

## Ethics and Feminism

Is there after all a fundamental flaw in traditional Western ethics—that of being inappropriate for more than half of the human race? That is, is moral philosophy as it is traditionally expounded biased toward androcentrism (male-centeredness)? Does it fail to take into account the experience of women and to take advantage of the moral insights derived from female experience? A good number of **feminist** critics of moral philosophy think this is the case.

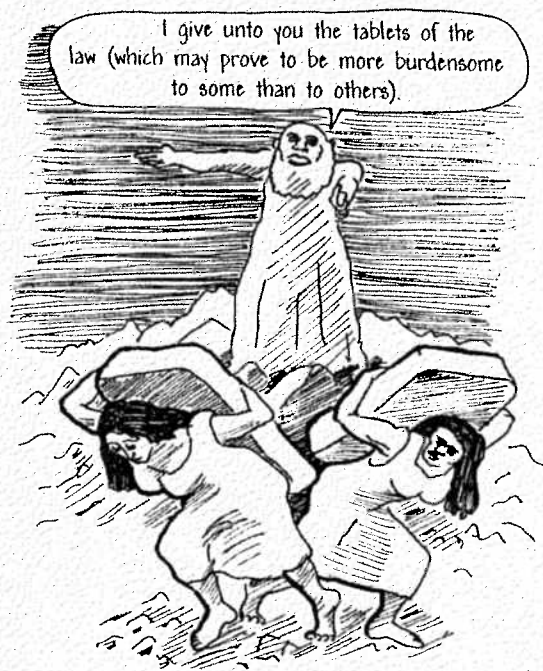
Certainly there is good reason to believe that women's experience is in certain significant ways different from men's experience. Novelists, psychologists, and sociologists have confirmed this suspicion. It is difficult to establish to what extent, if any, these differences can be traced to fundamental distinctions between the brains of females and males as opposed to differences in the way females and males are treated from birth forward. In our culture, for instance, each sex is immediately assigned a color (pink, blue) and toys (dolls, trucks) as well as behavioral models (passive, active).



which the differences in experience between females and males can be traced to biological or social distinctions, the question still remains, Is it possible that the experience of girls and women can provide insight into moral life that has been ignored by traditional ethical discourse? Furthermore, is it possible that the same "patriarchal" moral discourse has not only ignored women but has also participated in their oppression and perpetuated a bias against them? It would seem that in some ways such is the case.



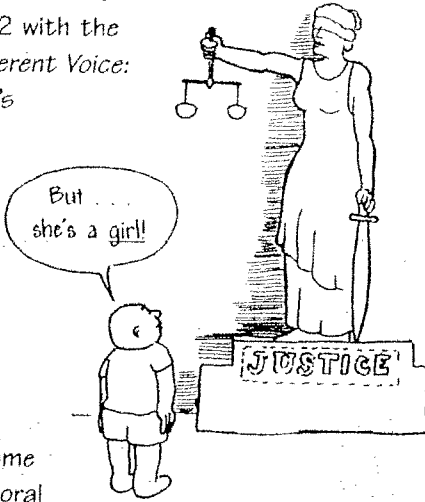
**The Assignment of Toys**



**Patriarchal Discourse**

Let us begin with this question: What differences exist in the experience of women that might be morally significant? An important

step toward answering that question was provided by Carol Gilligan in 1982 with the publication of her book, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. One of Gilligan's techniques was to interview children using a set of questions developed by the psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg. When Kohlberg performed the tests in the 1960s, it seemed to him that girls did not prove to have as clear a sense of justice as did boys nor the same deductive capacity for deriving moral conclusions. (There has been a whole literature based on the claim that women have a lower developed moral sense than men. The German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer [1788-1860] wrote:



"... women remain children their whole life long... the fundamental fault of the female character is that it has no sense of justice. This is mainly due to the fact... that women are defective in the powers of reasoning and deliberation."<sup>9</sup>



According to psychologist Otto Weininger (1880-1903), "A woman cannot grasp that one must act from principle; as she has no continuity, she does not experience the necessity for logical support of her mental processes."<sup>10</sup> Probably the most egregious case comes from [no surprise!] Freud, who wrote:

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. Character-traits which critics of every epoch have brought up against

**"Because He Thought So Highly of the Penis, He Thought Women Did Too"**  
(Germaine Greer on Otto Weininger)

...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 their feelings of affection or hostility—all these would be amply accounted for in the modification of the formation of their superego. . . . We must not allow ourselves to be deflected from such conclusions by the denial of the feminists, who are anxious to force us to regard the two sexes as completely equal in position and worth."<sup>11</sup>

Gilligan replicated Kohlberg's interviews

and reinterpreted the data. In one interview, she

posed the following question to a girl and a boy, both eleven years old:

Should "Heinz" steal medicine from a pharmacist in order to save the life of his sick wife if the pharmacist

refuses to lower the price so Heinz can afford it? The boy, Jake, is sure that Heinz should do so and is able to produce a principle ("life is worth more than money") and a logical argument applying that principle. Amy, on the other hand, is less sure. She thinks it's wrong for Heinz to steal the drugs but insists also that it is wrong for the pharmacist to withhold them. She refuses to apply the rules of logic to the case—in fact, in a way she refuses the hypothesis. She thinks if we could talk with the pharmacist and make him understand the situation, he would freely donate the drugs.

Is this an example of retarded moral development? Is Amy incapable of understanding the abstract concept of justice, of applying a principle to the case, and of drawing deductive conclusions from it? Gilligan does not believe that this is the correct lesson taught here. She sees the girl's account not as concentrating on "a contest of

I hesitate to give this thought expression!



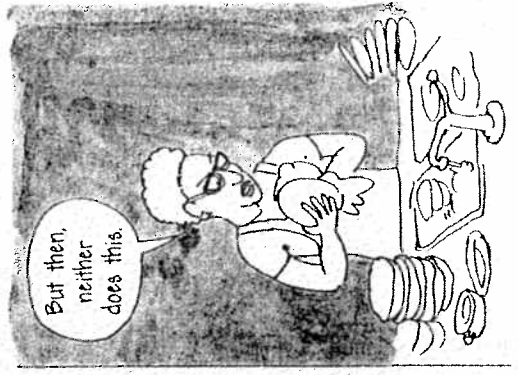
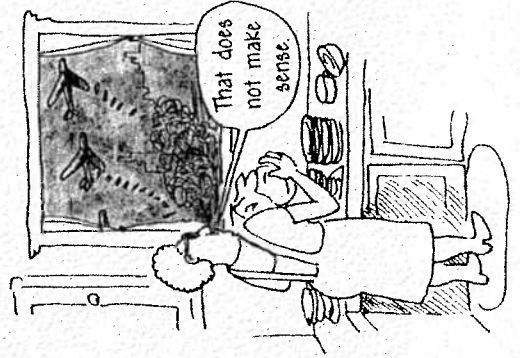
rights," but on "a network of relationships on whose continuation they all depend."<sup>12</sup> In short, Amy does refuse to apply abstract principles in a mathematical fashion to unrealistic scenarios as a solution to a human problem. She contextualizes and concentrates on the pragmatics of relationships between human beings.

A number of feminists think Amy got it right. (I say a number because there is no such thing as the feminist position. In fact, a few have

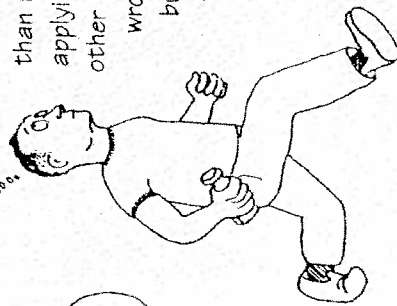
disagreed with some of Gilligan's views.<sup>13</sup>) They think Amy is right to reject the typical extreme-case scenarios in which moral philosophy is often argued. (E.g., "the case of Sam.") She is right to stress relationships over rules, and she is right to demand more information regarding the context. That is, she is correct to see moral judgments as emergent, flowing out from an understanding of a real situation.

Why would women have such different moral experiences? Agnes Heller believes that precisely women's historical confinement to the home and exclusion from the broader world of commerce, industry, travel, and war in Western society has made their lives more similar over the generations and has given them more insight into real human

### Amy's Solution



This theft is noble.



STOP THIEF!!

### Jake's Solution

relations close-up. They have had to learn to create and manage small communities involving real people, people with all their virtues and foibles. Because ethics must ultimately be about human relations, women may indeed have special insights into this sphere.<sup>14</sup>

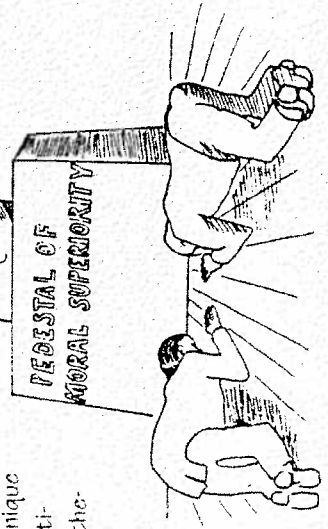
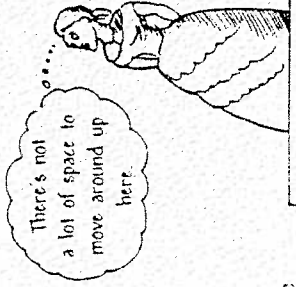
Does this mean that women are morally superior to men? Not necessarily so. (Though in Victorian England they were thought to be morally superior, and this supposed superiority was used both

against them—they would have to be confined to the home to protect their purity—and used to try to liberate them—they should be given the vote in order to influence society morally.) Nevertheless, it means that women might be afforded a unique perspective from which to criticize male-dominated ethical theory and to develop their insights systematically into a moral view.

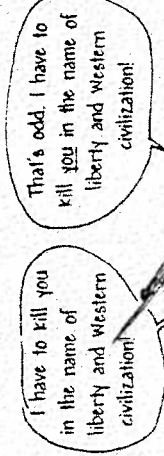
The feminist criticism of patriarchal ethics has two prongs. First, as philosopher Alison Jaggar says, feminist ethics "seeks to identify and challenge all

those ways, overt but more often and more perniciously covert, in which Western ethics has excluded women or rationalized their subordination."<sup>15</sup> Second, it seeks to develop an ethics inspired by, or at least consistent with, the actual moral experience and intuition of women.

Concerning the first point, some feminists have worried that a masculine tendency toward abstract thought may allow theories to be distanced from actual human life. Conceptions of morality derived from such alienated thought may 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," as feminist philosopher Jean Grimshaw says. Women's lives, Grimshaw asserts, may "provide the space for questioning the sorts of priorities that see human lives as easily dispensable in the service of some abstract idea or great



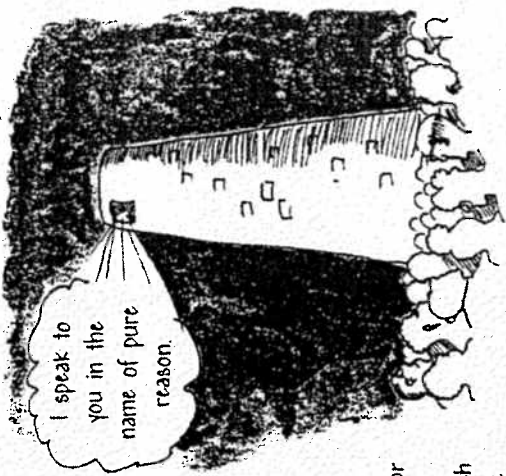
Victorian Virtue



cause; that see care for others to serving others or a life devoted to serving others as relatively unimportant."<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, precisely because women have to a great extent been historically excluded from the commercial and industrial world and from "world-historical events," they ironically may be in the best position to criticize the morality of the capitalist market economy.

Such social commentators need not be professional philosophers. Long-dead female novelists like George Eliot (a.k.a. Marian Evans) in her *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) can be very instructive on topics like this.

The second point, the development of a feminist ethics, is still undergoing formulation. An interesting suggestion for it comes from Mary Raugust (based not on an "Ivory tower" perspective from a professor's chair at a university but from the workplace. She was director of the Kennedy Aging Project. Raugust sets forth her proposal for a feminist ethics in seven tenets.<sup>17</sup>



Moral Edicts from the Ivory Tower

FIRST TENET: The central

priority of ethics is not the concept of individual rights but of relationships with other human beings. (Here Raugust seems to be agreeing with "Amy's" intuitions as opposed to "Jake's.")

SECOND TENET: The principal goal of ethics is not autonomy and liberty of individual humans (as in Kant and Sartre), rather it is "the giving and receiving of care appropriate to specific persons and their

situations." (The feminist philosopher who has pursued this feature of ethics in detail is Nel Noddings, in *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*.<sup>18</sup> For her, "caring" involves setting aside one's own concerns in order to put oneself into the experience of another person as far as possible. Such a definition of "caring" does seem to get at the very heart of morality.)

**THIRD TENET:**

interdependence over individualism. (Again, this seems to square with "Amy's" intuition. Gilligan, by the way, admits that this side of female experience has its dangers for women, some of whom have a problem in establishing a clear sense of their own boundaries, identities, interests, and needs from those of others with whom they interact.)

**FOURTH TENET: The**

"other" with whom one deals morally must be distinctly personified and not an impersonal, faceless abstraction. (The object of the critique here seems to be particularly

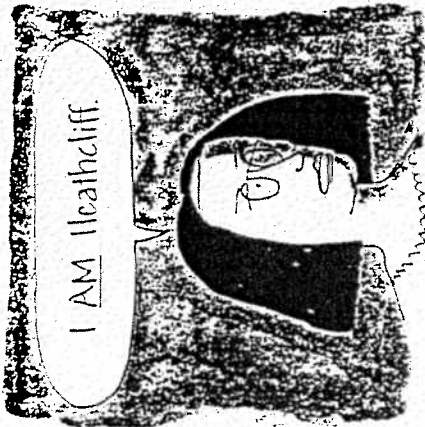
Kantianism, in which the moral subject has no particular characteristics at all, but also utilitarianism, wherein the "greatest happiness" is established formulaically.)

**FIFTH TENET: Moral judgments**

emerge from actual situations and are not derived by applying logical formulas to general principles. (Once again in line with "Amy's" intuition, and anti-Kantian and anti-utilitarian.)

**SIXTH TENET: Feminist**

ethics are "accepting rather than transformative." (To this extent, they



**Boundary Problems in Wuthering Heights**

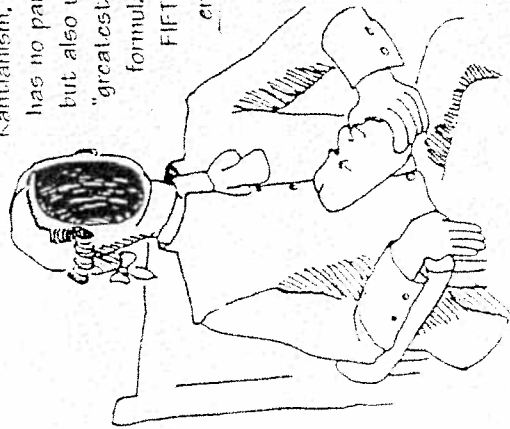
has no particular characteristics at all, but also utilitarianism, wherein the "greatest happiness" is established formulaically.)

**FIFTH TENET: Moral judgments**

emerge from actual situations and are not derived by applying logical formulas to general principles. (Once again in line with "Amy's" intuition, and anti-Kantian and anti-utilitarian.)

**SIXTH TENET: Feminist**

ethics are "accepting rather than transformative." (To this extent, they



Immanuel Kant as a Faceless Abstraction

agree with the biblical precept, "Judge not . . ." but disagree with another biblical precept—the one that graces Chapter 7 as its title—"Thou shalt become perfected." Again, this is an anti-Kantian thrust in that as Kant saw ethics as an engagement in self-improvement.)

**SEVENTH TENET:**

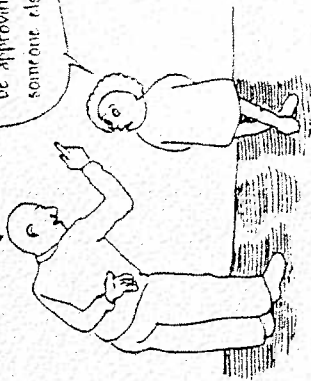
Feminist ethics will be a morality of virtues rather

than primarily one of

justice. (This tenet entails a rejection of the main thrust of Western ethics in the modern period. It also, in a way, involves a return to a Greek idea of ethics, particularly that of Aristotle, who, though no hero to feminists in terms of his actual attitude toward women, did provide an ethics based on social contextualization where moral behavior was analyzed in terms of propensities to act virtuously [courage, self-control, generosity, amiability, truthfulness, witiness, friendliness, modesty, and so on]. Aristotle wrote, " . . . the characteristic of [virtue] lies in moderation or observance of a mean relatively to the person concerned."<sup>19</sup> This seems much closer to "Amy's" way of approaching "the case of Heinz" than to "Jake's.")

You must CHANGE, or I won't approve of you!

But then you'd be approving of someone else.



YESSS. I WIN!



Amy Triumphant