

12. CHAPTER 12: FEMINISM AND THE ETHICS OF CARE

12.1. Do Women and Men Think Differently About Ethics?

Aristotle said that women are not as rational as men, and so women are naturally ruled by men. Kant agreed, adding that for this reason women "lack civil personality" and should have no voice in public life.

Kohlberg's stages of moral development:

1. The Stage of Punishment and Obedience: right is conceived as obeying authority and avoiding punishment.
2. The Stage of Individual Instrumental Purpose and Exchange: here, right is acting to meet one's own needs and allowing others to do the same, while making "fair deals" with others to further one's ends.
3. The Stage of Mutual Interpersonal Expectations, Relationships, and Conformity: Right is defined in terms of the duties and responsibilities that go with one's social roles and one's relationships with other people; a critical virtue is "keeping loyalty and trust with partners."
4. The Stage of Social System and Conscience Maintenance: the idea of doing one's duty in society and maintaining the welfare of the group becomes paramount. (The demands of personal relationships are subordinated to following the rules of the social group.)
5. The Stage of Prior Rights and Social Contract or Utility: right consists of holding the basic rights, values, and legal arrangements of the society. (At this stage, personal relationships are subordinated to universal principles of justice.)
6. Finally, the most morally mature people reach the Stage of Universal Ethical Principles, in which full moral maturity is manifested through one's fidelity to abstract principles that all humanity should follow.

Gilligan's objection:

"Women's moral weakness, manifest in an apparent diffusion and confusion of judgment, is thus inseparable from women's moral strength, an overriding concern with relationships and responsibilities."

Even if there are different styles of moral thinking, there is no style that is exclusively male or female.

People -- like all organisms -- have inherited the attitudes and dispositions that enabled their ancestors to win the reproductive competition.

12.2. Implications for Moral Judgment

Parents who act only from a sense of duty are bad parents.

The ethics of care does not take "obligation" as fundamental; nor does it require that we impartially promote the interests of everyone alike. Instead, it begins with a conception of moral life as a network of relationships with specific other people, and it sees "living well" as caring for those people, attending to their needs, and keeping faith with them.

A traditional "ethics of principle," such as utilitarianism, would conclude that we have a substantial duty to support an organization like UNICEF to save the children of the world.

One might think that an ethic of care would reach a similar conclusion, but that misses the point. An ethic of care focuses on small scale, personal relationships. If there is no such relationship, "caring" cannot take place.

An ethic of caring appeals to intuition and feeling rather than to principle.

A basic notion on which an ethic of caring rests is the idea of an individual relationship between the one who cares and the one who is cared for.

The opposing arguments are impressive, intuitions and feelings are not reliable guides.

12.3. Implications for Ethical Theory

The ethics of care turns out to be one part of the ethics of virtue. The verdict on the ethics of care will depend, ultimately, on the viability of the ethics of virtue.