

# Is a "Feminine" Ethic Enough?

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## ABSTRACT

One aspect of the feminine which has received much attention in recent nontraditional ethical theory (most notably in Nel Noddings' *Caring*) is the feminine practice of caring for others. The ability of the caring person to "receive" or "pay attention to" the reality of another in order to "feel with" that other is commonly presented as the most crucial ingredient to the caring relation. I argue that however important this caring attitude is to ethical relations, an ethics which focuses almost entirely on it is not enough to set us on the path to a moral society if applied within the oppressive social system of patriarchy. A feminist re-vision of this notion of caring is needed to ensure that the care women give to others does not contribute to sustaining patriarchal relations, and that women, too, receive care (from themselves, other women, and men). I offer a vision of such a feminist ethics of caring.

## RESUME

Un des aspects du féminin sur lequel les théories éthiques non-traditionnelles se sont beaucoup penchées récemment (notamment dans *Caring*, de Nel Noddings) est celui de la pratique féminine de "bienveillance" envers son prochain. L'élément principal des rapports entre la personne qui montre cette "bienveillance" et la personne qui la reçoit est le fait que la première soit capable de "capter" la réalité de l'autre, d'y "prêter attention," afin de pouvoir "ressentir" les émotions de cette autre personne. Je soutiens cependant que, bien que cette attitude de "bienveillance" soit très importante dans les relations éthiques, une éthique qui en dépendrait presque exclusivement ne suffirait pas à nous mettre sur la voie d'une société morale si elle était pratiquée dans le cadre du système social oppressif du patriarcat. Il est indispensable de procéder à une ré-vision féministe de cette notion de "bienveillance," afin d'assurer que cette bienveillance que les femmes portent à leur prochain ne contribue pas à entretenir des relations patriarcales. Les femmes, elles aussi, sont des êtres qui se concilient la bienveillance d'autrui (d'elles-mêmes, d'autres femmes, et des hommes). Je propose une vision d'une telle "éthique de bienveillance féministe."

Much has been written on the inadequacy of traditional ethical theory.<sup>1</sup> It is not my intention to review that literature here, except to say that the inadequacy of traditional ethical theory is commonly, and I think correctly, attributed to the predominance of the "masculine" perspective in such theory. Critics of traditional ethical theory suggest that the emphasis on masculine values—such as those of individualism, impartiality, reason "purified" of emotion, and the universal application of abstract principles and laws—results in the failure of traditional ethical theory to speak to (*i.e.*, capture the experience of) many human beings, especially women. Critics point out that traditional theorists locate the failure not in their theory but in the persons for whom their theory does not speak, with the result that such persons are viewed by traditional theorists as either immoral, or morally stagnated, or simply nonmoral<sup>2</sup>. Critics of traditional ethical theory further reveal that such theory is of limited applicability to many of us because it is firmly rooted in abstract principles which are too rigid to accommodate the complexity of real-life situations. The obsession with holding to such principles, come what may, often has morally repugnant consequences. Traditional ethical theory involves the perpetual risk of placing principle before person, of allowing the sacrifice of person(s) for the sheer preservation of the rule/theory.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, there is no mystery as to why moral theory, indeed most theory, has, until recently, been dominated by the masculine perspective. The reason is, quite simply, that those who have had the power and freedom to theorize (and to decide what should count as acceptable theory) have been primarily men, and it is primarily men who embrace masculine values. Feminists have long argued that the division between masculine and feminine values/perspectives is to a large degree both a product and a perpetuator of patriarchal social relations. Traditional (masculine) theory—whether it be epistemological, scientific or ethical—has served to both reflect and perpetuate the underlying social reality of patriarchy. For this reason the various sorts of theories are all interconnected and are in an important sense political: each being fueled by the value system which serves as the foundation of patriarchy.

Those ethical theories which may properly be called feminine ethical theories value the characteristics and qualities typically construed as feminine (and, hence, typically found in women), along with the particular ways of relating to others which are facilitated by these qualities. Feminine ethical theories advocate that such qualities and ways of relating form the foundation of moral theory. It is understandable that, in the attempt to formulate a moral theory which would be a suitable alternative to or displacement for traditional masculine moral theory, we

would look to the feminine values and experience of reality. After all, traditional moral theory has neglected, even eschewed, values typically construed as feminine (for instance, values arising from the ability to empathize with, and the willingness to trust and cooperate with others), and this neglect accounts for much of what is wrong with traditional theory. In extolling the feminine, we must be careful not to endorse the division between the masculine and the feminine in such a way as to perpetuate patriarchal social arrangements. Any ethical theory rooted in the feminine must be cautious of this. It will not suffice to say that, by calling a theory feminine one does not mean to imply that all and only women can have access to it, if one then proceeds to apply it to a social reality wherein most women and few men are required to develop the capacities, dispositions, attitudes, desires, and relations necessary to working with the ethic in question. In formulating a feminine ethical theory we must remain informed by the "politics of our reality." We must ask questions such as, "Will this ethical theory work (*i.e.*, will it enable human beings to interact in non-oppressive ways)?," "Will it work for women?," or "Is a 'feminine' ethic enough?."

My feeling is that although a feminine ethical theory might well be "enough" in an ideal society, and, although the formulation of a feminine ethic is undoubtedly a step towards a moral society, such an ethic is not enough within our particular social context of patriarchy. If a feminine ethic is to set us securely on the path to a moral society, and if it is to give birth to a moral/political climate which does not reinforce the subordination of women to men, it must undergo specifically feminist tailoring. It must become, for a time, a feminist ethic.

One aspect of the feminine which has received much attention in recent nontraditional ethical theory, and which I shall focus on here, is the feminine practice of "caring" for others. This notion raises immediate concern for feminists, for the role of women as carer and nurturer of others is fundamental to the patriarchal definition of woman. Will focussing on qualities which women possess by virtue of being subordinate to men, serve to further their subordination? The answer to this will no doubt depend on how one construes caring. There are various theories as to just what this feminine caring involves. Does it, for instance, involve the complete loss of self as women within patriarchy are accustomed to achieving? Perhaps the most extensive account of the notion of caring is that provided by Nel Noddings in her book *Caring*. Noddings' theory is, as she herself acknowledges, a feminine ethic and not a feminist ethic. I will suggest that it, like all

feminine ethical theories, is inadequate within patriarchy insofar as it is compatible with patriarchal relations between women and men. Nevertheless, there are many aspects of Noddings' account of caring which I find insightful and promising for they readily lend themselves to feminist re-vision.

In what follows, I present a vision of, at least, part of a feminist ethic of caring which draws from a few of the more general insights of Noddings. One such insight is her claim that morality is rooted in human relations in general and in the caring relation in particular, and that the ethic of caring is feminine in the minimal sense of being "rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness"<sup>4</sup>. I wish to retain this grounding for morality, but I suggest that such relatedness, receptivity, and responsiveness be viewed and defined in light of the broader social and political context of which they are a part. As we shall see, this will alter the concept of "ethical caring" so that it differs from Noddings' account; *i.e.*, it will alter what will count as ethically significant relatedness, receptivity, and responsiveness. While this feminist ethic will have important political implications for relations within and among oppressed groups in general, I am here primarily concerned with the implications it has for women.

By rooting morality in human relatedness, Noddings singles out a certain sort of caring relation as ethically significant. The ethical ideal in Noddings' view is to create, maintain, and enhance this caring relation: to become, and to aid others in becoming, the sorts of individuals who can partake in relations wherein genuine ethical caring can thrive. Insofar as relations exemplify this, they are ethical. Similarly, the actions of individuals are ethical insofar as they are born of this ideal, insofar as they are the product of individuals motivated by this ideal. More specifically, in Noddings' view, the caring relation holds between two individuals: the "one-caring" and the "cared-for," each of whom must meet certain conditions. The one-caring must possess a certain state of consciousness (the caring attitude) characterized by receptivity and the ability to "engross" oneself in another. This caring attitude is presented and developed by Noddings as the most crucial ingredient to the caring relation. Nevertheless, in order for the caring of the one-caring to be completed, the cared-for must respond in the appropriate manner to the one-caring's caring.

This is the general framework presented by Noddings which I wish to retain. From within it, I wish to expand somewhat upon the notions of relatedness, receptivity in the one-caring, and responsiveness of the cared-for, in

ways not adequately considered by Noddings.

I have primarily two things to say with regard to the notion of human relatedness, both in its general and in its specific form of caring. First, it is doubtful that there is any such thing as a pure caring relation. Caring relations usually occur within the context of other relations, and these prior relations affect the nature of the caring relation. We should keep this in mind when speaking of the caring relation. Second, not all prior relations, and similarly, not all caring relations are mere givens. That is, contrary to what Noddings often implies, it is not always the case that we merely find ourselves related to particular others towards whom we must then develop the caring attitude.

If it is true that the caring relation is seldom, if ever, the first or sole relation formed between people, then it is likely that where prior relations exist, these relations will give varying faces to the caring relation. Indeed, it usually is the case that people are brought together through some other relation first (*e.g.*, teacher and pupil, mother and child) which then either becomes a caring relation as well (one-caring and cared-for), or does not. I suggest that such prior relations influence the caring relation by placing conditions on the type of feelings the one-caring should be receptive to, and on the type of response which should be expected from the cared-for.

Lovers, for instance, care and are attentive to each other in different ways than are friends who are not lovers. Different friendships form around the attention to/reception of different feelings/thoughts/interests. Different sorts of friendships require different degrees of engrossment. In all of these relations mutuality (in the relevant respects) seems both attainable and desirable (though it may be neither in other relations). If I spend time and energy engrossed in my friend, in feeling-with her, then, if she is capable and the opportunity arises, I should be able to depend on her engrossment in me. Indeed, if time wears on and I continue to behave as a one-caring-friend towards her, and yet she devotes no such energy towards me, I may feel exhausted and short-changed. If my caring for my friend fosters the more general caring attitude in her, this pleases me, but this is not enough. I need her to respond as one-caring-friend towards me. I feel warranted in demanding mutuality here, and if my friend, although capable, continues to lack any interest in caring-as-friend for me, I may feel compelled to withdraw my caring-as-friend for her. The friendship relation has altered what will count as successful caring and appropriate response.

I have referred to prior relations which are considered to be purely social, and yet, when these relations occur between women and men within patriarchy, they become political as well. That is, within patriarchy, relations between women and men, especially caring relations, are always political in nature. Feminists have provided adequate reason to believe this, especially on the level of so-called personal relations, where women and men relate as lovers for instance. Furthermore, because patriarchy defines woman in terms of her relation to man, relations between women and children, and between women and women, also acquire political significance within patriarchy by virtue of their relation to this other relation. Motherhood, for example, is legitimate within patriarchy only when the child being mothered is legitimate. Similarly, women loving women within patriarchy constitutes a political relation insofar as it constitutes a refusal to conform to the patriarchal institution of compulsory heterosexuality. The conditions for caring will be doubly affected in these cases, in the sense that such political factors will help determine the needs, interests, desires, *etc.*, of the individuals being cared-for, as well as of the individuals caring, often in more fundamental ways than purely social prior relations do. I will speak more of this as it pertains to the requirements of receptivity and responsiveness in the caring relation.

My second point which I mentioned above, is related to the first. Briefly, many of these prior relations are alterable. Focussing, as Noddings does, solely on relations between individuals and the type of characteristics/consciousnesses individuals must possess in order to qualify as one-caring or cared-for, may cause us to overlook the fact that individual relations, and individual consciousnesses, are formed within a social context. Such a focus may give rise to the impression that people merely find themselves in relation to each other and that, given these relations, the task is for the individuals to make them into relations wherein ethical caring can thrive. It suggests a certain arbitrariness about whom it is that we can/should care for and who it is that can/should care for us. Now this is patently true for many relations wherein ethical caring has the potential to occur. For instance, none of us had a say in who our biological parents were, nor in what community we were born and raised. We had no choice, and it does seem that there is a certain arbitrariness in our finding ourselves in these particular relations.

Most relations, however, are not arbitrarily determined in this way. For instance, the customs/norms endorsed by a society determine (in a non-arbitrary way) many of the relations among people, as well as the consciousnesses of

people. Marxist political theorists have long pointed out how differences in economic class and relation to the means of production within society greatly influence the belief systems individuals of varying classes come to hold. These varying belief systems both reflect and maintain the divisions of class. Similarly, patriarchal institutions, such as compulsory heterosexuality, influence the beliefs women (and men) come to hold about themselves and their relations with others. Patriarchal institutions, such as this, are anything but arbitrary in defining relations as they do. Rather, relations are so defined for the purpose of maintaining patriarchy. What better way to ensure that women remain divided from each other and in the company of men, than to promote an ideology which portrays women as ideally, if not naturally, heterosexual? It is painfully obvious.

Equally obvious is that there is room for reflection as to the appropriateness of these social relations, both in themselves and as candidates for caring relations. It may be that some of these prior relations preclude the possibility of genuine caring ever occurring within them. This would be so, for instance, if a prior social-political relation inhibited, or rendered impossible, the ability of the one-caring and the cared-for to receive and respond in ways conducive to enhancing the ethical ideal. If so, then these relations would have to be appropriately altered or perhaps even disposed of altogether. Social-political factors influence moral relations, then, in the sense that such factors help determine who it is we find ourselves next to; what it is we think we can expect from certain types of individuals, including ourselves; and what become (and what we perceive to be) the needs and desires of certain individuals. All feminist ethical theories need to take this into account.

I contend that the nature of prior relations and the presence of social factors have at least two implications for the notion of receptivity in the one-caring. First, although the caring attitude (as Noddings describes it) is necessary to the caring relation, it is not sufficient. The caring attitude is not sufficient for the caring relation because alone it cannot guarantee that the one-caring will receive/perceive the needs and feelings of the cared-for which are relevant to her caring for the cared-for in a particular way (*i.e.*, as friend, as lover, as parent, *etc.*). Some judgment and discrimination, in addition to the caring attitude, is required on the part of the one-caring. For example, in order to care successfully as parent (and not as lover) for one's child, a parent must be able to discern which of the child's feelings and needs are appropriate to receive and respond to. Similarly so in cases where relations contain a political element. In such cases, however, the one-caring

may be ignorant of the relevant social factors and prior relations which influence the particular needs of the cared-for. This will mean that although the one-caring cares, she may not care in the relevant way. Here, the one-caring will have to become informed about such political factors and their influence on the cared-for in order to care successfully. This point will become clearer later in this discussion.

The second implication which prior relations have for the notion of receptivity in the one-caring is as follows. Given that prior social relations may affect the caring relation and that they may do so negatively, and given that such prior relations are often alterable, then where they are alterable, it seems there is room for the one-caring to be selective in her caring relations, both in the sense of selecting the type of care appropriate for a given individual, and in selecting the individuals for whom to care. Of course, such selection must be in keeping with the ethical ideal. Let me elaborate with the help of Noddings.

In Noddings' view, ethical caring is concerned with "how to meet the other morally"<sup>5</sup>, and to meet the other, the one-caring must remain, for a time, in what Noddings calls "the receptive mode of consciousness." This consciousness is crucial to determining the ethicality of the caring relation. It is at the heart of caring. This state of consciousness, "the caring attitude," enables the one-caring to engross herself in the other in order to apprehend the reality of the other. It allows her to lose herself and to feel with the other. In apprehending the reality of the other, I understand Noddings to mean seeing the other person's reality (life, situation, needs, interests, *etc.*) as that person sees and feels it, without imposing one's own judgments upon what one receives. The caring attitude allows one to grasp the perspective of another, and in so grasping, the other is confirmed as one who is worth having her reality grasped. This feeling with the other is frequently enough to motivate one to act on behalf of the other, as though on behalf of oneself, but it need not necessarily so move us. After one has received the reality of the other, Noddings suggests that one may (but, again, need not) reflect upon it and ask whether endorsing it would indeed be in keeping with the ethical ideal (*i.e.*, would it enhance the particular caring relation, or the ability of the particular persons involved to be caring in general?).

The caring attitude, and ability to feel with and to confirm the other is indeed at the heart of morality as I see it. To see that it is not enough, consider this example. A woman is in front of me. She has been sexually harassed,

and is relaying her feelings to me. I receive them openly; I listen, and I am attentive to her. I see the distress in her eyes, I feel with her. I possess the caring attitude, and although I say nothing, she senses my concern for her and responds appropriately to it. Is this caring of mine, ethical caring? Is the fact that I am receiving and confirming her enough to ensure that I care in the relevant or appropriate way (relevant to furthering the ethical ideal)? Is it enough that I receive and grasp her reality as she sees it? Can I shed my own perspective utterly while receiving her perspective? Can I refrain from making judgments even at this level? Should I so refrain?

Suppose that I listen openly, truly feel the distress she is feeling, but believe that she is overreacting, and that this distress, which is real, will pass. Suppose sexual harassment is, to me, a means whereby men compliment women, it is not truly harmful, though perhaps a nuisance at times. Suppose my concern, which she senses, arises from my perception/fear that she is psychologically weak and socially maladjusted. I will be here for her, and when the distress subsides, I will recommend a therapist to help her deal with her problem.

Suppose, on the other hand, that I listen openly, truly feel the distress she is feeling, but believe that she is warranted in feeling this distress. Suppose that sexual harassment is, to me, part of a network of social institutions which oppress women. Suppose my concern, which she senses, arises from my perception that she has suffered a grave injustice, as do many women. I will be here for her and when her distress, which is real, subsides, I will tell her that there is nothing about her *per se*, save her womanness, which led certain others to view such treatment of her as acceptable, and that she is neither to blame for it nor maladjusted in feeling distress over it, and that there are courses of action which she may pursue which may help to ensure that her harassor deals with his problem.

The caring attitude exists in me in both of these cases, yet I suggest that these two instances of meeting the other are not equivalent, ethically speaking, and that the second instance only is one wherein genuine ethical caring occurs. In both of these cases, the woman may either share my view of her experience of sexual harassment and the validity of her distress, or not. When can it be said that I have grasped her reality? Although feeling with her is utterly important, and although I feel with her in both cases, only in the second case do I truly understand her reality, whether or not she perceives it to be her reality, because only in this case do I see how it deprives her of a sense of self necessary to being a moral/caring person.

Understanding her reality in this sense is necessary if I am to care for her in the relevant way, *i.e.*, in keeping with the ethical ideal. My caring for her in the first case goes against the ethical ideal in the sense that I contribute to a sense of this woman's self compatible with her remaining a victim. I promote a warped sense of her self, whereas in the second case my caring for her in some sense "empowers" her.<sup>6</sup> Before my caring takes an active form (before I advise the woman as to what course she should seek—therapist or sexual harassment committee, for example), I must be able to discern what kind of care she is in need of. In general, we must be able to discern when the ethical selves of women are being thwarted and where ethical caring is needed. Whether or not we can discern will be determined in part by our own beliefs and world view. In an important sense judgments cannot be put on hold until after we have received the other's perspective. Even if we may refrain from making judgments while receiving, our own perspective predetermines to some extent what we will receive. In both instances, my view of sexual harassment colored the feelings I received from this woman, even though I felt with her in both cases. If this is plausible, then it will be important to be aware of how our own perspective influences what we receive and, similarly, it will be important to reflect on the accuracy of our perspective. Feminist analysis, as opposed to other political analyses, of social political relations, allows us to recognize the needs of individual women which they have by virtue of being a member of a group or class which is oppressed by some other group or class, recognition which a focus on individuals alone will not afford us. Feminist analysis enables us to perceive where the ethical selves of women are thwarted. Clearly, the consciousnesses of those who care, must be raised.

Perhaps the example chosen is one which too easily makes the necessity of a consciousness informed by feminist analysis seem necessary. Social/political factors influence women in more subtle ways. If the woman in my example had not relayed her experience of being sexually harassed, but rather, was expressing to me her difficulties with speaking in public, her general lack of self-confidence, or her love-hate feelings for her children, a feminist consciousness in the one-caring would be equally as necessary to perceiving the reality of this woman. Regardless of whether I care for this woman as would a friend, a mother, a therapist (or all of these), awareness of how social factors contribute in a fundamental way to her self-concept, her reality, and her feelings and, most importantly, awareness of how this is oppressive to her, would be crucial in confirming her, in nurturing her ethical self—in caring for her.

What of the notion of responsiveness? Although Noddings roots morality primarily in the “pre-act consciousness of the one-caring,” an absence of an appropriate response on the part of the cared-for will nullify the ethicality of the caring relation. Indeed, according to Noddings, it will nullify the ethicality of the one-caring’s caring. I agree with Noddings that the response of the cared-for should play an important role in determining the completeness of the caring relation. However, I stress the importance of the response of the cared-for in a different way: as it pertains to determining responsibility for the success/completeness of certain caring relations.

Although Noddings acknowledges that there are a range of responses which cared-fors may give, she does not consider that the appropriateness of a given response should to a large degree depend on the nature of the individual cared-for. I recommend that we consider the type of response it is/ought to be within the capacity of the cared-for to evidence, as well as other factors unique to particular relations wherein the caring relation holds, before we judge whether or not a particular response is appropriate. To repeat, prior relations of friendship, or whatever, will help determine what response should be deemed appropriate in a caring relation. In some cases, this will allow us to hold the cared-for equally as responsible for the success/failure of the caring relation as the one-caring. The earlier example regarding mutuality within some friendships, may be elucidating here. It seems reasonable to believe that if there is every reason to expect that my friend is capable of caring-as-friend for me, and yet she does not, then the failure of that friendship is at least partly her responsibility. On the other hand, if, due to immaturity, illness or other factors, the cared-for is not capable of responding in the expected way, the caring relation may be successful nevertheless.

Noddings does describe several different appropriate responses. One such response occurs when the care and attention the one-caring gives to the cared-for results in the cared-for’s development of the caring attitude and the ability to be one-caring (*i.e.*, the response of the cared-for becomes a matter of the cared-for coming to possess the caring attitude herself). Other appropriate responses consist of something quite minimal, along the lines of the recognition of the caring attitude in the one-caring, or even more minimally, in the ability of the cared-for to attain a state of being which is conducive to the “free pursuit of her projects.”

The cared-for is free to be more fully himself in the caring relation. Indeed, this being himself, this will-

ing and unselfconscious revealing of self, is his major contribution to the relation.<sup>7</sup>

One further response of the cared-for might be to respond in kind, *i.e.*, not only does the cared-for become a one-caring, he becomes a one-caring towards the one caring for him. In Noddings’ view this mutuality is not necessary to the caring relation. Although at least one of these responses is required, in Noddings’ view, any one of them, regardless of the type of caring relation, will be sufficiently appropriate and will render the caring relation complete. I believe this is where Noddings is mistaken.

Though I shall not argue this here, I believe that a feminist ethic of caring should enable us to care for members of species other than our own, and that we must be careful not to make it solely a matter of definition whether other animals can respond to our caring in the appropriate way. At any rate, my concern here is with the responses of human cared-fors. Contrary to Noddings, I believe that in caring for certain members of our species, such as the very young, the very ill, the very aged, and so on, the minimal response, as described above, from the cared-for should be acceptable to render the caring complete. Indeed, sometimes a complete lack of response might be acceptable as well if, for instance, one is caring for a terminally ill comatose relative.<sup>8</sup> Again, I suggest that we judge the appropriateness of a response on the grounds of what is reasonable to expect from the individual being cared-for, along with what should be expected from such an individual given the nature of the caring relation at hand. Neither of the minimal responses should be regarded as sufficient, for instance, if the cared-for is an adult, perfectly healthy, and willingly partaking in a relationship involving caring.

Caring relations of this latter sort which occur within friendships or love relations between women and men, are of primary concern to feminists. Women are often the emotional glue of the family—tending to the needs and desires of others while denying their own. They are often the ones who are expected to, and who do, expend the energy in maintaining the caring relation between themselves and their male friend, lover, or spouse. Further, men are accustomed to responding to this care from women, in the minimal sense described above. They flourish, becoming more fully themselves and freely pursue their own projects; but, this will not do. This kind of asymmetry in such caring relations is often what leads to low self-esteem in women. It is reasonable to believe that men could learn to become capable of deeper responses, and further, if they likewise embrace the ethical ideal as stated above, they have a responsibility to endeavor to learn.

In Noddings' view, men are indeed required to learn how to care, yet there is nothing to say that they ought to endeavor to care for the particular women from whom they receive care. Yet this is precisely what is needed. An analysis of some of the caring relations most central to the lives of women, such as those of friendship, would reveal that mutuality, where attainable, is desirable in the sense of confirming the self of particular women. Noddings rightly claims there is something central to morality in confirming the reality and self-worth of individuals. Men need to learn to confirm and value the women who care for them, not as mere extensions of the men themselves, but as persons in their own right with whom they are related in a certain way. Requiring men to respond as one-caring toward the women who care for them will, I believe, better ensure that women's caring does not contribute to women's subordination to men. If men care for the women who care for them in the way that a one-caring should care, then men must confirm such women in a way which promotes the ethical selves of these women. The ethical self of a person requires a certain sort of autonomy. This autonomy will allow women to be significantly independent of men. Just as prior relations and the individuals involved influence the types of feelings/thoughts to which the one-caring becomes attentive, so too, they influence the type of response which will be acceptable, and in some instances, required, from the cared-for.

There is a sense in which patriarchal relations, and the value system at their base, may actually preclude, or at least make very difficult, the possibility of relations becoming caring relations. The patriarchal value system gives rise to many attitudes antithetical to the caring attitude. One such attitude is that of arrogance and it characterizes the perspective of what Marilyn Frye has termed "the arrogant eye"<sup>9</sup>. The relation it typically accompanies is that which holds between oppressor and oppressed. The arrogant eye perceives the distinction between a certain class of individuals (subjects) of which he is a member, and another class of individuals (objects) as simultaneously a distinction between the superior and the inferior, respectively. The arrogant eye is present in most forms of oppressive social relations, such as those which hold between differing economic classes, differing races, and differing genders.

The arrogant eye perceives and defines "the other" as having certain natures, desires, needs, and purposes in terms of his (*i.e.*, the arrogant eye's) own interests. So strong is this perception of the other, so accepted as "normal" that eventually the other *becomes* what the oppressor sees. Is this so for women? Patriarchal definitions of "woman" abound in pornography, in ideals of mother-

hood, in ideals of femininity in general. Do women themselves embrace these images, aspire to them, physically mold their bodies to them, and evaluate their self-worth on the basis of how close they come to these ideals? Undeniably.

Indeed, the "self" of individual women arises in large part from the patriarchal definition of what it means to be a woman, of what it means to be a member of the class "woman." As all women, by definition, partake in this class to one degree or another, all women share to one degree or another, in the concept of "self" to which the definition of woman gives rise. There is, then, considerable overlap in the selves of individual women. In advocating a moral theory which places emphasis on the nature of selves, one must take into account the fact that political factors contribute in a fundamental way to the definition of such selves.

Although the patriarchally defined woman is adept at completely engrossing her self in others (specifically men and children), this is not conducive to caring as the one-caring should (in Noddings' view). The one-caring ought to engross herself in the other only for a time. After she has "received" the other, the one-caring should return to her self, in turn worthy of another's engrossment. The one-caring is an autonomous being, not in the sense that masculinist theory employs this word, but more so in the sense of dynamic autonomy as defined by Evelyn Fox Keller:

Dynamic autonomy reflects a sense of self as both differentiated from *and* related to others, and a sense of others as subjects with whom one shares enough to allow for a recognition of their independent interests and feelings. In short, for a recognition of them as other subjects.

...it gives rise to a sense of agency in a world of interacting and interpersonal agents with whom and with which one feels an essential kinship, while still recognizing and accepting, their independent integrity.<sup>10</sup>

Women as patriarchally defined are not autonomous in this sense. They seem to lose their selves altogether. A woman's self is typically defined entirely in terms of her relation to others. Their aspirations, desires, interests, become her aspirations, desires and interests in the sense that she lives to see their aspirations and desires fulfilled.

In Noddings' view, the one-caring has a prior commitment to maintain her own ethical self, to become the sort

of person who can be genuinely one-caring. This caring for self warrants the one-caring's withdrawal of care in order to redirect it towards herself, in cases where there is a continued lack of response from the cared-for. I think that the notion of dynamic autonomy and the role that this sort of autonomy plays in making one a moral/caring person is implicitly at work in Noddings here. What also is implicitly at work in Noddings' view is my belief that in certain caring relations a lack of response of the appropriate kind, more specifically a lack of mutuality, can often serve to diminish the one-caring's sense of self-worth. Further, I agree with Noddings' claim that we have a prior commitment to maintain our own ethical self, to become the sort of person who can be genuinely one-caring. Yet this commitment cannot be carried out utterly individually. It is not solely a matter of reflecting upon one's "self" trying to determine ways in which one could become a better caring individual. This self-reflection is important, but if one acquires aspects of one's self through being related to others, and through social definitions, then reflection on these relations and definitions is also necessary. We need a proper balance between the concept of ourselves as distinct from others and as related to others. Fox Keller's definition of Dynamic Autonomy is, I think, a good guide.

In addition to individual women's commitment to their ethical selves, indeed because of it, I suggest that women likewise have a prior commitment to the selves of other women. That is, women have an obligation to contribute to the ability of other women to become the sorts of individuals who are dynamically autonomous and who can truly care. This obligation is an extension of the prior obligation women have to themselves, for all women share to some degree in the same concept of self. Indeed, women have a moral obligation to so care for other women, even at the risk of caring less for others, *viz*, men and children, although caring for these others is important as well. If women are to care for others at all, they must first acquire a strong ethical self. In contributing to the strengthening of the ethical selves of other women, individual women likewise become stronger ethical selves.

Such contribution may be evidenced through forming personal caring relations with other women, but this is not always possible. Factors such as geographical distance between women and differences in personalities can make relations difficult. Further there is a limit to the amount of energy any given person can expend in maintaining close relationships. Yet there are other ways in which such a contribution may be made. One may endeavor to combat the various institutions of patriarchy, such as pornography or wife-battering, which serve to undermine the

ethical selves of all women. Combating these institutions may make it possible for women, for whom one cannot personally care, to enter caring relations with others. In this way, the ethical ideal is enhanced.

This is one point where ethics and politics become inseparable. When political factors determine a definition of self incompatible with the development of the ethical self of a person/group of persons, we have an ethical obligation to dispose of those political factors and to create relations wherein the ethical selves of such individuals can be enhanced. Similarly, individuals who are themselves members of an oppressed group are morally justified in committing themselves to caring for members of their group over nonmembers of their group and/or members of the oppressing group, by appeal to the ethical ideal and the concept of ethical self.

Being the object of the arrogant eye makes it difficult for women to be truly one-caring. Yet, the arrogant eye makes it difficult for men to become one-caring as well, and especially towards women. The arrogant eye is incompatible with the eye of the one-caring. How could the reality of the other, the feelings, and experiences attain as much import to the arrogant perceiver, even for a time, as his own? How could the arrogant eye possibly engross himself in that other beneath him? Even if he could manage to be attentive to the other, his arrogance would hinder his ability to clearly see the true needs and desires of the other, for his arrogance defines the needs and desires of the other solely in relation to this own.

It may be claimed that if the socially defined self in which all men partake is underdeveloped in terms of being a truly ethical self, then on my analysis men would be justified, indeed obligated, in directing their attention towards themselves, to care first for each other. This may be so. Yet, it is interesting to note that if men were to attempt to redefine their "Self" in keeping with the ethical ideal, women would automatically benefit. Is it not obvious that in redefining their male selves, all that was once defined solely in relation to their patriarchally defined male selves would no longer be so defined. Men would "care" for women, if only indirectly; but secondly, and most importantly, it is reasonable to believe that those who benefit most from oppressive social arrangements have a greater moral responsibility to rectify such arrangements. If so, then given that the ethical selves of women are diminished because of patriarchal relations, it seems reasonable to conclude that men have a significant moral obligation to dispose of patriarchy and to promote the ethical selves of women in addition to, and even before, their own. It should be clear that our commitment to the

ethical ideal and the caring relation entails that we dispose of the arrogant eye and any other patriarchal values which interfere with the caring relation, and that we work towards strengthening the selves of women, and other oppressed people, if we are ever to become truly ones who care.

## NOTES

*I have benefitted greatly from discussions with Susan Sherwin.*

1. See Susan Sherwin's "A Feminist Approach to Ethics," *The Dalhousie Review*, Vol. 64, No. 4, Winter 1984-1985; Kathryn Morgan's "Women and Moral Madness," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 17, No. 3, September 1987; Sheila Mullett's "Only Connect: The Place of Self-Knowledge in Ethics," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 17, No. 3, September 1987; and Genevieve Lloyd's *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
2. See Carol Gilligan's *In A Different Voice*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1982.
3. For criticism of this tendency among traditional moral theorists see Nel Noddings' *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984.
4. Noddings, p. 2.
5. Noddings, p. 4.
6. I thank Maryann Ayim for this phrasing.
7. Noddings, p. 73.
8. Noddings would deny that caring of the sort she is concerned with occurs in this case. Afterall, how could the one-caring possibly "feel with" or engross herself in this other, given this other's comatose state? Anyone who has had a loved one in this condition would, I think, agree that some sort of deep concern and emotional engrossment does occur on the part of the one-caring. Perhaps this is one instance where the caring attitude is sufficient for successful caring? At any rate, I do not see that a lack of response in such situations necessarily reduces our "caring-for" to "caring-about." If it does, then perhaps the notion of caring needs to be reworked to account for our intuitions here.
9. Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1983, pp. 66-72.
10. Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985, pp. 99-100.

## Circle Game

It's not just family voices now  
chanting over the wire, whispering expectations  
in her solitary ear; it's not just her mother's eye  
that measures her hand when she brings a new man home.  
At the reunion, family pictures were fanned  
in the ringed fingers of old classmates  
and she was back against the gym wall  
waiting to be picked, torn between a sport she didn't play  
and not wanting to be last.

She's noticed a recent mannerism that has her twisting  
the bare finger at night; sometimes she wakes  
to scratched skin, wonders if she was holding on  
or tearing off the dreamed circle.

The mirror tells her it's nearly too late, and she finds men  
harder to meet, and the ones she does, harder to stand.  
But she has things to do, and solitude is a friend  
who asks no questions, doesn't call late at night  
with a voice like whiskey, wanting to come over,  
doesn't need to talk right now  
about something she said last week.

She goes her own way, unable to explain her reasons for  
wanting  
her own way; entertains visits from old lovers  
that sometimes turn maudlin. It seem everyone needs this  
more than she does. She knows she will always be  
out of step, the odd one at parties, the one  
who knows more than most about deadbolts and tire  
changes,  
prefers to sit with the men when talk turns to pregnancy  
but no more at home with football.

Rhona McAdam  
Alberta