



Reconciling Impartial Morality and a Feminist Ethic of Care

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The association of women with caring dispositions and thinking has become a persistent theme in recent feminist writing. There are a number of reasons for this. One reason is the impetus that has been provided by the empirical work of Carol Gilligan on women's moral development. The fact that this association is not merely an ideologically or philosophically postulated one, but is argued for on empirical grounds, tends to add to its credibility. Another reason for the resilience of the association is the existence of an increasingly prominent theme in feminist thought and action that focuses on the importance of women's difference from men, both as a fact and as a goal. Within this theme, there are various views on what the relevant differences are between women and men, and why the differences ought to be emphasized and properly respected. Women's caring, as will be seen, turns out to have a firm presence in all of these views, and as a result, many women argue that caring should form the basis of a distinctive feminist ethic. On these views, women's approaches to understanding moral situations, defining self-conceptions, choosing goals and roles, and guiding behaviour, should all be informed by and based upon dispositions of caring. However, if this idea of a feminist ethic of care is to be plausible, it will need to be reconciled with another strong theme in feminism, according to which in fundamental moral respects women ought not be considered or treated differently from men.

We will examine the standing of a feminist ethic of care in the context of this tension between the difference theme and the sameness theme in feminism. The discussion begins by re-characterizing the justice and care debate in terms of impartialist and partialist ethical perspectives, and it then goes on to indicate the various ways in which women's presumed disposition to caring and partialism finds prominence within the difference theme. The central focus of the discussion, however, will be the question of how to reconcile the conflict that exists between impartialist, justice-based moral thinking, and a partialist, caring approach to morality. The impetus for addressing this question arose from the results of an empirical study we conducted concerning gender-oriented differences in partialist and impartialist ethical reasoning. That study is summarized here, and a two-levels philosophical view of moral thinking is proposed to explain its results. This philosophical view not only

explains the empirical observations, it also accounts for some of our key intuitions about the relationship between partialist and impartialist reasoning. As well as this, it constitutes a plausible and appealing means of unifying the two ethical perspectives, and provides a theoretical context in which a feminist ethic of care can be further developed.

Before launching into all this, though, it is worth briefly clarifying just why it is that a feminist ethic of care needs to somehow fit in with, or be reconciled with, the sameness theme, even though it makes good sense from the point of view of the difference theme. The reason is that these two strands within feminism compete with each other in certain basic respects. They each set out to present their own picture of how women's fundamental interests are best conceived and respected. But if they are to do this plausibly and comprehensively, they will be committed to addressing, and in some way accounting for, as many as possible of the considered claims, perceptions, problems, and observations that there are concerning women's interests. In fact, the most attractive feminist positions will be those that can comprehend the greatest number of these sorts of perceptions and considerations in the most satisfying way. Given this, there is a clear sense in which particular feminist views within the sameness theme will face pressure to address concerns and proposals about women's interests that emanate from the difference strand, and vice versa. If a feminist view or theory from one strand cannot at all account for, incorporate, explain away as mistaken, or in some other way become reconciled with the plausible and compelling proposals emanating from the other theme, then that feminist view will not present a fully satisfying picture of women's fundamental interests. So the two themes clearly interact, making demands on each other, and there is no more lively an example of this than in the current debate surrounding the ethic of care and the challenge it presents to the perspective of justice. There is much in that debate that is still unclear, however, and in the next section we will seek to clarify some of it, beginning with idea of a caring ethic and the work of Carol Gilligan.

1.

Gilligan's, by now, well-known and much discussed work contrasts the moral perspective of care with the perspective of rights and justice that is supposedly characteristic of standard ethics. In fact, the caring ethic is perhaps best described in terms of how it differs from the ethic of justice. While the reasoning associated with standard, justice-based, ethical views supposedly abstracts from the details of the moral situation to arrive at the salient and universally relevant features, an ethic of care is highly contextual in its approach and takes full account of all of the features of the situation. Also, unlike the stan-

dard justice ethic, which is adversarial and geared to the resolution of conflict and the individualistic respect for rights, caring is reparative and concerned more with maintaining connectedness rather than separation between people. It is also highly partialist in its preoccupation with ties of affection instead of impartial duties and impersonal obligations, things that are characteristic of justice. Similarly, justice-based reasoning is universalizable and objective, while caring is more local and subjectively influenced.

Although these are the contrasts that are usually employed to distinguish the two perspectives, it would be fair to say that not all of them turn out to be genuine. This becomes apparent when it is recognized that not all standard moral thinking is of the Kantian sort Gilligan supposed it to be. Once standard moral thinking is taken to include the likes of utilitarianism, the real differences between the perspective of care and the class of standard ethical views decrease. For example, the ethic of care opposes itself to objective, rights-based, individualistic moral thinking which has the resolution of conflict as its primary focus. Utilitarianism, however, need not display any of these characteristics.¹ One significant difference that does remain, however, is the distinction between partial and impartial moral reasoning. Partial moral reasoning is central to the care orientation, involves judgments that emphasize personal relationships and attachments. These sorts of judgments and dispositions differ from impartialist judgments in that they favour people with whom we are personally connected over people with whom we are not. Impartialist reasoning, by contrast, is central to standard moral thinking, and involves judgments and dispositions that are detached and do not favour personal attachments. They reflect concern for what equal consideration of people's interests requires, as well as wider impersonal responsibilities.

2.

If this characterizes the caring-partialist approach to moral reasoning, what basis is there in the difference theme for thinking that that approach is particularly suitable as a feminist ethic? Needless to say, the difference theme in feminism contains a number of distinct groups of views. As it turns out, a feminist ethic of care-partialism can be seen to gain support from each of these groups, and it is worth taking a brief overview of them in order to see how. Among them are descriptive views about what women's differences consist in, what their sources and natures are, and also prescriptive views about why women's differences ought to be emphasized, respected, or promoted. One group of descriptive views sees psycho-social factors as the source of women's differences. They point to gender-differentiated social and developmental processes like the sexual division of labor and different

processes of ego maturation. The fact that women predominate in nurturing roles and service occupations leads women to acquire altruistic, relational, and maternal moral dispositions, it is argued, while men, who occupy roles in the competitive public sphere, are more oppositional, autonomous, and self-interested.² Some particularly forceful views in this psychosocial group connect certain cognitive differences in the orientation of moral reasoning between the genders to different modes of identification that males and females experience toward their mother as the primary care-giver.³ Women are held to be more oriented to caring and partiality, males to justness and impartiality.

Various major prescriptive feminist views advocating the recognition of women's differences also lend support to a feminist ethic of care. One such view sees it as important for women to assert their distinctiveness in response to the patriarchal norms, categories, and practices that dominate the social construction of women's gender identity. The patriarchal construction of women's gender acts to obscure women's real characteristics and distinctiveness in a way that leads them to become alienated from themselves. To combat this, it is argued, women must reclaim and reconstruct their own distinctive gender identity in line with their authentic self-perceptions and preferred gender ideals. It is necessary also that women be empowered to set about valourizing these newly constructed womanly characteristics and ideals, establishing them in the social consciousness as valuable personal qualities in their own right. Of course, there are already many personal characteristics that are widely valued in society, with which women can align themselves. However, it is argued that an authentic reconstruction of the female gender must be solidly grounded in women's own experiences and considered self-perceptions, undominated by male interests. If Gilligan and others are right, and a disposition to caring-partiality is a feature of women's moral cognitive structure, it looks to be a deep fact about women's nature, and so an ethic of care can act as an authentic approach to women's construction of their identity.

Another broad rationale for recognizing women's differences also commends a caring approach for women. This rationale emerges in response to an assimilative, or androgynous tendency within the push for equality in the feminist movement. That push was, of course, propelled by the awareness that women did not enjoy the same social, economic, and political access as men. A prominent feminist agenda, then, was to secure women's equality and freedom of choice so that they could use that freedom to compete on the same footing with men to achieve the same social success. Women were to abandon the caring skills and characteristics that went with their traditional nurturing and familial roles – things that would be a positive impediment to

social success – and adopt the characteristics that had made men so successful in the market place. Women were to become more like men.

Many feminists, however, have come to view this assimilated, androgynous picture of womanhood as restrictive. Betty Friedan, for instance, asks why women, if they come to have equal powers and freedoms to determine their own lives, should choose to don the image of men, and completely abandon experiences of family, nurturing, and motherhood which are not *inherently* oppressive. If feminism is all about women being properly and completely free and equal, then surely this means that it is all about women being able to occupy the roles of their choice without being confined, oppressed, or marginalized. Women should be free, as Friedan says, to experience “a familiar place from a different vantage-point.”⁴ Similar views are echoed by feminists like Jean Elshtain, who argue that feminism, in rejecting motherhood and family life in favour of a public identity for women, has unnecessarily suppressed the traditional social world of women.⁵ Feminists ought to be able to unashamedly adopt a caring *motif* for their lives.

Finally, another prominent rationale for women’s differences is that there is universal value in women’s capacity for caring-partialism and maternal thinking, and that such dispositions ought to be strongly encouraged because of their wider benefits to society. For instance, Sara Ruddick, who attributes women’s maternal thinking to their social experience, sees this sort of thinking as providing a new and constructive perspective on problems of violence, and war and peace.⁶ Nell Noddings has also stressed the value of generalized caring for others, while Joan Tronto envisages caring as the basis for a form of politics that is radical in its attentiveness to people’s particular, concrete situations.⁷ Indeed, it was a central element of the early suffragist movement to emphasize the benefits of the supposed moral purity of women when it came to social evils such as crime, drunkenness, and debauchery. And much more recently, ecofeminists have seen the potential of women’s holistic, relationship-oriented thinking as an approach to ecological and environmental concerns.

3.

The idea of a caring ethic for women, then, is well-motivated from the point of view of the difference theme in feminist thought. However, there are a number of respects in which this idea faces strong critical pressure from the sameness theme. Just how credible that idea ends up being will depend on how it can be used to negotiate these other critical concerns. The different feminist views within the sameness theme are all likely to share a very general commitment to justice, universalism, equal respect and treatment, and allo-

cation of benefits and burdens according to merit. All of these commitments are recognizable from the impartialist moral perspective outlined before, and it would not be inaccurate, therefore, to characterize the sameness theme in feminism as broadly impartialist. The issue we now confront is that of how the idea of a partialist ethic for women shapes up in the context of certain impartialist concerns. There are two important points at which impartialist concerns can be voiced against a partialist ethic for women. Firstly, from the impartialist perspective, there is a question as to whether, and in what sense, caring-partialist reasoning counts as legitimate moral thinking, at all. Secondly, if it does have legitimate moral status, there are impartialist questions about the possible consequences for women of adopting that perspective as an ethical approach.

If partialism cannot be coherently accorded a moral status, it cannot be the basis of a women's ethic, so the first set of impartialist concerns will need to be addressed first. Naturally enough, partialist reasoning will be problematic from an impartialist perspective. While this perspective enjoins treating all alike, the partialist point of view allows, perhaps even sometimes requires, that we favor people with whom we are in relationship. There is clearly much to be said for both points of view. It does seem appropriate, or at least, permissible, to give greater weight to the interests of loved ones in certain situations. But, also, it seems central to our moral thinking that we should be impartial among people's interests. How should this tension be dealt with? The problem is that the partialist and impartialist perspectives each purport to be legitimate moral approaches, but nonetheless, present ostensibly conflicting reasons and commend conflicting actions and practices. Whatever form of reconciliation or relationship is ultimately conjectured between the perspectives, it must deal with this deep and pervasive conflict. Many proposals about the relationship between these perspectives, however, do not give this issue the attention it warrants. Many philosophers, for instance, suggest that our overall picture of morality ought to include both partialist and impartialist dimensions if it is to comprehend the full spectrum of our moral experience, or that practices of justice rely for their very possibility on pre-existing partialist, nurturing practices and relationships of trust.⁸ As Joy Kroeger Mappes argues, "solely following the (impartialist) ethic of rights would result in a place where none of us could thrive, endure, or perhaps even survive. For literally everyone to follow an ethic of rights would amount to the physical, psychological, and emotional neglect of virtually everyone."⁹ Certainly, the ways in which the two ethical approaches are complementary or contingently dependent on each other are very important, and no understanding of the relationship between the ethics would be complete without giving them due notice. Yet, we would not get very far in this understanding without first addressing the question

of conflict. That is the primary question in determining the true relationship between the perspectives, and it is a question about justification. The issue is how can it be justified to act in ways that accord with one approach, but which are apparently proscribed by the other?

There are three possible options to consider in trying to make sense of the relationship between the two approaches in the light of this conflict. Firstly, we might argue that both approaches are genuinely moral approaches but that morality is fundamentally divided. Secondly, it might be argued that morality is not fundamentally divided because one of the approaches is not a truly moral approach after all. Or thirdly, we could argue that morality is unified and both approaches do have moral standing, and that the conflict between them is not, at bottom, a real conflict. The first option ought to be avoided, since it involves a fairly radical and unsettling conclusion about morality. Of the remaining options, the third seems preferable because it allows us to preserve the moral standing of both perspectives. Pursuing that option will effectively mean trying to incorporate both perspectives, as much as possible, within just one of them, and arguing that the conflict between them is merely an apparent one. The choice of perspective for this purpose, though, ought to be soundly motivated, and not simply decided by fiat, or mere allegiance, or for reasons originating solely from within one of the competing perspectives. Independent reasons are needed to argue for one perspective being the host to the other, as it were.

So, we are presented with two possibilities: that the moral standing of partialist reasoning is best understood in terms of fundamentally impartialist considerations, or that these considerations, themselves, are somehow better accounted for, or seen as founded upon, properties of the partialist perspective. But, what would “best” and “better” amount to in this context? Seeing that what is being compared here are different sorts of explanations, “best” and “better” can usefully be thought of in terms of the explanatory power of the two scenarios. We may understand them in terms of how well each can be used to make sense of our widely held pre-theoretic moral intuitions and convictions, and also how well each can be used to explain our empirically observed dispositions to approach moral problems impartially or partially. We will argue that there are considerations from both of these areas which suggest the impartialist perspective to be the more fundamental.

As was said, partialist reasoning and action does seem legitimate in many circumstances. It often seems reasonable to favour the well-being of our children over the well-being of complete strangers, for instance. But, by the same token, not all instances of caring-partialist reasoning seem acceptable. Consider nepotism, where benefits in the public domain are allocated to people not on grounds of their merit or entitlement, but on the basis of sheer

favoritism. This form of partialism is widely condemned. Meting out burdens and punishments on the basis of personal vendetta, rather than desert, is similarly condemned. There appear, then, to be limits on what forms or instances of partialism are acceptable, and our intuitive judgements about them seem to be governed by impartialist considerations of equity, desert, merit, and entitlement. This suggests that our intuitive convictions about some of the limits of partialism can be explained by appealing to the impartialist perspective, and supposing that it provides something like a set of prior and fundamental constraints on caring and partialism.

This cannot be the full story, however. If impartialist considerations do constrain partialism, then partialist reasoning cannot override those considerations. But, then, this would seem to leave no room for partialism, at all. If impartiality requires the needs, interests, and entitlements of everyone to be weighted equally and without favour, then what appear to be legitimate partialist exercises, like feeding our own children rather than those who are starving in the Third World, would simply be impermissible. The question is how partialism can have *any* moral status if impartial requirements are fundamental. If the impartialist perspective is to be fundamental, then it must have the capacity to explain not only when partialism is inappropriate, but also when and how it can often be *legitimate*. And, on top of this, an impartialist rendering of partialist reasoning ought ideally to shed light on some of the observed facts about the moral reasoning dispositions that people actually have.

4.

As it turns out, there is an understanding of partialist reasoning that accounts for these things. To see how, we can begin by looking at a sample of empirical observations concerning people's reasoning dispositions. We conducted a study to explore the extent to which professionals in a health-care context exhibited partialist or impartialist ethical reasoning.¹⁰ The study consisted of a questionnaire describing four hypothetical dilemmas, and was administered to three hundred people, doctors, and nurses of both sexes. The dilemmas required participants to choose, in various situations, between aiding their mothers and aiding other people who were either more deserving or whose being aided would have better overall consequences from an impartial point of view. The dilemmas were designed to represent problems in four important sorts of situation. The first posed a choice between aiding the person's mother and aiding a judge, and involved a non-life-threatening situation in a non-professional context where only mere discomfort was at stake; the second dilemma posed a choice between saving the person's mother or a medical spe-

cialist, and involved a life-threatening situation in a non-professional context; the third was a choice in a professional life-threatening situation where the lives of the person's mother and a saintly nun were in danger; and the fourth was a professional and non-life threatening situation which posed a choice between benefitting the person's mother and an accomplished sportswoman. The description of each dilemma was followed by ten statements that expressed either a choice and a particular reason for it, such as, "I should rescue the medical specialist first, because the medical specialist has an important commitment on which others depend," or else stated a general attitude or consideration, such as, "I need to look at the situation from an impersonal perspective." Five statements represented reasons from a partialist orientation, and five from an impartialist orientation.

Statistical measures were taken to see if there was an association between the reasoning approach taken to dilemmas and the sex and occupation of the respondents. It turned out that no significant relationship between these was found. Males were no more likely than females, and nurses no more likely than doctors, to respond partially or impartially. The following significant and interesting findings did emerge, however. (i) subjects of both sexes, whether they were doctors or nurses, used both partialist and impartialist modes of reasoning; (ii) modes of reasoning were overwhelmingly partialist when lives were at stake and favoured saving the mother. The professional versus non-professional nature of the dilemma context made no difference to this; (iii) the professional versus non-professional nature of the context did make a difference to responses when mere discomfort was at stake, with responses being overwhelmingly impartialist in the professional context, but neither partialist nor impartialist modes of reasoning dominating in the non-professional context.

These findings, along with the other considerations mentioned earlier, can be accounted for if we employ a two-levels understanding of moral reasoning.¹¹ On this understanding, moral thinking involves two distinct, but connected levels of reasoning. One level, the critical level, is the sort of reasoning we could conduct about each moral problem if we had before us all the relevant facts and considerations, and were not limited by time or intellectual ability. Such thinking would result in the correct answer on each occasion, and the reasons appealed to at the critical level would constitute the ultimate justification for that answer. Clearly, though, in the hurly-burly of everyday conditions, we often cannot engage in critical level thinking. Limitations of time, intellectual ability, and information mean that mistakes are very likely if we attempt extended critical thinking. A better alternative under these conditions is what R.M. Hare calls intuitive-level moral reasoning, where people cultivate the habit of simpler strategies and dispositions for decision-making

that are easy to internalize and employ, but reliable enough to lead to correct decisions in particular cases. Because the correctness of a moral decision depends ultimately on its justification at the critical level, the reliability of an intuitive disposition or habit will depend on how likely it is to lead to the sorts of decisions and outcomes that would be recommended by critical thinking. The virtue of such reliable intuitive dispositions is that they will generally lead to greater success in making the right moral decisions under everyday pressures than critical thinking which is ill-suited to such pressures.

In the light of this, it could be argued that impartialist and partialist reasoning are not two different types, but two levels of moral thinking, impartialist reasoning being at the critical level and partialist reasoning being at the intuitive. According to this view, correct moral outcomes or decisions would be arrived at through principled, abstract, impartialist reasoning. If an outcome or decision cannot be justified in terms of equality, reciprocity, merit, or other impartialist considerations, then it is not the correct outcome or decision. On some sorts of occasion, the impartialist critical level thinking is possible and appropriate. For instance, in public life, it is usually possible to take into account all the relevant factors, and to justly and equitably arrive at appropriate decisions and outcomes. On many other occasions, however, the time, energy and information are just not available for extended impartialist reasoning. In everyday circumstances, it is reasonable to think that the impartial good will be better served if people cultivate habits and dispositions to care about and favour those who are close to them. If people, in everyday circumstances, attempted to engage in critical thinking on every occasion, taking into account all possible factors and consequences for all people, then little would be achieved. People are likely to make better decisions if they confine their concerns to their loved ones, about whom they know a great deal. Ties of affection, caring, and special responsibilities to loved ones can be seen, therefore, as an intuitive level form of moral reasoning, a moral disposition, grounded ultimately in impartialist considerations.

A two-level picture of moral thinking like this looks as if it can give a plausible explanation of our results. Firstly, it can immediately make sense of the fact that people engage in both partialist and impartialist reasoning without this making them confused or inconsistent. So, it accounts for finding (i) above. Also, on this picture it would be expected that the greater the potential harm to a person's loved ones in the life-threatening study dilemmas, the more compelled the person is to respond partially, and this disposition would be expected to be strong enough to override the influence on thinking of other contextual factors like the professional or non-professional nature of the dilemmas. So, (ii) above is accounted for. However, when there is no threat of serious harm to a loved one, but only mere discomfort, as in the non-life-

threatening dilemmas, the partialist response would be less prominent and other contextual factors, such as the person being in a professional or non-professional situation, would have a greater influence on moral thinking. As was noted before, the two-levels view stipulates that people are more likely to be disposed to impartial responses in the public arena, and this was borne out in our third finding, where participants overwhelmingly responded impartially in the professional dilemma context. So, by treating the impartialist ethical perspective as prior and fundamental, it turns out that we can plausibly account for some of our intuitions about the allowable limits of partialist dispositions and accommodate partialism as genuinely moral thinking, and we can do this, moreover, in a way that explains some observations about the circumstances under which people do think in partialist terms.

5.

Perhaps this same two-level description can provide some clues about the second major set of concerns mentioned earlier, namely, impartialist questions about the possible detrimental consequences of women adopting caring-partialism as an ethical approach. It is very often argued that in both public and private arenas the dangers for women of an ethic of care are considerable. In the public sphere there is the danger that women's active embrace of caring dispositions will simply act to compound their disempowerment. It is argued that it will only further marginalize women's interests by entrenching stereotypes of domesticity and by stifling women's capacities to form and assert their self-identity and acquire positions of public power. In the private sphere, there is the danger of women engaging in self-sacrifice and denial of their well-being, to the benefit of men. As John Broughton argues, an ethic of partialism-care as a women's ethic "perpetuates the status quo, affirms the established division of labor, and forecloses on the possibility of a radical transformation."¹²

These reservations about the consequences of a feminist care ethic are clearly impartialist in basis, since they revolve around the potential of caring practices to disadvantage women compared to men. It should be acknowledged too, that these reservations seem legitimate. How, then, can the idea of a partialist ethic for women be maintained in the face of these impartialist reservations? Looked at in one way, we have already avoided this problem through the two-levels account of the justificatory relationship between the two ethical perspectives. Because partialism, on that account, has no independent or autonomous ethical status, but derives its force ultimately from impartialist principles, no *morally sound* practice of caring-partialism can, strictly speaking, consistently have consequences that would be counted bad

on balance from the impartialist point of view. If some caring practice did have sufficiently bad consequences on some occasion, then that would disqualify or seriously weaken its claim to have been an ethically sound practice in the first place. Given this, the central concern for philosophers who wish to see caring as a feminist ethic ought to be the question of just which of the forms of caring and partialism that women could adopt are most likely to count as genuinely ethical ones from the point of view of impartialist criteria. The flip side of this project will be the question of just which conceptions or interpretations of impartialist principles are most fitting as criteria for that purpose.

This account of the relationship between partialist and impartialist ethical perspectives can be taken to have some broader implications for the relationship between the difference and sameness themes within feminism. Whatever the differences are that women perceive as important, whether they are care-related or not, it would make little sense if pursuing these differences only served to disadvantage women compared to men, and to therefore undermine the project of gender equality. Again, this suggests that the broader difference movement in feminism can only legitimately be pursued under the governance of certain deep aspects of the sameness theme, namely that women are the same as men in the fundamental moral characteristics and capacities that are central to the measurement and distribution of social advantage. The only sorts of women's differences that ought to be expressed, pursued, or otherwise recognized are those that flow from or are compatible with a more fundamental commitment to women's equality. If this is the right way to look at things, as it seems to be, then the difference and sameness themes in feminist thought turn out to be less in tension than they first appear.

Notes

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