principle. Beyond that, it is a question of deciding or choosing, in a case of conflict, how to order or rank one's principles in a hierarchy, in this particular situation, if not more generally. Moral dilemmas take the form of a clash of principles.

Noddings argues that this view of morality offers an inadequate account of women's moral reasoning. It is not, she says, that women *can't* order principles hierarchically. Rather, 'it is more likely that we see this process as peripheral to, or even alien to, many problems of moral action. Faced with a hypothetical dilemma, women often ask for more information. We want to know more, I think, in order to form a picture more nearly resembling real moral situations' (p.2).

In *Existentialism and Humanism* (1948) Sartre outlines the dilemma of a young man faced with the question of whether to leave home and join the Resistance or stay at home with his aged mother. The dilemma is posed very starkly and briefly; and the point of the story, for Sartre, is that the outcome will be one of mere choice and commitment, for which no justification other than the making of that choice can be found.

Noddings argues that the posing of moral dilemmas in such a way thoroughly misrepresents the nature of moral decisions. Far from making the 'real' issues stand out more sharply, it conceals them. We know nothing about the mother's feelings or situation, about the family history, or about the context of the decision that the young man has to make. If it were argued that however much further information was supplied, *in the end* a decision has to be made on the basis of principles, Noddings would I think reply that the more concrete and detailed knowledge we have of a situation, the less use are general rules and principles. Human situations are so different from each other that a principle of universalisibility (whenever X, then do Y) is either useless or serves to conceal the differences. Noddings also argues that a morality of rules or principles can be dangerous. Principles, for one thing, always imply exceptions to themselves (killing is wrong *except* in defence of one's country, etc.). And they lend themselves to the danger of self-righteousness. The amount of violence and psychic pain inflicted in the name of principle should, she suggests, make us wary.

Noddings' idea seems to be that a judgement *emerges*, as it were, from a more and more detailed look at the situation. Now, insofar as she is criticising what can be called the 'desert-island dilemma' account of moral reasoning, I entirely agree with her. There has been a tendency sometimes, in moral philosophy, to suppose that if you present only the 'bare bones' of a situation, it makes the issues stand out more sharply. If you have one kidney machine and two patients, one a sick child and the other a famous scientist aged sixty, whose life should you save? If you survived an aircraft crash in the jungle, would it be right

to leave the wounded to die in order that the fitter might survive? I think the right response to questions like this is to refuse to answer them 'in the abstract', and this is not moral cowardice or fudging, it is a recognition of the absurdity and insensitivity in supposing that a 'right' answer to questions like these could be decided without a detailed knowledge of, and even involvement in, the situation. But I think there is nevertheless something wrong about the sharp distinction between 'abstract' and 'concrete', and about the way this has been used to characterise female moral reasoning. To bring out why, I first want to look again at the notions of 'rule' and 'principle', and then discuss an example in some detail.

Noddings does not really distinguish between 'rules' and 'principles'. What does she take a 'principle' to be? She understands it to be, I think, a rule which prescribes or proscribes a course of action (with possible exceptions). She clearly has in mind rules like 'Don't kill', or 'Don't steal', which, as principles, would be 'Killing is wrong', or 'Stealing is wrong'. She sees rules and principles as functioning to prevent or render more difficult an appreciation of the complexities of a particular situation.

I think, however, that there are important differences which are concealed by this conflation of rules and principles, and I want to suggest a distinction between them as follows. A rule specifies or forbids a certain sort of action, and to follow a rule is to accept a guideline for one's conduct whose purpose is to eliminate the need for reflection, except in marginal or problematic cases. A rule that one should not kill will raise problems about what counts as 'killing'; is abortion killing, for example? No rule can be applied totally 'automatically', for this sort of reason. Nevertheless, to be 'rule-bound' in one's conduct is to seek to order what one does in a way that does not require much in the way of reflection. What I shall call a 'principle', however, functions quite differently. It serves precisely to *invite* rather than block reflection. Principles are, I think, best expressed in the form of 'Consider...'. Consider whether your action will harm others; consider what the consequences for other people will be if you do this; consider whether the needs of others should outweigh consideration of your own.

The distinction between rules and principles is not always easy to draw. Thus it might seem that the injunction not to harm others could either be a rule or a principle, expressed as 'Do not harm others', or as 'Consider whether your actions will harm others'. The notion of 'harm', however, is so unspecific that it would be very difficult for 'not harming others' to function as a rule unless one adopted an extremely narrow definition of what constituted 'harm'. Conversely, it would be very difficult for 'Do not condone homosexual behaviour' to function as a principle, since 'homosexual behaviour' is so much more 'specific' than 'harm'. I am not suggesting that an absolutely hard-and-fast distinction between rules and principles can be drawn; but I am suggesting that there is a real difference between a mode of approaching moral dilemmas and organising one's conduct that tends to invite reflection and attention to the particular, and one which does not; and I think it is useful to draw a distinction between 'rules' and 'principles' to mark this.

A principle, therefore, is a general consideration which one deems important to take into account when deciding what is the right thing to do. In this sense, principles *invite* contextualisation of judgements, consideration of the particular. To have principles is not to be inclined to ignore complexity; it is quite compatible with recognising that the judgement one made in a particular situation was so specific to that situation that other apparently similar situations might require a different one.

Principles may be more or less explicitly held or formulated. I think it is possible sometimes to offer interpretations or 'reconstructions' of someone's behaviour that credit them with adhering to principles which maybe they have not formulated to themselves very clearly or explicitly. If it is possible to make consistent sense of such behaviour, and if the behaviour itself is consistently in line with what would have resulted from explicit appeal to principles, then one is entitled to ascribe such principles. In fact I think one needs to do so; there is a difference between the person who explicitly formulates a principle and one who does not, but there is a more important difference between a person whose behaviour shifts and changes in a random or

totally pragmatic way and one whose behaviour can be seen as consistent and coherent in the light of certain principles. I now want to give an example of such a 'reconstruction' which comes from my own experience.

My mother and father both held a strong belief that it was wrong for a woman and a man to live (i.e. sleep) together if they were not married. (I was never aware of any exceptions allowed by them to the wrongness of this behaviour, though doubtless there may have been some). When my sister did this, my father's response was that he would not visit my sister's house, since by doing so he would be 'condoning' behaviour that he thought to be wrong. This, of course, involved him in an interpretation of 'condoning'; thus he did not regard it as condoning what my sister was doing if she visited him, provided it was not in the company of the man she was living with. It was not possible for my mother to behave like this. She too, as much as my father, judged what my sister did to be wrong – but she saw the maintaining of care, of relationships with my sister and her children, as a priority. And she continued to visit my sister. Now, implicitly, I think, in my father's eyes, he was the *real* upholder of principles – and he could safely leave to my mother the 'weaker' (and female) task of maintaining relationships. On this view, she becomes a sort of 'moral pragmatist', thinking contextually and situationally, and more prepared than my father to waive her principles in response to personal feelings.

But I think, in fact, that such an interpretation would be wrong, and that a better one goes like this. My mother and my father both had a rule: 'Don't sleep with someone to whom you are not married'. My father had a principle; roughly, 'Consider whether your behaviour will condone that which you think to be morally wrong'. My mother also had this principle, but she had another one too: 'Consider whether your behaviour will stand in the way of maintaining care and relationships'. This principle overrode the other, although my mother made an effort to reconcile the two, by visiting my sister and *saying* that she disapproved (ceasing to do the latter when it quickly became clear that the relationship could not be maintained on that basis).

This account, as I have said, offers a 'reconstruction', and I do not know whether my parents went through explicit thought processes of this sort. I think, however, that it is legitimate to ascribe principles on the basis of consistency of attitude and behaviour. The reason I have looked at this example in detail is that it suggests to me that a distinction between 'abstract' and 'concrete' judgements, interpreted as a distinction between acting on principle and acting in the context of a particular situation may be misleading.

There is evidence, both from common experience and from the work of Carol Gilligan and others, that women often perceive the maintenance of relationships as very important in their lives, and see it as a moral priority. What I have called a 'principle' is a consideration that one deems relevant and important in making moral judgements. In this respect my mother's behaviour was as principled as my father's. Furthermore, it was not that she, unlike my father, was uncertain about the rule; she was *quite* certain that non-marital sex was wrong. But what she did was different because her principles were different. I suspect that it is sometimes the case, not that women do not act on principles, but that the principles on which they act are not recognised (especially by men) as valid or important ones. Thus, to act so as to maintain relationships, despite belief that certain behaviour is wrong, may be seen as a weakness, as a *failure* of principle. It may, however, more adequately be represented as simply a difference of priorities.

It might be that the behaviour of men tends to be more rule-bound (though I am very uncertain of this). It might be that women do not, so often as men, make their principles fully explicit to themselves, perhaps because they themselves sometimes accept the sort of view that sees them as 'weaker'. But even if either of these were true, it does not follow that women's behaviour is generally less 'principled' in the way in which I have tried to define this. If women are more aware of complexity, or of particularity or ambiguity, it may be because the task of maintaining relationships, of preserving care and love, is one which poses immense problems about how to behave. It is an immensely difficult task. Adrienne Rich (1980) has written of the activity of

'world-protection, world-preservation, world-repair' (p.205), which has been especially the province of women. It has included the daily struggle to 'repair' the dirt and decay which human activity in the world has to contend with; but it has also involved what Rich calls 'the invisible weaving of a frayed and threadbare family life'. I think that is precisely the task to which my mother gave priority; as did Amy, the eleven-year-old girl whose interview was analysed by Gilligan.

I wish to resist, therefore, a view that sees women's moral reasoning, insofar as it may differ from that of men, as context-bound or situational, if these things are understood as sharply opposed to principles or general reasons for action. I think there are real dangers that a representation of women's moral reasoning based on such a sharp opposition will merely become a shadow of the belief that women perceive and act intuitively, situationally, pragmatically, 'from the heart', and that their processes of *reasoning*, if they exist at all, are nebulous or unfathomable.

Differences between men and women have often been mapped onto a series of dichotomies; men are rational, women are emotional; men think logically, women intuitively; and so forth. A sharp distinction between 'abstract' and 'concrete' thinking seems to me to have a tendency simply to replicate some of these other dichotomies. The danger with such dichotomies is that they both misrepresent women's capacities and differences from men, and suggest a false polarisation of such things as reason and emotion. A sharp distinction between 'abstract' and 'concrete' moral thinking could be used simply to defend (yet again) a view that women do not do such things as think out general reasons for acting in certain ways, or that their processes of thought are somehow more mysterious than those of men.

Human Consequences and Experienced Reality

In the second sense of 'abstract', to make an abstract judgement is to be 'distanced' from a conception of the human consequences of actual or potential experienced reality of that which is the object of the judgement.

What is it for a judgement, a concept, a way of thinking, to 'distance' one from some such reality? The best way to explain this is to look at some examples, and the language of warfare provides some of the most striking. In the Second World War, bombs or bomber aircraft were often given 'pet' names, such as 'M for Mother', 'A for Apple', 'P for Popsie', and so forth. During the Vietnam war, the Vietnamese were often referred to as 'Gooks', and military operations were sometimes known as 'zapping the Cong'. Many writers have written about what has become known as 'Nukespeak'; about the use, for example, of terms such as 'limited nuclear warfare' or 'theatre warfare' for the annihilation of Europe.

What is happening in these cases is that an attempt is made (often intentional, as with the training, for example, of American marines) to describe events in a way that is intended to *block* consideration of the often almost unimaginably frightful experienced reality that might underlie the description. The language and context is often homely, jokey; or it is dehumanising. 'Gooks' are not human beings, and to 'zap' the Cong sounds like a cartoon adventure. This sort of distancing happens in many contexts where violence occurs; I suppose it is psychologically easier to rape a woman if you see her as just a 'piece of ass'.

But it happens in other contexts too. For example, the police (where I live at least) call a road accident an 'RTA' (road traffic accident). An event in which people are killed or maimed for life can be referred to bureaucratically as an 'RTA', which might hinder commuters for a few minutes on their way to work. Distancing is not always just a function of language; it may happen, for example, as a result of things like the structure of TV or radio news programmes, where the incessant 'flow' of discrete items, and the juxtaposition of accounts of human disasters such as war or famine with 'lighter' items of news, can have the effect of almost obliterating any real imaginative conception of what it might be like to live through such disasters.

Is it true that men, more than women, are prone to this sort of abstraction or distancing? I think it may be, though I do not know how to substantiate such an assertion. What it *is* possible to say is that wars and military training and the planning of wars have been conducted by men, and warfare provides some of the most horrific examples of this sort of abstraction. Sara Ruddick (1984) argues that this tendency to abstraction is one important factor underlying militarism. Women too have, of course, often supported wars, and men have often opposed them; nevertheless, it is likely, I think, that women have been ambivalent about or appalled by the idea of war more frequently than men. (One problem here is the 'invisibility' of much of what women may have said or thought about war.)

But it is wrong to see 'abstraction' just in connection with militarism. Some capacity for 'shutting off', for refusing to dwell on consequences, is necessary for emotional survival. A surgeon, or an ambulanceman or a nurse have to be able to distance themselves emotionally from the human sufferings and tragedies they may work with in order to be able to do their job at all. Sometimes an incessant emotional dwelling on actual or possible horrors may be counterproductive or oppressive. A dwelling on the horrors of rape, for example, may lead to fears that are out of proportion to the actual risk of being raped. A dwelling on the horrors of nuclear war can lead to the sort of nihilism that sees nothing as worth doing if there is a possibility of the holocaust. Films like 'The Day After' attempt, rightly, to raise consciousness about what nuclear war would mean, to present a vivid picture of what it might be like to survive a nuclear attack. But imaginative portrayals of supposed consequences can also be used to create panics, to inflate fears; think of the language of 'floods' and 'waves' in which black immigration into this country has been described, of the graphic pictures sometimes drawn of white British citizens in fear of the disappearance of their 'culture', of Enoch Powell's speech about 'rivers of blood'.

'Abstraction' as such is neither good nor bad; it all depends who is thinking about or depicting things abstractly, and for what purposes. The reason why abstraction in the case of nuclear war is so chilling is precisely because it is *nuclear war*, and because the language of 'Nukespeak', like that of 'rivers of blood', is manipulative. The objective of 'Nukespeak' is to acclimatise us to thinking of nuclear war as

a possibility. It is intended to make the unthinkable thinkable. The objective of the sort of distancing that a casualty nurse might do, however, is not to acclimatise us, or herself, to accepting road accidents as inevitable or not as bad as we had thought. A refusal to dwell on consequences does not necessarily imply a lowered threshold of acceptance of the phenomenon concerned. I have myself stopped watching films depicting the aftermath of nuclear war since I find them unbearable; but I do not think I am any more ready as a result to accept nuclear war as inevitable or tolerable.

In fact, I think that sometimes a distinction between 'abstract' and 'concrete' may conflate a number of things that are different. Consider again a phrase such as 'limited nuclear war'. This is 'abstract' in that it does not give any details about what the 'limitations' are; and one way of rendering it more 'concrete' is simply to remove the reassuring connotations of the word 'limited' by pointing out how many deaths are envisaged, how many cities would be destroyed, how all public services would be destroyed, what problems and agonies those that survived would face. Such a spelling out does not necessarily imply the sort of imaginative emotional living through that might be experienced by watching a film about it. But, as I have suggested, this sort of emotional living through is something that it may be necessary to curtail, and such curtailment does not necessarily imply that one is more prepared to accept or regard with equanimity the possible events on which one refuses, for much of the time, to dwell. Furthermore, a proneness to dwell imaginatively on the consequences of actions either for oneself or for others can create a vulnerability, to which women are perhaps particularly susceptible, and which can sometimes be exploited by others. For example, I have known women who have put up with intolerable behaviour from the men they live with, because they have dwelt on the suffering the man will experience if they leave (usually vividly depicted by the man) and which they will feel responsible for.

In the next section, I shall look at the notions of empathy and caring, and it is clear that there is a connection between

these and the notion of emotionally living through the consequences of actions. Here I have suggested that the distinction between 'abstract' and 'concrete' is not always a clear one and that insofar as women have a greater propensity or capacity for conceiving of human actions in terms of the actual or potential experienced human consequences of those actions, these are things which can sometimes work against them, and which it is not always desirable to exercise.

ON CARING

The concept of 'caring' is central to many accounts of a female ethic. I shall first discuss briefly some problems about the meaning of 'caring'. Then I want to look at some ways in which an appeal to 'caring' can be used oppressively, and at the difficulties in supposing that an ethic of 'care' can always provide clear guidelines for human conduct.

The Meaning of 'Caring'
Noddings (1984) rightly points out that the notion of 'care' for another person is complex and has many strands in it. To care for someone thus has connotations of *anxiety*, of a potential burden; it has connotations of *desire*, of wanting to be with or enjoying being with another person; and it has connotations of *carefulness*, in understanding or appreciating the situation of another. The relationship between 'caring' and behaviour is again complex. In some circumstances one might be said to care for someone even if one does or can do nothing practical for them; in other circumstances, claims to care would rightly be greeted with scepticism in the absence of efforts to be with or assist the other person. It is not possible to specify any clear set of sufficient conditions for the existence of 'caring'. And the problem of defining 'caring' is not merely one of how to produce a definition for the sake of clarity of argument; it is also a practical and political problem. I shall try to bring out why in a minute.

Central to Noddings' conception of 'caring' is the notion of 'apprehending the reality of the other'. 'Caring', she argues, involves *engrossment* in another, a putting aside of self and an entering into the experience of another as far as is possible. Thus she gives the example of a maths teacher who tries to enter into the experience of a child who hates or fears maths; what is it like to feel like that, what possible reasons could there be for the child ever to want to learn maths? This engrossment in another does necessarily need to be long-term or part of a sustained or intimate relationship. It is possible to care for another in this sense without having deep personal feelings for them. Noddings suggests that a failure to apprehend the reality of the other in some way may be seen as constituting a failure of care, no matter how deep in other respects the involvement with the other person may be. Thus the parents of Laing's patients in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, despite their constant anxiety about and involvement with their daughters, could be said in a certain sense not to have achieved the ability to care; the object of their care was often a projection of their own fantasies and bore little relation to the experiences and feelings of the daughters themselves.

The Politics of Caring

I want now to bring out three of the ways in which appeals to 'caring' can be used oppressively, or can serve to disguise social relationships of exploitation or domination.

First, it is very common indeed for women to be accused of failure to care. Recently, for example, I listened to a radio phone-in on the question of women who went out to work. (The way the topic was defined suggested already that there was something deviant or unusual about this.) A number of callers, both men and women, argued that women who went out to work usually did so for 'selfish' reasons, and at the cost of not caring adequately for their husbands or children.

Arguments against abortion are often conducted in terms of 'caring'. Women who want abortions are (again) seen as 'selfish'; as putting their own selfish interests above care for human life or the potential human being they want to get rid of. A common feature of attacks on abortion is the

thin-end-of-the-wedge argument; that is, if we care so little for human life that we are prepared to abort a foetus, then the next step might be a careless and unthinking support for euthanasia, a general sliding into lack of respect for others if they interfere with our selfish purposes.

The problem here is often how to define 'care'. What does care for children entail, for example? Is it a failure of care not to be available on demand to one's children twenty-four hours a day for the first five years of their lives? Is it a failure of care not always to find their company rewarding, however much one may love them? Is it a failure of care to insist on a holiday alone away from one's elderly parents? Is it a failure of care for a woman sometimes to refuse sex on demand to her partner? Women in particular are often prone to feelings of guilt if they try to seize a bit of space, time or privacy for themselves, away from other people. They are especially vulnerable to charges of not-caring, since they are so often seen as defined by their caring role and capacities.

Second, it is very common for debates about industrial action to be conducted on the basis of an implied sharp opposition between self-interest and caring, especially where those taking such action have jobs where this is likely to have a direct or immediate effect on the public. If nurses or ambulancemen go on strike, radio and TV reports almost invariably focus on what it is thought will be the immediate human consequences — longer hospital queues, possible deaths, and so on. If teachers strike, there is a focus on the disruption of children's examinations. If it is the power workers, questions are raised about old people dying of hypothermia. The largely female profession of nursing has suffered particularly from this opposition between selfishness and caring. How can nurses, who are doubly defined as 'caring', both by being female and by the nature of their work, possibly entertain the idea of causing inconvenience, let alone suffering, to others, by selfishly striking for some rudimentary form of social justice when all other means fail?

Third, claims about 'caring' can be used ideologically to conceal other more fundamental objectives. There was an advertisement, for example, for Texaco, which showed a

tanker delivering fuel supplies to a remote village community; the message of the advertisement was 'Texaco *cares*'. We are thus invited to imagine that what underlies the policy of a large multinational corporation is not primarily the pursuit of profit but a desire to meet the needs of small communities. Programmes of aid to developing countries often conceal objectives of political domination under an official pretence of caring. Programmes of improving industrial relations by policies of greater 'care' for the psychological needs of workers generally have the objective of preventing industrial unrest in the interests of greater profits for the company. One of the most common features of relationships between men and women has been the way in which male 'experts', such as doctors or psychiatrists, have, in the name of a paternalistic care or concern for the welfare of women, reduced women to a state of passivity and dependence on men.

All of this suggests that claims to care or accusations of failure to care may serve to divert attention from issues of injustice or oppression, or to conceal other objectives which have nothing to do with care.

Now, in all attempts to change exploitative or oppressive relationships, someone is going to be deprived of something. They may be deprived of some attention, service or amenity to which they are accustomed. They may undergo some hardship or difficulty and experience this as lack of care. Consider the following examples:

1. A woman is accused of not caring by her husband because she wants some time to herself.
2. A person who is committed to political activity spends less and less time with his or her family, who feel that she/he is neglecting their needs.
3. A nurse knows that industrial action will have the effect of lengthening hospital queues for 'non-urgent' operations, and will inevitably cause hardship to some people.
4. Rebels against an oppressive military government take action which leads to military confrontation, and the certainty of deaths and injuries which will cause immense grief and distress.

In all of these cases a course of action might be seen to be uncaring; to be entered into without due regard for the immediate human consequences. In none of them can an appeal to 'caring' settle the question of what is to be done.

To what sorts of considerations might one appeal to try and resolve the dilemmas posed by the above situations. There are several. Sometimes it might be important (as in example 1), to redefine 'caring'; to argue, for instance, that it does not constitute a failure of care to refuse to spend all one's time serving, or in the company of, those with whom one is intimate. It might be important to suggest that such care may be damaging or destructive, both to the carers and the cared-for. Sometimes it is relevant simply to insist that care for oneself is legitimate. I noted earlier Carol Gilligan's observation of the difficulty women often had in overcoming the feeling that basing a course of action on one's own needs or desires was selfish or reprehensible.

The question of caring, however, also involves the difficult question of the relation between means and ends. One of the strong feelings underlying Sara Ruddick's critique of abstraction and Nel Noddings' critique of a morality based on principles is that of the danger of engaging in any struggle where 'abstract' or large-scale goals, whether they be obedience to God or the dictates of a nationalistic militarism, or a fight against social injustice or exploitation, are pursued without consideration of the damaging consequences to human beings that may occur on the way. The rationale of such a setting aside of consideration of the immediate human consequences may be that in the long run the goal is that of a more just or humane society. Thus, for example, the exploitation of nurses may be closely related to a general failure to provide an adequate health service which is responsive to human needs, and to the distorted priorities which spend billions on armaments while paying nurses a pittance.

There are problems, however, in distinguishing, ultimately, between means and ends. There are many cases where the use of certain means can corrupt or vitiate the end. This is above all, perhaps, true of the nuclear state. The supposed objective of nuclear weapons is the defence of

'freedom'; in fact, however, the nuclear state itself undermines and erodes freedom, by processes of increasing surveillance and restriction, of deception and doublethink, and of escalating fear and terror, quite apart from the possibility of the elimination of all 'freedom' in the event of a nuclear war itself. The same is true in other cases. Peace and security worth the name are unlikely to be achieved by police violence and repression, or by the ruthless elimination of political opponents.

In fact, the notion of 'means' and 'ends', with its picture of a clearly envisaged end-state which is sharply demarcated from the processes that lead up to it, is often a very misleading one. The processes by which change is brought about are themselves often an essential *part* of the sorts of change that are needed or envisaged. One of the strengths of the women's movement has been the way in which it has often perceived this. Thus, for example, in many women's health groups, the processes of sharing knowledge and encouraging participation, in a relationship of equals, are not simply *means* to enabling women to become more healthy. Often, it is precisely the means-end model, based on a mystique of expertise and the reduction of people to the status of powerless 'patients' that has been the object of a great deal of feminist (and other) criticism. Similarly, women have often rejected 'efficiency', if this is seen as something which can only be achieved by authoritarian or hierarchical methods.

Thus appeal to 'caring', to concern for the immediate human consequences that a course of action may entail, cannot of itself solve any problems or answer questions about the right thing to do. But I think that it can suggest two principles which should always be taken into account. First, it suggests a rejection of any sort of *quantitative* approach to human suffering. The suffering of a human being should never be regarded as a negligible thing, or of no consequence, no matter whose it is and no matter what ends this suffering is seen as a means to achieving. It may be that at times the options facing people are such that they have little choice but to cause human suffering in the pursuit of some goal. But this should never be dismissed easily as of

little consequence. Second, it suggests a constant consideration of the relation between means and ends; a recognition of the impossiblity of holding these apart, and of the unlikelihood of achieving any liberation worth the name by methods based on authoritarianism, violence or terror, or on the disregard of the principle that, no matter what course of action is eventually chosen, the consequences for all those likely to be affected should be taken into account.

The idea of 'caring', then, if interpreted as concern for the human consequences of a course of action and for the 'reality' of those who will be affected by it can, I think, suggest principles which should be taken into consideration, even though it cannot by itself provide answers on all occasions to dilemmas about the right course of action to take. These principles imply a critique of the sharp distinction between a 'public' and a 'private' morality, one of which is appropriate to personal or intimate relationships, and one of which is appropriate to wider or impersonal concerns.

'Caring' is, as I have said, a concept which needs interpreting before it can be applied, and I want to conclude this chapter by giving an example of a way in which an application of such an interpretation of caring would necessitate quite radical changes in institutions and social practice. It is not possible to care for all those people with whom one comes into contact in a deeply personal way, and any definition of caring which is applicable only to intimate personal relationships is not going to be useful when considering broader problems of social organisation or practice. But there is an aspect of Noddings' account of caring which I think *can* be given an important sense when thinking about such problems. Noddings talks, as I have said, of trying to 'apprehend the reality of the other', of trying to grasp what the other is experiencing and how she sees things, and behaving towards her in a way that recognises and is appropriate to that apprehension. Now such apprehension is a matter of degree; one may apprehend the reality of another more or less well, and that may be a function of things such as the time and energy at one's disposal, as well as the disposition to do so in the first place.

But I think it is possible to argue that a great many institutions tend to work directly *against* such an attempt rather than facilitating it. The example I have chosen here is that of health care and the medical profession.

Above all others, perhaps, the medical profession likes to see itself as a 'caring' profession; and none of what I am about to say implies, of course, that there are not many individuals working within it who are deeply committed to the welfare of those who seek its services. But a number of critiques of the way the medical profession has developed institutionally can be read as arguing that care for patients, in anything like Noddings' sense, happens *despite* rather than because of institutional structures (see, for example, Ingleby, 1981, Mitchell, 1984, and Ehrenreich and English, 1979). The history of the medical profession over the last hundred years has not simply been one of 'progress' in the overcoming of disease, aided by scientific discoveries. It is a history which can be read partly as the attempt to establish white male hegemony over medicine, and what are seen as medical priorities can sometimes been seen as serving to legitimate status and hierarchies within the profession (the emphasis on prestigious 'high-tech' medicine, for example, rather than on other aspects of health care). Jeannette Mitchell (1984) shows how hospitals are often subject to quasi-industrial criteria of 'efficiency' and 'productivity', defined simply as the rate of throughput of patients in the hospital, and how hospital policy can be dominated by this requirement.

The aspect of this system that people most often encounter experientially is its tendency to reduce the patient to the status of a *body* to which things need to be done by medical experts. The cult or mystique of medical authority and expertise, as it permeates much of medical practice, tends to objectify or infantilise people, to deny them the status of participants in discussion or decisions about their condition or welfare and to render them powerless or fearful to ask questions or insist on information or participation. There have been many critiques, for example, of the medical handling of childbirth and the way in which women have often been reduced to a state of drugged passivity, unable in

any way to participate in or control their own labour. But it is not just women who are thus objectified. The 'infantilisation' of much hospital procedure was brought home to me sharply when my father was in hospital, in great physical and mental distress after suffering a stroke. The mode of address to him by the staff, both nurses and doctors, often resembled that of 'play-school', and he was routinely described as 'naughty' if, for example, he was restless or uncooperative or made a noise in the night, and 'good' if he was docile. The attempt to preserve any shreds of human dignity in such a situation was well nigh impossible.

Criticisms of the objectification and infantilisation of patients point to a need both to redefine caring and to consider how a medical system might facilitate rather than work against such care. Questions of 'care' in the medical profession are all too often linked with assumptions of paternalism, a mystique of expertise and the incompetence in all respects of those who are the objects of care. Caring might, however, be conceived of as intrinsically involving the participation of a client or patient, facilitating their understanding, regarding consultation as mutual rather than always as a confrontation between expertise and ignorance. It might be thought of as 'apprehending the reality of the other', in the sense of seeing the patient's illness or problem as something inextricable from their consciousness or life situation. And taking these things seriously would involve radical changes in medical training, medical practice, the organisation of hospitals, the relations between the roles of 'nurse' and 'doctor', the hierarchies in the medical profession and the priorities not only within health care but also between health care and other things, such as spending on armaments.

To talk of a principle of caring here, then, is not to put forward a sentimental view of making health care more 'personal'. It is, first, to offer a conception of care that avoids both sentimentalism and paternalism and that is appropriate to the context; second, it is to engage in the very difficult task of seeing how such a conception might be put into practice. Applying a notion of care to any aspect of

personal relationships or social life involves both these problems. Nevertheless, it is possible to see, at least in broad outline, the sorts of changes that a principle of caring of the sort that I have described might make. I think that it is in fact this sort of approach to caring which has underpinned many feminist critiques of things such as health care, and the attempts which have been made by many women to develop alternatives.

In this chapter I have suggested that some conceptions of a 'female ethic' raise great problems. In particular, I have argued the following:

1. There is no consensus among women, hence there is no one view of ethical priorities or moral questions that can unproblematically be seen as female.
2. The idea that women 'reason differently' from men about moral issues should be questioned. Insofar as there are differences between men and women, it is better to see these as differences in ethical concerns and priorities, rather than as differences in mode or style of reasoning. The idea that women 'reason differently' rests on problematic oppositions between concepts such as 'abstract' and 'concrete', or on the notion that a morality of 'principles' can be sharply opposed to one in which judgement is contextual. In addition, it tends to recapitulate old polarisations, between 'reason' and 'intuition' for example, which should be challenged rather than assumed.
3. It is important, when considering notions such as 'caring', which have sometimes been thought to be particularly associated with women, to recognise the ways in which these can be used oppressively, and the ways in which they may need transforming before they can guide any re-evaluation of social policy.

I have suggested, however, that the life experiences and activities of women, centred as they have tended to be, more than those of men, around the 'microcosm' of household, family and the physical and emotional care of others, may provide space more easily than those of men for questioning some dominant social priorities. In particular, they may provide space for questioning the split between a 'public'

world whose concerns or constraints tend to exclude the personal, and a 'private' world of care for others whose constraints and concerns are not suppose to impinge on the 'public' realm.

If ethical concerns and priorities are related to life-experience and activities, then it follows that questions about the sexual division of labour are crucial. It is very important that men should participate more fully in and take more responsibility for the tasks of physical and emotional maintenance which have been seen as especially the province of women. But feminism needs to engage, too, with questions which are not just about the sexual division of labour. Women, as much as men, are situated within capitalism; their lives are affected, as are those of men, by such things as the sharp division between mental and manual labour and by the criteria of profit and 'efficiency' which govern industrial enterprises and much of public life. It is true that a great deal of socialist and Marxist thinking has been blind or insensitive to the particular situation, needs and aspirations of women, and has often failed to challenge the sexual division of labour. But the sexual division of labour is related in complex ways to the general division of labour within capitalism. Neither the *particular* forms that the sexual division of labour or the oppression and subordination of women takes, nor *particular* conceptions of the public/private split, can be understood by looking at the situation of women in isolation from the ways in which capitalism may often be oppressive to men too. In this sense, I do not think that there can be a viable 'autonomous' feminist criticism which merely considers the situation of women, or ascribes the relegation of common female activities and priorities to an assumed set of 'male' priorities which are believed to characterise men simply because of their maleness. The construction of current conceptions of masculinity and of a male 'sphere' of life has gone hand in hand, for example, with the development of the sort of 'rationality' which subordinates other human needs or concerns to goals of profit, 'productivity', or 'efficiency'. To write all these things down simply to 'maleness' cannot explain the *specific* forms that 'masculinity' has taken, nor

the *specific* ways in which the sexual division of labour has been characterised. The relationship between feminism and socialism is a very problematic one but I think it is one which needs to be at the heart of any feminist critique of dominant social priorities.

7. The Idea of a Female ethic

1. *See* for example, E.Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (1968) and J.Piaget, *The Moral Judgement of the Child* (1977).

   Lawrence Kohlberg originally published his theory of stages of moral development in a PhD dissertation from the University of Chicago in 1958: 'The Development of Modes of Thinking and Choices in Years 10-16'. Many questions have been raised about Kohlberg's work which I do not discuss in this chapter. It has, for example, been suggested by C.M.J.Braun and J.M.C. Baribeau (1978) in their article 'Subjective Idealism in Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development' that Kohlberg's approach simply exemplifies an ethical theory derived from the work of Kant and from the contemporary liberal philosopher John Rawls. There is a critique of some of the philosophical assumptions underlying Kohlberg's work in an article by Owen J. Flanagan Jnr, 'Virtue, Sex and Gender': Some Philosophical Reflections on the Moral Psychology Debate', *Ethics*, April 1982. This issue of *Ethics* also includes a reply by Kohlberg to Flanagan.
2. For a discussion of Gilligan's work which argues that she tends to depoliticise questions about the differential development of men and women, and points out some of the ways in which ideas of distinctive female 'virtues' or capacities can be used in non-feminist or anti-feminist ways, *see* Judy Auerbach, Linda Blum, Vicki Smith and Christine Williams, 'Commentary on Gilligan's 'In a Different Voice' in *Feminist Studies* 11, no. 1, Spring 1985.
3. The idea that moral principles should be universalisable is one that is very much a Kantian one. One of the best-known modern defenders of a view that sees universalisability as essential to moral judgements is Richard Hare (*see*, for example, *The Language of Morals (1952) and Freedom and Reason (1963).*

8. Maternal Thinking

1. Discussions of this can be found in the collection of essays edited by Nell Keddie, *Tinker, Tailor...the Myth of Cultural Deprivation* (1973).
2. For a discussion of Bowlby's work, *see* Michael Rutter, *Maternal Deprivation Reassessed* 2nd edn, Penguin, 1981.
3. I do not, of course, want to deny that women's social experience and life activities have often differed greatly from those of men; in fact, I have stressed this at various points in this book. What I am questioning is the view that these differences give rise to 'women's practices' which can be considered as if they were quite 'apart' in some way from other aspects of the culture in which they exist.
4. Think, for example, of the perennial political debate about the notion of 'standards' in education and of the constant right-wing critique of so-called 'permissive' parents or lack of 'responsibility' in parents.

Afterword

1. *See*, for example, the book by J.Blassingame *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Ante-bellum South* (1972).