

## **FEMINIST VIRTUE ETHICS**

**Karen Stohr**

**Georgetown University**

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### OVERVIEW

The task of this chapter is a large one, since there is no single answer to the question of what is virtue ethics or, for that matter, the question of what is feminism. Whether or not virtue ethics proves to be compatible with feminism depends on what version of virtue ethics we have in mind and with what considerations in feminist theory we are most concerned. There are ways in which virtue ethics seems particularly amenable to important currents in feminist thought, as well as ways in which it does not fit well with feminist aims.

One of the striking features of virtue ethics is the extent to which women philosophers have played a crucial role in returning it to prominence on the contemporary scene and making it a legitimate competitor to other moral theories. The fact that virtue ethics has been developed and defended by women philosophers does not, of course, suffice to make it compatible with feminism, much less a significant contribution to feminist theory. But it is worth noting, and perhaps this article will provide some insight into why virtue ethics has been attractive to women philosophers in ways that other moral theories have not always been.

Let me acknowledge from the outset the quite wide array of ethical frameworks that are referred to as versions of virtue ethics. The most well-known such version is the broadly neo-Aristotelian one defended by Elizabeth Anscombe (1958), Philippa Foot (2003), Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), and Rosalind Hursthouse (1999), among others. There are, of course,

important differences among these philosophers, some of which will be discussed below. For the moment, however, I will group them together. This set of theories will be my primary focus in this essay, both because of their predominance and also because Aristotle's notorious sexism might seem too deeply entrenched in his theory to make any form of Aristotelian virtue ethics compatible with feminism, though I will argue that this is not the case.

But there are other versions of virtue ethics. Christine Swanton (2003) has developed a pluralistic version of virtue ethics which is Aristotelian in some ways, but departs from neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics in important ways. There are also accounts with distinctively Humean roots, such as the sentimentalist virtue ethics developed by Michael Slote (2001, 2007). The different types of virtue ethics each have different affinities with feminist theory, and there are strengths and weaknesses of each approach when it comes to thinking about virtue ethics through a feminist lens.

An important feature of both contemporary feminist ethics and contemporary virtue ethics is that both of them developed in part out of a deep dissatisfaction with other normative theories on offer. The course of feminist ethics has been indelibly shaped by the psychologist Carol Gilligan's critique of the gendered implications of Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. According to Gilligan (1982), Kohlberg's account prioritized types of moral reasoning loosely grouped together as concerns about justice. Gilligan offered an alternative picture of nuanced moral reasoning based in considerations of care and empathy, giving rise to what has become known as the ethics of care. Gilligan's original work had suggested that women and girls tend to employ care-based reasoning more frequently than justice-based reasoning, thereby consigning themselves to a lower rung of Kohlberg's moral development ladder. That particular claim turned out not to be well-founded, but the care perspective on ethics took hold

and has played an important role in feminist ethics ever since. The original justice/care debate has been superseded by more complex pictures of both justice-based and care-based theories of ethics (Noddings 1984, Calhoun 1988, Card 1990), and in any case, not all versions of feminist ethics are properly understood as ethics of care. Even so, the considerations originally raised by Gilligan continue to form an important set of concerns about ethical theory seen from a feminist standpoint.

Contemporary virtue ethics has its roots in a parallel dissatisfaction with dominant ways of thinking about moral theory. This dissatisfaction is perhaps best exemplified in Elizabeth Anscombe's foundational article, "Modern Moral Philosophy," in which she argues that something like Aristotelian virtue ethics provides the only coherent path to thinking about ethics productively (1958). Bernard Williams produced an even more sweeping critique of ethical theory in his book, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985). Although Williams saw ancient ethical theories as providing greater insight into the practice of ethics than their Enlightenment counterparts, he never defended a position that could readily be classified as a version of virtue ethics. His anti-theoretical stance, however, caught on among those looking for alternative ways of thinking about ethics.

These anti-theory sentiments in both feminist ethics and virtue ethics are reflected especially well in the work of Annette Baier (1994, 2004). Baier's take on virtue ethics is deeply Humean and in many ways at odds with aspects of more traditional Aristotelian virtue ethics. Still, her work—particularly her account of trust and its significance—has been influential in the movement to look towards virtue ethics for new ways of thinking about ethics through a feminist lens.

Not all versions of feminist ethics or virtue ethics are driven by anti-theory commitments, and so it would be a mistake to say that a suspicion of moral theorizing is somehow essential to either enterprise. But it is characteristic of defenders of both theories that they are skeptical about the resources of moral theories like Kantianism and various forms of consequentialism to capture the totality of moral experience, particularly the experience of women. The question is whether virtue ethics, in any of its myriad forms, is in a position to do better.

Let me divide the driving concerns of feminist ethics into two broad categories. The first category is the set of concerns just discussed about the need for a moral theory to account for the full range of moral experience. Obviously, the focus within feminism is on the moral experience of women, but feminist ethics has traditionally allied itself with those asking parallel and sometimes overlapping questions about the experience of men and women of color, persons with disabilities, and others who have historically suffered under oppressive and unjust social structures. Within feminist ethics, there has been a widely shared concern that with their excessive emphasis on rationality, traditional formulations of Kantianism and consequentialism are overly abstract and inattentive to important moral considerations. It is a standard tenet of feminist ethics that an adequate account of ethics will incorporate the moral significance of emotion –both its expression and its role in the exercise of moral judgment. The idea is that moral judgment is likely to go awry, or at least be incomplete, in the absence of an emotionally sensitive attunement to the particulars of a situation. An ethics adequate by feminist criteria should also give weight to the moral dimensions of activities such as raising children, caring for the sick and elderly, and maintaining social relationships, all of which have traditionally been the province of women.

The second broad category of feminist concerns includes issues that might best be described as concerns about justice and women's rights. It is hardly news that women are still not treated as the full moral and political equals of men. Women lack political standing in much of the world and suffer higher rates of poverty and general economic hardship as a result of unjust social structures and policies. Moreover, women and girls around the world are routinely subjected to sexual servitude and exploitation through prostitution, forced marriage and childbearing, sexual violence, and so forth. Identifying these deeply oppressive structures and remedying the wrongs they impose is an essential goal of feminism. Any feminist version of ethics needs to be able to employ the language of justice and human rights in a way that captures the moral weight of these issues adequately and effectively.

Conventional wisdom has it that virtue ethics may very well fare better than other moral theories with regard to the first broad category of feminist concerns, but fall short of other theories when it comes to the second category. I will suggest that conventional wisdom continues to be largely correct on this point. Virtue ethics in any of its forms is a mixed bag for feminists, including as it does both welcome new perspectives on the ethical life as experienced by women and seemingly intractable difficulties about accounting for the exploitation and injustice that continues to characterize the lives of women around the world. At the end of this essay, I will point to what I think is the most promising way forward for feminist virtue ethics.

### SENTIMENTALIST VIRTUE ETHICS AND FEMINISM

Let me now turn to the task of considering how particular versions of virtue ethics fare with regard to these two broad sets of concerns, beginning with care-based virtue ethics. Since care-based virtue ethics is being addressed elsewhere in this volume, I will say comparatively

little about it here. But given the deep theoretical connections between certain forms of care-based virtue ethics and feminist ethics, it would be remiss not to include at least a short discussion.

The most prominent current version of care-based virtue ethics is the sentimentalist virtue ethics defended by Michael Slote in *Morals from Motives* (2001) and refined in *Moral Sentimentalism* (2013). Slote, who emphasizes his intellectual debt to David Hume, Francis Hutcheson, and James Martineau, is especially concerned that sentimentalist virtue ethics be deeply compatible with feminism (2007, 2011). We might describe Slote's work as an effort to bring care ethics and virtue ethics under one theoretical roof. Slote takes the position that caring is the primary virtue of moral agents and that all other moral considerations can be adequately described in terms of care. Unsurprisingly, his account of care is quite robust and incorporates into the notion of care far more by way of moral attitudes and judgments than what early care ethicists like Gilligan and Noddings included. But Slote is clear that his care-based ethics should be understood as a deliberately feminist way of thinking about virtue. Slote thinks that most (though not all) philosophers in Western history have failed to attend to the moral richness of caring, in part because they have failed to attend to women's experiences. The philosophical marginalization of care and the actual marginalization of women are thus connected in his view.

Sentimentalist virtue ethics generally fares well when it comes to the first broad category of feminist concerns, though Virginia Held (2011) has argued that there are important points of departure between Slote's sentimentalism and the ethics of care. With its emphasis on care and empathy and its attentiveness to the broad array of contexts in which caring plays a role, it captures the moral importance of emotional attunement and attentiveness to the needs of particular others. Slote is of course aware of the need to address issues arising from the second

category of concerns about justice and women's rights. He thinks that care, properly understood, can accommodate these concerns. Someone who is virtuously empathetic to the oppressive circumstances in which women find themselves will be motivated to ensure that their rights are respected and that they are treated fairly. Others, myself included, are not so sure. Held (2011) has expressed skepticism that any account of care can capture all the concerns of justice, particularly in circumstances where the victims of oppression are not in a position to acknowledge their own rights. Moreover, an account of justice needs to be able to demand that people respect women's rights regardless of their motives and attitudes. Undoubtedly Slote is correct that fully caring people are also concerned with justice, but the attempt to derive all demands of justice from the concept of care risks not only downplaying the significance of justice, but also stretching the concept of caring too far beyond its intuitive meaning.

### ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUE ETHICS AND FEMINISM

The most familiar and probably most influential version of virtue ethics consists of a set of theories that are more or less broadly Aristotelian. This is also the version of virtue ethics that tends to draw the most suspicion from feminists, and not without reason. I will return to that below. But let me first remark on something noteworthy, which is that most of the philosophers responsible for bringing renewed versions Aristotelian virtue ethics to the forefront of ethical theory have been women: Elizabeth Anscombe (1958), Philippa Foot (1978, 2003), Rosalind Hursthouse (1999), Martha Nussbaum (1986, 1988), Julia Annas (1993), and Nancy Sherman (1989), to name a few. As I said above, the mere fact that a higher-than-normal percentage of women philosophers find an ethical theory appealing hardly shows that it is compatible with feminism. Still, it should give us reason to look more closely.

Most neo-Aristotelian versions of virtue ethics (and perhaps all that accept that designation) are eudaimonistic. By this I mean that they have at their center a robust conception of human flourishing. Not all versions of virtue ethics that draw on Aristotle have this feature. For instance, Christine Swanton's pluralistic virtue ethics (2003), which has significant Aristotelian elements, is deliberately non-eudaimonist. The eudaimonism characteristic of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics is part of what feminists find both appealing and unappealing about it, and so it warrants further exploration.

On the traditional Aristotelian picture, human flourishing is tied to the nature of human beings as rational animals. To flourish as a human being is to live well as a rational animal in community with others (because Aristotle regarded human beings as fundamentally social or political creatures). Virtues are excellences of a human being that conduce to flourishing. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle himself appears to have taken the strong stand that virtues are necessary for flourishing, meaning that one cannot flourish in the absence of the virtues. They are not, however, sufficient because some of them, such as magnificence, require external goods like wealth for their exercise and also because some external goods, such as friends, are essential to flourishing in their own right (1101a15, 1122b28, 1169b10).

Aristotle also held a controversial view sometimes called the unity of the virtues, but more properly called the reciprocity of the virtues. This is the view that the moral virtues and the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom stand in a reciprocal relationship with each other, such that one cannot have the full moral virtues in the absence of practical wisdom, nor practical wisdom in the absence of the moral virtues (1144a8-10, 1144b31). Not all neo-Aristotelians accept the reciprocity thesis, but it plays an important role in Aristotle's own virtue ethics. For Aristotle, the exercise of virtue is a complex skill, involving both appropriate emotional



attunement (the job of the moral virtues) and correct judgment honed through experience (the job of practical wisdom).

All these aspects of Aristotle's theory have given rise to concerns among feminists about the compatibility of Aristotelian virtue ethics with central feminist tenets. Aristotle himself held a number of deeply sexist beliefs, including perhaps most pertinently the view, expressed in the *Politics*, that women were incapable of full virtue because they were incapable of acting on their deliberations in the manner necessary for virtue (1260a12). Of course, the mere fact that Aristotle held sexist beliefs doesn't mean that an Aristotelian virtue ethics somehow commits defenders to those same beliefs. It does not seem hard to reject Aristotle's claims about the stunted capacities of women and natural slaves while still adhering to his more general account of virtue and flourishing. And yet, there are other concerns about the extent to which eudaimonistic neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics is inextricably wrapped up with dubious forms of essentialism, or at least an overly directive understanding of what human virtue and flourishing are (Conly 2001).

Suppose a culture takes it to be the case that women and men are essentially quite different creatures, and that a woman's flourishing consists primarily in domestic activities centered on a husband and children. In such a society, the virtues or excellences of a woman in those cultures would likely consist in character traits that include submissiveness, nurturing, caretaking, and so forth. Women who do not exhibit those traits (or men who do) would be considered not virtuous.

Neo-Aristotelians can, of course, respond by claiming that the beliefs of such a culture are simply false. Indeed, the ethical naturalism defended by Foot (2003), Hursthouse (1999), and MacIntyre (1999) does not appear commit neo-Aristotelianism to any kind of gender-based

essentialism. And yet, part of the appeal of virtue ethics for feminists has been in its sensitivity to the social, historical, and cultural circumstances of human life. This has sometimes led to circumstances in which philosophers are applauding and criticizing the same text on feminist grounds. Thus, Annette Baier (1994) praises MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1984) for its potential openness to women's experience while Susan Moller Okin (1996) criticizes it for its reinforcement of suspect patriarchal norms. (Baier later added a postscript to her essay modifying her praise of MacIntyre in light of Okin's remarks.)

Okin worries that the sexism implicit in Aristotle's account is too deeply entrenched to be fully eradicated (1996: 212-213). Versions of virtue ethics that stay too close to Aristotle risk systematically ignoring the lives and work of women. Nussbaum (1992) takes the opposite view, arguing that Aristotle's attentiveness to the material conditions in which human beings live makes his theory ideal for articulating the needs of women in an unjust society and the importance of addressing them. I will return to Nussbaum's defense of Aristotelian ways of thinking later. But first, let us consider a rather different direction from which feminists have criticized neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics.

In her 2005 book, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*, Lisa Tessman points to the extent to which the development of virtue and the capacity to exercise it are compromised in oppressive societies, as is the link between virtue and flourishing. Tessman worries that the cultivation of virtue itself may be impossible in oppressive circumstances and also that some virtues necessary to survive or oppose oppression will prove to be "burdened," meaning that they are systematically disconnected from their possessor's own flourishing. Those struggling under the weight of oppression may, for instance, need to cultivate sustained anger, and that anger may preclude the agent from flourishing. Although Tessman finds neo-

Aristotelianism compelling, she wonders whether it can make sense of the moral experience of oppressed people. Aristotle, of course, did not hold the view that flourishing is within everyone's grasp, and so the fact that some people are unable to flourish, particularly as a result of material conditions, is not a problem for his theory per se. But Tessman's critique does call for a closer look at the relationship between virtue and flourishing in oppressive societies, as well as at the extent to which the virtues needed for flourishing depend for their cultivation and exercise on the absence of oppressive forces.

Tessman also considers the question of whether oppressors are able to flourish in an oppressive society, a topic discussed by Marilyn Friedman as well (2009). If we take for granted that oppressors lack at least some virtues, the existence of flourishing oppressors seems to cast doubt on Aristotle's claim that virtue is a necessary condition of flourishing. This is especially troubling if oppressors seem to be flourishing because of (and not just in spite of) their status as oppressors. Indeed, Aristotle's own account of the good human life seems to depend on the person's being free from many of the menial tasks of ordinary human existence, which are presumably being carried out by others so that the oppressor is free to engage in contemplation and other fine activities.

Aristotle's theory of the reciprocity of the virtues is also potentially threatened by Tessman's critique, since it implies that people—whether oppressors or oppressed—who lack one virtue as a result of living in an unjust society must thereby lack the rest. This would mean that it would be impossible for an oppressed person, beset by anger at her circumstances, to count as fully exercising courage in her efforts to fight it. Likewise, it would imply that any oppressor would fail to have any other virtues in light of having the vices associated with participation in oppressive societies. Neo-Aristotelians could, of course, just live with these

conclusions and accept that circumstances of oppression make both virtue and flourishing impossible. This might be seen as idealizing the theory beyond the point at which it can still be a helpful way of thinking about ethics. Or it might just be seen as an unfortunate pervasive fact of human life, in which case neo-Aristotelianism is merely depressing.

Regardless, in order for neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics to be fully responsive to feminist concerns, it must have a way of accounting for the moral experiences of people living under circumstances that seem to preclude flourishing. Perhaps even more significantly, it must have a way of articulating just what is wrong with such circumstances and what reason the people living in those circumstances have to alter them. Nearly everyone believes that oppressors have moral reason to stop being oppressors. The question is whether virtue ethics can make sense of that.

In most versions of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, we have compelling moral reasons to act for the sake of our communities, since we cannot flourish in the absence of a thriving social and political society. If it's plausible to think that oppressors cannot flourish in an oppressive community, then they have reason to make at least their own communities more just. But if oppressors can indeed flourish in conditions of oppression, the problem becomes more complicated to resolve (Friedman 2009). What moral reason can virtue ethics offer oppressors to do what is needed to enable their less fortunate neighbors to flourish as well? For virtue ethics to really be responsive to feminist considerations, it would be helpful to have some kind of answer to that question.

Let us step back and evaluate neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics in light of those two broad categories of concerns that feminists tend to have. The first category focuses on the totality of moral experience, especially the experience of women, and whether an ethical theory can account adequately for those experiences. It would seem that neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics fares

well in this regard. Correct moral judgment demands emotional sensitivity and an attentiveness to the particulars of situations unavailable to those without direct experience of the circumstances in which those decisions are made. This accords nicely with the call to acknowledge the wisdom of women's experiences, particularly in the domains in which women have traditionally exercised their agency most thoroughly. Although Aristotle himself did not recognize the importance of women's role in the moral education of their children, his theory leaves plenty of space to give the care and education of young children its due.

And yet, the capacity of virtue ethics, whether care-based or neo-Aristotelian, to incorporate these aspects of women's moral experiences is no longer the distinguishing, feminist-friendly theoretical feature that it may once have been. When virtue ethics first came on the scene, it seemed to be alone among moral theories in emphasizing issues like moral education and the role of emotion in moral judgment. But in the intervening years, other theories have caught up. Consequentialists began developing more nuanced accounts of emotion and moral judgment. Kantian ethicists took up the *Metaphysics of Morals* and *Lectures on Ethics* and changed the direction of Kantian ethics, with a new focus on Kant's accounts of virtue and emotion. Indeed, the traditional sharp distinctions between the defining elements of Kantian ethics and those of virtue ethics have become increasingly hard to identify. The advantages of virtue ethics over Kantianism with regard to issues like the importance of emotion cannot be taken for granted, although this is not to say that they have disappeared (Stohr 2002).

The second category of concerns includes the issues just discussed in the context of flourishing. Can neo-Aristotelianism provide the necessary critique of social structures and political systems that perpetuate the subordination and domination of women? Can it make sense of claims that certain practices and policies violate women's rights and unjustly treat them as

having a lesser moral status than men? Aristotle thought of justice first and foremost as a personal virtue, and while he had a great deal to say about the political organization of the polis, he appears rather too willing to allow social arrangements that benefit a few at the expense of many. A feminist neo-Aristotelian must find a way to block this result.

The comparative disadvantage of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics when it comes to employing the language of domination and oppression is exacerbated by the success of other theories in articulating those problems. Although Kant himself was not exactly a bastion of feminist insight, his theory has the resources for an exceptionally powerful critique of the political, social, economic and sexual subordination of women. Likewise, utilitarians have been able to launch compelling arguments against unjust social arrangements by pointing to the devastating effects that inequality and injustice have on those who suffer under it. So, if virtue ethics cannot address these issues in a plausible way, it will fall short of other theories in terms of its practical value for feminist ethics.

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN FEMINIST VIRTUE ETHICS

In my view, one of the more promising directions for feminist virtue ethics to take is one that cedes some territory to other theories when it comes to talking about justice. The approach I have in mind is the capabilities approach, particularly as developed by Martha Nussbaum (2000, 2011). For the most part, the capabilities approach is regarded as falling under the domain of political philosophy rather than ethics, focusing as it does on issues of social justice with regard to institutions, practices, and the distribution of resources. Moreover, there are many dimensions on which the capabilities approach, with its debt to liberalism, seems more at home among Kantian theories, or even utilitarianism, than it does in virtue ethics. And yet, it might be

employed within a virtue ethics framework to make it more compatible with the aims of feminist philosophy.

The centerpiece of Nussbaum's capabilities approach is the idea that human beings have certain capacities and functionings, the realization of which is essential to a flourishing human life. Whether they become capabilities, or real opportunities, depends in part on whether certain material conditions are met, just as whether a person flourishes in Aristotle's sense depends in part on whether she has consistent access to the external goods necessary for flourishing.

Nussbaum has long argued that Aristotle's theory is highly sensitive to the actual conditions of human life and their effects, for better and for worse, on human flourishing (1986, 1992). The interrelationship between human flourishing and circumstances in which particular human beings live, is already a central part of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. Capabilities are not exactly virtues in the usual sense, although there is some resemblance between Nussbaum's list of ten capabilities and the original Aristotelian account of virtues as excellences. Certainly Nussbaum's capabilities leave far more room for pluralism about the good life than does Aristotle's account of virtue. Still, there is much about the capabilities approach that seems compatible with neo-Aristotelian versions of virtue ethics, including the idea that an important role of government is to create and foster the conditions necessary for people to realize their capabilities. Crucially for our purposes, the capabilities approach is able to capture many of the issues of particular concern to feminists, such as unequal access to resources, laws and policies enforcing or encouraging the subjugation of women, the physical, social, and financial burdens of childbearing and childrearing, the lack of effective political agency, and so forth.

The capabilities approach rests on a broadly described, but universal understanding of human flourishing, one that applies regardless of gender. This is very much in line with recent

efforts by virtue ethicists, mentioned above, to develop a plausible form of ethical naturalism (Hursthouse 1999, Foot 2003). Nussbaum employs language and framing from Rawlsian-style liberalism in her articulation of the capabilities, but it is language and framing that could potentially be brought under a broadly construed naturalistic conception of flourishing. Even so, insofar as neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics ties the flourishing of individual human beings to the flourishing of the communities in which they live, it will be necessary for virtue ethicists to develop ways of thinking and talking about global communities and how our flourishing is bound up with that of strangers in other parts of the world. The capabilities approach offers intriguing possibilities for neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, but there is much more to be done before it can be responsive to the entire range of feminist concerns.

This essay has barely scratched the surface of the possible interplays between feminist ethics and virtue ethics. The sheer diversity of perspectives found within each approach makes exhaustive discussion difficult, but it also opens up considerable theoretical space for creative work at the intersection of the two standpoints. Feminist ethics and virtue ethics have been shaping the development of each other for some time now, and with any luck, will continue to do so to the benefit of both approaches.

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