

TWO ETHICAL STYLES: THE DEBATE ABOUT GENDER

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At one time hardly anyone considered the differences in the way men and women think an issue for serious discussion. It was simply assumed for many years in our male-dominated society that the way that men thought and acted was clearly superior. The women's movement rightly challenged this assumption. It also led to a new exploration of "feminine" and "masculine," to a recognition of both the similarities and differences between the two genders, and to an appreciation of the unique value of each.

Since the early 1980s, a growing body of research in psychology suggests that there are some important differences between the ways that men think and the ways women think, and that these differences may have origins that are more complex than the mere differences in childhood training. Pioneered by the Harvard psychologist Carol Gilligan, this research focused on differences in how men and women perceive and resolve ethical dilemmas.

The following case will prepare you for the next stage of our discussion. Read it and think about it for a few minutes.

Consider a small company whose policy about sick days reads like this: "Employees are allowed a maximum of 12 sick days each year. After the 8th day, employees receive a verbal warning. After the 10th day, employees receive a written warning. Any employee exceeding the 12 days will be terminated."

Lots of companies have similar policies, and everyone is usually pretty well satisfied with them. One year, however, the company faced a difficult problem. Two employees, Hal and Roger, had used all 12 of their allotted sick days. Hal had been with the company for 2 years. He was a so-so worker--not great, not terrible--but his boss suspected that most of Hal's "sick" days were not legitimate and that he was just taking additional time off when he felt like it. Roger was a very good worker who had been with the company 10 years. His child has become seriously ill during the past year, however, and Roger frequently needed to take him to the hospital for treatments. He used up his vacation and personal days in this way and now he was using his sick time for the same reason. Both men were called in and warned about their misuse of sick days. The following week, both took another day off.

Imagine that you are the executive who has to decide what happens to the two workers and think about the situation you face. How would you describe the problem? What facts and issues in the case are most important, and how do they bear on what you do? Do you see this as an "ethical" problem? Is it "right" or "wrong" to fire the two men? What about keeping Roger and firing Hal? What implications does your action have for all the other employees of the company? What decision would you make?

Jot down your answers to these questions, ask other people what they think, and compare your answers to theirs. Pay special attention not so much to their final decision about whether or not to fire anyone but how they arrive at their answers. Does everybody see the problem the same way? Do they all grapple with the same issues? Does everybody agree about what the most important facts are? Do most of the men you speak with see the problem one way and most of the women another way?

ETHICS: "MASCULINE" JUSTICE VERSUS "FEMININE" CARE

There are almost as many systems of "personal ethics" as there are people. Where do such differences come from?

Beyond the impact on our ethical outlook of family, religion, and personal choice, some people claim that gender plays an important role. Some researchers claim that men and women differ in how they decide on what is "right" and what is "wrong." The landmark book published in 1982 by the moral development psychologist Carol Gilligan stimulated the latest round of research into whether there might not actually be some basic differences in how men and women think about these and other matters.

We all evaluate our own and other people's actions many times a day. If you compare and contrast how you decide what to do and how you appraise what other people do with the ethical styles of same-sex and opposite-sex friends and associates, you may not see a hard and fast linkage with gender. You will probably be able to distinguish two fundamentally different approaches that people use in evaluating their own and others' actions. One approach, which prizes reason and objectivity, applies the same rules impartially across the board. The ideas of rights, justice, and fairness are paramount here. The other approach, which combines

reason with emotions, holds that we should do what is most appropriate within the particular circumstances of the case. This approach stresses responsibility to people in need; its central moral principle is care, rather than justice.

The questionnaire you completed helps you identify your ethical style. The higher your J score, the more your ethics are based on the need for justice. Some would call these ethics typically masculine. The higher your C score, the more care underlies your ethics. Such ethics have been identified as typically feminine. Actually, it is unclear just how closely much these different styles can be correlated with gender. In practice, many men and women cross from one to the other. Furthermore, some people are very strongly J or C, while others are more balanced. Nonetheless, the odds are high that within any typical group, more men will have higher J scores than C scores while women's scores will be in the reverse.

The debate over whether or not there are two ethical styles that can be related to gender arose as an unintended result of research done by the late Harvard psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987). Kohlberg sought to discover the process by which we develop our sense of morality. His research convinced him that to go from an undeveloped to a mature sense of ethics, we pass through a series of distinct stages. When Carol Gilligan, also at Harvard, discovered that Kohlberg's system placed women lower than men on his ethical ladder and that all of Kohlberg's subjects were male, she looked to see if a female sample would yield different results. She thinks they do.

Taking first things first, we will start with Kohlberg's research because that is what led to Gilligan's work.

Kohlberg's "masculine" ethics of justice

Kohlberg's research was inspired by the work of the great Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget who had tried to connect the development of a child's moral judgment to its overall cognitive development. Kohlberg believed that as the whole human personality matures, our thinking about right and wrong starts at a preconventional level, then progresses to a conventional level, then finally arrives at postconventional thinking. Each of these three levels has two specific stages. Kohlberg's research included subjects from many cultures, and therefore he believed that he was uncovering a universal innate developmental structure of the human personality.

Stages of ethical development

At the preconventional level, we understand "good" and "bad" in a very primitive way. This stage runs from about age 4 to 10. (Kohlberg does not see anything of consequence taking place in ethical development before age 4.) In Stage 1, all that counts is power. "Good" is what the person with the most power says is good. We do what is right only to avoid punishment, and we regulate our dealings with others so as not to provoke anyone who is stronger than we are. In Stage 2 we advance only a little. Now something is "good" because it will satisfy some need we have. We come to value reciprocity, a notion well put in the proposition "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." This notion, of course, is still totally self-oriented. "Right" and "wrong" are just labels that indicate whether something brings us pleasure or pain.

Conventional morality, the next level, marks a major advance over in that we shift our focus from ourselves to others. The expectations of our family, or the rules of our society, now become our moral standard. At Stage 3 of this level, an action is "good" if it pleases other people, helps them, or at least tries to. Generally, we adopt traditional and stereotyped ways of behaving without questioning them. Our purpose is to act in ways that will make other people like and accept us. Next, in Stage 4, authority and law and order become more important. Now we think that respecting authority, obeying rules, doing our duty, and maintaining the status quo are morally right for their own sake--no matter what the circumstances. Conforming to the traditions of our group is a major virtue. So many people are so comfortable at this level that only one in four advances to Kohlberg's final level.

When and if we move into the third, postconventional level as adults, we develop an appreciation for moral principles that do not depend on what anyone thinks but are valid in and of themselves. This level of is the stage of autonomous, individual ethical thinking, like the earlier levels, also has two stages. Stage 5 thinking utilizes the ideas of utilitarianism and the "social contract" which promote free agreement, individual rights, and democratic processes and institutions. As Kohlberg notes, "this is the `official' morality of American government, and finds its ground in the thought of the writers of the Constitution." At this stage, we decide whether an action is right or wrong by an impartial assessment of how fair it is, how well it respects the rights of others, and how far it advances the common good. Stage 6 goes beyond this to individually realized ethical principles that are abstract and universal, the Golden Rule, for example, or Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative. These, says Kohlberg, "are universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity and equality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons." Now we assess the ethical character of actions in terms of the principles we have chosen to apply and to which we have a deep personal allegiance. Something is right or wrong depending on how it measures up to these principles.

Kohlberg's scheme is often called an ethics of justice. Like the representation of Justice wearing a blindfold, the person at Stage 6 refuses to see anything that could sway his or her decision. There are no extenuating circumstances, no special cases, no emotions. Everything must be rational, objective, and impartial.

How valid is Kohlberg's scheme?

Kohlberg's analysis makes a good deal of sense. The process of moral development, he says, means moving toward a progressively less self-centered and ever more complex and abstract ethical outlook. We start with a selfish way of determining right and wrong, give that up for other people's judgments, then grow beyond that to a view of morality as an expression of ultimate principles--justice, fairness, and respect for individual rights and human dignity. Kohlberg's stages also test out empirically. His evidence shows that everyone can be placed at one of his six stages as they pass through what turns out to be the same sequence.

Some researchers raised questions about Kohlberg's theory, however, when they saw that most women do not go past Stage 3--that is, they determine right and wrong according to whether or not an act helps or pleases others. If women achieve no higher levels than this, either they are morally inferior to men or something is wrong with the theory.

Carol Gilligan's "feminine" ethic of care

Harvard psychologist Carol Gilligan studied Kohlberg's findings and found them wanting. Because all Kohlberg's subjects were male, Kohlberg could not have taken into account the different socialization of little girls and little boys in our culture. Males are traditionally socialized to be autonomous and independent, while females are supposed to be passive but loving caretakers for the members of their group. Gilligan argues that these differences lead to different values. She writes,

For the men, this had led to a morality based on equal rights and devotion to abstract principles even at the sacrifice of people's well-being. For the women, it had led to a morality based on caring, in which increasing maturity broadened the scope of the person's sense of responsibility and compassion. For mature women, the goal became not equality but equity, in responding to people's differing needs.

Gilligan's subsequent research suggests that Kohlberg missed an alternate way of thinking about right and wrong, an approach used by both men and women, but used far more frequently by women. In this outlook, care and responsibility to others, rather than justice and individual rights become the fundamental ethical principles. Gilligan claims that this ethical outlook defines an ethical issue mainly in terms of helping others and minimizing harm. The most basic moral command becomes "an injunction to care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate the 'real and recognizable trouble' of this world." If ethics is essentially a matter of getting involved with other people's lives in order to reduce their troubles, then, we have a responsibility to help others. Thus in the view of most women, she says, "the moral person is one who helps others; goodness is service, meeting one's obligations and responsibilities to others."

From this ethical perspective, every situation is different, and appropriate responses will vary from case to case, depending on the details. Every problem, then, calls for a tailor-made solution, not something "off the rack." In fact, Gilligan's "care" outlook is often called a "response" orientation.

Stages of development

Like Kohlberg, Gilligan thinks that people develop through a series of stages on their way to "moral maturity" (although the stages are less central to her thought than to Kohlberg's and are given much briefer treatment). Whereas Kohlberg's stages involve a progressively more abstract way of thinking about ethics, however, Gilligan describes stages that involve a woman's developing an advanced sense of responsibility.

The first stage is characterized by caring only for the self in order to ensure survival. This is how we all are as children. Then comes a transitional phase when others criticize this attitude as selfish and the individual begins to see connections between herself and others. The second stage is characterized by a sense of responsibility. "Good" is equated with caring for others, a value readily captured in the traditional role of wife and mother. Such devotion to caring for other people often leads to ignoring the self, however, and this ultimately gives way to a second transition in which the tensions between the responsibility of caring for others and the desire to have one's own needs met are faced. Finally the third stage is defined by an

acceptance of the principle of care as a universal ethical principle which schemes exploitation and hurt in the lives of others and ourselves.

The ethics of justice and the ethics of care compared

Justice, care, and the case of Roger and Hal

According to Gilligan, men and women look at ethical situations through different "lenses," with each one revealing something different. Suppose we look again at the case of Roger's and Hal's sick days first through one lense, then through the other. As you will see, the problem underlying the case looks entirely different, depending on which one we use.

Through Kohlberg's "justice" lense, we see a problem of fairness. The policy is explicit, and it has served the interests of the company and the workers very well. The ethical problem is obviously whether we should treat Roger and Hal the same or treat them differently.

We all feel sorry for Roger, but the rules are clear and they have to apply the same to everyone. We might want to treat Roger differently than Hal, but how can we? That wouldn't be fair to Hal. And according to Kohlberg's hierarchy, acting according to an abstract principle of fairness--the requirement that we treat similar cases the same way--is ethically superior to giving in to our personal sympathy towards Roger. We must apply the rules consistently.

What if we gave both men another chance? That would hardly be fair to people who were fired in the past for exceeding 12 sick days. Nor would it be fair to the other employees, many of whom may want or need to take extra sick days but don't. Perhaps they have a problem with some other policy. If we make this exception for Roger, aren't we setting a dangerous precedent and opening a Pandora's box? Wouldn't everybody now expect special treatment? Without a policy, decisions could end up being arbitrary, and we cannot do business in a way that meets everyone's interests if we make exceptions all the time. That would be chaos

When we view the case in this way, we are hard pressed to defend treating the two men differently from each other or from the way the policy clearly specifies. Anything other than identical treatment appears unjust, unfair, and sure to cause more problems than it solves.

Through a "care" lense, however, the problem looks quite different. Now it seems to involve our responsibility to help someone in need. Given this assumption, treating Hal and Roger the same seems indefensible. If the facts we have are correct and complete, clearly Roger and his son need help more than Hal does. Making some special arrangements for Roger will not hurt others in the company--and may, in fact, reassure them that the company will help them too should they find themselves with a serious problem on their hands. If we do not assist Roger with this unusual and difficult problem, we will have violated the principle of care.

The question is no longer "do we apply or ignore the policy?" From a "care" point of view, policies are for normal cases, not unusual ones. Because this is an unusual case, the primary question, then, is, "What is ethically appropriate to these special

circumstances?" From this perspective, special treatment for Roger is not "setting a precedent." It is not going to come back to haunt us, as the "justice" outlook would have it. Making an exception to policy this time does not mean that we would do so in every case. Nor would such an exception constitute arbitrariness. We are trying "to discern and alleviate the `real and recognizable trouble' of this world." To find a solution tailor-made to a special circumstance, we must be guided by the facts of each case.

With all this in mind, we can perhaps say that treating Hal and Roger the same is not "fair." The essence of fairness is treating similar cases the same. But these two employees are in very different situations. Circumstances are beyond Roger's control--not so Hal's. Roger's problem is real and serious. He also has a better work history with the company. The two cases differ so much that in fact it may be unfair to treat them the same.

From which perspective would you view the case of Roger and Hal if it were yours to decide. Look back at the results of that short self-inventory you took a few pages ago. The odds are that if you have a high "J" score, you probably think Roger and Hal should be treated the same. If you have a high "C" score, you probably think it would be wrong not to give Roger special treatment.

Similarities and differences

Gilligan's model of moral development resembles Kohlberg's in a couple of ways. Both progress from a totally self-centered outlook to one governed by a central moral principle. Both begin with an emphasis on the greater authority or importance of someone else, but culminate in a personal forging of one's own ethics.

The differences between these two approaches, however, are more striking than the similarities. For one thing, the moral principles arrived at are very different. Treating people impartially according to abstract principles of justice is more detached and less personal than reducing the amount of pain and suffering in the world. Although both values are important, "respecting someone's rights" affects the lives of ordinary people less immediately than "reducing their sorrow and unhappiness."

More notably, perhaps, Gilligan's findings speak to the psychological struggle of women against our society's traditional idea of their gender-determined role. According to Gilligan, women can gain personal independence and autonomy only after they reject the idea that their proper role is to subjugate their interests to those of their husbands, children, or other people they are caring for. A typical woman in our culture probably has no trouble accepting the idea that helping others is important. The harder task is accepting the idea that she should apply the principle of care to her own life as much as she applies it to others. Kohlberg's stages reflect no such psychological struggle for men.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH?

Care, justice and traditional philosophical ethics

It should be apparent by now that both the ethics of justice and the ethics of care are legitimate intellectual outlook. We might even say that these two approaches

parallel to some degree the teleological and deontological traditions in philosophical ethics.

Those using a teleological approach to ethics argue that whether actions are right or wrong depends on how much actual good or harm results. The most familiar, not to mention influential teleological system is that of Utilitarianism, the school of thought that approves actions to the extent that they produce "the greatest good of the greatest number." Gilligan's ethic of "care" endorses something similar. Both claim that ethics is a matter of evaluating real-life consequences, whether positive or negative, not following a program that follows from some abstract principle.

Those taking a deontological approach, on the other hand, say that actions themselves are intrinsically right or wrong. Their merit does not depend on their consequences. That would allow for the unacceptable position that "the ends justify the means." Deontological thinkers determine the moral character of an action by measuring it against abstract moral principles. Kohlberg's ethic of justice sounds very much like this.

So when Gilligan questioned Kohlberg's assumption that his "ethic of justice" was the most advanced ethic, she joined a time-honored debate among philosophers about the best way to evaluate right and wrong.

Care and justice: the philosophical significance

Here we have two distinctly different ethical styles that, more often than not, can apparently be predicted by one's gender. What is the philosophical significance of such an observation?

First, the existence of two separate but equal ethical perspectives suggests that each has its strengths and weaknesses, but each alone is ultimately incomplete. A full ethical analysis, then, should use both approaches.

Second, if we need to combine both perspectives, somehow moral justification becomes a much more complicated matter. A justice orientation might say that as long as a particular action matches universal ethical principles, it is morally acceptable. But adding the care orientation's requirement that the deed must respond to a particular set of circumstances and reduce trouble in the lives of others makes an action's morality harder to guarantee.

Moral justification, then, becomes a matter of balancing the theoretical against the concrete and the universal against the particular. We must also carefully consider the harm many different people could suffer or be saved from by our actions. We must scrutinize our responsibilities to ourselves as well as to others. And we must figure out how to balance competing interests and responsibilities. These are only a few of the moral knots we must simultaneously untie.

Third, we must envision a new accommodation of reason to emotion. Gilligan's ethic of "care" involves an emotional process. Most philosophers, on the other hand, have put their faith in reason. Yet thinkers as unlike as the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle and the early modern British thinker David Hume both stress the role of emotions in the morally good person. Aristotle says that moral virtue involves both

actions and emotions. Being a virtuous individual, he claims in the Nicomachean Ethics, depends not on doing the right things, but performing the actions in a certain way: "feeling at the right time, about the right things, in relation to the right people; and for the right reason." Hume sees ethics as mainly a matter of "sympathy" or "fellow feeling." Both philosophers think that ethics involve feeling and personal character as well as rational analysis. Thus it may certainly be true that the role of emotion in Western ethics has been greatly underestimated or simply ignored.

Finally, if the way we perceive, interpret, and resolve ethical problems is affected by gender, how do we know when we have an objective picture of reality? Modern Western thinking has counted on the possibility of objectivity. We weigh things, measure them, use incredibly sophisticated instruments, observe, test, experiment, and quantify. In the end, we believe we can get a precise and objective picture of what we are looking at. But if gender affects our perception of reality so profoundly, how can we be sure our results are correct?

Immanuel Kant may be right when he claims that we can know things only "as they appear," never "as they really are in themselves." Kant came to the conclusion that the mind by its very nature determines what we experience as reality. Our minds do not just passively receive a picture of reality more or less accurately. Kant claims that the mind takes the raw "stuff" of reality and manufactures a representation of the reality that conforms to the nature of the mind. We end up with a "thing as it appears"; the "thing in itself" is always beyond our grasp. If gender also plays its part in shaping the appearance of an ethical issue, does this doom us even more certainly to subjectivity.

To make matters more complicated, Gilligan proposes another theory that raises still more problems connected with the issue of appearance versus reality. In essence, she suggests that the different thought processes and values of mature men and women result from the self-concept we form when we are very young. We end up with one of two different self-concepts, she says, one individual, autonomous, and essentially separate from others, the other intimately connected to other people. Gilligan claims that most men develop the former self, most women, the latter.

In essence, Gilligan argues that our ethical outlook stems largely from the psychological makeup associated with our gender. Take the "masculine" view of the self. Men are separate, autonomous individuals, out in the world doing what they want. Inevitably they come into conflict with each other. Many men may want the same thing, but only one of them can have it, or they find their individual interests in total opposition. How do they protect their "separateness" and yet live in the same society? The most logical way is to adopt an ethic of fairness, equality, and impartiality, the rules of which specify the rights of all and apply the same way to all. Thus Kohlberg's ethic of "justice" is appropriate in a society of "separate" masculine selves.

On the other hand, if we see ourselves are essentially connected to other people, we will develop a different ethic. In a reality based on relationships, the chief threat is a lack of care for other people. Because we must inevitably accept different responsibilities to different people, the ethical dilemmas that people with this orientation face stem mainly from the fact that they have competing or conflicting responsibilities. Which responsibility gets priority? One must look at the specifics of

each situation very carefully and then decide who gets special treatment. Thus, a view of the self as "connected" implies the primacy of Gilligan's ethic of care.

This general theme has also been developed by feminist philosophers who argue that traditional moral theories are grounded in the male experience and consequently have serious limitations. The contemporary philosopher Virginia Held, for example, claims that moral theory generally proceeds from the activities of the marketplace, a traditionally male forum of activity. She writes,

The relation between buyer and seller has often been taken as the model of all human interactions. Most of the social contract tradition has seen this relation of contractual exchange as fundamental to law and political authority as well as to economic activity. And some contemporary moral philosophers see the contractual relation as the relation on which even morality itself should be based. The marketplace, as a model for relationships, has become so firmly entrenched in our normative theories that it is rarely questioned as a proper foundation for recommendations extending beyond the marketplace. Consequently, much moral thinking is built on the concept of rational economic man. Relationships between human beings are seen as arising, and as justified, when they serve the interests of individual rational contractors.

As a result, competition and domination in the hope of advancing one's interest are seen as natural and appropriate activities.

Held suggests, however, that if we base our thinking in a paradigm drawn from the more characteristically female experience of the nurturing relationship between a caretaker and a child, we arrive at a very different moral theory. Seen in this light, she observes,

the competition and desire for domination thought of as acceptable for rational economic man might appear as a very particular and limited human connection, suitable perhaps, if at all, only for a restricted marketplace. Such a relation of conflict and competition can be seen to be unacceptable for establishing the social trust on which public institutions must rest, or for upholding the bonds on which caring, regard, friendship, or love must be based. . . . We might then take it as one of our starting assumptions that creating good relations of care and concern and trust between ourselves and our children, and creating social arrangements in which children will be valued and well cared for, are more important than maximizing individual utilities. And the moral theories that might be compatible with such assumptions might be very different from those with which we are familiar.

Minimally, Held argues, we should reject the idea that a single moral theory is sufficient, opting instead for a "division of moral labor" which employs different ethical approaches for different domains of experience. "Satisfactory intermediate principles for areas such as those of international affairs, or family relations," she writes, "cannot be derived from simple universal principles, but must be arrived at in conjunction with experience within the domains in question."

If Gilligan and Held are right, a psychological fact--our self-concept--and a gender experience that we take as paradigmatic determine our perception of reality and the

way we prefer to handle ethics. This would undercut the idea that philosophy and reason can ever be a "pure" and objective instrument for studying reality and analyzing human experience. If we must call even the theoretical possibility of objective reason into question, that presents us with a philosophical problem as stunning as it is fundamental.

A FINAL NOTE

All this talk about possible differences in thinking that might be related to gender may be interesting, but you may be wondering if the issue is really all that important. Does it have anything to do with real life, you may ask, and above all does all this questioning do anybody any good?

Look at it this way. Sooner or later you will experience the difficulties and frustrations that come from working with someone who in effect speaks a different "conceptual language" than you do. It may be someone of a different gender, or it may be someone of the same gender as you but with a way of thinking--epistemologically or ethically--opposite to your own. By having studied this topic, however, you should understand such a situation better than you otherwise might have. And the more accurately you understand a problem, the better position you are in to handle it. Also, these differences are not carved in stone. All that the research shows is that we seem to have proclivities to think in certain ways that may be related to our gender. It does not say that we cannot expand the way we think. Thus we can work at seeing things the way the other gender does, viewing the world and problems as they do, trying to speak their "conceptual language." Obviously, if we can do that, we will transcend some of the limitations of our preferred way of thinking, and we will find it much easier to understand, work with, and relate to wide range of people different than ourselves. And these are not small benefits.

SUGGESTED READINGS

For Lawrence Kohlberg's work see: [The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice: Essays on Moral Development, 1](#), (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), and [The Psychology of Moral Development: Essays on Moral Development, 2](#) (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984). Gilligan's thesis is set out in her [In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development](#) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); it is developed and explored by Gilligan and other writers in: [Mapping the Moral Domain](#), edited by Carol Gilligan, Janie Victoria Ward, Jill McLean Taylor, with Betty Bardige (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988)