Feminist Ethics

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Imagine a world in which women are forbidden from holding property or jobs and even from reading. In this world, women are taught that the order of things entails their utter subservience to men. It is a world in which women's freedom is so circumscribed that they are forced to bear children against their will. This is the world that Margaret Atwood (1939–) portrays in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), a novel set in the Republic of Gilead, a repressive theocracy that takes hold in the United States after a governmental coup. This is a world in which women's oppression—and their reduction to nothing more than their reproductive function—is complete. In Gilead, rich, White, able-bodied men determine the meaning and shape of all women's lives. They do so in large part by controlling the

A promotion for the Hulu series based on Margaret Atwood's novel **The Handmaid's Tale.** *The novel's narrator says the bonnets the handmaids wear "are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen."* **REUTERS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO.**

ethical codes that govern the lives over which they rule. In its depiction of patriarchy unchecked and misogyny unbounded, *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a potent reminder of why we need ethical theories and practices with the elimination of oppression against women at their core. It also shows us why we need ethical systems that value women in all their diversity, as well as systems that promote women's right to determine for themselves the meaning of their own lives.

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* is a work of fiction, it bears a striking resemblance to reality. Atwood has noted that there is "nothing in the book that didn't happen, somewhere" (Heching 2017). Thus, it is not that it *could* happen but rather that, piecemeal, all elements of it *already have*. This is all the more reason why attention to varieties of ethics with the power not only to identify errors of the past but to prevent horrors of the future is vital. Feminist ethics is one such form of ethics. Gilead is the world to which feminist ethics is the antidote and against which it guards. In short, *The Handmaid's Tale* shows us why we need feminist ethics.

This chapter begins by discussing what feminist ethics is and does through examination of a specific example of the spheres into which our lives are separated: the public and the private. After demonstrating how feminist ethicists critique, complicate, and expand the content and experiences of such categories, I characterize the overarching aims of feminist ethics as (1) critical and (2) creative. I then turn to major themes in feminist ethics, exploring four of them in depth: oppression, vulnerability and dependency, relationality, and the nonideal. Having provided an overview of the ethical themes that matter to feminists, I also depict three different varieties of feminist ethics—liberal, care, and transnational—before concluding.

WHAT IS FEMINIST ETHICS?

Feminist ethics invites us to imagine an ethical life beyond the rigid confines erected by ethicists throughout the history of ethics. Ethics has been an enterprise written nearly exclusively by men, for men, and about men. Even when purporting to be universal in scope, much of Western ethics has been falsely so. Though ethicists wrote of *humanity*, only the middle part of that word—*man*—was their real focus. Western ethics has believed that, as James Brown put it in a 1966 song, "this is a man's, man's, man's world." Feminist ethics arrives on the scene to complete this lyric: "But it wouldn't be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl" (though feminists might intend this lyric in a more empowering way than the Godfather of Soul likely meant it).

The content, feel, and focus of ethical life shifts under feminist critique and revision as feminists push the boundaries of the "proper" subject matter of ethics. They explore issues and themes not previously taken to be part of moral philosophy, such as child rearing, domestic violence, and sex work. Feminist ethicists have expanded not only the content of ethics but also how it might be done. Instead of seeing ethics as a process of consulting imagined, ideal situations to determine which principles work in such perfect contexts, feminist ethicists point to the importance of beginning ethical inquiry from real life, in all its imperfection and messiness. And finally, a point that is perhaps not acknowledged often enough: feminist ethicists have challenged the very notion of who gets to be an ethicist in the first place. Although the profession was for centuries forbidden to the fairer sex and reserved nearly exclusively for their less fair counterparts, philosophy in general and philosophical ethics in particular are now, finally, open to women.

WHAT FEMINIST ETHICS IS AND WHAT IT DOES: AN OPENING EXAMPLE

Consider an example that is handy for the way in which it demonstrates all three foregoing, interwoven points about the forms of expansion feminist ethics initiates (i.e., expansion of the content of ethics, how ethics is done, and those who are deemed appropriate to be ethicists): the public/private split. This is the split thought to exist between the public sphere of commerce and politics and the private sphere of family and home. Historically, the private sphere was the place of women, while the public sphere was the rightful place of men. Social evidence of this split exists throughout US history.

Challenging the Public/Private Divide. Take, for example, the White, suburban culture of the late 1950s and early 1960s, as exemplified in the popular television series *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–1963), where June Cleaver, a wife and mother, tended to the home and the raising of two sons, while her husband, Ward Cleaver, worked outside the home in an unspecified white-collar office job (though his questionable past as a philosophy major must also be noted). Traditionally speaking, what happened in the private sphere was just that— *private*, and therefore often beyond the reach of public ethical judgment. How men treated "their" women was a personal matter not open to public critique or restriction. With a few exceptions, the realm of the family generally existed beyond the reach of justice.

The public/private split has been a focus of feminist criticism in multiple significant ways. Carole Pateman (1940–) asserted that "the dichotomy between the private and the public is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle; it is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is about" (1983, 281). Pateman felt feminists should be suspicious of the public/private split for multiple reasons. First, the split between the public and the private is itself a mechanism of patriarchy. The private becomes a space in which men's actions toward women exist beyond public reproach. Private family matters are to be addressed behind closed doors, out of the public eye. Second, Pateman argues that rather than existing as two separate spheres operating independently of one another, there is a necessary reliance of the public sphere on the private sphere. More specifically, the continuation of the public sphere is dependent on the free labor that primarily women perform in the private sphere as they tend to domestic life with all of the physical and emotional labor that it takes to keep a household running. Think of the scene from the 2016 animated film *Sing*, in which the mother pig, Rosita, attempts to automate her duties at home so she can attend a rehearsal for a singing competition. As viewers watch her Rube Goldberg housework contraption go hilariously awry, with piglets being washed as dishes, the sheer volume and intensity of the labor Rosita performs becomes shockingly apparent. Third, public work is culturally and socially overvalued at the expense of or to the exclusion of private work. One need think no further than the still widespread view that paid labor performed in the workforce is more valuable and important than the unpaid labor of raising children in the home.

In general, feminist ethicists hold that family matters are, in fact, not private matters situated beyond the reach of ethics; rather, they are sometimes matters of ethics, and more specifically, justice. Feminists have thereby rejected traditional ethics' inherent sequestering of private matters away from matters thought to be properly *ethical*, that is, a domain proper for ethical inquiry and investigation. For example, relations between members of a family— how husbands treat their wives—for centuries have been considered by many to be beyond the reach of ethical principles and judgment. But women battered by their husbands or children molested by relatives experience gross forms of injustice that are not simply

unfortunate private matters that constitute the skeletons in any family's closet or the dirty laundry never to be aired in public. Beyond examples of sexual violence and assault, feminists argue that the division of labor within the home is not only an ethical matter but also a political one. Much of this movement in seeing private matters as matters of justice intersects with the feminist rallying call from the Second Wave of feminism: "the personal is political." (This saying indicates another example of a boundary that feminist ethicists have challenged, that is, the boundary between the ethical and the political.)

This discussion of the feminist critique of the private/public split demonstrates a shift in ethical content through the inclusion of new issues previously deemed to be outside the scope of ethics, as well as a shift in methodology. The methodological shift is one through which feminists assert that ethics need not be conducted from a position of remove, that is, from some kind of idealized stance. Instead, feminists call for ethics to be done with attention to the full expanse of real life, without shying away from all the messiness that comes with personal relationships, the home, and caretaking. With this methodological shift, moral agents are no longer seen as abstract, impartial reasoners and judges, but rather as real-life actors embedded in actual relationships with contextually situated, concrete, imperfect, partial others.

Mad Men and the Shift in the Public/Private Divide. The transition from 1950s to 1960s culture and beyond in the United States reflects some of these feminist challenges to the more traditional conception of the split between public and private. These tensions are depicted vividly in the television show *Mad Men* (2007–2015), an award-winning drama with its initial episode set in March 1960. *Mad Men* explored the inner workings of a New York City advertising firm, Sterling Cooper. The series is set in a time period on the cusp of serious gender upheaval, when the lines between public and private began to shift and blur. *Mad Men* first illustrates and ultimately challenges the gendered split between the two domains.

The character of Peggy Olson proves particularly interesting for exposing the blurring lines between the public and private spheres and the complicated evolution of feminist interventions into them. At the start of the show, Peggy is the meek secretary of the lead character, advertising executive Don Draper. Even though she occupies a job in the public sphere, she does so as a secretary—a position that requires her to perform much emotional labor and hence echoes the realm of the private. Initial episodes of the series typify the split between the public and private spheres, with the accompanying division of labor between men and women. In this world, emotional labor is the job of women, who tend to the private emotional needs of their husbands, children, and sometimes bosses. Public labor is the domain of men.

The main female characters—Peggy, Joan Harris (head of the secretary pool), and Betty Draper (Don's wife)—all firmly occupy feminine positions either strictly located in the private realm or echoing it heavily even though technically situated within the public realm. In the course of the series, all three women come to take on increasingly public roles. Peggy is perhaps the most intriguing case in point. As a secretary, Peggy rises from an initially feminine position of anticipating and meeting men's needs to the role of copywriter with an office of her own. She is the only woman in the series to hold the job of copywriter.

In *Mad Men*, the exception proves the rule. Peggy's place as the exception to the rule of the public/private divide teaches us a fair amount about the nature of that rule. Peggy's ascension represents a parallel move into a male-dominated domain, where she

faces considerable challenges. We might think of the sexism that Peggy experiences as the only female copywriter—most notably, her ideas are consistently co-opted or dismissed—as paralleling how mainstream philosophy has begun to accept the role of women in philosophy.

To the very end of the series, *Mad Men* continues to blur the lines between public and private. In a heartwarming final scene, a colleague, Stan Rizzo, declares his love for Peggy, and Peggy suddenly realizes that she loves him too. In the ending montage that follows, Peggy is seated at home in front of a typewriter, presumably creating copy, as Rizzo approaches from behind, gently placing his hands on her shoulders to massage her as she leans back from her work, looking satisfied with what she has created. Here, it is a woman who brings public work into the private space of the home, with her male partner lovingly performing the emotional labor of supporting her. The division of labor between the sexes with which the series began—where men create ad campaigns in the brutal world of corporate marketing while women support their unacknowledged emotional and material needs, labor that makes men's creativity possible in the first place—begins to shift and crumble along with the social mores that held it in place for so long.

What Peggy's character arc shows us regarding the shifting domains of private and public and of women and men illuminates what feminist ethical engagement is and what it can do. It helps us see the very relationship between the public and the private as an ethical matter in the first place. It helps us recognize that ethics can and should be done from the midst of the mess of life. And it helps us see that women can rightfully be the authors of and driving force behind that work.

THE TWO PRIMARY AIMS OF FEMINIST ETHICS

Having delved into a specific example to provide an initial sense of what feminist ethicists do and how they do it, I would like to now take a bird's-eye view to consider the overarching aims of feminist ethics. Speaking in broad strokes, feminist ethics can be said to have two primary aims: one *critical* and one *creative*.

Before describing those two aims in depth, a point of clarification is in order. In addressing what feminist ethics is, it is also important to mark off what it is not. First of all, feminist ethics takes as its subject matter the oppression of women, but it does not take a principled negative stance toward men. Men as well as women can be feminist ethicists. Anyone genuinely committed to ending the oppression of women can be a feminist. A second important point to address: the focus for ethicists of this variety is not *feminine* ethics but rather *feminist* ethics. The distinction is an important one. While some feminist ethicists do find moral significance in practices that historically have been labeled *feminine*—for example, caring for the young and the elderly—feminist ethics covers more territory and takes as its proper subject matter that which exceeds the feminine. In fact, feminist ethics can and frequently intentionally does address material that is not understood as feminine at all.

Feminist Ethics as a Critical Endeavor. One primary aim of feminist ethics is to criticize earlier ethical theories for a host of inadequacies, spanning from the overt to the covert. Throughout the history of ethics, philosophers have offered treatises and systems shot through with biases and unfounded assumptions about women. A clear example of these sexist biases can be found in the work of German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant's sexism covers the continuum from the seriously biased (as when he notes that

"It is difficult for me to believe that the fair sex is capable of principles" [Kant 2012, 39], hence downplaying the abilities of women to engage in the pinnacle of ethical thought) to the downright catty (as when he claims that "woman has a preeminent feeling for the *beautiful*, so far as it pertains to *herself*" [47]).

One aim of feminist ethics is to take such ethical approaches to task for their failings, blind spots, and self-puffery. Feminist critical engagement with the history of ethics has thus yielded a number of incisive observations and accusations, such as the charge that male ethicists have tended to feature the supposed superiority of the moral development and abilities of men and boys over and against the concomitant developmental and agential inferiority of women and girls (see Gilligan 1982; Kohlberg 1973, 1981). In short, male ethicists have found women to be less morally developed than the paragons of the ethical they believe themselves to be. They have valorized culturally masculine modes of engagement with the world—autonomy, independence, and rationality—rather than the more culturally feminine modes of relationality, interdependence, and emotionality. Male philosophers have been thorough in their failure to appreciate ways in which women might approach the realm of the ethical differently than they do, characterizing women as morally suspect in their modes of moral perception, reasoning, aptitudes, valuing, and character (see Miller 2011). In addition to highlighting how men have devalued women and feminine modes of moral engagement, feminist ethicists have pointed to the ways in which women's experiences and lives have been ignored or shut out from ethical theory—both intentionally and unintentionally.

Without wanting to resort to a form of gender essentialism that pretends that all women engage morality in the same way (be it because of their biology, social conditioning, or a complex mixture of the two), feminist ethicists have consistently criticized other ethicists for devaluing and overlooking women's moral experience (Jaggar 1992). This happens not merely on the individual level of specific authors penning obnoxious views about women. Feminist ethicists are deeply aware of how these individual instances hook into and sustain systemic gender oppression.

The overall contribution of feminist ethicists, however, is not solely or strictly a critical one—as important as such efforts are. Feminist ethics is also a creative endeavor.

Feminist Ethics as a Creative Endeavor. Criticizing the gendered inadequacies of moral theory is useful for determining why and how mainstream moral theories do not properly perceive, cannot perceive, and sometimes do not even care to perceive gender oppression. But without creative endeavors to generate positive ethical theories that can make up for the shortcomings of other moral philosophies, feminists would be left without an ethical rudder.

Ethical theories answer two key questions about our shared moral lives: (1) What ought I do? and (2) How ought I live? The first question aims to help people understand which actions are morally required of them. The second question aims to help people determine the main elements of the good life or a life of virtue. While the critical endeavor of feminist ethics shows how other ethical theories recommend acting and living in ways that both fail to detect and contribute to the oppression of women, the creative endeavor of feminist ethics can take the next crucial steps of determining how we ought to act and how we can live well through specifically feminist methods. Feminist ethical theories describe right action and good character in ways that express distinctly feminist values. The creative aim of feminist ethics is ultimately to imagine and create the mechanisms to overcome women's oppression.

One way feminists have created new modes of ethical engagement is by drawing on women's moral experiences. Such experiences—largely unexplored throughout the history of Western philosophy—have served as the primary source of these insights. Mothering is one of the best examples of the kind of experience feminists have mined for ethical insight. With few exceptions, prior to the advent of feminist ethics, childbearing and child rearing were thought to stand firmly and uncontestably outside the realm of the philosophical. More to the point, they were thought not so much to be outside of it as *beneath* it.

One of the first philosophers to plumb the depths of mothering for its philosophical insights was Sara Ruddick (1935–2011). In 1989, Ruddick published *Maternal Thinking*, in which she offered a series of recommendations for ethics and politics developed from women's experiences of bearing and raising children. Ruddick introduces the core of the book in these terms:

> I identify some of the specific metaphysical attitudes, cognitive capacities, and conceptions of virtue that arise from mothering. I treat separately the thinking that arises from the three demands of preservation, growth, and acceptability, partly with the aim of highlighting the conflict that arises between them. While this abstract, tripartite division is true to maternal experience of conflict, it belies the jumbled unity of mothers' lives. It is maternal work as a whole that gives rise to a distinctive kind of thinking called forth by the demands of children. (Ruddick 1989, 61)

Through the three core features of preservative love, fostering growth or nurturance, and training for acceptability, Ruddick displays the complexity and tensions inherent within the work that feminist ethicists do. Preservative love occurs through an attitude toward the vulnerable that Ruddick calls "holding." Holding is how mothers produce the conditions necessary for keeping children safe. Mothers also foster growth, which encompasses all that it takes to encourage a child's development. And by "training," Ruddick means "training a child to be the kind of person whom others accept and whom the others themselves can actively appreciate" (1989, 104). Training, which involves some of the most difficult work mothers do, works best when accomplished through conscience and educative control, while guarding against inauthenticity and domination.

Ruddick's work serves as an exemplar of feminist ethical thinking for multiple reasons. Perhaps most importantly, through Ruddick we see that drawing on women's experience as a source of ethical insight is far from an easy and frictionless endeavor. This is no airbrushed version of maternal life. Ruddick depicts the tensions and difficulties inherent in mothering in ways

Mother and Child *(1987), by Mary Cassatt. Cassatt is best known for her beautiful, impressionist paintings of intimacy between mother and child. Art historians have speculated that Cassatt turned to the maternal theme because of a changing social climate, which encouraged women to paint what were considered appropriate feminine subjects.* **BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY, LONDON / BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY, LONDON / SUPERSTOCK.**

that generate a richer, more forceful and effective overall account. A far cry from Mary Cassatt's (1844–1926) beautiful, impressionist paintings of intimacy between mother and child, Ruddick's version of mothering is real. In that realness and honesty there is power—the power of ethical accounts that begin from real life rather than ideal principles. Ruddick candidly addresses not only the ways in which mothering can serve as a source of ethically affirming attitudes and capacities, but also how it can fail, serving instead as a source of domination and oppression. The maternal devotion that Cassatt's paintings portray may be visually and emotionally gorgeous, but fails to tell the stories of women who have felt trapped by motherhood, sacrificing their dreams and passions to oppressive societal expectations of maternal perfection. Importantly, while honoring women as a source of philosophical insight, Ruddick argues that mothering is not solely the province of women, but rather an activity open to people of all genders.

Not all feminists agree with the claim that mothering is a quintessential women's experience. Feminist ethicists disagree about which women's experiences should be seen as paramount. There has been pushback from feminists rightfully concerned about feminist ethics being reduced to a focus on caring in a maternal context—an experience that not all women have or want to have. Issues like these show that there are areas of disagreement and tension internal to the enterprise of feminist ethics. Such disagreement is a good thing, indicative of a robust and thriving philosophical subdiscipline with a richness of ideas and commitments. Feminist ethics has progressed to a point where there are enough people at the table to engender productive discussions that ultimately give rise to better ways to fight oppression. Feminist ethicists have multiple, competing creative accounts to offer, as we shall see in the last section, "Three Varieties of Feminist Ethics."

PROMINENT THEMES IN FEMINIST ETHICS

Four central themes that demonstrate both the breadth and depth of feminist ethical engagement are oppression, vulnerability and dependency, relationality, and the nonideal. Each of these themes responds to criticism of standard concepts and approaches in mainstream ethical theory.

OPPRESSION

Feminist ethics starts with an analysis of sexist oppression, a concept that rarely has been the subject matter of traditional philosophy. If you were to survey both historical and contemporary texts on the "big three" Western ethical theories—virtue ethics, articulated in the work of Aristotle (384–322 BCE); deontology, found in the work of Kant; and utilitarianism, developed in the work of Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873)—you would find very limited analysis of systems of oppression. (Another work of Mill's, *The Subjection of Women* [(1869) 1970], is a noteworthy exception: Mill developed the conceptual framework for the book, which argues for the equality of the sexes, with his wife, Harriet Taylor Mill.) Philosophers' general neglect of oppression may have to do with the fact that those who wrote the texts of the Western philosophical canon were rarely subjected to oppression themselves. In fact, they were more likely to be members of oppressor groups.

Wonder Woman's Inversion of Oppression. One way to understand the nature of sexist oppression is by contemplating its opposite: a society in which women are fully liberated

and empowered. Wonder Woman to the rescue! Diana of Themyscira is Amazonian royalty and a warrior princess. Loosely based on a Greek mythological community, Wonder Woman comes from a matriarchy of superhumans graced with such abilities as superior strength and speed. Amazonian women heal faster than mere mortals and enjoy enhanced senses. Wonder Woman originates from Paradise Island, a society comprised only of women in which sexism does not exist. On Paradise Island, socially constructed assumptions about women's inferiority and inherent weakness do not govern women's self-conception or how they conceive of one another. Quite the opposite—their strength is celebrated and their freedom assured.

Wonder Woman first leapt from the pages of All-Star Comics in December 1941. Beyond the comic books and the screen adaptations that followed, the backstory of Wonder Woman is feminist through and through. The real-life details of her creation story are also feminist. William Moulton Marston (1893–1947), a psychologist by trade, was fueled by distinctly feminist motives when he created Wonder Woman. A press release from the time characterized Marston's intent this way: "'Wonder Woman' was conceived … to set up a standard among children and young people of strong, free, courageous womanhood; to combat the idea that women are inferior to men, and to inspire girls to self-confidence and achievement in athletics, occupations and professions monopolized by men" (Lepore 2014). For Marston, Wonder Woman was a way to further the freedom and equality of women, something on which he felt the future of humanity would depend. Marston hoped that women inspired by Wonder Woman would come to rule the world. Jill Lepore reminds us that "it isn't only that Wonder Woman's backstory is taken from feminist utopian fiction. It's that, in creating Wonder Woman, William Moulton Marston was profoundly influenced by early-twentieth-century suffragists, feminists, and birth-control advocates and that, shockingly, Wonder Woman was inspired by Margaret Sanger, who, hidden from the world, was a member of Marston's family" (Lepore 2014). Connections with early feminists, suffragists, and advocates for women's reproductive rights cement Wonder Woman's serious feminist credibility and her position as an anti-oppression icon.

Lynda Carter as TV's **Wonder Woman** *(1976). William Moulton Marston (1893–1947) created the character of Wonder Woman in 1941, as a way to further the freedom and equality of women, something on which he felt the future of humanity would depend. Marston hoped that women inspired by Wonder Woman would come to rule the world.* EVERETT COLLECTION.

The Systematic Nature of Gendered Oppression. Against this backdrop of a feminist utopia and inversion of oppression, we can now consider what oppression as a fundamental concept for feminist ethics is. Because the real world is drastically different from the one in which Wonder Woman has her origins, we find ourselves in circumstances characterized by

multiple instances and kinds of oppression. Feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young (1949–2006) posits five faces of oppression—violence, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism (Young 1990). Our current world differs greatly from Paradise Island: women in our world are locked in stereotypes that promote inequality in moral standing, political standing, and material and economic reality.

The mechanisms of oppression are quite varied: they may be social, psychological, or economic and material. To focus on the economic as an example, as of 2015, American women still make only eighty cents to the dollar that men make in the workplace, where equal pay for equal work remains well out of reach. The gender pay gap is even starker for women of color in the United States, with Latina women making only 54 percent of what their White male counterparts make and African American women making 63 percent of what White men make (AAUW 2017). (The pay gap is also worse for mothers and increases with age.)

The Double Bind. We live in a world in which gender oppression is so pervasive and so normalized that often we do not even perceive the patterns of subordination surrounding us. A good way to begin to understand oppression and how it operates is to see it as an overarching system. Through this system, women are systematically subordinated to men, whose interests necessarily come first. Marilyn Frye (1941–) has influentially demonstrated why perceiving gendered oppression can be so difficult. According to Frye, what typifies oppression is the double bind, or "situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation" (1983, 2). To illustrate how the double bind works, Frye offers the example of the requirement that women and members of other oppressed groups smile:

> It is often a requirement upon oppressed people that we smile and be cheerful. If we comply, we signal our docility and our acquiescence in our situation. We need not, then, be taken note of. We acquiesce in being made invisible, in our occupying no space. We participate in our own erasure. On the other hand, anything but the sunniest countenance exposes us to being perceived as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous. This means, at the least, that we may be found "difficult" or unpleasant to work with, which is enough to cost one one's livelihood; at worst, being seen as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous has been known to result in rape, arrest, beating and murder. One can only choose to risk one's preferred form and rate of annihilation. (Frye 1983, 2–3)

The double bind represents the old adage, "damned if you do; damned if you don't." It resonates with a contemporary expectation that women smile cheerfully, a demand so omnipresent and burdensome that women risk having their relaxed faces slapped with the label of "resting bitch face." To smile on command is to participate in one's own oppression. Not to smile, however, places one at risk of being on the receiving end of censure, anger, or even outright violence. Placed in this double bind, women cannot win.

The culturally prevalent, misogynistic requirement that women smile functions as a powerful subtheme of the Netflix show *Jessica Jones* (2015–), based on a comic about a former superhero who becomes a detective. The requirement that Jessica smile bookends season one of the series. The premiere includes a flashback in which Jessica is at an upscale restaurant with a companion named Kilgrave who, after he tells her that she will love her meal, commands her to smile. She obliges in a way that's jarring for its emptiness and that indicates the mind control to which she's been subjected.

The imperative to smile arises again in the season finale, "AKA Smile," when Kilgrave (Jessica's arch nemesis) wrongly believes he has attained control over Jessica again and

commands her to smile as he did in the first episode, in a gesture designed to demonstrate his dominance and her submissiveness. She complies with what appears to be a perplexing gleam of genuine happiness just behind her smile. What Kilgrave does not recognize is that this time her smile is an act of reclamation (she has escaped the effects of his mind control) and is the gesture that ultimately enables her to grab Kilgrave, snap his neck, and kill him. Thus, in these final moments between victim and perpetrator, Jones breaks through the double bind, as the smile becomes not an act that makes one complicit in one's own oppression but rather the gate to powerful resistance.

Frye's Birdcage Analogy. Frye introduces a striking analogy to further characterize the systematic nature of oppression. She writes:

> Consider a birdcage. If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere. Furthermore, even if, one day at a time, you myopically inspected each wire, you still could not see why a bird would have trouble going past the wires to get anywhere. There is no physical property of any one wire, *nothing* that the closest scrutiny could discover, that will reveal how a bird could be inhibited or harmed by it except in the most accidental way. It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere; and then you will see it in a moment. It will require no great subtlety of mental powers. It is perfectly *obvious* that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon. (Frye 1983, 4)

Frye's birdcage analogy is famous for a good reason: it is an incredibly useful tool for wrapping one's mind around the structural nature of oppression. If you imagine yourself in a birdcage, constrained in vision to that which is directly in front of you, it is only the one, single wire that you could see. This is analogous to being able to perceive only a very small component of the overall system of oppression that governs a person's existence. Your mobility around the interior of the cage makes it possible for you to view multiple different instances of single wires—all of which fail to disclose that which makes them so difficult to fly past. But the conditions that make it impossible for you to leave the cage remain unseeable. You would then be likely to blame yourself for your miserable circumstances— why can't you fly past one little wire? And others who view you externally, presumably equally incapable of seeing the overarching system of wires, might wonder the same.

Because you can see only what is directly in front of you, you are incapable of seeing the extent to which that one wire is connected to and supported by a whole interlocking system of birdcage wires, which ultimately results in your inescapable captivity. It is when you make the move from the microscopic to the macroscopic that the nature of your captivity comes into focus—you are held in place by an elaborate system of wires, forming an interlocking pattern of oppression.

Another way of addressing this point is to ask if birds with myopia are ever able to see the cage in which they or others reside. From inside the cage, they may not be able to get enough distance to see the conditions that confine them. Outside of the cage, their myopia will prevent them from seeing the cage as a whole, even after they gain the necessary distance. Frye's analogy proves remarkably illuminating not only for showing why our view of individual instances of oppression do not yield a broader understanding about what

oppression is really like—an interlocking system that functions to hold each and every wire in place—but also for implicitly questioning the possibility of ever gaining enough perspective on a situation in order to see the complex terms of oppression clearly.

The legacy of Frye's work has been a rich feminist ethical engagement with the nature and persistence of oppression. There is much that this legacy teaches us. Feminists have consistently maintained that oppression is ultimately a systemic matter. While individual moral agents can enact or resist it, structural forces beyond the individual level keep the system running. Oppression happens most effectively not at the individual level, but rather at higher levels—for example, through institutions such as the family, public education, and the legal system.

Expanding the Understanding of Oppression. Of ongoing interest to feminist ethicists have been two specific elements of oppression: the participation of people in the continuation of their own oppression (Cudd 2006) and the interaction and sometimes mutual reinforcement between different kinds of oppression (gender, racial, sexual, etc.). Feminists have charted and dissected the ways in which people are complicit in their own oppression and have considered obligations people may have to resist their own oppression (Hay 2013).

The expansion of understandings of oppression within feminist ethics has happened in at least two major ways: awareness of the wider variety of genders and awareness of the interlocking systems of oppression along multiple lines of difference. While feminists may have first understood gender oppression primarily as a binary system of men oppressing women, that understanding has opened up to the reality of multiple genders, including trans people and nonbinary gendered individuals, and to increasing awareness of the vital significance of all forms of gender oppression. Influential figures such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1959–) and Patricia Hill Collins (1948–) mapped the ways in which multiple systems of oppression—not merely gender, but race, class, and sexuality too—interact and compound one another. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) introduced the concept of intersectionality (although it finds its historical roots in the work of Anna Julia Cooper [1858–1964]) in the late 1980s to describe the ways social identities and related systems of oppression overlap and interrelate. Collins (1990) discusses a related concept, "interlocking oppressions," to depict the way systems of oppression do not simply stand in relation to one another but are tied together and structurally reinforce one another. Both contributions from Black feminist thought add much-needed dimensionality to feminist ethical takes on oppression and help us to see that oppressions interact in ways that are multiple and complex.

VULNERABILITY AND DEPENDENCY

Feminist ethical interest in oppression arises from a critique of patriarchal ways of doing ethics that fails to detect or take interest in the oppressive conditions that make up many non-White, nonmale, or nonheterosexual lives. The second theme, vulnerability and dependency (to be treated here together because they are conceptually intertwined), arises from a different sort of critique. Traditional forms of ethics have often focused on an idealized version of humanity, one that is fully rational, independent, and free from harm. Traditional ethics has tended to understand human beings as somewhat impervious to vulnerability. We are, however, susceptible to damage and disease and vulnerable to the harmful actions of others. And once injured, we are dependent upon others for support. Our dependency spans beyond situations of harm and injury though. We are born into a

situation of radical dependency, a situation that continues for human beings throughout their childhood and often arises again at the end of their lives.

The Ethical Significance of Human Interdependence. Instead of beginning from the imagined best of what humans can be, many feminist ethicists begin instead from how humans actually are. While many moral theories take the autonomy of humans to be paramount, feminist ethics focuses instead on our dependency on others and on the normative significance of this interdependence. Many traditional ethicists begin from human rationality, as if this is our default state. Many feminist ethicists begin instead from the imperfections of human reason—how we are vulnerable to cognitive bias and influence and injury or disability. Traditional ethicists have been reluctant to acknowledge not only human vulnerability, on the one hand, but also its possible ethical significance, on the other. Vulnerability and dependency, however, are the reality of our existence. And they are deeply ethical matters. As such, they constitute two interrelated themes in feminist ethics.

We can understand vulnerability as a form of susceptibility to harm. As humans, we are vulnerable to everything from cancer to tiger attacks to tornadoes. We tend to think of vulnerability in negative terms: through our susceptibility to things that could injure or kill us. But some feminists have pointed out that vulnerability functions in ways that are positive too. While being human involves a necessary openness to forms of damage, it also can involve an openness to being loved and cared for, to being touched and desired.

Dependency represents a state of reliance on other entities—most notably, other people, though we are also dependent on a host of other things, such as ecosystems and the environment. Humans are born in a radical state of dependency that necessitates a caring response to their needs for the entirety of their lives. Infancy is not the only dependent phase in the human life span. Dependency bookends the human life span, for old age is also frequently a time of dependency. And while we cycle in and out of periods of greater or lesser dependency throughout our lives, there is an infrequently acknowledged baseline of dependency that arises from our social and material circumstances—for example, contexts that reliably produce water that is clean and safe to drink. Dependency relations are those relations we stand in with others where we care for them in their vulnerability and need, and they for us. We can hold such relationships with those with whom we enjoy a high degree of intimacy, as well as those we hardly know at all.

Many feminists have sought to answer a series of ethical questions about vulnerability and dependency, including whether one or both might give rise to specific moral obligations, and if they do, who might bear these responsibilities. Feminist ethicists have also wondered how we might best respond to those who are vulnerable and dependent. That is, what are the most effective and respectful ways to fulfill our moral obligations to these people?

Feminist philosophers have also noted that not all vulnerabilities and dependencies are the same. We can be vulnerable and dependent in ways that are inherent to the human condition or in ways that result from the specific context in which we live. There are forms of vulnerability and dependency that are recurrent and others that can be responded to in ways that are likely to limit their recurrence (Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2014, 1). Feminists have tracked the relationship between vulnerability, dependency, and another sometimes overlooked moral element, human need (Miller 2012).

The Conceptual Relationship between Vulnerability and Dependency. One thing that remains undecided for feminist ethicists is the precise nature of the conceptual relationship

between vulnerability and dependency, and moreover, the specific moral implications of that relationship. Susan Dodds characterizes the relationship this way: "On my account dependency is a specific form of vulnerability, and the care provided to meet the needs, and support the autonomy of dependents (dependency-care), is a response to this vulnerability" (2014, 182). In this rendering of the relationship, dependency is a subvariety of vulnerability. Vulnerability holds pride of place both in terms of conceptual primacy and expansiveness.

But there are reasons to believe that dependency stands apart conceptually. We can also think of examples in which dependency is conceptually distinctive from vulnerability. Dependency and vulnerability's relationship with the concepts of harm and need demonstrates how this might be the case. When vulnerable, there is the possibility that we will be harmed. The extremely vulnerable suffer from circumstances that make their harm very likely. The experience of dependency, however, does not involve the likelihood that something will happen, but rather the guaranteed state that one has needs that another must meet. To understand the distinction between vulnerability and dependency, think about the difference in being vulnerable to breaking your leg in a car accident versus our necessary dependency on others to help us get around when wearing a cast to heal a fractured femur. Granted, those who are very vulnerable are likely to be dependent. And those who are extremely dependent tend to experience a certain heightened vulnerability. But it seems philosophically unsound to say that one concept is necessarily derivative of the other.

Why does this matter? Is the parsing of the conceptual relationship between vulnerability and dependency anything other than the act of philosophers entertaining themselves with conceptual puzzles? This issue matters because the way we understand this relationship has huge implications for which concept provides foundational reasons for our responsibilities to respond to others. If dependency is derivative of vulnerability, then it is in light of our vulnerability that others must respond to us. If dependency is conceptually distinct from vulnerability, and perhaps also ethically cofoundational, then it might well provide us with a different, yet equally important set of reasons for why we must respond to others. And that seems to matter a good deal.

RELATIONALITY

Relationality is yet another main theme in feminist ethics that arises from a critique of canonical ethical theory. Many feminist philosophers have called attention to the overvaluation of the concept of the autonomous individual in mainstream philosophy and especially in Enlightenment-era philosophy. Philosophers have often written as if humans were fully independent—both in terms of how they come to be and how they live. An odd pair of examples involving mushrooms and dragon's teeth can help us see why this is problematic.

Mushrooms and Dragon's Teeth. In an oft-quoted passage, philosopher Seyla Benhabib (1950–) discusses how, in describing the concept of the state of nature in social contract theory, the philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) suggests that we understand humans as "mushrooms, come to full maturity, without all kind of engagement to each other" (cited in Benhabib 1992, 156). Benhabib names Hobbes's vision as the "ultimate picture of autonomy" (156). This vision of men springing up from the ground like so many mushrooms typifies the obsessive focus on autonomy and independence and the curious

denial of relationality and interdependence in much of Western ethical thought. The absurdity of the example stems from what it obscures: the relational conditions (gestation, birth, and child rearing) that are a necessary component of humans coming to exist at all.

Before there was Hobbes and his mushroom men, there was Cadmus, a prominent mythological figure in ancient Greece. Some traditional ethicists, with their fantasies of spontaneous, nondependent, nonrelational generation, appear to take a page right out of Cadmus's tale of the founding of the city of Thebes. As the story goes, the oracle of Delphi instructed Cadmus to find and follow a special cow who bore the mark of a half moon on her side. He was to found a city wherever this cow ultimately laid down to rest. Soon after Cadmus and the cow found their spot, Cadmus sent some friends to a spring to collect water and a terrible dragon who guarded the spring killed them all. Cadmus took revenge on the dragon, slaying him, and was then instructed by the goddess Athena to sow the dragon's teeth in the ground. From these teeth many fierce warriors spontaneously sprang up. The men immediately began fighting with one another. The five who remained after that fight was over—the Spartoi or "sown men"—helped Cadmus to found the city of Cadmea, which was soon renamed Thebes.

This myth, which tells the story of the generation of an important Greek city and society and the founding of a network of relationality between humans, somehow largely avoids most elements of relationality. It glorifies strife, ferocity, and independence rather than collaboration or interdependence. Stories and myths soaked in autonomy and independence, as this one is, are strewn throughout the history of Western thought. Such stories help us understand the lengths to which earlier philosophers went to avoid seeing relationality as the condition out of which all humans necessarily arise and the social condition in which they necessarily exist. Better to be born "sons of the teeth of the dragon" (Davidson 2008), this myth seems to say, than to be born of a woman.

The Significance of Relationality for Moral Life. Of course, when it comes to human beings, Hobbes's mushrooms had moms and dads. Many ethicists seem to remain strangely philosophically oblivious to this simple truth. Moral value, they maintain, adheres strictly to individuals. It is individuals, not relationships or even groups, who are the proper units of moral concern. It's as if somehow humans exist as fully separated, isolated beings who not only develop utterly alone but who also live their lives completely disconnected and radically separated from one another. Feminist ethicists of several stripes take issue with this theoretical myopia. (It is important to note that other feminist philosophers embrace a feminist version of individualism that acknowledges both the moral and political importance of the agency and well-being of individuals, and especially women [Hay 2013, 23–26]. For example, Martha Nussbaum [1947–] reminds us that "self-sufficiency is a goal that has actually been endorsed by some very valuable feminist projects in the developing world, those focusing on the empowerment of women through employment, credit, and land rights" [1997, 9].)

In focusing on relationships, feminist ethicists help to determine the significance of relationality for moral life. They ask both about the moral meanings of the specific relationships in which we stand with others and also about the constitutive nature of relationality for morality itself. Relationality can spur us to reconsider and reformulate key ethical concepts, such as agency, autonomy, interests, and dignity. The feminist reconceptualization of each of those concepts moves feminists away from a primarily individualist formulation. Take dignity, for example. Philosophers tend to think that

humans are deserving of dignity because of some capacity that humans have, most frequently the ability to reason. You might think of this as how our reason or rationality distinguishes us from animals and inanimate objects, who don't think like us. The fact that we can reason makes us distinctive and morally special. We are deserving of better moral treatment or greater moral regard than other nonreasoning or only partially rational animals. But note that this is an idea that focuses exclusively on our individual capacities. Feminists challenge this ultimately atomistic idea of dignity by pointing out that dignity is a concept that only makes sense through our relationships with others, not in light of the special abilities we have as individuals (Miller 2017). We can only understand what dignity is—what it means to respect others and to treat them well morally—when we think about relationships between human beings.

Relationality can also help us to reconsider issues in mainstream ethics in need of further feminist treatment, such as friendship, love, partiality versus impartiality, special obligations, the role of the moral emotions in our relationships, and patterns of moral reasoning that incorporate partiality and particularity. Key questions that feminists ask about our relationships include the following: What does a specifically feminist kind of friendship look like? (And do Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj have one? [Sostaita 2015].) Is it sometimes appropriate to favor those we love in our moral decision making? When is love ethical and when is it oppressive? Care ethics, which we will explore in depth below, is one variety of feminist ethics that delves into the philosophical and ethical significance of relationships.

THE NONIDEAL

The final theme I want to consider, the nonideal, is in some ways an amalgamation of the three foregoing themes. When feminists criticize ethical theories for viewing humanity as predominantly independent or autonomous, what they are criticizing is the ideal nature of those ethical theories. Ideal theories commence and operate from the best of what humans can be, conveniently overlooking the ways in which we break down, fail, and fall apart.

The Vices of Ideal Theory. One the best authors to help us understand the problems with ideal theory and the importance of the nonideal as an alternative approach is philosopher Charles W. Mills. Mills identifies the multiple vices of ideal theory as follows: (1) an idealized description of the social world consisting of atomistic individuals in an oppression-free society; (2) idealized capacities, including perfect rationality and agential abilities; (3) silence on oppression in a historical sense, covering both past forms of domination and their present-day legacy; (4) ideal social institutions that bear little relation to the sometimes disadvantaging realities of actual families, government, educational, or economic structures; (5) an idealized cognitive sphere that does not register the impact of developing and living in conditions of structural injustice; and (6) strict compliance or moral agents who unfailingly follow any principles of justice on which a society agrees, without, for example, trying to game the system in some way, or who seek and uphold just institutions (Mills 2005, 168–169).

After carefully considering each item on this list of vices, Mills pauses to pose the following question: "*How in God's name could anybody think that this is the appropriate way to do ethics?*" (Mills 2005, 169; emphasis in the original). Through this humorous outburst, Mills calls attention to the ridiculousness of beginning ethical theory with humans who are perfectly rational, who have no difficult history, who always follow rules, and who want for nothing. Determining what is right and wrong in their world is not such a difficult task. But

real life is much messier and involves humans who are often irrational, who have histories of oppression, who only sometimes follow rules, and who have a variety of complex needs. The energy behind Mills's frustration is palpable and well-warranted: when one piles up all of the vices of ideal theory, the absurdity of doing ethics in this way with this ridiculous set of assumptions becomes clear. Mills helps us see the importance of theorizing the nonideal and the value of the nonideal to future philosophical exchange. Many feminist ethicists appreciate the value of the nonideal and make it a cornerstone of feminist ethics. Moreover, feminist ethicists share Mills's incredulity about the standard content of ethical theories. They feel a sense of urgency regarding alternatives because real-life questions about ending oppression and suffering are on the line.

The Virtues of Nonideal Theory. Against this backdrop, Mills juxtaposes multiple virtues of nonideal theory. I will focus on two of these virtues, though, as we will see, both are considerable and complex. One virtue has to do with what Mills calls "nonidealized descriptive mapping concepts" (2005, 174). In short, this virtue is that the nonideal observer can see things that the ideal observer cannot (176). In the following quotation, Mills provides a framework in which we can begin to understand:

> The crucial common claim … is that all theorizing, both moral and nonmoral, takes place in an intellectual realm dominated by concepts, assumptions, norms, values, and framing perspectives that reflect the experience and group interests of the privileged group (whether the bourgeoisie, or men, or whites). So a simple empiricism will not work as a cognitive strategy; one has to be self-conscious about the concepts that "spontaneously" occur to one, since many of these concepts will not arise naturally but as the result of social structures and hegemonic ideational patterns. In particular, it will often be the case that dominant concepts will obscure certain crucial realities, blocking them from sight, or naturalizing them, while on the other hand, concepts necessary for accurately mapping these realities will be absent. Whether in terms of concepts of the self, or of humans in general, or in the cartography of the social, it will be necessary to scrutinize the dominant conceptual tools and the way the boundaries are drawn. (Mills 2005, 175)

Through nonideal theory, we can begin to perceive differently. We are able to engage the concepts and norms that we take to be "natural" through self-reflexive critique, revealing the ways in which concepts that appear to have the status of natural law are instead carefully maintained, socially dominant notions that result in the systematic privileging of a few at the expense of the well-being of many. Ideal theory does not have this same power. Nonideal theory and the concepts it provides give our moral perception a serious boost.

Mills's second virtue involves normative concepts. Now, as normative concepts are themselves ideals, it would seem that an ideal theoretical approach to them couldn't be all bad. But Mills finds them lacking in several ways. Take the example of the concept of purity. "In abstraction," Mills writes,

> it sounds innocent enough—surely purity is good, as against impurity. Who could object to that? But consider its historic use in connection with race. For many decades in the United States and elsewhere, racial purity was an ideal, and part of the point of anti-miscegenation law was to preserve the "purity" of the white race. Since blackness was defined by the "one-drop rule" … the idea of black purity would have been a contradiction in terms. (Mills 2005, 176)

Mills rightly argues that though seemingly innocuous in theory, purity can function rather nefariously in practice. As an abstract concept, it seems fine. But when mixed with

racial oppression in real historical circumstances, purity becomes the stuff of whiteness and morphs into a concept that cannot even be applied to blackness.

Mills also points to how experience shapes concepts. Returning to the era and example of *Mad Men*, the successful 1960s advertising executive who believes that the love of his mother and now his wife is natural, good, and his right is unlikely to generate the concept of exploitative emotional labor. Why would he when love has only ever served him sweetly and well? He will be incapable of seeing the work his wife and mother do to remember birthdays, schedule doctors' visits, organize family social events, and recall who has which food preferences as forms of labor at all. It is nonideal theory and the way in which it can center the experiences of those who have been exploited that proves essential here.

With these virtues and the pitfalls of the vices in mind, the strengths of nonideal theory over ideal theory should now be clear. Feminist ethics often prides itself on advancing and valuing forms of nonideal theory, as we will see in the next section, where we explore three varieties of feminist ethics.

THREE VARIETIES OF FEMINIST ETHICS

In the last section, we explored feminist ethics through four major themes that cut across subcategories of feminist ethics. For example, dependency is a concept important to both liberal and care varieties of feminist ethics, though in notably different ways, whereas relationality features heavily, though differently, in both care ethics and transnational feminist ethics. And arguably, the theme of oppression is central to all three theories. Appreciating the ways in which themes weave through different varieties of feminist ethics is important. So, too, is understanding the specific content of those varieties. That is the task of this section.

Feminist ethics represents a diverse collection of ethical beliefs and theories. The area of study is so rich, in fact, that providing an overview of all feminist ethical theories is not possible here. Believing that fortune favors the bold, however, I offer the following list of feminist ethical theories, though this list is almost certainly incomplete. Varieties of feminist ethical thought include: liberal, Marxist and socialist, radical, care, transnational, global, decolonial, multicultural, Black feminist, ecofeminist, existentialist, materialist, poststructuralist, postmodern, psychoanalytic, and pragmatist. I have picked three of these theories to describe in greater depth here, selected both because they draw on different strengths and emphases in feminist philosophy, so as to provide readers with a broad experience of feminist ethics, and because of the interesting tensions that exist between them.

CARE ETHICS

Sometimes people falsely interpret care ethics to be the leading or even the only feminist ethical theory. In fact, care ethics is not synonymous with feminist ethics; it is merely one important subcategory. Care ethics originally stemmed from studies of gender and developmental psychology. It raises interesting questions about the interaction of gender and morality: Do women and men tend to take different approaches to morality and ethical life? Do they think through moral dilemmas in the same ways or do they draw on different resources when deciding what to do in a tough ethical situation?

A Different Moral Voice. Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–1987) and Carol Gilligan (1936–) are two developmental psychologists who sought to answer these questions. Gilligan took issue

with the model of moral development that Kohlberg (her mentor) espoused. In Kohlberg's findings, boys consistently came out ahead of girls in their moral development. Gilligan thought this was curious and decided to investigate whether something other than girls' moral developmental inferiority was afoot.

Gilligan detected what she came to call women and girls' "different moral voice," which inspired the title of her famous 1982 book, *In a Different Voice*. We can understand this difference through how two children, Jake and Amy, responded to a now famous dilemma—the Heinz dilemma—originally designed by Kohlberg. Gilligan describes the Heinz dilemma this way:

> The dilemma that these eleven-year-olds were asked to resolve was one in the series devised by Kohlberg to measure moral development in adolescence by presenting a conflict between moral norms and exploring the logic of its resolution. In this particular dilemma, a man named Heinz considers whether or not to steal a drug which he cannot afford to buy in order to save the life of his wife. In the standard format of Kohlberg's interviewing procedure, the description of the dilemma itself—Heinz's predicament, the wife's disease, the druggist's refusal to lower his price—is followed by the question, "Should Heinz steal the drug?" The reasons for and against stealing are then explored through a series of questions that vary and extend the parameters of the dilemma in a way designed to reveal the underlying structure of moral thought. (Gilligan 1982, 25–26)

Jake and Amy have very different responses to the dilemma. Jake reasons this way:

> For one thing, a human life is worth more than money, and if the druggist only makes $1,000, he is still going to live, but if Heinz doesn't steal the drug, his wife is going to die … the druggist can get a thousand dollars later from rich people with cancer, but Heinz can't get his wife again. (Gilligan 1982, 26)

Jake is clear on the fact that Heinz should steal the drug and views the conflict inherent within the dilemma as one between the ethical priorities of property (the druggist's right to sell the drug) and life (Heinz getting the medicine for his wife so she won't die).

Amy reads the situation differently and offers a contrasting response. Amy does not believe Heinz should steal the drug:

> I think there might be other ways besides stealing it, like if he could borrow the money or make a loan or something.… If he stole the drug, he might save his wife, but if he did, he might have to go to jail, and then his wife might get sicker again, and he couldn't get more of the drug, and it might not be good. So, they should really just talk it out and find some other way to make the money. (Gilligan 1982, 28)

Amy's focus is not on the tension between two principles, but rather on Heinz's relationship with his wife and on ensuring care for her over a longer period of time. Amy also pushes past the constructed confines of the dilemma—property or life?—to think more creatively about other solutions that Heinz might consider, such as borrowing money to pay for the drug.
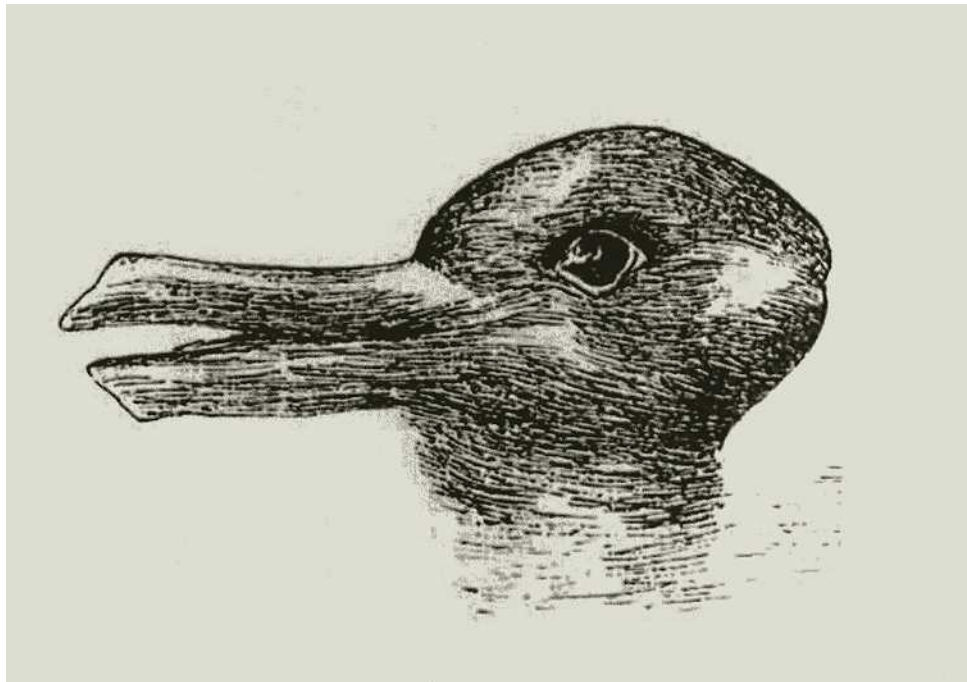
While Kohlberg thought that Jake's focus on principles and logic evidenced greater moral maturity than Amy's less principle-focused answer, Gilligan saw something else. Gilligan believed that the children evidenced two different moral orientations—one an ethic of justice (Jake) and the other an ethic of care (Amy).

The Justice Perspective versus the Care Perspective. The justice perspective embodies the ideals of impartiality, autonomy, fairness, rules, and rights. This viewpoint may sound

PHILOSOPHY: FEMINISM

familiar because it is inherent in much of the Western philosophical tradition. The man of justice makes moral decisions in accordance with reason alone, keeping emotions out of the mix. His relationships with others do not affect his moral reasoning. While he may feel a pull to save his mother first from a burning building, he will see that there may be compelling reasons to give someone else priority. He respects rights and follows rules. He sees himself as autonomous and fair and impartial.

In contrast, the care perspective embraces partiality, interdependence, compassion, relationships, and sometimes making exceptions. These values are likely less immediately familiar and represent an alternative to more traditional moral approaches. Those who embody the care perspective—frequently thought to be the perspective of women—see the relationships in which they stand with others as ethically important and highly relevant to their moral deliberations. Their fundamental conception of themselves is as part of an interdependent web of existence. They are likely to meet others' difficulties with compassion. They find moral significance in emotions. And they recognize that while rules are important, exceptions to those rules can be not only morally permissible, but necessary. We can see evidence of these two perspectives in Jake's and Amy's responses to the Heinz dilemma.

Gilligan illustrates the relationships between the moral orientations of justice and care using Gestalt images. The most famous of these images is the duck/rabbit. When you look at the image in one way, you see a duck. When you rearrange your perceptual organization, you see a rabbit. The justice and care perspectives represent two different ways we might

Duck/rabbit illusion. *From John Jastrow, "The Mind's Eye,"* Popular Science Monthly*, 1899.*
HERITAGE IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES.

perceive moral situations in our lives. Certain features of the situation (e.g., autonomy or interdependence, rights or relationships, fairness or compassion) are more prominent in one case or the other. They orient how we interpret those situations and the resources we bring to bear to solve them. They represent our different moral aptitudes, patterns of reasoning, and even the forms of moral character we take to be most important.

As a final note, it is also interesting that just as most of us are able to see both the duck and the rabbit, both moral orientations are open to people of all genders. Gilligan came to appreciate this idea too. While Gilligan's initial approach to the relationship between gender and morality was essentialist—she believed that women identified with care while men identified with justice—she subsequently came to recognize that although social conditioning shapes men's and women's ethical tendencies, there is nothing necessarily biological about it: women can be drawn to justice just as men can be drawn to care.

LIBERAL FEMINISM

Building on the distinction between justice and care we just explored, within feminist philosophy there is a kind of ethics that begins from and draws heavily upon the justice perspective. In fact, one finds justice at its very core. This is *liberal feminism*. Liberal feminism responds to the overarching matter of gender oppression that is the focus of feminist ethics by seeking equality between the genders. Liberal feminists propose equality between the genders in both the public and private spheres as an antidote to gender oppression.

What does equality between the genders in both public and private spheres mean? How do we accomplish it? In the private sphere, liberal feminists promote the ethical importance of domestic partnerships and marriages that are genuinely equal, especially in terms of how people divide the labor of running a household. Nearly thirty years ago, sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1940–) identified a pervasive form of inequality in the private sphere, which she called women's "double day" or "second shift." After working a full day outside of the home, women faced a load of housework and childcare labor largely on their own. In heterosexual partnerships, when both spouses work outside the home, only one—the woman—tended to work inside the home too.

Although Hochschild originally published *The Second Shift* in 1989, this problem persists. While men are now carrying more of the burden of work at home than they ever have, working moms still spend nearly double the time on domestic work than working dads do (Wang 2013). Examination of this inequality and its implications for how it impedes women's career aspirations represents some of the important work liberal feminists do. That women shoulder a disproportionate share of domestic labor isn't just the unfortunate way things are. Instead, it is a vital ethical issue and a clear instance of injustice.

Liberal feminists demand equality in the public sphere as well. A great historical example of this is the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which calls for equal rights for citizens of all genders, hence guaranteeing an end to gender-based discrimination on matters as diverse as employment, property, and equal access to public services. Alice Paul (1885–1977), a trailblazing leader of the women's suffrage movement, originally authored the ERA in 1923, but it wasn't until nearly fifty years later that both the US House of Representatives and the Senate passed the amendment. Even so, it stumbled when the required three-fourths of the states failed to ratify it. Instituting the ERA remains a strong desire of feminists. And it is a fantastic example of liberal feminism because it would create structural and institutional changes that could bring about significant gains for women's equality.

In addition to equality, liberal feminists frame their approach to ethics through several key concepts that include freedom, autonomy, and ultimately, self-determination. Liberal feminists address freedom in various forms, including both *negative* freedom (or freedom from harmful circumstances), such as freedom from coercion, and *positive* freedom (or the freedom to do things), such as freedom of expression. For liberal feminists, freedom is best understood through the concepts of personal and political autonomy. In the realm of personal autonomy, women should be able to have substantial control over their choices and circumstances throughout their lives, including whether or not they decide to have a family and the profession they decide to enter. In the realm of political autonomy, liberal feminists seek a significant role for women in authoring the conditions of our shared, public lives. Ultimately, liberal feminists strive for as much self-determination for women as they can. It is their belief that it is women's ethical right to shape the contours of their lives to the greatest extent possible in ways both private and public.

Support for women's reproductive autonomy serves as a good example of how liberal feminists embrace personal and political autonomy. Reproductive autonomy involves a woman's right to determine whether, when, how, and with whom she procreates. Liberal feminists have been strong proponents in both theory and practice of a woman's right to choose if and when she has children. Reproductive autonomy involves vital real-world issues, such as access to obstetric and gynecological health care, birth control, and abortion. For liberal feminists, a significant practical component of women's freedom involves their bodies. Given that women's bodies are the ones in and through which gestation and birth take place, liberal feminists argue that the ultimate decision about reproductive matters belongs to women themselves. It is of primary importance that a woman retain full control over her body by determining what happens to and through it, including the possibility of creating and bringing another human being into this world.

TRANSNATIONAL FEMINIST ETHICS

Our focus takes a global turn with the final subvariety of feminist ethics we will examine, namely, transnational feminist ethics. There are three interesting features of transnational feminist approaches to ethics to consider here: intersectionality, self-reflexive criticism, and activism.

Transnational feminist ethicists are concerned with both similarities and differences in the forms gender oppression can take worldwide. We might first consider these similarities and differences by looking at two hypothetical instances of a prevalent form of gender oppression: sexual violence. In the first hypothetical case, a woman is raped by someone she meets at a fraternity party at a major university in the United States. In the second hypothetical case, a woman of a similar age is raped by a friend in a rural part of Namibia. What is the relationship between these two events? Are they representative of a global system of sexual oppression, even in light of the vastly different material and social circumstances in which they take place? Transnational feminist ethicists will make such a comparison with great care, asking whether the vast power differentials between these two cases mean that they represent two instances of the same system of oppression or whether they might be better understood through a wider, more complex representation of oppression and intersectionality.

Transnational feminist ethicists argue that we cannot understand global gender oppression properly absent a strong sense of intersectionality, that is, absent awareness of the ways in which gender oppression is interwoven with other forms of oppression, including racial, class-based, and sexual forms of oppression. It is this awareness that causes

transnational feminist ethicists to be critical of global feminist ethicists, finding their slogan "sisterhood is global" to be suspect. The concern is that slogans such as these hide power differentials that exist between women across the globe. Although the sexual assaults described in the hypothetical examples given above are arguably equally harmful, the opportunities for response and repair in both contexts will differ, often dramatically. It is these kinds of differences that get papered over when we move too quickly and take gender oppression to be an undifferentiated, worldwide phenomenon.

Methodologies of self-reflection and self-criticism can help enable awareness of the ways in which certain feminist approaches inadvertently erase important differences between women. Self-reflexive criticism represents another key element of transnational feminist ethics. What this means is that transnational feminist ethicists encourage all feminists to be aware of the power they wield, sometimes over other women. This kind of critical engagement with oneself is particularly important for women who hold social privilege—for example, White, middle-class women in the Global North. While these women undoubtedly experience gender oppression, they also participate in other systems of oppression that harm, for example, poor women of color. The role that sweatshop labor plays in producing much of the clothing that North Americans purchase and wear is one example of possible complicity in the oppression of others.

At its heart, transnational feminist ethics is both a theory and a practice of feminist ethics. A final feature of this subvariety of feminist ethics features the practical side of things. Transnational feminist ethicists are known for their commitment to activism. This means that while they are very good at talking the theoretical talk of global justice for women, they are equally committed to walking the walk. They are also very thoughtful about the forms that activism takes, making sure that their activism is as ethical as their theory in the sense of respecting the wishes and needs of local women. Transnational feminist activism must therefore embody both the intersectional awareness and the self-reflexive criticism of the theory in order to avoid forms of cultural dominance and insensitivity.

An example of such tensions is present in the case of Amina Lawal, a Nigerian woman who was convicted of adultery and sentenced to death by stoning in 2002. Alison Jaggar (2005) and Leela Fernandes (2013, 20) both describe how the interventions of Western activists into the case (primarily through widely circulated online petitions that decried the sentence) failed to heed what local Nigerian activists were actually calling for. The local activists requested that international activist groups not send petitions, for they were concerned about the ways in which such petitions could actually serve to strengthen opposition to overturning the sentence. Jaggar provides particularly incisive analysis about the role of Western activists:

> Westerners concerned about the plight of poor women in poor countries should not focus exclusively, and perhaps not primarily, on the cultural traditions of those countries. Since gender inequality is correlated so strongly with poverty, perhaps we should begin by asking why so many countries are so poor. To do so would encourage us to reflect on our own contribution to the plight of poor women … [which] would show more respect for non-Western women's ability to look after their own affairs according to their values and priorities. Citizens and residents of countries (such as the United States and those of the European Union) that exert disproportionate control over the global order bear direct responsibility for how that order affects women elsewhere in the world. Rather than simply blaming Amina Lawal's culture, we should begin by taking our own feet off her neck. (Jaggar 2005, 75)

Jaggar's analysis provides a powerful point on which to end. It is a quotation that clearly embraces and embodies both the intersectional awareness and the self-reflexive critique typical of transnational feminist ethics.

Summary

The overarching aim of this chapter has been to acquaint readers with the richness and depth of feminist ethics. Whether we are analyzing feminist ethics in terms of themes such as oppression, vulnerability and dependency, relationality, and the nonideal, or through its many subvarieties, including care ethics, liberal feminism, and transnational feminist ethics, we can see that this is an approach to ethics with much to offer. It invites the engagement of its readers through thought-provoking questions about whether morality is itself in some way gendered, as well as how best to achieve equality between genders, all the while thinking carefully about the role of other intertwined forms of oppression.

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