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Slote: Are Women Morally Different from Men?



Michael Slote

Are Women Morally Different from Men?

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Everyone has believed from time immemorial that men and women are different, but in recent years—and perhaps surprisingly given the emergence of feminism and the movement for equal rights—there has been a crescendo of talk about such differences. John Gray's famous *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* is just one example of this trend, and another is all the books by linguist Deborah Tannen on the conversational differences between men and women. Where does this flurry of recent discussion come from?

Well, let's consider another question. Who started all the talk about *caring*? Nowadays, we have HMO's and other medical establishments talking about how much they care ("we're the caring people"), and the politicians have gotten into the act too. And not just the "bleeding heart" liberals/democrats, but Republicans! During his presidential campaign, Robert Dole was quoted in the *Washington Post* as telling us: "I am essentially a caring person and I care about America." More recently and familiarly, presidential candidate George W. Bush campaigned as a "compassionate conservative," and the talk of compassion seems to me at least to be just one variant on the theme of caring.

Some younger readers may not know that this talk of caring hasn't always been around, because it's so prevalent and so taken-for-granted, these days. But older readers will know what I am talking about—thirty years ago this kind of talk may have occurred, but it wasn't familiar *and everywhere*. So what made the difference? It's no good saying that the theme of caring comes out of Christianity or Judeo-Christianity, because those influences have been around for two thousand years, and the change I am talking about is fairly recent? So what recent development or event brought it about?

I think that the answer is that the same cultural event that brought about the recent surge of interest in differences between women and men also brought about the phenomenon of everyone talking about caring. And that event was the publication of a book called *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982) by educationist Carol Gilligan. That book seeks to show that men and women differ in the way they approach moral issues, and that book has certainly had an enormous influence in academic circles. However, it has also had a wider influence on our society and culture—but, as so often happens in such matters, many or most of those being influenced don't know the source of that influence (and, as I suggested a moment ago, may not even realize that they are taking part in a new phenomenon).

The tie-in between the talk of male-female differences and the emergence of all the appeals to the idea and ideal of caring comes from the fact that Gilligan said women tend to approach moral issues in terms of caring and men usually approach them in strikingly different terms. Gilligan maintained that, faced with a situation in which it is difficult to know how one should act, men tend to appeal to principles of justice. In addition, men see themselves as separate

and autonomous from other individuals, and see the resolution of moral issues as depending on a scheme of individual rights—of rights each of us has against other persons. By contrast, according to Gilligan, women typically see themselves as connected with, rather than separate from, those around them, and they typically solve difficult moral questions not by appealing to universal principles of justice or human rights, but on the basis of the sense of connection to, and their feelings about, the people to whom their moral choice will make a difference. One can see this difference, for example, in cases where rules can be or have been broken. Women tend to bend rules if that is the only way to make everyone or most everyone happy. Men are given to emphasizing the independent moral force of rules, and even if a given instance of rule breaking seems to help matters, they tend to worry more about the fairness (or justice) of doing so than women usually do.

Academic psychologists and educationists have raised many questions about the statistical studies on which Gilligan based her conclusions about men and women. But I hope and believe many of my readers will “get” what Gilligan is talking about. Most or all of us have experienced the differences she mentions; they are familiar to us. So the real question, then, is what to make of them. This question lies at the heart of Gilligan’s book, and the title of her book—*In a Different Voice*—actually suggests, or at least hints at, where she is headed. Gilligan wrote her book in order to show that women aren’t morally inferior to men, only *different*. But at this point I think I need to provide some background. Why did Gilligan feel she needed to show that women aren’t inferior to men? After all, during the Victorian period of the nineteenth century, there was talk of woman being “the angel in the house.” Women were put on a moral pedestal at the very same time they were deprived of many powers and freedoms they/we take for granted today. So what changed to make it necessary for Gilligan to defend the non-inferiority of women?

I am not sure. But what I am sure of is that academic or learned opinion at the time Gilligan wrote tended to think of men as morally superior to women. Is it all Freud’s fault? Freud, after all, famously, or infamously, claimed that women have no sense of justice. But there were other influences than Freud’s at work here.

Gilligan’s own teacher at Harvard, Lawrence Kohlberg, had done studies of moral development which seemed to indicate that women tend not to develop as far or as completely as men do, and, as we learn from Gilligan’s book, it was primarily Kohlberg’s widely influential work that set Gilligan going. Kohlberg was a follower of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, who had written about the cognitive development of young children (often on the basis of observations made about his own children). Piaget’s work had an enormous impact, and one side of that work concerned moral development. Piaget had shown that children’s cognitive development proceeds through various stages. At one age, for example, the child who sees water poured from a tall beaker into a wide but flat beaker, will say there is less water once the water is in the flat beaker. However, an older child will recognize that the amount of water is the same

despite the difference in the shape of the containers.

Piaget sought to understand moral development in similar terms, and both he and Kohlberg claimed that children develop morally through a series of clearly-marked stages. Roughly, there were three such stages: a pre-conventional stage in which children inhibit their hostile impulses through fear of parents or others; a conventional stage in which children want to belong to and keep things going smoothly in some group; and a post-conventional stage in which they deal with moral issues in terms of universal principles that transcend the conventions of any given group. Kohlberg subsequently divided each of these stages into two parts, so that there were in the end, and according to Kohlberg, six definite stages of human moral development. And according to the studies Kohlberg did, men or boys tend on average or on the whole to advance to a more advanced stage than women or girls do. That's why Kohlberg's work was seen as indicating the moral superiority of men or males (I won't distinguish those two terms here).

So how did Gilligan call this whole tradition of research into question? With benefit of hindsight we can see that this was not, in fact, difficult to do. She just blew the whistle on the studies Kohlberg had done. And how did she do that? Well, she pointed out that Kohlberg's studies had all been done exclusively on (a sample of) males. So when Kohlberg adopted the six-stage approach and treated the later stages as morally more advanced than the earlier ones, he was treating what comes later or last for males as the criterion or standard of all moral progress. In that case, if women develop differently, they will count as inferior to men. But wouldn't it have been fairer and more reasonable to study human moral development with a sample that included both boys/men and girls/women? Given the results Kohlberg and Gilligan obtained, that would have made it difficult if not impossible to see human moral development and progress in terms of Kohlberg's rigid six-stage sequence, and that negative result is precisely what Gilligan thinks is shown by an unbiased study of human moral development. Woman's voice isn't inferior to the male voice, it is simply a *different* voice.

Kohlberg saw women as "stuck" in the conventional stage of moral development because of their concern for group harmony; men he saw as tending toward greater moral progress because they would tend to place less emphasis on group harmony or dynamics and more on universal principles of rights and justice that go beyond any group. But from the standpoint of women's development all the emphasis on complying with principles is a sign of men's greater "abstractness" and their lesser focus on people, and these things are not, or certainly need not be seen as being, to men's greater moral advantage. By the same token, Freud's view that women lack a sense of justice seems to have been primarily based on the fact that women are more willing than men to break rules in order to achieve (purported) moral purposes. But if one questions whether morality is or should be based in universal or abstract rules—that is, in moral principles or laws—then Freud's criticism can be questioned too. So, once again, it seems to make sense *not* to assume or conclude at this point

that women are morally inferior to men. The most we can say is that they are different, and that is the lesson Gilligan seeks to impart.

But notice one thing. The idea of male superiority, whether morally or otherwise, is one that feminism, or the women's movement, has sought to overcome. That very idea has had a widespread influence and has "helped keep women down." But if men have historically had greater power than women in society, we'd expect that men's ideas would have a greater influence than women's over the terms in which moral issues are commonly discussed and debated. If men think morally in terms of justice and universal/abstract principles, we'd expect public moral discussion(s) to be dominated by these notions rather than by those notions and approaches that come most naturally to women. And in fact, prior to Gilligan, that seems to be exactly what happened. When the great moral issues of recent times were debated, they tended to be debated in terms of rights and fundamental moral principles, rather than in terms of caring for others or human solidarity; and the twentieth-century examples of the "civil rights" movement and the movement, internationally, toward the correcting and ending of violations of human rights prove that point rather well. What was lacking, in most twentieth-century, public moral debates, was an emphasis on the themes and concepts that come, according to Gilligan, more naturally to women.

However, due in considerable measure to Gilligan's work, that lack is no longer so glaring. As I said above, there is now much more talk in public and political life of ideals of caring and the goals such caring dictates or recommends. A politician nowadays is probably just as likely to speak idealistically of a caring society as of a just society, and that new language, or rhetoric, reflects, I think, not only Gilligan's ideas in *In a Different Voice*, but also recent increases in the power and influence of women. If caring and talk of caring is women's "natural" voice, then as women attain a greater social influence, we shouldn't be surprised to hear more public and political talk in that voice, and some of it, even a good deal of it, coming from men, like Robert Dole and George W. Bush, who *want to appeal to women*. But Gilligan's book also made a great many women more *consciously aware* that they have a voice of their own and to that extent made them more able and likely (and proud) to speak in that voice—and to influence others to think and talk in similar fashion.

Now people have plausibly questioned whether all and only women think in terms of the moral "voice of caring" and whether all and only men address moral issues in terms of abstract or general principles of justice. And it needs to be conceded by those who speak of different voices that that difference is only very imperfectly correlated with sex or gender. Yes, women tend to think more in terms of caring than men do; yes, the use of general principles is more typical of men than of women. But even if there is nothing absolute here about the way women and men differ, the difference is still a significant one, and I think someone might well wonder whether it threatens the very possibility of a morality that can solve human problems.

If women think about morality differently from men, one may then wonder

whether men and women *are governed by different moralities*, and that possibility is threatening because it suggests that there is no common morality that can help men in dealing with women and women in dealing with men—and in fact, and more strongly, that there is no common morality for dealing with the problems that we humans face *together*. Men and women live on a planet with limited resources and opportunities, and those limitations help to determine the moral issues that human beings face: issues about pollution, global warming, human rights violations in distant lands and closer to home, and countless others. If there isn't, and we can't create, an acceptable morality governing all human beings, then it's going to be all the harder to come up with reasonable solutions to the moral issues that face us all. But that's precisely what seems to follow from the assumption that there is one morality for men and another for women.

When I first read Gilligan, this possibility loomed large for me; it seemed to me that her results threatened the possibility of some kind of reasonable morality applying to and usable by all human beings, and I found that implication disquieting, to say the least. But I now think Gilligan's work doesn't have this implication, and I would like to explain why. It is true that most academic and philosophical discourse about morality over the centuries has exemplified what Gilligan thinks of as typical male or masculine thinking. Modern moral philosophy has largely emphasized rights, autonomy, justice, rationality, and universal/abstract principles. The putatively feminine focus on direct connection to and concern about others has been largely absent except among the eighteenth-century philosophers known as moral sentimentalists, philosophers like David Hume and his teacher, Francis Hutcheson, who treated benevolence and sympathy toward others as the basis for all morality. But one lesson that might be learned from reading Gilligan—and it's a lesson that both Gilligan and others who have been influenced by her have sought to teach—is that benevolence, or (as we now in our folksier way say) caring is more central to the moral life than ancient philosophy and most modern thinkers have recognized. So Gilligan's talk of two different ways of thinking about morality, of two "voices," may not show that there are two different moralities, but indicate, rather, that a truly human morality should place a far greater emphasis on caring (or benevolence, compassion, or sympathy) than most previous thinkers have acknowledged or seen.

But if caring is at the core of morality and women have an easier time approaching issues in a caring voice than men do, does that mean that men are at a moral disadvantage in relation to women? Are women, then, really the "angels in the house" that they were deemed to be in the nineteenth century and do we as a result have to swallow the (to me at least) unpalatable conclusion that men are morally inferior to women? Kohlberg's writings led toward the precise opposite conclusion, that it is women who are inferior. But I would think both these opposites are unpalatable, so let me say how I think we can plausibly avoid them.

First, even though women may tend to approach things in terms of caring

more than men do, the explicit idea that caring is central to morality is one that, to a first approximation, originally occurred to men. Long before Gilligan in the twentieth century, Hume and Hutcheson formulated a moral philosophy that made something very close to caring, namely, sympathetic benevolence, central to morality. However, in the ancient world of Greece and Rome, ideals like caring and benevolence were totally unheard of, and most historians think that what helped make these ideals available to eighteenth-century thinkers was the historical example and influence of Christianity. The New Testament teaches that we should all love one another, and that idea is absolutely central to Christian ideals of morality. And benevolence, caring, and the like are, arguably, just secular or less religiously loaded versions of (non-sexual) Christian love.

But then a morality that places caring front and center doesn't necessarily favor women and their thinking. The eighteenth-century sentimentalists, who were the first to think of this idea in philosophical terms, were all men, and the founder of the Christian religion was, after all, not a woman. So a morality or moral philosophy that emphasizes caring needn't be regarded as just a women's morality or a women's point of view. It can make an appeal to all human beings, or at least there is no reason at this point to think that it can't.

But let me now add a further element into the mixture of this discussion. I think the concept of empathy is very relevant to the issues I have been raising, and I would like now to explain why I think so. Everyone talks about empathy nowadays, and it should feel like a commonplace if I say that caring about others relates to our empathy for others, but I need to be a bit more specific.

First of all, we need to be clear or clearer about the difference between empathy and sympathy, and the following may help. To be sympathetic to another person is to wish them well and possibly also be willing to help improve things for them. Being sympathetic is being "on someone else's side." But empathy seems somehow more intimate. When Bill Clinton said he felt other people's pain, he was expressing or laying claim to empathy. With empathy, what another feels conveys itself to one, and one in some sense feels what they feel. There is a sense of identification with the other that in some sense goes beyond having positive or sympathetic feelings *about* them. It's the difference between feeling what, or as, another feels, and feeling *for* the other person ("I feel your pain" vs. "I feel *for* your pain").

I think what I have just said should sound plausible and familiar, and I am therefore going to assume that the idea of empathy is well-enough understood for me to make use of it now. And what I want to emphasize with the notion of empathy is its relevance to, indeed its central role in, caring about other people. Recent psychologists have tended to hold to what they call the empathy-altruism hypothesis, which claims that all genuine caring requires and is sustained by the development of empathy for others. I am inclined to accept this hypothesis as a plausible one, but, then, what if it turns out that women are more empathic than men? If caring is central to morality, won't the empathy-altruism hypothesis once again threaten us with the conclusion that men are morally inferior to women? It will or it would, if it turned out that women were more empathic than men, and certainly it has been held—and perhaps

it seems obvious—that they are. But interestingly enough, psychological studies of this issue have tended to be quite inconclusive. It has been found that men are less willing than women to admit to being empathic or to use language that we think of as tied to empathy, but nothing clearly shows that they actually *are* less empathic.

However, whatever particular studies show, there is a general argument, a general way of thinking of these matters, that seems to indicate that women are in fact more empathic. The argument seeks to show, in terms of the different ways in which men and women attain maturity or adulthood, *why* we can expect men to be less empathic than women. The argument in its most powerful form can be found in a book that greatly influenced Gilligan. In her deftly titled *The Reproduction of Mothering*, psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow argued that the fact that women are the primary care-givers for children, the fact that most “mothering” is and traditionally has been done by women, has implications for the development of empathy in the two sexes—and a lot of other implications as well.

According to Chodorow, the fact that men spend so much less time at home with children entails that boys attain their identity as males only through leaving the situation with their mothers and pushing off to a larger or public or at least different male realm. But little girls can attain a feminine identity, learn what it is to be a woman, within the home situation, because their mothers are right there to be learned from. So it’s no wonder that women tend to think in terms of connection to or with others and men in terms of autonomy and separateness from others. The connection with their mother that girls begin life with is something they need never relinquish in their quest for adult female status or identity; whereas little boys have to push off from such connection, learn to be autonomous from their mothers, in order to identify with or learn to be like other men. Given that mothers are primary care-givers, males have to value and emphasize autonomy in order to become adult males—but females don’t have to do this, and it is no wonder, then, that women tend to put less emphasis on their separateness from others. For adult men, autonomy is a basic value and connection is either voluntarily chosen or not chosen; for women connection to the needs of others is not a matter of free choice, it is assumed, a given in their lives.

But the very same autonomy that makes male identity possible in present and historical circumstances may also make it difficult for men to identify with other people, to empathize with them. We are probably all familiar with the idea of the emotionally distant father and the giving, caring mother, but that stereotype contains a grain and perhaps more than a grain of truth. That father had to push off from his own mother in order to achieve his male identity, and that emotional distancing presumably makes it harder in general for men to feel emotional connection with others. But women didn’t need to perform such a stalwart and decisive act of emotional distancing, and that, according to Chodorow, is why it is easier for women to empathize than it is for men. What kind of answer, if any, can be given to this rather forceful line of argument?

Well, I think one thing we can do is bear in mind another interesting fact about empathy, namely, that empathy is not a merging of two individuals into one. We can perhaps most easily see this if we consider what psychologists call “substitute success syndrome” (“sss,” for short). We have all heard of the “stage mother” who pushes her child toward a theatrical career as a way of compensating for her own unfulfilled theatrical ambitions. Similar things can and do happen with fathers and their children, but it is more frequent with mothers, and that fact needs to be explained. But perhaps the first thing we need to recognize is that the substitute success syndrome parent who takes over the life of their child shows a lack of empathy for that child. Such parents don’t allow themselves to be affected by what their children say they want, but rather tend to ride roughshod over their children’s independent desires, fears, and aspirations—and that shows a lack of empathy, even if it involves a kind of closeness.

Now there is a fairly obvious explanation of why sss tends to occur more with mothers than with fathers. Because fathers tend on the whole to be emotionally more distant than mothers in relation to their children, they less frequently end up as sss parents. Mothers tend to be more involved, and what I’m saying here is that in many cases this can be an sss type overinvolvement. But the danger of overinvolvement comes from the fact that, unlike men, women can stay attached or connected with their mothers. That less interrupted and so deeper or more permanent sense of connection can make it difficult for some women to recognize the separateness of their own children, and empathy requires that, at the same time one feels with the other, one recognize the other as having a separate and individual sense of their own good. In a word, the danger of women’s uninterrupted connection with their mothers lies in the fact that in its stronger or more exaggerated forms, it can prevent an individual from distinguishing her own identity from that of others and make empathizing with others in their own terms difficult or impossible.

Thus, because of their withdrawal from their mothers, men may have a hard time feeling close to or becoming emotionally involved with others, and that certainly works against empathy. But women’s tendency toward overinvolvement or overconnection works against their empathy, so to speak, from the opposite direction, making it more difficult for them to see the other as a genuine other with their own desires, aspirations, and needs. In that case, both men and women have problems with empathy; and it is unclear whose problems are greater. So a morality that places caring front and center and that treats empathy as the engine of caring needn’t regard women as morally superior to men—and doesn’t regard men as superior either.

Clearly, we owe Gilligan a great deal for pointing up some very interesting differences between men and women in the area of morality. Gilligan’s ideas are confirmed and taken further if and when we recognize the importance of empathy to the moral life. But the differences she uncovered don’t threaten us with the conclusion that men and women are subject to or governed by two different moralities and allow, in fact, for there to be a single morality apply-

ing to both men and women. If morality requires caring and empathy, then men and women may tend to face somewhat different moral challenges. The male tendency to emphasize autonomy may frequently leave men open to the criticism that they are emotionally too distant from (certain) other people. But the female emphasis on and tendency toward connection with others may often lead to forms of exaggerated closeness that are morally criticizable. So I tentatively suggest that there may well be a single human morality, but that men and women simply tend to have different (and opposite) moral faults or weaknesses in relation to that morality. Such a conclusion can only reinforce the emphasis Gilligan placed on difference—as opposed to superiority or inferiority—between men and women.

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