

just a matter of requesting that the university's policies be respected. Christina and the other students are facing a dysfunctional, misogynistic organizational culture on top of the already Byzantine nature of academic politics. There are issues of ego, privilege, bias, and power struggles between one office and another. These students have already learned that following the steps listed in the student handbook has actually made things worse, so they're at a loss as to what to do next. Because "culture always wins," they need the help of someone with the skills required to navigate the situation.<sup>10</sup>

Your best tactic would be to contact a sympathetic, female senior faculty member with political savvy, a deft touch, firm resolve, and a willingness to help behind the scenes. Using her understanding of how to make things happen on campus, she could recommend appropriate next steps. Perhaps there is a women's center, student senate, ethics line, or grievance procedure. Ideally, if things start going off the tracks, she would be willing to step in and help. Working closely with her, you would get a better understanding of the situation, appropriate tactics, and how to deal with the various people and campus offices that could now get involved. The goal would be to figure out the path that would be "just right" for protecting Christina and the other women—avoiding continued harassment and retaliation ("not enough") or approaching this with such an aggressive and heavy-handed way ("too much") that it could produce any number of unforeseen consequences, like retaliation from other faculty.

Perhaps one of Aristotle's most important contributions, then, is helping us identify the various elements that might be involved as we try to tailor a strategy for handling difficult ethical dilemmas.

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### A Personal Inventory

Before you continue to the next topic, please answer this questionnaire.

- 1 Which is worse?
  - A hurting someone's feelings by telling the truth
  - B telling a lie and protecting their feelings
  
- 2 Which is the worse mistake?
  - A to make exceptions too freely
  - B to apply rules too rigidly
  
- 3 Which is it worse to be?
  - A unmerciful
  - B unfair

<sup>10</sup> I owe this insight and phrase to Steve Priest of Integrity Insight International.

- 4 Which is worse?
  - A stealing something valuable from someone for no good reason
  - B breaking a promise to a friend for no good reason
  
- 5 Which is it better to be?
  - A just and fair
  - B sympathetic and caring
  
- 6 Which is worse?
  - A not helping someone in trouble
  - B being unfair to someone by playing favorites
  
- 7 In making a decision you rely more on
  - A hard facts
  - B personal feelings and intuition
  
- 8 Your boss orders you to do something that will hurt someone. If you carry out the order, have you actually done anything wrong?
  - A yes
  - B no
  
- 9 Which is more important in determining whether an action is right or wrong?
  - A whether anyone actually gets hurt
  - B whether a rule, law, commandment, or moral principle is broken

To tally up your survey answers, use the chart below and score each of your answers as either a C or a J. For example, in question 1, if your answer was A, score it a C; if it was B, score it a J. Check all nine of your answers and then count up how many Cs and Js you have. We'll return your results shortly.

|   | A. | B. |
|---|----|----|
| 1 | C  | J  |
| 2 | J  | C  |
| 3 | C  | J  |
| 4 | J  | C  |
| 5 | J  | C  |
| 6 | C  | J  |
| 7 | J  | C  |
| 8 | C  | J  |
| 9 | C  | J  |

## Ethics of Care

As we just saw, the way that Aristotle incorporates factors other than cold, rational analysis into his study of ethics has both positive and negative dimensions. And one of the *most* negative is his view of women. A victim of his time and class, Aristotle clearly reflects the bias against women that has been a hallmark of Western culture. However, this raises some intriguing questions. If as great a thinker as Aristotle can be affected by gender bias so much that it surfaces in his ideas, is it possible this is a widespread problem among philosophers? Until very recently, philosophy was dominated by men. Considering how important gender is to our identity and in identifying which personality traits are considered appropriate depending on our sex, is it possible that philosophy has unintentionally tilted in a stereotypically *masculine* direction? If so, a number of traits of Western philosophy—enshrining reason, denigrating emotion, the adversarial model that characterizes philosophical discussion, even what are considered the most important philosophical principles—might come from the culture that male philosophers produced and not from what is objectively the best methodology for seeking knowledge. At the very least, this means that an approach to ethics that self-consciously explores whether a stereotypically “feminine” perspective might reveal something different would be an extremely valuable corrective.

In fact, such an approach has been explored by feminist philosophers since the 1980s. Reflecting on a debate in the field of moral development psychology, such philosophers as Alison Jaggar, Virginia Held, Nel Noddings, Sara Ruddick, and Rosemarie Tong have argued for an *ethic of care*.

Before examining the details of this alternative approach to ethics, however, it's important to realize that these thinkers are *not* making the simplistic claim that men think one way about ethics and women another. They contend instead that an approach to ethics has been overlooked in Western thought because it is more stereotypically “feminine.” This ethical perspective is, in fact, favored by many men, while the traditional, “masculine” outlook is preferred by many women. The questionnaire that you just filled out illustrates this, because it reveals whether (and how strongly) you approach ethical issues with an “ethic of *justice*” or an “ethic of *care*.” If you compare your results with your classmates, you'll no doubt find women with high J scores and men with high C scores.

### Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan

The controversy that feminist philosophers use as a point of departure begins with the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, who believed that he discovered the stages of moral development in the human personality. Kohlberg claimed that he had identified the characteristics of a fully developed moral sense and that he could chart the stages people go through in developing their ability

to reason about ethical issues. He described three levels of moral reasoning (pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional), each with two stages.

At the *pre-conventional* level, good and bad is understood in terms of reward, punishment, and power. (Children from age four to ten are usually at this level.) In Stage 1, all that counts is power. “Good” is what the person with the most power says is “good.” Stage 2 advances on this slightly, with “good” being seen as something that will bring about some benefit to the individual.

People at the *conventional* level take as their moral standard the expectations and rules of their family or society. At Stage 3, “good” behavior is seen as pleasing or helping others or at least trying to. At Stage 4, social order is most important. Doing one’s duty, respecting authority, and maintaining the status quo are seen as good in themselves.

At the *post-conventional* level, people make moral decisions according to autonomous moral principles. Stage 5 has a social contract and utilitarian orientation. Right and wrong depend on free agreement or standards adopted by the whole society. At Stage 6, right and wrong are determined according to individually chosen universal ethical principles: justice, fairness, equality, and the like, but primarily justice.

According to Kohlberg, the most fully developed or “advanced” moral reasoning is deontological and “act-oriented”—assessing behavior according to universal, abstract moral principles. If you’re tempted to cheat on a test, Kohlberg would say that the best reason you could give for not cheating would be, “Cheating violates basic moral principles to which I have a deep allegiance.” (The worst would be, “I’m not going to cheat because I might get caught and punished.”)

Human moral development, according to Kohlberg, means going through these six stages in this order. Full development means getting to at least Stage 5. Furthermore, Kohlberg claimed that his research shows that these stages are valid across cultures. There may be surface differences in the way different cultures manifest each stage, and people may go through them at different rates in different cultures, but the sequence itself holds firm.

Carol Gilligan basically agreed with Kohlberg that there are specific stages of moral development. However, she took issue with the stages themselves and argued that his theory failed to appreciate the ethical perspective used by many women.

Taking her cue from the fact that Kohlberg’s initial studies did not include any women or girls, Gilligan saw that women generally fared badly when their moral reasoning was evaluated by Kohlberg’s system. Women’s responses typically focused on how much actual harm or good was done. And Kohlberg’s system sees this as a “conventional” response, indicating that the women were at Stage 3 or 4.

Gilligan’s more detailed examination of responses of this sort, however, showed that they were actually quite sophisticated. This led her to claim that there are two distinct ethics at work—an ethic of *justice* and an ethic of *care*.

The ethic of care focuses on our responsibility to help others and minimize actual harm. This account of moral development also suggests stages or perspectives different from Kohlberg's. The first stage is characterized by caring only for the self in order to ensure survival. This is followed by a transitional phase in which this attitude is criticized as selfish and in which the individual begins to see connections between the self and others. The second stage is characterized by a sense of responsibility, and "good" is equated with caring for others. Devotion to others' interests to the exclusion of one's own ultimately takes its toll, however. This leads to a second transition in which the tensions between the responsibility to care for others and the necessity to have one's own needs met are resolved. The third and final stage is then defined by the acceptance of the principle of care as an individually chosen universal ethical principle which condemns exploitation and hurt in the lives of others and ourselves.

As Gilligan explains it, the ethic of care rests on the idea that *no one should be hurt*. This differs from Kohlberg's ethic of justice which is built on the idea that *everyone should be treated the same*. The central moral command of the ethic of care is to "discern and alleviate the 'real and recognizable trouble' of this world."<sup>11</sup> By contrast, the prime moral imperative of the ethic of justice is "to respect the rights of others and thus to protect from interference the rights to life and self-fulfillment."<sup>12</sup> Gilligan calls the ethic of justice a *morality of rights* and the ethic of care a *morality of responsibility*.

### Two Ethical Voices

If Gilligan is right, there are fundamental differences in the way people work through moral dilemmas. These differences encompass: what counts as an ethical issue in the first place; how serious it actually is; how to respond to it; and how to evaluate one's final decision. As Gilligan puts it, there are two moral "voices." One emphasizes justice, rights, and autonomy; the other speaks of care, responsibility, and human connections. However, these approaches are complementary, not mutually exclusive. In practice, as the C/J questionnaire should have demonstrated, most people—men and women alike—have both of these "voices." But each of us probably has a stronger or weaker preference for one or the other.

### An Alternative Approach to Ethics

There is no question, however, that the "voice" associated with the ethic of justice has been the dominant one in the history of philosophical ethics. Accordingly, one of the most important philosophical implications of Gilligan's

11 Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 100.

12 *Ibid.*

claim is that an alternative approach to ethics should be a valuable tool for giving us a more complete picture when we try to identify, understand, and resolve the ethical issues we encounter. The various facets of such an alternative perspective continue to be worked out by a variety of thinkers—primarily feminist philosophers. For our purposes, we’re going to briefly discuss just some of the most fundamental features of such an alternative approach.

Before we continue, however, it would help if you would jot down an answer to the question, “How would you describe yourself to yourself?”

### **Autonomous Self, Connected Self**

Perhaps the most fundamental difference between the traditional perspective to ethics and an approach based on an ethic of care is the image of “the self” on which each depends. The former imagines a world of independent, autonomous individuals; the latter, people who are connected to one another through *relationships*.

These differences can be seen in how people answer the question, “How would you describe yourself to yourself?” An *autonomous* self-definition would be something like Jamal’s “I’m 6 feet, 175 pounds. I major in economics, play the piano, am very good at video games, and think of myself as adventurous.” Rosa gives us a *connected* self-definition: “I’m the only girl in a family of two brothers and my dad. My closest relationship is with my best friend, who feels like the sister I never had. I’m devoted to the people I love. I work hard at trying to give people the benefit of the doubt.” Notice that Jamal is the only person in his account. He stands apart from others. Rosa, on the other hand, refers to her connections with other people in every sentence. She is part of a network of relationships.

Each self-definition represents a reasonable way to picture the world. Neither is better nor worse. But they have dramatically different implications. For autonomous individuals, connections with other people are immediately problematic because of how they might threaten one’s independence. To minimize the possibility of these relationships feeling emotionally overwhelming, the preferred way to manage them would be unemotional and impartial, which moves us in the direction of law and abstract philosophical principles. The ideal relationship with other people would be something like a contract, freely agreed to by all parties, with the terms and conditions clearly spelled out so that there are no misunderstandings or surprises. From this perspective, in order to protect one’s independence and autonomy, it would also make sense always to take at least a slightly adversarial stance towards others. What’s at stake is protecting the freedom, autonomy, and rights of the individual.

Connected individuals, by contrast, experience *relationships* as the most basic and important fact of their lives. They are nourishing, not dangerous. Being able to depend on others provides a sense of safety and protection. Relationships, however, also bring responsibilities to other people. Each

relationship is unique and must be tended to differently. Dealing with our own and other's emotions is central to the process in order to make sure that our bonds with others are strong and appropriate. Being trustworthy, emotionally honest, and responsive to the needs of others are extremely important.

It should be apparent to you that autonomous individuals and connected individuals essentially live in two different worlds. The contrasting self-definitions imply different strategies for dealing with other people. It's no surprise, then, that this leads to very different understandings of ethics. In the one, ethical issues arise when individual autonomy is threatened; in the other, when people need protection from harm or when relationships need to be tended to. In the one, protecting ourselves is the first priority; in the other, caring for others. A traditional approach to an ethic of justice considers the most important virtues to be: fairness, justice, and equality. The primary virtues from the alternate perspective of an ethic of care are: trust, empathy, cooperation, sensitivity, altruism, compromise, and consensus.

Even the weaknesses that go with each perspective are polar opposites. Taken to an extreme, an autonomous outlook can lead to selfishness. Connected individuals risk not taking good enough care of themselves.

Now take a look at your self-description. Does it reflect one or the other of these "selves"? How strongly? Is there any relationship between this and your C/J score? This isn't an exact science, so there will be many exceptions. But there's a good chance that high J or C scores will be associated with clearly autonomous or connected self-definitions.

### Equality, Equity

A second major implication of the differences between these two ethical perspectives results from the fact that an ethic of care regards every ethical dilemma as unique. It must be viewed in its specific context to be completely understood. Any resolution needs to be tailored to the particulars of a real life situation—not some academic hypothetical. So it is critical to understand all relevant details of the case—the people involved, their relationships, the consequences of various actions, what our own emotional responses tell us about the issues, and so on.

Note how different this is from an ethic of justice. Given the outlook of the autonomous self, it's no surprise that the image that best represents an ethic of justice is "Justice Blindfolded"—the statue of a woman holding the scales of justice with her eyes covered. This expresses the idea that knowing anything about a case that could compromise our impartiality or doing anything but objectively weighing "the facts" will produce an unfair finding. In particular, any feelings we have about the case must be ignored. First-hand experience with the issue or having a relationship with anyone involved would certainly disqualify us from being impartial and objective. Moreover, in such a detached approach, we look for the similarities between the ethical issue before us and

others like it in the past. This lets us establish precedents among cases that can guide us in the future so that everyone will be treated the same.

From the standpoint of an ethic of care, however, such impartiality is not only disrespectful to the uniqueness of the situation and the people involved, it leaves us blind to central facts in a case. Accordingly, the image that best represents this perspective would be exactly the opposite of Justice Blindfolded. It would be like a master detective who has first-hand experience with the case and applies great psychological acumen in studying every particular detail: the individuals, circumstances, the nature of the relationships involved, the emotional importance of various factors, etc.

The appropriate resolution of an ethical dilemma applies solely to *the situation at hand*, however. There are so many different factors that are relevant to determining a proper outcome that there are no guarantees that another dilemma resembling this one should be resolved the same way. Precedents have little weight in this perspective because *differences* between cases are more important.

For “Justice Blindfolded,” treating people appropriately means treating everyone *equally*. For an ethic of care, however, it’s treating people in a way that’s *appropriate to the circumstances and context*. That is, an ethic of care makes a principle of *equity* central.

While equality calls for strict impartiality and blind justice, equity isn’t blind at all. It looks very carefully at the particulars of a situation and asks that people be treated differently if they have different needs. Whenever we make exceptions to policies because of extenuating circumstances, we decide according to a principle of equity.

Equity is hardly a novel concept in the history of philosophy. Even Aristotle recognizes its importance when he discusses the weaknesses that come from the general language used in stating laws. “So in a situation in which the law speaks universally, but the case at issue happens to fall outside the universal formula, it is correct to rectify the shortcoming,” he writes. “And this is the very nature of the equitable, a rectification of law where law falls short by reason of its universality.”<sup>13</sup>

A principle of equity, however, is not only much more central to the alternative approach to ethics we’re examining, it also values direct, personal *experience* with the issue at hand. How else would we be able to determine what’s appropriate? How else would we know how the events make everyone involved—ourselves included—feel? We certainly couldn’t understand these details using a detached approach that relies only on reason.

Arguing that *personal experience* is a necessary tool for understanding an ethical issue may seem heretical when contrasted with a traditional philosophical

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13 *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1137b 20–25.



methodology that enshrines the detached objectivity of applying abstract principles like justice and fairness. However, remember that Mill considers first-hand experience necessary in order to correctly identify the *quality* of pleasures and pains. And first-hand experience is certainly part of what Aristotle requires in learning “the mean” and becoming someone who does the right thing, at the right time, in the right way.

The alternative approach we’re considering takes exactly this same view—*experience* is an important source of knowledge. However, it takes a more expansive view of experience. As Virginia Held puts it: “It is not the constricted experience of mere empirical observation. It is the lived experience of feeling as well as thinking, of acting as well as receiving impressions, and of connectedness to other persons as well as of self.”<sup>14</sup>

### Emotions as a Tool for Understanding

One of the most significant features of an alternative approach to ethics based on an ethic of care is the respect given to emotions. Historically, the only role that philosophers give to emotions is helping us do what our *intellect* has told us is the right thing. An alternative approach, however, sees emotions as a critical source for understanding the ethical issue at hand. As Held explains:

Many feminists argue, in contrast, that the emotions have an important function in developing moral understanding itself, in helping us decide what the recommendations of morality themselves ought to be. Feelings, they say, should be respected by morality rather than dismissed as lacking impartiality. Yes, there are morally harmful emotions, such as prejudice, hatred, desire for revenge, blind egotism, and so forth. But to rid moral theory of harmful emotions by banishing all emotion is misguided. Such emotions as empathy, concern for others, hopefulness, and indignation in the face of cruelty—all these may be crucial in developing appropriate moral positions. An adequate moral theory should be built on appropriate feelings as well as on appropriate reasoning.<sup>15</sup>

The idea that emotions are an appropriate instrument for moral understanding makes sense. After all, emotions evolved as a mechanism to tell us something about the outside world. Imagine that we’re out for a walk in the woods and we come upon a bear who eyes us hungrily. Interaction between our brain’s prefrontal cortex and amygdala generate a “fight or flight” response, and we automatically run to safety—no doubt more quickly than if we’d stood there doing a rational calculation.

14 Virginia Held, “Feminist Moral Inquiry and the Feminist Future,” in *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, edited by Virginia Held (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), p. 154.

15 Held, p. 157.

At the same time, Held's distinction between morally harmful emotions and positive emotions is critical to bear in mind. The heart, like the head, is not always right. If, nervous after our encounter with the bear, we come upon what looks like a large snake, we'd probably take off again without thinking, in what's called an "amygdala hijack." It would only be after we felt safe and let the parts of our brain that handle memories and judgment go to work that we'd realize it was just a big stick.

Still, when it comes to understanding an ethical issue, emotions like empathy, compassion, and care tell us something that the Categorical Imperative or Hedonistic Calculus can't.

### **A Final Evaluation of an Ethic of Care**

An ethic of care originated as a corrective to important weaknesses in an ethic of justice, and we can see ways in which it has succeeded. Its central moral principle is more down to earth than an abstract concept of justice. It regards the emotions as a significant source of information for understanding and resolving ethical issues. It attempts to work with the complexities of real-life moral dilemmas by stressing the importance of context, equity, and experience. And by identifying the underlying differences in self-definition which likely determine a preference for an ethic of justice versus an ethic of care, an ethic of care reveals the profound insight that *autonomous* and *connected* individuals quite literally live in different worlds.

However, this perspective also suffers from some flaws. As compassionate as it is to recognize the special features of every situation, and to argue that every solution must be tailored to the circumstances, such a perspective poses major practical problems. When every case is "unique" and all circumstances are "extenuating," there is virtually no predictability about what will count as ethically acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Such a narrow focus on the particularities of a situation risks ignoring implications for the bigger picture, that is, losing sight of the forest for the trees. The emphasis on emotions and relationships opens the door for idiosyncratic or self-serving emotional perspectives to be regarded as legitimate.

#### **Applying an Alternative Approach**

~~Nonetheless, the key elements of an alternative approach to ethics based on care call our attention to details we didn't see earlier in our introduction to ethics. So let's apply such an approach to a case and see how it works.~~

~~Michelle, a freshman, was having a difficult time in a writing course that regularly required in-class essays. She was supposed to write two essays in 1½ hours. The professor would give the assignment ahead of time so that students would have time to prepare. But they were supposed to write the essay in class without using any notes.~~