

## **Postscript to "Abortion and the 'Feminine Voice'" 1993. The Gutting of the Ethics of Care by Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings**

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Since the publication of this article, there has been a great deal of interest in the issues raised by those feminists who articulate and affirm the "feminine voice" (often called "difference feminists"), and their work has triggered extraordinarily bitter controversy among feminists. What the "feminine voice" is is not in dispute; there is general agreement that in ethics it involves the centrality of care and taking responsibility for others, concern for the particular other, an appreciation of our interconnectedness with each other and nature, conflict resolution through communication and the attempt to harmonize conflicting interests instead of violence. Some of the debate has centered on the empirical question of whether in fact it is more commonly found in women, and if so whether it might have a biological basis. Since my argument was that anyone (male or female) who defends "feminine voice" values cannot consistently take the position on abortion that main line American feminists have taken, these disputes do not affect my argument.

In this postscript I do two things: (1) I briefly comment on some things relevant to the abortion issue that Gilligan and Noddings have said since 1989, and (2) I conclude with a brief look at the deep division within feminism revealed by the bitter dispute over "feminine voice" virtues, and at its implications.

### **Gilligan and Noddings**

Gilligan has not, to my knowledge, addressed the morality of abortion directly or developed any new line of argument to reconcile it with the "feminine voice" in ethics. Her understanding of what the ethics of care entails remains essentially the same. She says:

From the perspective of someone seeking or valuing care, relationship connotes responsiveness or engagement, a resiliency of connection that is symbolized by a network or web. Moral concerns focus on problems of detachment or disconnection or abandonment or indifference, and the moral ideal is one of attention and response.<sup>1</sup>

In responding to feminist critics who argue that the ethics of care traps women in traditional roles and calls on them to lives of self-sacrifice which open them up to exploitation, Gilligan reiterates her belief that moral maturity requires that a woman include herself among those for whom she should care.<sup>2</sup> But including the mother

does not justify radically excluding the unborn by violently destroying him or her. The feminine voice seeks to harmonize conflicting interests and to resolve them in such a way that no one is hurt, and if someone will be hurt no matter what she does, my reasons for saying that the mother ought not to sever her connection with the unborn still seem to me good ones. In fact, I would argue that the peculiarly intimate connection which links mother and unborn child places special obligations on her not to sever that relationship and sacrifice his or her interests to her own or to those of other people in her life because in the absence of artificial placentas and wombs, the mother is the only person who can meet the needs of the unborn.

Nel Noddings' position on abortion is articulated more clearly in her second book, Women and Evil.<sup>3</sup> She continues to hold that we have no obligation to include the unborn in our circle of care (at least prior to viability) because he or she is not capable of the sorts of characteristically human responses which we value -- such as the nuzzling, sucking, snuggling behavior of newborn infants.

The unborn is, however, in the process of developing these capacities. Its potential for entering into caring relationships is a dynamic one which increases throughout the pregnancy. Hence, Claudia Card, in a Hypatia symposium on Noddings, raises a question about the potential of the embryo similar to those I raised. She asks:

Why... is the embryo a woman carries not connected with her by indefinitely many "chains," independently of her relationship with its father? It has indefinitely many potentialities for entering into relationships with her.... Why is there no formal relation? (Is it not, for example, potentially its mother's student?) How does a connection by "formal relation" differ from "the possibility of relation"?<sup>4</sup>

Noddings, in her response, massively misses Card's point and takes her to be objecting to the fact that she speaks in terms of the relationship between the mother and the father. She notes that

... a similar breakdown might occur if a Lesbian couple broke up while one was pregnant. The pregnant partner might feel that the formal circle intended to support the child no longer existed. (Clearly a woman might still decide to have the child and seek to build a new relationship to which both she and the child might belong.)<sup>5</sup>

She does not, it is to be noted, say the woman ought to seek to build a new relationship if she is a caring person, or even that it would be better if she did -- merely that she "might."

The most disturbing things about Noddings' discussion of abortion in Women and Evil are her explanation of the intention of abortion, and her rather chilling dismissal of the human potential of the unborn. Most "would-be parents who seek abortion," she says,

... do not want there to be a baby (a responsive being) who is their

biological child. They do not want to enter the intense relationship characteristic of parent and child, at least not right now, and they do not want to turn that responsibility over to an already overburdened society. They do not want a person to exist who, by its genetic makeup, will have a response-based claim upon them.... There is no death to consider if the entity whose biological processes are stopped is incapable of human response. It is precisely this capacity that early abortion is designed to prevent.<sup>6</sup> (emphasis added)

There are two serious confusions in this passage. First, if our obligation to an infant is based on his or her capacity for characteristic human responses ("a response based claim") then what does genetics have to do with it? And if our genetic link with our own offspring does in fact give rise to a special obligation to care for him or her, then shouldn't that imply that a woman has a special obligation not to abort her child? Second, there is a contradiction in her argument that "there is no death to consider." If there is an "entity" with "biological processes," it is alive, and if these processes are stopped, there is the death of that entity.

Looking, now, at the intention of abortion, she says that its purpose is to destroy the embryo before it matures enough to exert a claim on the parents' care. Her position, then, turns out to be more cold-blooded even than Thomson's, since Thomson argues that the woman has a right to have the embryo removed from her body but not to have it killed. That her position does not represent the "feminine voice" here is clear for several reasons: 1) She neglects the fact that what is present is a particular other -- a particular embryo who needs the mother's care. No one else can meet his or her needs at this point. Abstract talk about whether the parents want "a baby" or "a child" right now denies the reality of the present other. 2) Since, according to Noddings, people can only find fulfillment in caring relationships, the intention to destroy a being because it is in the process of developing the capacity to enter into caring relationships makes no sense at all. There are adoptive parents who would find great happiness in caring for the child and the child could experience happiness in being cared for.

Noddings, however, dismisses the suggestion that we should preserve the embryo for the sake of its human potential. She says:

Here pessimists with their tragic view of life might give us wise counsel. Everywhere we see the senseless proliferation of living things that will not achieve maturity -- millions of frog eggs that will never be frogs, thousands of baby sea turtles that will never reach the sea.... It is pointless to fuss over the loss of every potential paradigm entity. Our attention should go to those already existing beings with whom we can establish a responsive relation.<sup>7</sup>

Since she earlier criticized the pessimistic view of life with its focus on the "bloody hunter" in nature, and proposed that from a feminine perspective we should "choose to build our lives and our conceptual models on the natural facts of affection and

protection of the young" instead,<sup>8</sup> her reversion to the tragic view of life at this point is, by her own standards, a retreat from the feminine voice.

Indeed, Noddings' entire discussion of abortion and euthanasia, although couched in terms of "care" and "caring responses" to the pain and helplessness of others, has a rather chilling subtext. A newborn whose medical prognosis is of "profound and continued helplessness" may be provided with a "quick and painless death" if "their [the parents'] ordinary support structures are thin, and if the handicap of their child seems to them insurmountable."<sup>9</sup> We respond to the psychic pain and helplessness of the woman pregnant against her will not by providing her the sort of support which might enable her and the child to live happily, but by providing an abortion -- an act which, by her own admission, deliberately intervenes to destroy the developing capacity of the unborn to enter into caring relationships. The subtext, then, is that those whose would-be caregivers lack an adequate support system are dispensable unless they are capable of explicitly communicating their desire to live. These sorts of "caring" responses" are disturbingly hard to distinguish from simple selfishness. They make it all too easy to feel good about how caring we are without requiring us to do anything ourselves to ameliorate the situation of the caregivers.

Surely the feminine voice, if it is to mean anything at all beyond using the word "care" frequently, must commit one to taking into account all those immediately affected by our decisions, making every possible effort to harmonize conflicting interests, and avoiding violence. If some caregivers are overburdened, we ought to reach out to support them -- either directly if they are people with whom we have a relationship (e.g., family or neighbor), or indirectly, for example, by donating time or money to organizations which provide respite time for caregivers or pushing for more government assistance to such people.

### **The Division within Feminism**

In order to understand why advocates of the feminine voice tend to eviscerate the notion of "care" in this way, it is helpful to look at the ethics of care against the background of controversies within the feminist movement.

The reason why attempts to reaffirm the value of the "feminine voice" have triggered such controversy among feminists is because mainstream American feminists have, for the most part, believed that the way to end oppression of women is to encourage them to pursue success in the competitive and individualistic world of work, and have therefore devoted their energy to the struggle to remove all obstacles to this goal. The fact that so many women's lives have revolved around the care of children, nursing the sick, making a home, holding families together and doing community service (often on a volunteer basis) is a bad thing in the eyes of these feminists because it has led to their being exploited. They have been badly paid and badly treated when they work outside the home at service types of jobs, and their economic dependence on their husbands and responsibility for the care of children have left them vulnerable to abuse and unable to develop their own projects and personalities autonomously in the way men can.

On the other hand, the roots of the "feminine voice" tradition go deep. Many

women (including many feminists) resonate to the values described as "feminine voice," feel very deeply about them, and do not want to see women simply relinquish them and immerse themselves in the competitive rat-race to the degree necessary to achieve the sort of career success which the liberal, individualist feminists hold out as an ideal. They believe that many women can and do find caregiving fulfilling. And after all, real fulfillment in one's career is something which is out of reach of most women and men in any case; most jobs are routine and boring and performed only out of a need for money. These women also are aware of the fact that if women were suddenly to abdicate all caring functions, society would be significantly worse off.<sup>10</sup>

Those who see the goal of feminism as career advancement of women within existing structures, however, naturally see these "difference feminists" as threatening to erase all the gains women have made in the professions and send them back to the kitchen and nursery. Susan Faludi, for example, says: "Difference became the new magic word uttered to defuse the feminist campaign for equality. And any author who made use of it, even one who could hardly be considered antifeminist, was in danger of being dragooned into the backlash's service."<sup>11</sup>

People like Gilligan and Noddings, then, who seek to affirm "feminine voice" values, and who also think of themselves as feminists, are pulled in two directions. They want to affirm that which is valuable in the kinds of activities and attitudes traditionally regarded as "feminine," without embracing destructive stereotypes of women or oppressive features of traditional female roles. In order to defend themselves against the accusation that their ethics based on the notion of care is one which returns women to exploitative traditional roles,<sup>12</sup> they are very careful to insist that care should not be equated with self-sacrifice and that women must also care for themselves.

The notion of care, however, cannot be totally separated from self-sacrifice without eviscerating it. No doubt the two are not identical, but clearly meeting the needs of the particular other will sometimes involve the sacrifice of something else we would rather do. It may involve at least postponing projects which are very important to us. And while it is legitimate to care for oneself (as both of them point out), not just any action undertaken out of self-interest can count as caring for one-self, or the notion of care would be evacuated of content.

The issues here do not admit of any simple solution. On the one hand, women have often been expected to pour themselves out for ungrateful others who do not in turn take an interest in their needs and projects, and sometimes even abuse them. But to demand reciprocity in all relationships is obviously impossible, since those most in need of care are often not capable of reciprocating -- even in the minimal sense of acknowledging the care of the one-caring.<sup>13</sup> How much reciprocity is appropriate will depend on the sort of relationship involved; what is appropriate in an infant is not appropriate in a spouse.<sup>14</sup>

There are two moves, however, that a person guided by the feminine voice will not make in thinking about reciprocity: 1) To make extending care to the particular other in need contingent on the other's reciprocating either now or in the future. "I will do x for you only if you do y for me" reflects the masculine contractarian tradition,

according to which my obligations are only those which I freely choose and which meet stringent conditions of fairness. The feminine voice in ethics, by contrast, directs us to go out to meet and respond to the needs of the particular other; those needs themselves call forth the caring response. 2) To treat unequal relationships as inherently ethically diminished by contrast with relationships between autonomous equals. Relationships in which one person is dependent on the other might, of course, lead to exploitation of the one-caring or infantilization and lack of respect for the autonomy of the cared-for,<sup>15</sup> but they need not.

Some willingness to sacrifice one's own interests is essential in any case to social life. "Caring" has its costs, but for that matter the masculine voice virtues of justice and fairness often do also. A man who keeps a contract against his own interests, for example, is called on to make a sacrifice to live up to his ethical principles.<sup>16</sup>

The reason why many proponents of the feminine voice have eviscerated the notion of caring is, I believe, because they have been too timid about challenging either their liberal feminist sisters or the broader society.<sup>17</sup> No society can completely eliminate conflicts between care for others and one's own needs. But if our social structures fail to provide adequate support for caregivers,<sup>18</sup> then some of the insights of feminine voice social thought need to be implemented through public policy. Instead of thinking of women as eager participants in the present system, or watering down the ethics of care whenever caring for the particular other in need becomes burdensome, we need to give thought to ways of changing the system to ease the burdens of caregivers.

Although I cannot develop this line of thought fully here, I think it is useful to understand the feminine voice as a kind of "seamless garment." Its emphasis on embodiment implies a recognition of our human vulnerability and hence our need for care. It also makes us aware of our embeddedness in nature and in a particular set of human relationships which are not freely chosen and without which none of us would survive to maturity. We live our lives surrounded by particular others with whom we are interconnected and to whom we therefore have responsibilities, and the ethics of care directs us to sustain that network of relationships within which we are imbedded. The feminine voice is therefore more compatible with a broadly communitarian approach to social philosophy than it is with liberal individualist theories. If competitive and individualistic social structures corrode feminine voice values, and subject those who practice them to exploitation, what is called for is not adapting human beings to the requirements of an atomic and competitive society, but meaningful social change.