

ABORTION AND THE “FEMININE VOICE”

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A growing number of feminists now seek to articulate the “feminine voice”, to draw attention to women’s special strengths, and to correct the systematic devaluation of these by our male-dominated society. Carol Gilligan’s book, *In a Different Voice*, was especially important to the emergence of this strain of feminist thought. It was her intention to help women identify more positively with their own distinctive style of reasoning about ethics, instead of feeling that there is something wrong with them because they do not think like men (as Kohlberg’s and Freud’s theories would imply). Inspired by her work, feminists such as Nel Noddings, Annette Baier, and the contributors to *Women and Moral Theory*,¹ have tried to articulate further the feminine voice in moral reasoning. Others such as Carol McMillan, Adrienne Rich, Sara Ruddick, and Nancy Harstock agree that women have distinct virtues, and argue that these need not be self-victimizing.² When properly transformed by a feminist consciousness, women’s different characteristics can, they suggest, be productive of new social visions.

Similar work is also being done by feminists who try to correct for masculine bias in other areas such as our conception of human nature, the way we view the relationship between people and nature, and the kinds of paradigms we employ in thinking about society.³

Some of those engaged in this enterprise hold that women *by nature* possess certain valuable traits that men do not, but more frequently, they espouse the weaker position that, on the whole, the traits they label “feminine” are more common among women (for reasons which are at least partly cultural), but that they also can be found in men, and that they should be encouraged as good traits for a human being to have, regardless of sex.⁴

Virtually all of those feminists who are trying to reassert the value of the feminine voice, also express the sort of unqualified support for free access to abortion which has come to be regarded as a central tenet of feminist “orthodoxy.” What I wish to argue in this paper is that: (1) abortion is, by their own accounts, clearly a masculine response to the problems posed by an unwanted pregnancy, and is thus highly problematic for those who seek to articulate and defend the “feminine voice” as the proper mode of moral response, and that (2) on the contrary the “feminine voice” as it has been articulated generates a strong presumption against abortion as a way of responding to an unwanted pregnancy.⁵

These conclusions, I believe, can be argued without relying on a precise determination of the moral status of the fetus. A case at least can be made that the fetus is a person since it is biologically a member of the human species and will, in time, develop normal human abilities. Whether the burden of proof rests on those who defend the personhood of the fetus, or on those who deny it, is a matter of moral methodology, and for that reason will depend in part on whether one adopts a masculine or feminine approach to moral issues.

I. Masculine Voice/Feminine Voice

A. Moral Reasoning

According to Gilligan, girls, being brought up by mothers, identify with them, while

males must define themselves through separation from their mothers. As a result, girls have “a basis for empathy built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not.”⁶ Thus while masculinity is defined by separation and threatened by intimacy, femininity is defined through attachment and threatened by separation; girls come to understand themselves as imbedded within a network of personal relationships.

A second difference concerns attitudes toward general rules and principles. Boys tend to play in larger groups than girls, and become “increasingly fascinated with the legal elaboration of rules, and the development of fair procedures for adjudicating conflicts.”⁷ We thus find men conceiving of morality largely in terms of adjudicating fairly between the conflicting rights of self-assertive individuals.

Girls play in smaller groups, and accord a greater importance to relationships than to following rules. They are especially sensitive to the needs of the particular other, instead of emphasizing impartiality, which is more characteristic of the masculine perspective. They think of morality more in terms of having responsibilities for taking care of others, and place a high priority upon preserving the network of relationships which makes this possible. While the masculine justice perspective requires detachment, the feminine care perspective sees detachment and separation as themselves the moral problem.⁸

Inspired by Gilligan, many feminist philosophers have discovered a masculine bias in traditional ethical theories. Nel Noddings has written a book called *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Annette Baier has praised Hume for his emphasis on the role of the affections in ethics⁹ and proposed that trust be taken as the central notion for ethical theory.¹⁰ Christina Hoff Sommers has argued for giving a central role to special relationships in ethics.¹¹ And Virginia Held has suggested that the mother-child relationship be seen as paradigmatic of human relationships, instead of the economic relationship of buyer/seller (which she sees to be the ruling paradigm now).¹²

The feminine voice in ethics attends to the particular other, thinks in terms of responsibilities to care for others, is sensitive to our interconnectedness, and strives to preserve relationships. It contrasts with the masculine voice, which speaks in terms of justice and rights, stresses consistency and principles, and emphasizes the autonomy of the individual and impartiality in one’s dealings with others.

B. Human Nature: Mind and Body

Feminist writers have also discovered a masculine bias in the way we think of mind and body and the relationship between them. A large number of feminists, for example, regard radical mind/body dualism as a masculine way of understanding human nature. Alison Jaggar, for example, criticizes what she calls “normative dualism” for being “male biased”,¹³ and defines normative dualism as “the belief that what is especially valuable about human beings is a particular ‘mental’ capacity, the capacity for rationality.”¹⁴ Another critic of dualism is Rosemary Radford Ruether, a theologian. Her book *New Woman, New Earth* is an extended attack upon what she calls transcendent hierarchical dualism, which she regards as a “male ideology.”¹⁵ By “transcendent dualism” she means the view that consciousness is “transcendent to visible nature”¹⁶ and that there is a sharp split between spirit and nature. In the attempt to deny our own mortality, our essential humanity is then identified with a “transcendent divine sphere

beyond the matrix of coming to be and passing away.”¹⁷ In using the term “hierarchical,” she means that the mental or spiritual component is taken to be superior to the physical. Thus “the relation of spirit and body is one of repression, subjugation and mastery.”¹⁸

Dodson Gray, whose views resemble Reuther’s, poetically contrasts the feminine attitude with the masculine as follows:

I see that life is not a line but a circle. Why do men imagine for themselves the illusory freedom of a soaring mind, so that the body of nature becomes a cage? ‘Tis not true. To be human is to be circled in the cycles of nature, rooted in the processes that nurture us in life, breathing in and breathing out human life just as plants breathe in and out their photosynthesis.¹⁹

Feminists critical of traditional masculine ways of thinking about human nature also examine critically the conception of “reason” which has become engrained in our Western cultural heritage from the Greeks on. Genevieve Lloyd, for example, in *The Man of Reason: Male and Female in Western Philosophy*,²⁰ suggests that the very notion of reason itself has been defined in part by the exclusion of the feminine. And if the thing which makes us distinctively human—namely our reason—is thought of as male, women and the things usually associated with them such as the body, emotion and nature, will be placed in an inferior position.

C. Our Relationship with Nature

Many feminists hold that mind-body dualism which sees mind as transcendent to and superior to the body, leads to the devaluation of both women and nature. For the transcendent mind is conceived as masculine, and women, the body, and nature assigned an inferior and subservient status.²¹ As Rosemary Radford Ruether puts it:

The woman, the body, and the world are the lower half of a dualism that must be declared posterior to, created by, subject to, and ultimately alien to the nature of (male) consciousness in whose image man made his God.²²

Women are to be subject to men, and nature may be used by man in any way he chooses. Thus the male ideology of transcendent dualism sanctions unlimited technological manipulation of nature; nature is an alien object to be conquered.

Carolyn Merchant, in her book *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*,²³ focuses on the Cartesian version of dualism as particularly disastrous to our relationship with nature, and finds the roots of our present ecological crisis to lie in the 17th Century scientific revolution—itsself based on Cartesian dualism and the mechanization of nature. According to Merchant, both feminism and the ecology movement are egalitarian movements which have a vision of our interconnectedness with each other and with nature.

Feminists who stress the deep affinities between feminism and the ecology movement are often called “ecofeminists.” Stephanie Leland, radical feminist and co-editor of a recent collection of ecofeminist writing, has explained that:

Ecology is universally defined as the study of the balance and interrelationship of all life on earth. The motivating force behind feminism is the expression of the feminine principle. As the essential impulse of the feminine principle is the striving toward balance and interrelationship, it follows that feminism and ecology are inextricably connected.²⁴

The Masculine urge is, she says, “to separate, discriminate and control,” while the feminine impulse is “toward belonging, relationship and letting be.”²⁵ The urge to discriminate leads, she says, to the need to dominate “in order to feel secure in the choice of a particular set of differences.”²⁶ The feminine attitude springs from a more holistic view of the human person and sees us as imbedded in nature rather than standing over and above it. It entails a more egalitarian attitude, regarding the needs of other creatures as important and deserving of consideration. It seeks to “let be” rather than to control, and maintains a pervasive awareness of the interconnectedness of all things and the need to preserve this if all are to flourish.

Interconnectedness, which we found to be an important theme in feminist ethics, thus reappears in the writings of the ecofeminists as one of the central aspects of the feminine attitude toward nature.

D. Paradigms of Social Life

Feminists’ descriptions of characteristically masculine and feminine paradigms of social life center around two different focuses. Those influenced by Gilligan tend to stress the contrast between individualism (which they take to be characteristic of the masculine “justice tradition”) and the view of society as “a web of relationships sustained by a process of communication”²⁷ (which they take to characterize the feminine “care perspective”). According to them, the masculine paradigm sees society as a collection of self-assertive individuals seeking rules which will allow them to pursue their own goals without interfering with each other. The whole contractarian tradition from Hobbes and Locke through Rawls is thus seen as a masculine paradigm of social life; we are only connected to others and responsible to them through our own choice to relinquish part of our autonomy in favor of the state. The feminine care perspective guides us to think about societal problems in a different way. We are already imbedded in a network of relationships, and must never exploit or hurt the other. We must strive to preserve those relationships as much as possible without sacrificing the integrity of the self.

The ecofeminists, pacifist feminists, and those whose starting point is a rejection of dualism, tend to focus more on the contrast between viewing social relationships in terms of hierarchy, power, and domination (the masculine paradigm) and viewing them in a more egalitarian and nonviolent manner (the feminine one). Feminists taking this position range from the moderate ones who believe that masculine social thought tends to be more hierarchical than feminine thought, to the extreme radicals who believe males are irredeemably aggressive and dominating, and prone to violence in order to preserve their domination.

The more moderate characterization of masculine social thought would claim that men tend to prefer a clear structure of authority; they want to know who is in control and have a clear set of procedures or rules for resolving difficult cases. The more extreme view, common among ecofeminists and a large number of radical feminists, is that males seek to establish and maintain patriarchy (systematic domination by males) and use violence to maintain their control. These

feminists thus see an affinity between feminism (which combats male violence against women) and the pacifist movement (which does so on a more global scale). Mary Daly, for example, holds that “the rulers of patriarchy—males with power—wage an unceasing war against life itself. . . . Female energy is essentially biophilic.”²⁸ Another radical feminist, Sally Miller Gearhart, says that men possess the qualities of objectification, violence, and competitiveness, while women possess empathy, nurturance, and cooperation.²⁹ Thus the feminine virtues must prevail if we are to survive at all, and the entire hierarchical power structure must be replaced by “horizontal patterns of relationship.”³⁰

Women are thus viewed by the pacifist feminists as attuned in some special way to the values and attitudes underlying a pacifist commitment. Sara Ruddick, for example, believes that maternal practice, because it involves “preservative love” and nurtures growth, involves the kinds of virtues which, when put to work in the public domain, lead us in the direction of pacifism.³¹

II. Abortion

A person who had characteristically masculine traits, attitudes, and values as defined above would very naturally choose abortion, and justify it ethically in the same way in which most feminists do. Conversely, a person manifesting feminine traits, attitudes, and values would not make such a choice, or justify it in that way.

According to the ecofeminists, the masculine principle is insensitive to the interconnectedness of all life; it strives to discriminate, separate, and control. It does not respect the natural cycles of nature, but objectifies it and imposes its will upon it through unrestrained technological manipulation. Such a way of thinking would naturally lead to abortion. If the woman does not *want* to be pregnant, she has recourse to an operation involving highly sophisticated technology in order to defend her control of her body. This fits the characterization of the masculine principle perfectly.

Abortion is a separation—a severing of a life-preserving connection between the woman and the fetus. It thus fails to respect the interconnectedness of all life. Nor does it respect the natural cycles of nature. The mother and the developing child together form a delicately balanced ecosystem with the woman’s entire hormonal system geared towards sustaining the pregnancy.³² The abortionist forces the cervical muscles (which have become thick and hard in order to hold in the developing fetus) open and disrupts her hormonal system by removing it.

Abortion has something further in common with the behavior ecofeminists and pacifist feminists take to be characteristically masculine: It shows a willingness to use violence in order to maintain control. The fetus is destroyed by being pulled apart by suction, cut in pieces, or poisoned. It is not merely killed inadvertently as fish might be by toxic wastes, but it is deliberately targeted for destruction. Clearly this is not the expression of a “biophilic” attitude. This point was recently brought home to me by a Quaker woman who had reached the conclusion that the abortion she had had was contrary to her pacifist principles. She said, “We must seek peaceableness both within and without.”

In terms of social thought, again, it is the masculine models which are most frequently employed in thinking about abortion. If masculine thought is naturally hierarchical and oriented toward power and control, then the interests of the fetus (who has no power) would naturally be

suppressed in favor of the interests of the mother. But to the extent that feminist social thought is egalitarian, the question must be raised of why the mother's interests should prevail over the child's.

Feminist thought about abortion has, in addition, been deeply pervaded by the individualism which they so ardently criticize. The woman is supposed to have the sole authority to decide the outcome of the pregnancy. But what of her interconnectedness with the child and with others? Both she and the unborn child already exist within a network of relationships ranging from the closest ones—the father, grandparents, siblings, uncles and aunts, and so on—to ones with the broader society—including the mother's friends, employer, employees, potential adoptive parents, taxpayers who may be asked to fund the abortion or subsidize the child, and all the numerous other people affected by her choice. To dismiss this already existing network of relationships as irrelevant to the mother's decision is to manifest the sort of social atomism which feminist thinkers condemn as characteristically masculine.

Those feminists who are seeking to articulate the feminine voice in ethics also face a *prima facie* inconsistency between an ethics of care and abortion. Quite simply, abortion is a failure to care for one living being who exists in a particularly intimate relationship to oneself. If empathy, nurturance, and taking responsibility for caring for others are characteristic of the feminine voice, then abortion does not appear to be a feminine response to an unwanted pregnancy. If, as Gilligan says, “an ethic of care rests on the premise of nonviolence—that no one should be hurt,”³³ then surely the feminine response to an unwanted pregnancy would be to try to find a solution which does not involve injury to anyone, including the unborn.

“Rights” have been invoked in the abortion controversy in a bewildering variety of ways, ranging from the “right to life” to the “right to control one's body.” But clearly those who defend unrestricted access to abortion in terms of such things as the woman's right to privacy or her right to control her body are speaking the language of an ethics of justice rather than an ethics of care. For example, Judith Jarvis Thomson's widely read article “A Defense of Abortion” treats the moral issue involved in abortion as a conflict between the rights of the fetus and the mother's rights over her own body.³⁴ Mary Anne Warren also sees the issue in terms of a conflict of rights, but since the fetus does not meet her criteria for being a person, she weighs the woman's rights to “freedom, happiness and self-determination” against the rights of other people in the society who would like to see the fetus preserved for whatever reason.³⁵ And, insofar as she appeals to consciousness, reasoning, self-motivated activity, the capacity to communicate, and the presence of self-concepts and self-awareness as criteria of personhood, she relies on the kind of opposition between mind and nature criticized by many feminists as masculine. In particular, she is committed to what Jaggar calls “normative dualism”—the view that what is especially valuable about humans is their mental capacity for rational thought.

It is rather striking that feminists defending abortion lapse so quickly into speaking in the masculine voice. Is it because they feel they must do so in order to be heard in our male-dominated society, or is it because no persuasive defense of abortion can be constructed from within the ethics of care tradition? We now consider several possible “feminine voice” defenses of abortion.

III. Possible Responses and Replies

Among the feminists seeking to articulate and defend the value of the feminine voice, very few have made any serious attempt to grapple with abortion. The writings of the ecofeminists and the pacifist feminists abound with impassioned defenses of such values as nonviolence, a democratic attitude towards the needs of all living things, letting others be and nurturing them, and so on, existing side by side with impassioned defenses of “reproductive rights.” They see denying women access to abortion as just another aspect of male domination and violence against women.

This will not do for several reasons. First, it is not true that males are the chief opponents of abortion. Many women are strongly opposed to it. The pro-life movement at every level is largely composed of women. For example, as of May 1988, 38 of the state delegates to the National Right to Life Board of Directors were women, and only 13 were men. Indeed as Jean Bethke Elshtain has observed,³⁶ the pro-life movement has mobilized into political action an enormous number of women who were never politically active before. And a Gallup poll in 1981 found that 51% of women surveyed believed a person is present at conception, compared with only 33% of the men. The pro-life movement, thus, cannot be dismissed as representing male concerns and desires only. Granted, a pro-choice feminist could argue that women involved in the pro-life movement suffer from “colonized minds”, but this sort of argument clearly can be made to cut both directions. After all, many of the strongest supporters of “reproductive rights” have been men—ranging from the Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* to the Playboy Philosopher

Secondly, terms like violence and domination are used far too loosely by those who condemn anti-abortion laws. If there are laws against wife abuse, does this mean that abusive husbands are being subjected to domination and violence? One does not exercise violence against someone merely by crossing his or her will, or even by crossing his or her will and backing this up by threats of legal retribution.

Finally, those who see violence and domination in laws against abortion, but not in abortion itself, generally fail to look at the nature of the act itself, and thus fail to judge that act in light of their professed values and principles. This is not surprising; abortion is a bloody and distressing thing to contemplate. But one cannot talk about it intelligently without being willing to look concretely at the act itself.

One line of thought is suggested by Gilligan, who holds that at the highest level of moral development, we must balance our responsibility to care for others against our need to care for ourselves. Perhaps we could, then, see the woman who has an abortion as still being caring and nurturing in that she is acting out of a legitimate care for herself. This is an implausible view of the actual feelings of women who undergo abortions. They may believe they are “doing something for themselves” in the sense of doing what they must do to safeguard their legitimate interests. But the operation is more naturally regarded as a violation of oneself than as a nurturing of oneself. This has been noted, even by feminists who support permissive abortion laws. For example, Carolyn Whitbeck speaks of “the unappealing prospect of having someone scraping away at one’s core,”³⁷ and Adrienne Rich says that “abortion is violence: a deep, desperate violence inflicted by a woman upon, first of all, herself.”³⁸

We here come up against the problem that a directive to care, to nurture, to take responsibility for others, and so on, provides a moral orientation, but leaves unanswered many important questions and hence provides little guidance in problem situations. What do we do when caring for one person involves being uncaring toward another? How widely we must

extend our circle of care? Are some kinds of not caring worse than others? Is it caring to give someone what they want even though it may be bad for them?

Thinking in terms of preserving relationships suggests another possible “feminine” defense of abortion—namely that the woman is striving to preserve her interconnectedness with her family, husband, or boyfriend. Or perhaps she is concerned to strengthen her relationship with her other children by having enough time and resources to devote to their care. To simply tell a woman to preserve *all* her existing relationships is not the answer. Besides the fact that it may not be possible (women *do* sometimes have to sever relationships), it is not clear that it would be desirable even if it were possible. Attempting to preserve our existing relationships has conservative tendencies in several unfortunate ways. It fails to invite us to reflect critically on whether those relationships are good, healthy, or worthy of preservation.³⁹ It also puts the unborn at a particular disadvantage, since the mother’s relationship with him or her is just beginning, while her relationships with others have had time to develop. And not only the unborn, but any needy stranger who shows up at our door can be excluded on the grounds that caring for them would disrupt our existing pattern of relationships. Thus the care perspective could degenerate into a rationalization for a purely tribal morality: I take care of myself and my friends.

But how are decisions about severing relationships to be made? One possibility is suggested by Gilligan in a recent article. She looks at the network of connections within which the woman who is considering abortion finds herself entangled, and says “to ask what actions constitute care or are more caring directs attention to the parameters of connection and the *costs of detachment . . .*” (emphasis added).⁴⁰ Thus, the woman considering abortion should reflect upon the comparative costs of severing various relationships. This method of decision, however, makes her vulnerable to emotional and psychological pressure from others, by encouraging her to sever whichever connection is easiest to break (the squeaky wheel principle).⁴¹

But perhaps we can lay out some guidelines (or, at least, rules of thumb) for making these difficult decisions. One way we might reason, from the point of view of the feminine voice, is that since preserving interconnectedness is good, we should prefer a short term estrangement to an irremediable severing of relationship. And we should choose an action which *may* cause an irremediable break in relationship over one which is certain to cause such a break. By either of these criteria, abortion is clearly to be avoided.⁴²

Another consideration suggested by Gilligan’s work is that since avoiding hurt to others (or non-violence) is integral to an ethics of care, severing a relationship where the other person will be only slightly hurt would be preferable to severing one where deep or lasting injury will be inflicted by our action. But on this criterion, again, it would seem she should avoid abortion, since loss of life is clearly a graver harm than emotional distress.

Two other possible criteria which would also tell against abortion are: (1) that it is permissible to cut ties with someone who behaves unjustly and oppressively toward one, but not with someone who is innocent of any wrong against one, or (2) that we have special obligations to our own offspring, and thus should not sever relationship with them.

Criteria can, perhaps, be found which would dictate severing relationship with the fetus rather than others, but it is hard to specify one which clearly reflects the feminine voice. Certainly the right to control one’s body will not do. The claim that the unborn is not a person and therefore does not deserve moral consideration can be faulted on several grounds. First, if the feminine voice is one which accepts the interconnectedness of all life and strives to avoid

harm to nature and to other species, then the nonpersonhood of the fetus (supposing it could be proved) would not imply that its needs can be discounted. And secondly, the entire debate over personhood has standardly been carried on very much in the masculine voice.⁴³ One feminist, Janice Raymond, has suggested that the question of when life begins is a masculine one,⁴⁴ and if this is a masculine question, it would seem that personhood, with its juridical connotations, would be also. It is not clear that the care perspective has the resources to resolve this issue. If it cannot, then, one cannot rely on the nonpersonhood of the fetus in constructing a “feminine voice” defense of abortion. A care perspective would at least seem to place the burden of proof on those who would restrict the scope of care, in this case to those that have been born

It seems that the only way open to the person who seeks to defend abortion from the point of view of the feminine voice is to deny that a relationship (or at least any morally significant relationship) exists between the embryo/fetus and the mother. The question of how to tell when a relationship (or a morally significant relationship) exists is a deep and important one which has, as yet, received insufficient attention from those who are trying to articulate the feminine voice in moral reasoning. The whole ecofeminist position relies on the assumption that our relationship with nature and with other species is a real and morally significant one. They thus have no basis at all for excluding the unborn from moral consideration.

There are those, however, who wish to define morally significant relationships more narrowly—thus effectively limiting our obligation to extend care. While many philosophers within the “justice tradition” (for example, Kant) have seen moral significance only where there is some impact upon rational beings, Nel Noddings, coming from the “care perspective” tries to limit our obligation to extend care in terms of the possibility of “completion” or “reciprocity” in a caring relationship.⁴⁵ Since she takes the mother-child relationship to be paradigmatic of caring, it comes as something of a surprise that she regards abortion as a permissible response to an unwanted pregnancy.⁴⁶

There are, on Noddings’s view, two different ways in which we may be bound, as caring persons, to extend our care to one for whom we do not already have the sort of feelings of love and affection which would lead us to do the caring action naturally. One is by virtue of being connected with our “inner circle” of caring (which is formed by natural relations of love and friendship) through “chains” of “personal or formal relations.”⁴⁷ As an example of a person appropriately linked to the inner circle, she cites her daughter’s fiancé. It would certainly *seem* that the embryo in one’s womb would belong to one’s “inner circle” (via natural caring), or at least be connected to it by a “formal relation” (that is, that of parenthood). But Noddings does not concede this. Who is part of my inner circle, and who is connected to it in such a way that I am obligated to extend care to him or her, seems to be, for Noddings, largely a matter of my feelings toward the person and/or my choice to include him or her. Thus the mother *may* “confer sacredness” upon the “information speck”⁴⁸ in her womb, but need not if, for example, her relationship with the father is not a stable and loving one. During pregnancy “many women recognize the relation as established when the fetus begins to move about. It is not a question of when life begins, but of when relation begins.”

But making the existence of a relation between the unborn and the mother a matter of her choice or feelings, seems to run contrary to one of the most central insights of the feminine perspective in moral reasoning—namely, that we already *are* interconnected with others, and thus have responsibilities to them. The view that we are connected with others only when we

choose to be or when we *feel* we are, presupposes the kind of individualism and social atomism which Noddings and other feminists criticize as masculine.

Noddings also claims that we sometimes are obligated to care for “the proximate stranger”. She says:

We cannot refuse obligation in human affairs by merely refusing to enter relation; we are, by virtue of our mutual humanity, already and perpetually in potential relation.⁴⁹

Why, then, are we not obligated to extend care to the unborn? She gives two criteria for when we have an obligation to extend care: There must be “the existence of or potential for present relation” and the “dynamic potential for growth in relation, including the potential for increased reciprocity . . .” Animals are, she believes, excluded by this second criterion since their response is nearly static (unlike a human infant).

She regards the embryo/fetus as not having the potential for present relationships of caring and reciprocity, and thus as having no claim upon our care. As the fetus matures, he or she develops increasing potential for caring relationships, and thus our obligation increases also. There are problems with her position, however.

First of all, the only relationships which can be relevant to *my* obligation to extend care, for Noddings, must be relationships with *me*. Whatever the criteria for having a relationship are, it must be that at a given time, an entity either has a relationship with me or it does not. If it does not, it may either have no potential for a morally significant relationship with me (for example, my word processor), or it may have such potential in several ways: (1) The relationship may become actual at the will of one or both parties (for example, the stranger sitting next to me on the bus). (2) The relationship may become actual only after a change in relative spatial locations which will take time, and thus can occur only in the future (for example, walking several blocks to meet a new neighbor, or traveling to Tibet to meet a specific Tibetan). Or (3) The relationship may become actual only after some internal change occurs within the other (for example, by waiting for a sleeping drug to wear off, for a deep but reversible coma to pass, or for the embryo to mature more fully), and thus can also happen only in the future.

In all three of these cases there is present now in the other the potential for relations of a caring and reciprocal sort. In cases (1) and (2) this is uncontroversial, but (3) requires some defense in the case of the unborn. The human embryo differs now from a rabbit embryo in that it possesses potential for these kinds of relationships although neither of them is presently able to enter into relationships of any sort.⁵⁰ That potential becomes actualized only over time, but it can become actualized only because it is there to be actualized (as it is not in the rabbit embryo).⁵¹ Noddings fails to give any reason why the necessity for some internal change to occur in the other before relation can become actual has such moral importance that we are entitled to kill the other in case (3), but not in the others, especially since my refraining from killing it is a sufficient condition for the actualization of the embryo’s potential for caring relationships. Her criterion as it stands would also seem to imply that we may kill persons in deep but predictably reversible comas.

Whichever strand of Noddings’ thought we choose, then, it is hard to see how the unborn can be excluded from being ones for whom we ought to care. If we focus on the narrow, tribal morality of “inner circles” and “chains,” then an objective connection exists tying the unborn to

the mother and other relatives. If we are to be open to the needy stranger because of the real potential for relationship and reciprocity, then we should be open to the unborn because he or she also has the real and present potential for a relationship of reciprocity and mutuality which comes with species membership.

Many feminists will object to my argument so far on the grounds that they do not, after all, consider abortion to be a *good* thing. They aren't pro-abortion in the sense that they encourage women to have abortions. They merely regard it as something which must be available as a kind of "grim option"—something a woman would choose only when the other alternatives are all immeasurably worse.⁵²

First of all, the grim options view sounds very much like the "masculine voice"—we must grit our teeth, and do the distasteful but necessary deed (the more so where the deed involves killing).⁵³ Furthermore, it is in danger of collapsing into total subjectivism unless one is willing to specify some criteria for when an option is a genuinely grim one, beyond the agent's feeling that it is. What if she chooses to abort in order not to have to postpone her trip to Europe, or because she prefers sons to daughters? Surely these are not grim options no matter what she may say. Granted, the complicated circumstances surrounding her decision are best known to the woman herself. But this does not imply that no one is *ever* in a position to make judgments about whether her option is sufficiently grim to justify abortion. We do not generally concede that only the agent is in a position to judge the morality of his or her action.

Feminists standardly hold that absolutely no restrictions may be placed on a woman's right to choose abortion.⁵⁴ This position cannot be supported by the grim options argument. One who believes something is a grim option will be inclined to try to avoid or prevent it, and thus be willing, at least in principle, to place some restrictions on what counts as a grim option. Granted, practical problems exist about how such decisions are to be made and by whom. But someone who refuses in principle to allow any restrictions on women's right to abort, cannot in good faith claim that they regard abortion only as a grim option.

Some feminists will say: Yes, feminine virtues are a good thing for any person to have, and yes, abortion is a characteristically masculine way of dealing with an unwanted pregnancy, but in the current state of things we live in a male dominated society, and we must be willing to use now weapons which, ideally, in a good, matriarchal society, we would not use.⁵⁵ But there are no indications that an ideal utopian society is just around the corner; thus we are condemned to a constant violation of our own deepest commitments. If the traits, values and attitudes characteristic of the "feminine voice" are asserted to be good ones, we ought to act according to them. And such values and attitudes simply do not lend support to either the choice of abortion as a way of dealing with an unwanted pregnancy in individual cases, or to the political demand for unrestricted⁵⁶ access to abortion which has become so entrenched in the feminist movement. Quite the contrary.⁵⁷

NOTES

¹ . Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), Annette C. Baier, "What Do Women Want in a Moral Theory?", *Noûs*, vol. 19 (March, 1985) and "Hume, the Women's Moral Theorist?", in *Women*

and *Moral Theory*, (eds.) Kittay and Meyers (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

² □. Carol McMillan, *Women, Reason, and Nature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (N.Y.: Norton, 1976); Sara Ruddick, "Remarks on the Sexual Politics of Reason" in *Women and Moral Theory*, "Maternal Thinking" and "Preservative Love and Military Destruction: Some Reflections on Mothering and Peace" in Joyce Trebilcock (ed.) *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allenheld 1983), and Nancy Harstock, "The Feminist Standpoint" in *Discovering Reality*, Harding (ed.), (Boston: Reidel, 1983).

³ . Among them are such writers as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Susan Griffin, Elizabeth Dodson Gray, Brian Easla, Sally Miller Gearhart, Carolyn Merchant, Genevieve Lloyd, the pacifist feminists, and a number of feminists involved in the ecology movement.

⁴ . In this paper I shall use the terms "masculine" and "feminine" only in this weaker sense, which is agnostic about the existence of biologically based differences.

⁵ . A strong presumption against abortion is not, of course, the same thing as an absolute ban on all abortions. I do not attempt here to solve the really hard cases; it is not clear that the feminine voice (as least as it has been articulated so far) is sufficiently fine-grained to tell us exactly where to draw the line in such cases.

⁶ . See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 8.

⁷ . *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸ . See Gilligan, "Moral Orientation and Moral Development: in *Women and Moral Theory*, p. 31.

⁹ . Annette Baier, "Hume, the Woman's Moral Theorist?" in *Women and Moral Theory*, pp. 37-45.

¹⁰ . "What Do Women Want in a Moral Theory", *Noûs*, vol. 19 (March, 1985), p. 53.

¹¹ . Christina Hoff Sommers, "Filial Morality" in *Women and Moral Theory*, pp. 69-84.

¹² . Virginia Held, "Feminism and Moral Theory" in *Women and Moral Theory*, pp. 111-128.

¹³ . Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allenheld 1983), p. 46.

¹⁴ . *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁵ . Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 195.

¹⁶ . *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹⁷ . *Ibid.*, p. 195.

¹⁸ . *Ibid.*, p. 189.

¹⁹ . Elizabeth Dodson Gray, *Why the Green Nigger*, (Wellesley, MA: Roundtable Press, 1979), p. 54.

²⁰ . Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: Male and Female in Western Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)

²¹ . See, e.g., Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, Elizabeth Dodson Gray, *Why the Green Nigger*, and Brian Easla, *Science and Sexual Oppression* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1981).

²². Ruether, *op cit.*, p. 195

²³. Carol Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

²⁴. Stephanie Leland and Leonie Caldecott, (eds.) *Reclaiming the Earth: Women Speak out for Life on Earth* (London: The Women's Press, 1983), p. 72. For an overview of ecofeminist thought which focuses on the role of mind/body dualism, see Val Plumwood, "Ecofeminism: An Overview:", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplement to Vol. 64 (June, 1986), pp. 120–138.

²⁵. Leland and Caldecott, *op cit.*, p. 71.

²⁶. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

²⁷. Introduction to *Women and Moral Theory*, by Kittay and Meyers, p. 7.

²⁸. Cited by Barbara Zanotti, "Patriarchy: A State of War", in *Reweaving the Web of Life*,. Pam McAllister (ed.), (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1982), p. 17.

²⁹. See, e.g., Sally Miller Gearhart, "The Future— if there is one—Is Female," in *Reweaving the Web of Life*, p. 266.

³⁰. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

³¹. See Sara Ruddick, "Remarks on the Sexual Politics of Reason".

³². I owe the idea of regarding mother and child as an ecosystem to a conversation with Leonie Caldecott, co-editor of *Reclaim the Earth*.

³³. Gilligan, *op cit.*, p. 174

³⁴. Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 1 (1971), pp. 47–66.

³⁵. Mary Anne Warren, "On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion," *The Monist*, vol. 57 (January, 1973), reprinted in Wasserstrom, *Today's Moral Problems*, (New York: Macmillan, 1985), p. 448.

³⁶. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 312.

³⁷. Carolyn Whitbeck, "Women as People: Pregnancy and Personhood," in *Abortion and the Status of the Fetus*, W. B. Bondeson et al (eds.), (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Co, 1983), p. 252.

³⁸. Rich, *op cit.*, p. 269.

³⁹. Joan Tronto makes this point in "Beyond Gender Differences to a Theory of Care", *Signs*, vol. 22 (Summer, 1987), p. 666.

⁴⁰. Carol Gilligan, "Moral Orientation and Moral Development" in *Women and Moral Theory*, p. 24

⁴¹. This was evident in the reasoning of the women in Gilligan's case studies, many of whom had abortions in order to please to placate other significant persons in their lives.

⁴². Some post-abortion counsellors find the sense of irremediable break in relationship to be one of the most painful aspects of the post-abortion experience, and try to urge the woman to imaginatively re-create a relationship with the baby in order to be better able to complete the necessary grieving process. Conversation with Teresa Patterson, post-abortion counselor at Crisis Pregnancy Center in Walnut Creek, California.

⁴³. For an excellent "masculine voice" discussion of the personhood issue, see, e.g., Philip E. Devine, *The Ethics of Homicide*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978).

⁴⁴. Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*: Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), p. 114

⁴⁵. It would seem that in using the term "obligation", Noddings- is blurring the distinction between the masculine and feminine voice, since obligations imply rights. When she speaks of obligations to extend care, however, these are not absolute, but relative to the individual's choice of being a caring person as an ethical ideal. They are binding on us only as a result of our own prior choice, and our care is not something the other can claim as a matter of justice.

⁴⁶. Noddings' discussion of abortion occurs on pp. 87–90 of *Caring: A Feminist Approach to Ethics*, *op cit.*, and all quotes are from these pages unless otherwise noted.

⁴⁷. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴⁸. It is inaccurate to call even the newly implanted zygote an "information speck". Unlike a blueprint or pattern of information, it is alive and growing.

⁴⁹. I realize that Noddings would not be happy with the extent to which I lean on her use of the term "criteria", since she prefers to argue by autobiographical example. I however, since moral intuitions about abortion vary so widely, this sort of argument is not effective here.

⁵⁰. I omit here consideration of such difficult cases as severe genetic retardation.

⁵¹. The notion of potentiality I am relying on here is roughly an Aristotelean one.

⁵². Carolyn Whilbeck articulates a view of this sort in "Women as People: Pregnancy and Personhood", *op cit.*

⁵³. Granted, this sort of judgment is, at least in part, an impressionistic one. It is supported, however, by Gilligan's findings about the difference between boys and girls in their response to the "Heinz dilemma" (where the man is faced with a choice between allowing his wife to die or stealing an expensive drug from the druggist to save her). Although the females she studies do not all respond to the dilemma in the same way (e.g. Betty at first sounds more like Hobbes than like what has been characterized as the feminine voice—pp. 75–76), some recurring patterns which she singles out as representative of the feminine voice are: resisting being forced to accept either horn of the dilemma, seeing all those involved as in relationship with each other, viewing the dilemma in terms of conflicting responsibilities rather than rights, and seeking to avoid or minimize harm to anyone (see, e.g., Sarah p. 95). Since the abortion decision involves killing and not merely letting die, it would seem that the impetus to find a way through the horns of the dilemma would be, if anything, greater than in the Heinz dilemma.

⁵⁴. For example, one feminist, Roberta Steinbach, argues that we must not restrict a woman's right to abort for reasons of sex selection against females because it might endanger our hard won "reproductive rights"! (See "Sex Selection: From Here to Fraternity" in Carol Gould (ed.) *Beyond Domination*, (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allenheld, 1984), p. 280.

⁵⁵. For example, Annette Baier regards trust as the central concept in a feminine ethics, but speaks of "the principled betrayal of the exploiter's trust" (Baier, "What Do Women Want in a Moral Theory?", p. 62.)

⁵⁶. Restrictions can take many forms, including laws against abortion, mandatory counselling which includes information about the facts of fetal development and encourages the woman to choose other options, obligatory waiting periods, legal requirements to notify (and/or obtain the

consent of) the father, or in the case of a minor the girl's parents, etc. To defend the appropriateness of any particular sort of restrictions goes beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵⁷. I wish to thank the following for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this paper: Edith Black, Tony Celano, Phil sDevine, James Nelson, Alan Soble, and Michael Wreen.