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Ethics from a Feminist Perspective

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Jean Emily P. Tan, Ph.D.

Ethics from a Feminist Perspective

What does it mean to take a feminist perspective on ethics?

In other words, what does it mean to **do ethics** from a feminist perspective?

LEVELS OF ETHICAL INQUIRY

Applied Ethics: Focuses on the application of moral theories to fields of practice

Normative Ethics: Focuses on the principles that make an action right and how to determine action based on those principles

Metaethics: Concerned with meta questions about the nature of morality

Where would you place feminist ethics?

Feminist ethics is a mode of questioning that can be pursued in any of the three modes of ethical inquiry.

Bioethics

Is it moral to implant an embryo in the womb of a woman who is not the genetic parent, for her womb to facilitate the gestation, and for her to give birth to a child whom she will have to give up?

Not immediately obvious:

What normative moral approach should be applied?

How should it be applied?

There is no guarantee that in analyzing the ethical issue, the perspective of the woman as a woman would be considered.

e.g.

An ethical analysis: "what reproductive practices are consistent with natural law?"

without inquiring into gender norms that undergird the situation in which surrogacy arises.

APPLIED ETHICS

e.g.

One could ask questions like

“Is surrogacy against nature?”

“Is it compatible with the order of natural inclinations?”

without asking “Whose inclinations are we speaking about?”

Do we listen to the voices of the women, the surrogate and the one using the surrogate, their needs and interests, their rights regarding their bodies, in our moral calculations?

APPLIED ETHICS

Maternal surrogacy is not just about the mechanization of human reproduction.

Possibilities to consider:

- Does it treat the maternal body as nothing but a medium of reproduction that ensures the offspring's genetic provenance?
- Could surrogacy be an exercise of agency for poor women?

Ethics of teaching

Articulates norms in the field of education

What would a feminist approach to the ethics of teaching look like?

A feminist approach to the ethics of teaching would ask:

Do classroom practices capitalize on gendered expectations of teachers and students?

Are female students exploited on the notion that they are more diligent?

A feminist approach to the ethics of teaching would ask:

Are expectations regarding male and female professors the same?

Do gender stereotypes about teachers and students enable sexual harassment in the educational setting?

NORMATIVE ETHICS AND METAETHICS

Very often, questions in ethics are generated, precisely at the conjunction or overlap between the different levels of ethical discourse.

A great deal of feminist theorizing occurs at the metaethical level as an outcome of feminist critiques of the normative ethical theories that dominate ethical theory.

NORMATIVE ETHICS AND METAETHICS

By reading Aristotle with a feminist lens, one is led to ask whether Aristotle's notion of virtue is gendered, whether some virtues are seen to be characteristic of and appropriate to men or women, and whether certain virtues are expected of men but not of women and vice versa.

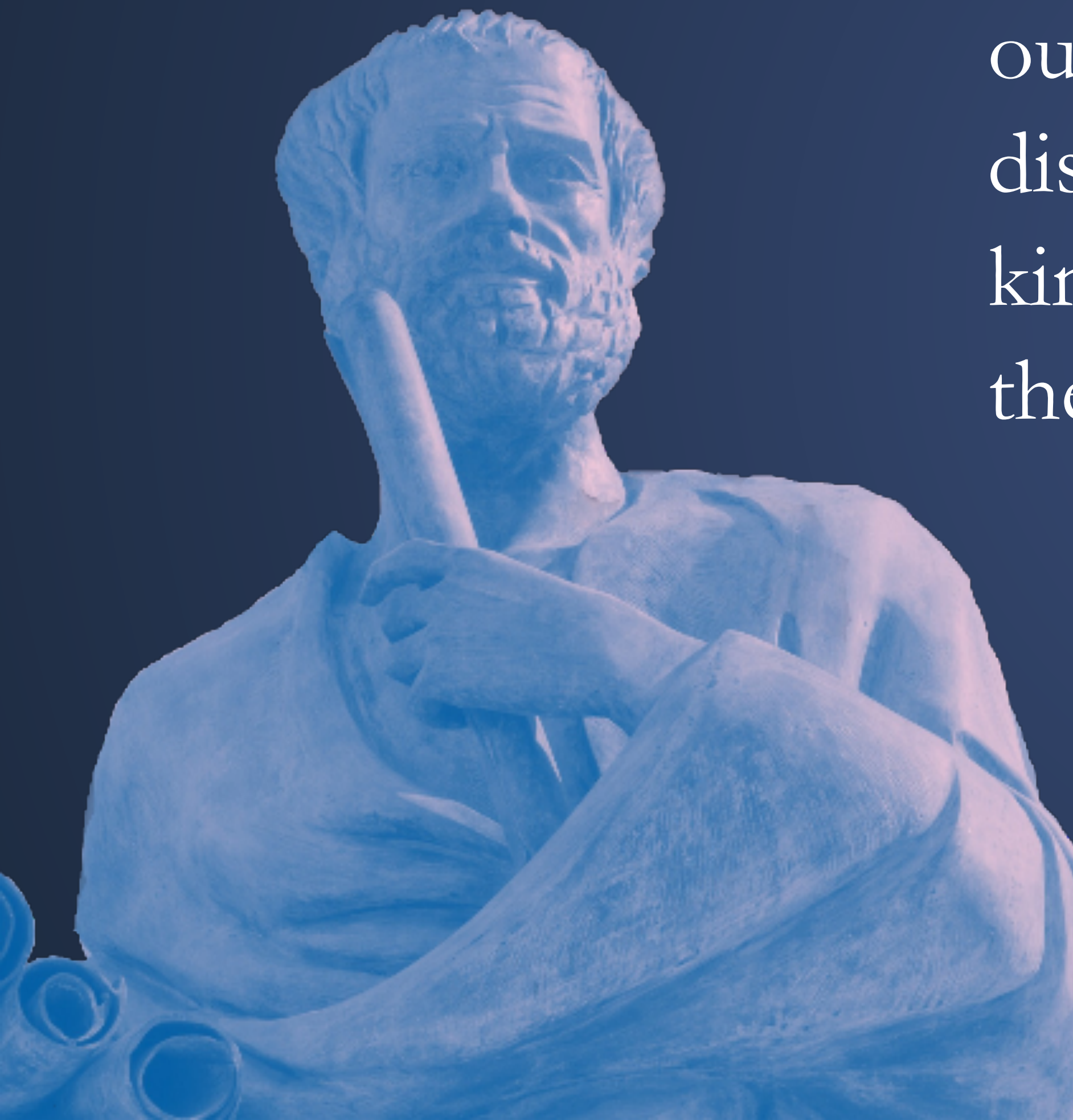
If you look at Aristotle's writings, you would find that he holds double standards of virtue for men and women.

NORMATIVE ETHICS AND METAETHICS

“ It is surprising if a man is defeated by and cannot resist pleasures or pains which most men can hold out against, when this is not due to heredity or disease, like the softness that is hereditary with the kings of the Scythians, or that which distinguishes the female sex from the male.”

-Aristotle

Nicomachean Ethics, 1150 b12-16



NORMATIVE ETHICS AND METAETHICS

““ The temperance of a man and a woman, or the courage and justice of a man and of a woman are not, as Socrates maintained, the same; the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying.”

-Aristotle

Politics, 1260a 20-23



Rather than simply dismissing such comments as antiquated notions that are peripheral to the theory of virtue ethics, a metaethical feminist critique might ask whether similar gendered stereotypes still govern our expectations of virtuous actions, and whether such stereotypes curtail the full development of women's moral and political capacity.

Are our expectations of virtuous action governed by gender stereotypes that undermine the agency of women?

What are the consequences of these expectations?

Another major line of metaethical feminist inquiry asks whether the widely accepted understanding of moral deliberation, in taking a rationalist orientation, is a gendered one.

Consider Kant's deontological ethics.

While it is true that Kant does not discount the importance of feelings in ethics, he is also very clear in his position that we should not rely on one's emotions for sound moral judgement.

If there is a feeling that he would trust, it would not be compassion or sympathy, but respect: respect for law, and respect for the self-rule (autonomy) that the rational being is capable of.

In other words, **respect for reason itself**—reason abstractly “embodied” by law and reason concretely embodied in the human being who has an absolute worth precisely insofar as he is capable of morality.

Two questions
regarding Kant and
Kantian ethics

Is Kant's notion of moral reasoning
gendered?

Isn't the very privileging of reason
over emotions problematic?

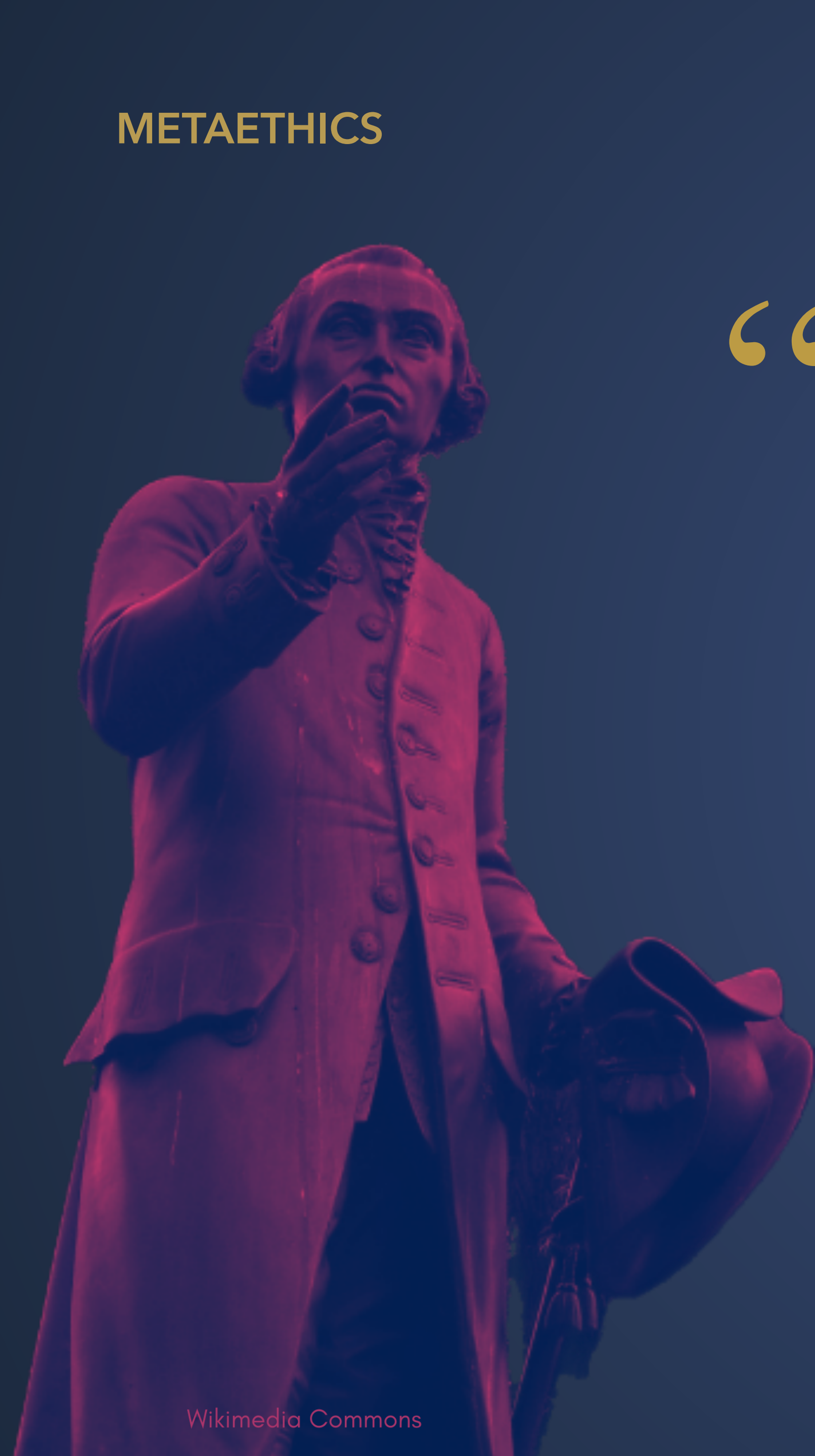
1) Is Kant's notion of moral reasoning gendered?

Unfortunately, the answer to this question is yes.

In his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, Kant talks about woman's "beautiful" in contrast to that of man's "noble" understanding. Women's moral *intuitions* are seen to be based on feelings, not on reason.

Her morality is based on feelings and intuitions, particularly on feelings of sympathy for the particular human beings closest to her daily experience, but she is unable to give a rational justification – with a universal scope – for her moral judgments. That capacity would require universalizing reasoning.

The difference between the two kinds of morality would be the difference between, on one hand, acting on the basis of feeling and particular interests and motivations and, on the other hand, acting on the basis of principle.



“ The Women will avoid the wicked not because it is unright, but because it is ugly; and virtuous actions mean to them such as are morally beautiful. Nothing of duty, nothing of compulsion, nothing of obligation!”

Immanuel Kant

Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime

METAETHICS

For Kant, properly speaking, the former kind of moral “reasoning” has no moral worth.

This is because it is essentially heteronomous (rather than autonomous) in nature. It is the kind of moral calculation that is easily swayed by one’s desires and fears...

2) Isn't the very privileging of reason over emotion problematic?

If, rather than looking at Kantian ethics abstractly, we situate it within broadly accepted and operative gender stereotypes, which associate women with emotions and men with reason,


then we will have to ask whether an ethical theory that privileges reason and excludes or devalues emotions undermines the agency and autonomy of women.

Is it possible that, even as we champion the autonomy of rational beings, by accepting these twin presuppositions


1. that the essence of morality is reason and
2. that women are less rational than men and thus less qualified for rational discourse

we end up denying women their full autonomy?

Who counts as an agent, who is recognized as an actor in the social and political sphere, who can claim rights and demand accountability, whose words are listened to – in other words, **who counts as an autonomous moral subject** – cannot be answered abstractly without looking at **concrete conditions.**

 **i love the government** ❤️
@kakiep83

- rape culture is real and a product of this precise line of thinking, where the behavior is normalized, particularly by men.
- the way anyone dresses should not be deemed as 'opportunity' to sexually assault them. ever.
- calling me hija will not belittle my point.

 **Ben Tulfo** @bitagbentulfo · 6/13/20
Hija @kakiep83 , a rapist or a juvenile sex offender's desire to commit a crime will always be there. All they need is an opportunity, when to commit the crime. Sexy ladies, careful with the way you dress up! Yo...

9:18 AM · 6/14/20 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

 **Ben Tulfo**
@bitagbentulfo



Hija @kakiep83 , a rapist or a juvenile sex offender's desire to commit a crime will always be there. All they need is an opportunity, when to commit the crime. Sexy ladies, careful with the way you dress up!
You are inviting the beast.

8:09 PM · 6/13/20 · [Twitter Web App](#)



“
PASALAMAT KA IHA, KUNG ANG EDAD KO 12 YRS. MAGTAGO KA NA SA TATAY MONG SENADOR KIKO MATSING PANGILINAN DAHIL HAHANAPIN KITA PARA GAHASAIN. TAPOS SISIHIN MO TATAY MO. DAHIL HINDI AKO MAKUKULONG.
😂😂😂😂

***Sonny Alcos**
Wishes he's young to rape teens, Loves Duterte, Solid DDS
Sharing his thoughts on social media.
*Kunwari itatago natin ang tunay na pangalan.

 @weareddsconfessions2.0
 @ddsconfessions

Totoong tao.
Totoong DDS.
Totoong kuwento.
Akala mo lang satire.
Ito ang DDS Confessions.

MORAL AGENCY AS GENDERED

By casting her critique of victim blaming in this way, this social media post is sending the following messages:

Women speaking on behalf of rape victims are themselves inviting rape.

Critique of victim-blaming is futile, because having thus invited sexual violence, they are to blame for their potential victimization.

MORAL AGENCY AS GENDERED

By casting her critique of victim blaming in this way, this social media post is sending the following messages:

In other words, it's not just how women dress, but also how women speak, that is to blame for their being sexually assaulted.

Rape is the business of men; men decide what is to be done (or not done about it); women should stay out of the discussion.

A feminist critique of Kantian ethics, therefore, is not just about “calling out” Kant for his sexist views, but about drawing out the concrete ethical implications of such views upon the lives of those who suffer gender-based injustice.

Critique of traditional moral theory as being
too rationalistic



Nel Noddings

Carol Gilligan

Articulating an alternative normative
ethical theory

1) Ethical deliberation can be enriched by a recognition of the necessary role played by affective responses that theories with masculinist biases tend to exclude or at least underutilize.

2) The experiences of women – as mothers, as care givers, as human beings whose lives are so intimately immersed in the daily and mundane encounters with vulnerability – are a fertile ground for the cultivation of ethical perspectives and sensibilities no less rational and fundamental than those articulated by the male voices in the ethical canon.

A Caveat: Feminine vs. Feminist Ethics

It is one thing to say that the experience of caring for the needy and the vulnerable gives us access to an enhanced understanding of our moral obligations and capacity to respond to the moral claims of others,

A Caveat: Feminine vs. Feminist Ethics

and another to say that this way of experiencing and responding to moral problems is typically feminine or the forte of women.

A CAVEAT: FEMININE VS. FEMINIST ETHICS

The tendency to think of the ethics of care as ethics for women or as feminine ethics runs the risk of merely reinforcing gender stereotypes that relegate women to the sphere of the non-rational, the sphere of immediate feeling (of intuition, emotion, sympathy) and men to the sphere of more deliberate and calculative rationality.

A CAVEAT: FEMININE VS. FEMINIST ETHICS

Think about the fact that even in the public sphere, women are assigned the caregiver roles.

Both in the private, domestic and in the public, national scale, care work which is overwhelmingly assigned to women is socially undervalued.

Feminist ethics should be less about teaching masculine ethics to welcome its feminine side, but more about sharpening one's appreciation of ethical issues in the sphere of gender relations, or — put more simply — sharpening one's awareness of injustice owing to sexism.

THE PRIMARY TASK OF FEMINIST ETHICS

1. Making us more sensitive to ethical problems pertaining to gender. Feminist ethics should enable us to spot issues of gender injustice. It should make us – whatever our gender – more capable of identifying injustice owing to sexism
2. Making us more sensitive to the fact that our own understanding of what counts as an ethical issue may be colored by our assumptions about gender
3. Making us aware that our understanding of moral agency is shaped by biases and stereotypes about gender

For example, in order to recognize and reject blaming victims of sexual assault, one has to come from a perspective that acknowledges the unequal power relation between men and women, and from this perspective, see that the very notion of “consent” is a gendered notion.

Why is it that what a woman is wearing is seen as an expression of her consent for what can be done to her?

Does this way of representing rape perhaps suggest that when it comes to sex, this tacit assent of a woman suffices, because after all we do not expect women to speak, to verbalize their will?

Why is it that what a woman is wearing is seen as an expression of her consent for what can be done to her?

Is it because for the most part, our society cares less about the free and informed consent of women than it does about the desires and decision of men?

This is an example of thinking through the questions:

Are our ethical categories gendered categories?

And if they are, what are the consequences of this gendering of our moral categories ?

CONCLUSION

Feminist ethics is a mode of questioning rather than a body of tenets or positions.

Feminist ethics is a living discourse, a vital field of inquiry and debate, with many questions and no final answers, because human beings have not yet figured out how to live the reality of gendered lives in a way that does justice to all of us.

CONCLUSION

Hallmarks of feminist ethical inquiry

- A recognition and criticism of gender inequality and gender-based injustice
- Critique of ethical frameworks, concepts, and related cultural presuppositions insofar as these undermine the agency of women
- A deliberate effort to listen to the voices of women, to learn about their experiences and perspectives on morality and moral issues

CONCLUSION

At its core, feminist ethics is about bringing women to the table of moral deliberation and the field of social and political action.

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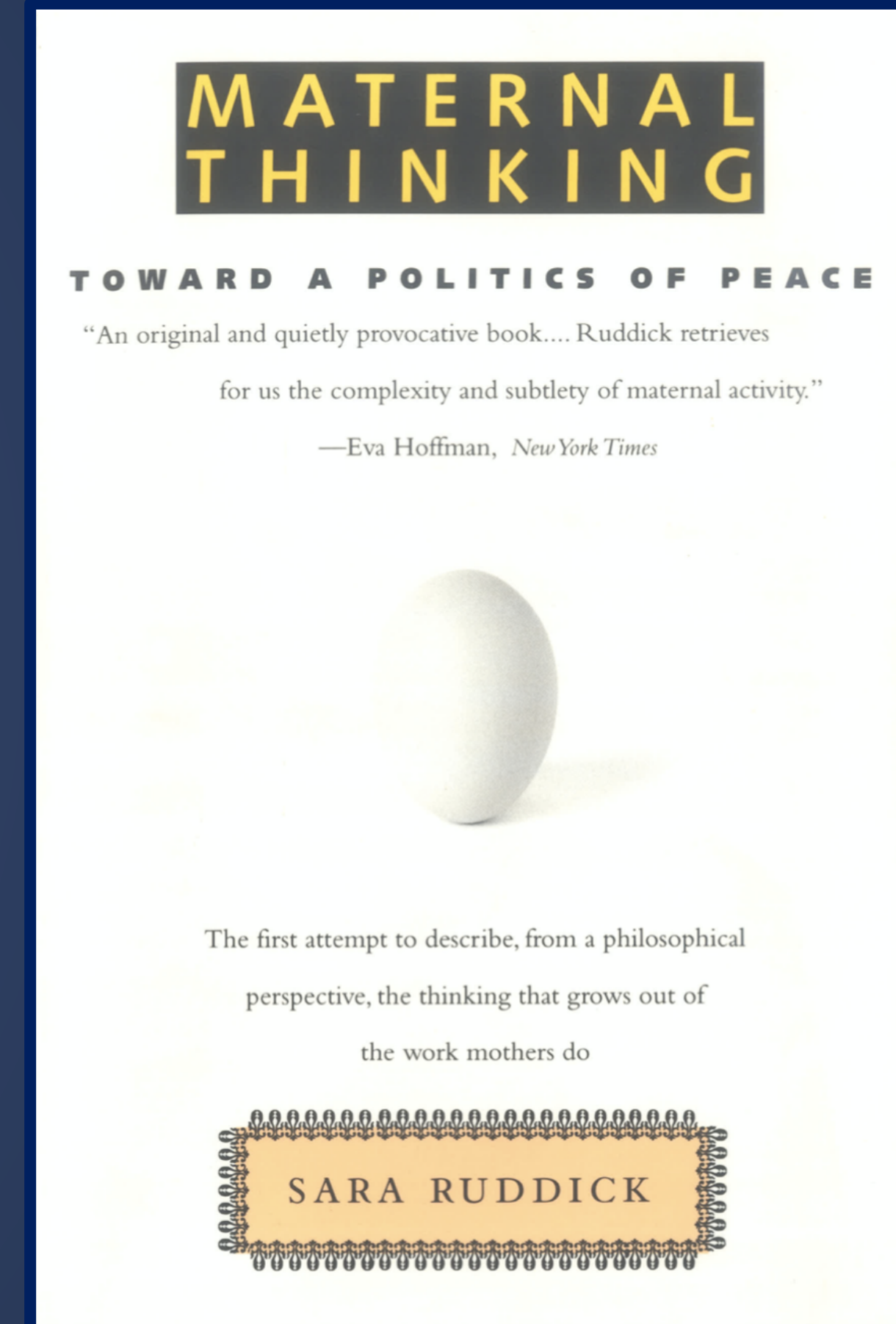
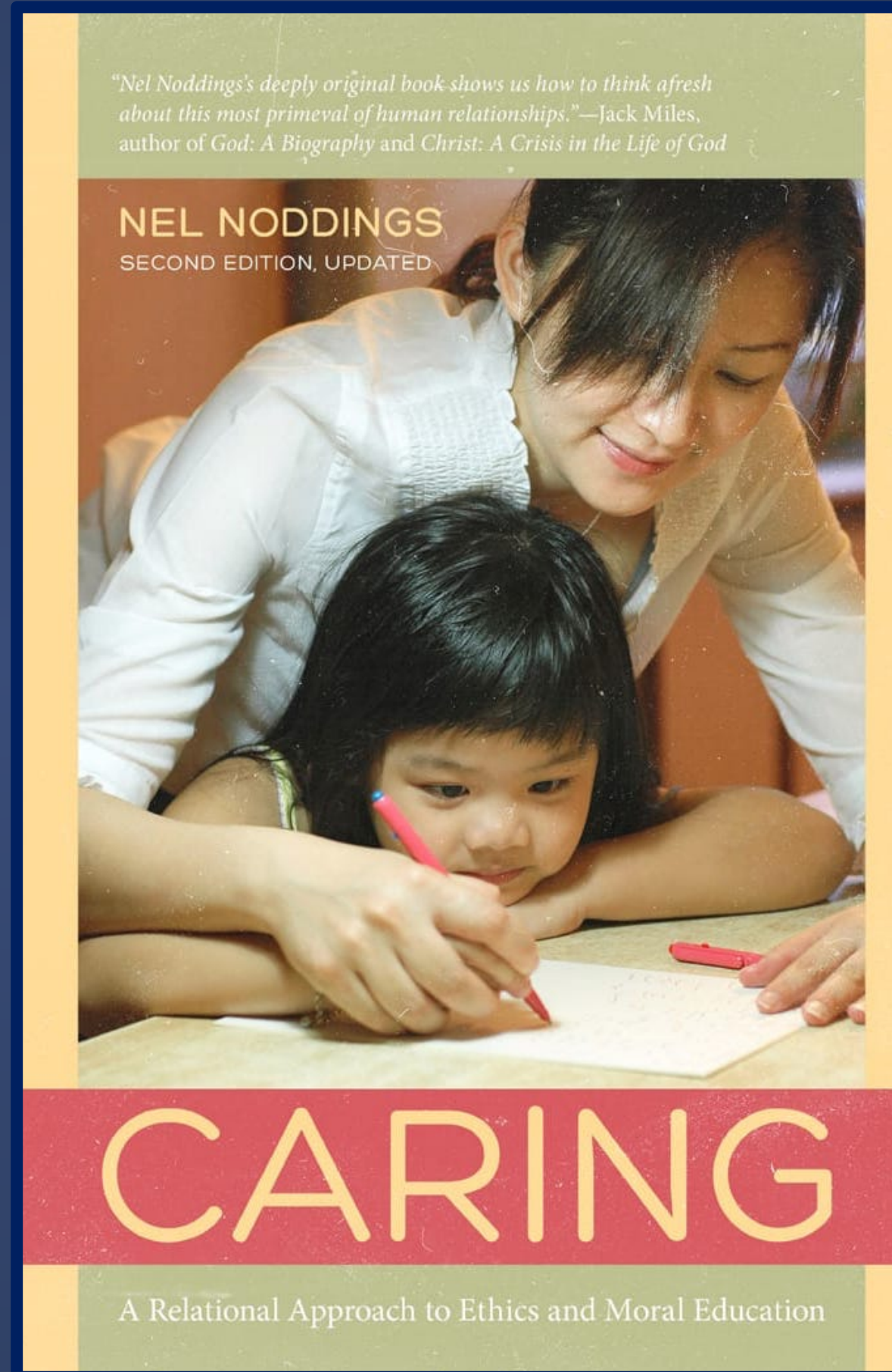
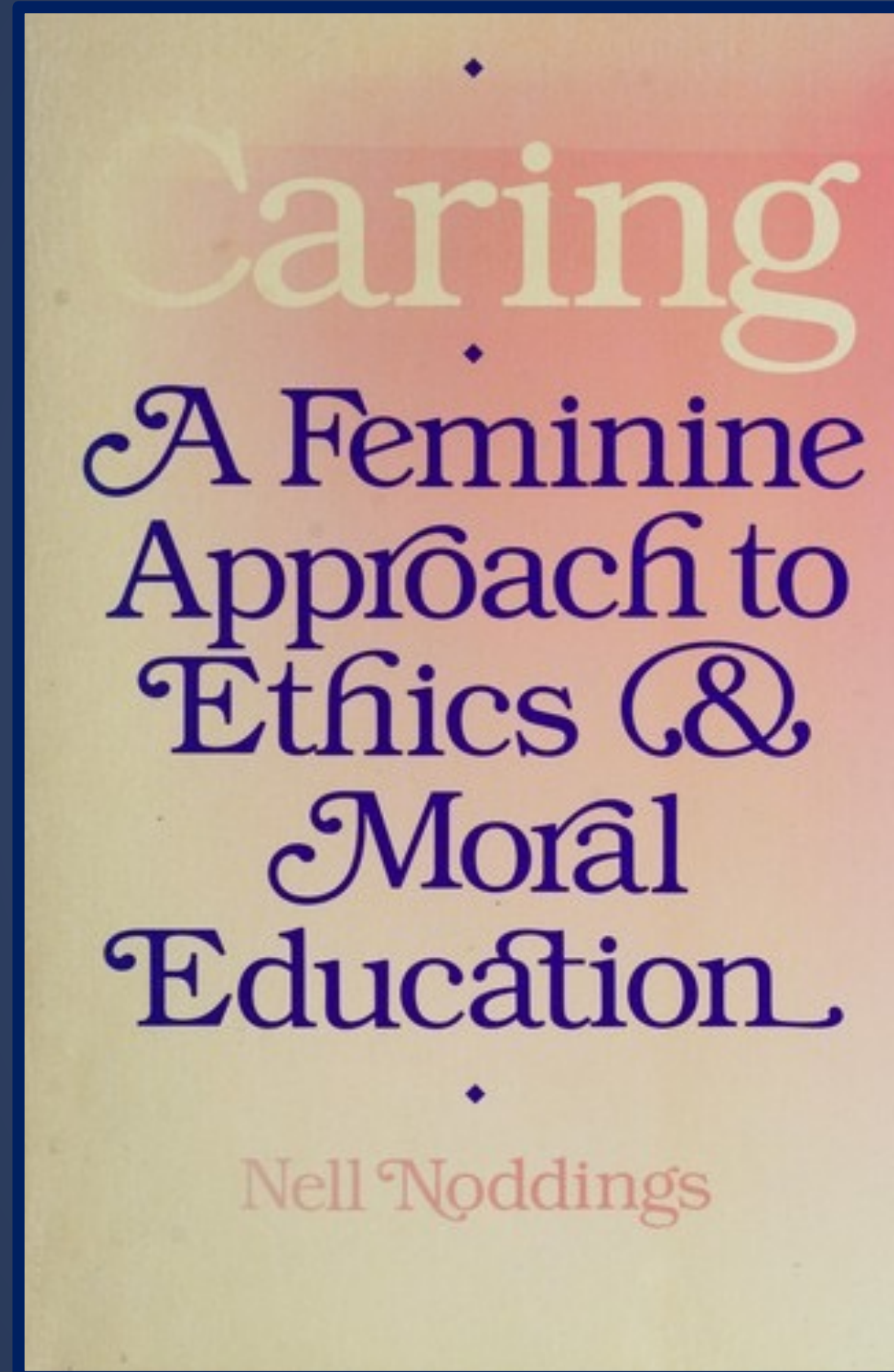
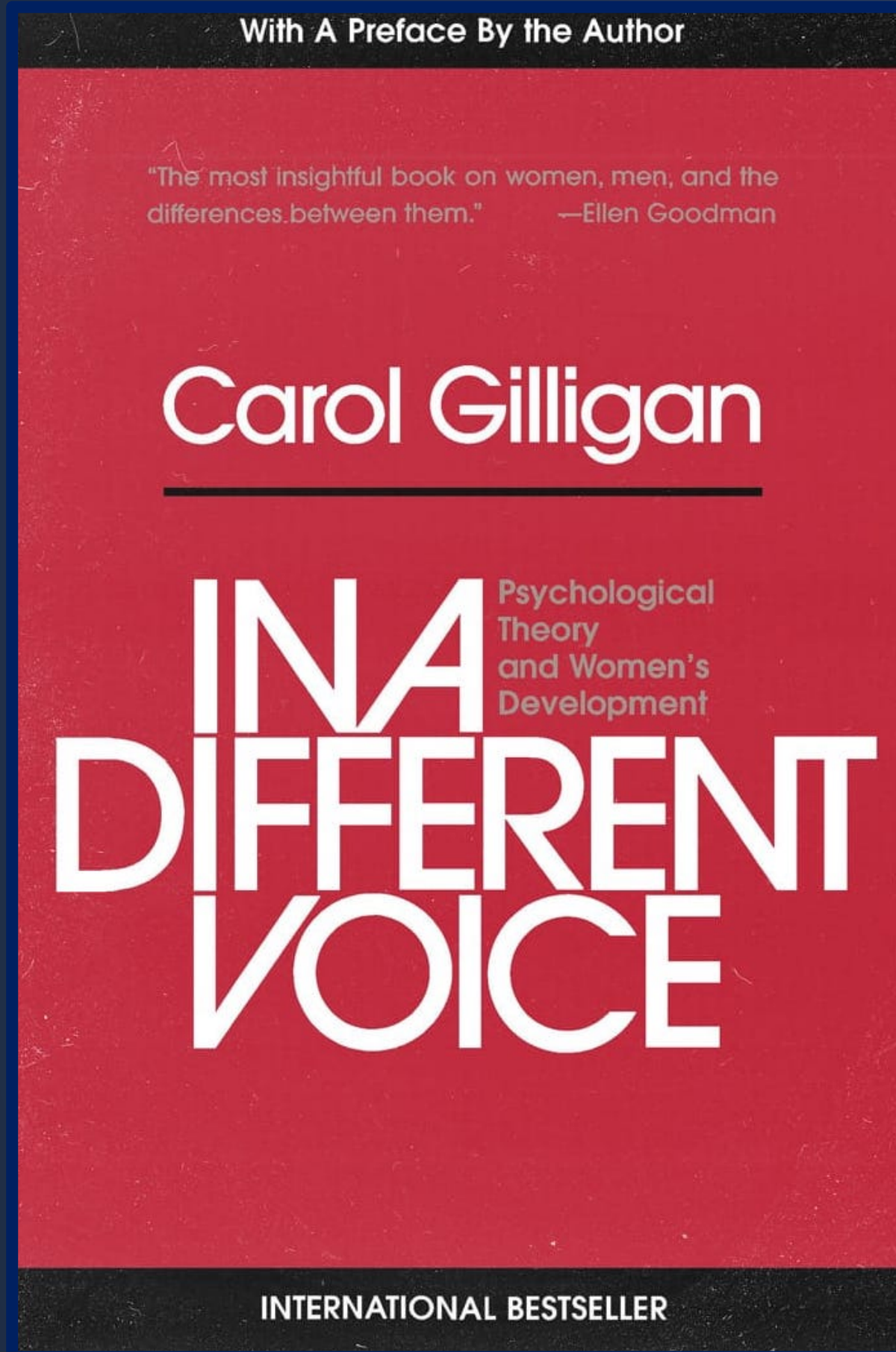
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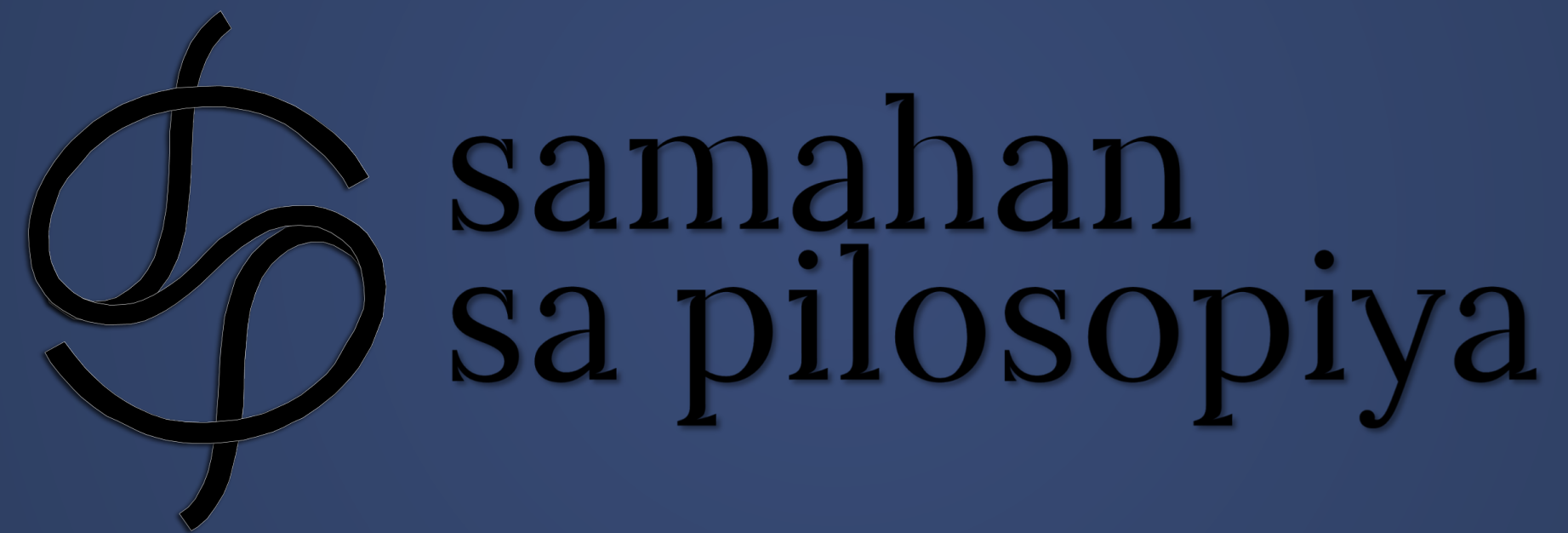


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