feminist ethics

Feminist approaches to ethics, often known collectively as feminist ethics, are distinguished by an explicit commitment to correcting male biases they perceive in traditional ethics, biases that may be manifest in rationalizations of women’s subordination, or in disregard for, or disparagement of, women’s moral experience. Feminist ethics, by contrast, begins from the convictions that the subordination of women is morally wrong and that the moral experience of women is as worthy of respect as that of men. On the practical level, then, the goals of feminist ethics are the following: first, to articulate moral critiques of actions and practices that perpetuate women’s subordination; second, to prescribe morally justifiable ways of resisting such actions and practices; and, third, to envision morally desirable alternatives that will promote women’s emancipation. On the theoretical level, the goal of feminist ethics is to develop philosophical accounts of the nature of morality and of the central moral concepts that treat women’s moral experience respectfully, though never uncritically.

Just as feminist ethics may be identified by its explicit commitment to challenging perceived male bias in ethics, so approaches that do not express such a commitment may be characterized as nonfeminist. Nonfeminist approaches to ethics are not necessarily anti-feminist or male-biased; they may or may not be so.

The Development of Contemporary Feminist Ethics

The history of Western philosophy includes a number of isolated but indisputable instances of moral opposition to women’s subordination. Noteworthy examples are Mary Wollstonecraft’s (1759–1797) A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), John Stuart Mill’s (1806–1873) The Subjection of Women (1869), Frederick Engels’ (1820–1895) The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State (1884), and Simone de Beauvoir’s (1908–1986) The Second Sex (1949).

In the late 1960s, however, as part of a general resurgence of feminist activism, an unprecedented explosion of feminist ethical debate occurred, first among the general public, soon in academic discourse. Actions and practices whose gendered dimensions hitherto had been either unnoticed or unchallenged now became foci of public and philosophical attention, as feminists subjected them to outspoken moral critique, developed sometimes dramatic strategies for opposing them, and proposed alternatives that nonfeminists often perceived as dangerously radical. First grassroots and soon academic feminist perspectives were articulated on topics such as abortion, equality of opportunity, domestic labor, portrayals of women in the media, and a variety of issues concerning sexuality, such as rape and compulsory heterosexuality. By the 1980s, feminists were expressing ethical concern about pornography, reproductive technology, so-called surrogate motherhood, militarism, the environment, and the situation of women in developing nations.

Despite the long history of feminist ethical debate, the term “feminist ethics” did not come into general use until the late 1970s or early 1980s. At this time, a number of feminists began expressing doubts about the possibility of fruitfully addressing so-called women’s issues in terms of the conceptual apparatus supplied by traditional ethical theory. For instance, some feminists alleged that a rights framework distorted discussions of abortion because it construed pregnancy and motherhood as adversarial situations. Other feminists charged that certain assumptions widely accepted by traditional ethical theory were incompatible with what was now beginning to be claimed as a distinctively feminine moral experience or sensibility. Social contract theory, for instance, was criticized for postulating a conception of human individuals as beings who were free, equal, independent, and mutually disinterested, a conception that some feminists claimed reflected an experience and perspective that were characteristically masculine. Even impartiality, usually taken as a defining feature of morality, became the object of feminist criticism insofar as it was alleged to generate prescriptions counter to many women’s moral intuitions. Some feminists began to speculate that traditional ethics was more deeply male-biased and needed more fundamental rethinking than they had realized hitherto.

Such reflection was fueled by the much-publicized
work of developmental psychologist Carol Gilligan, whose 1982 book, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*, seemed to demonstrate empirically that the moral development of women was significantly different from that of men. Claiming that females tend to fear separation or abandonment while males, by contrast, tend to perceive closeness as dangerous, Gilligan reported that girls and women often construe moral dilemmas as conflicts of responsibilities rather than of rights and seek to resolve those dilemmas in ways that will repair and strengthen webs of relationship. Furthermore, Gilligan described females as less likely than males to make or justify moral decisions by the application of abstract moral rules; instead, she claimed that girls and women were more likely to act on their feelings of love and compassion for particular individuals. Gilligan concluded that whereas men typically adhere to a morality of justice, whose primary values are fairness and equality, women often adhere to a morality of care, whose primary values are inclusion and protection from harm. For this reason, studies of moral development based exclusively on a morality of justice do not provide an appropriate standard for measuring female moral development and may be said to be male-biased.

Many feminists seized on Gilligan’s work as offering evidence for the existence of a characteristically feminine approach to morality, an approach assumed to provide the basis for a distinctively feminist ethics. For some, indeed, feminist ethics became and remained synonymous with an ethics of care. Scholarly work in feminist ethics often is also responsive to the ethical reflections of nonacademic feminists as these occur, for instance, in much feminist fiction and poetry. In addition, a considerable body of nonfiction, written by nonacademics and directed towards a nonacademic audience, presents itself as feminist ethics. Popular feminist books and journals frequently engage in ethical consideration of moral or public policy issues and sometimes also offer more general discussions of supposedly “masculine” and “feminine” value systems.

Much of the work in feminist ethics has been done by white Western women, but this is slowly changing. A few male philosophers are doing significant work in feminist ethics, and people of color are making increasing contributions, both within and outside the discipline of philosophy, although they sometimes hesitate to accept the label “feminist,” because of feminism’s racist history.

**Feminist Criticisms of Western Ethics**

Since most feminist ethics is done in a Western context, it is Western ethics, particularly (though not exclusively) the European Enlightenment tradition, that has been the most frequent target of feminist critique. The feminist challenges to this tradition may be grouped conveniently under five main headings.

**Lack of concern for women’s interests.** Many of the major theorists, such as Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) and Rousseau (1712–1778), are accused of having given insufficient consideration to women’s interests, a lack of concern expressed theoretically...
by their prescribing for women allegedly feminine virtues such as obedience, silence, and faithfulness. Some feminists charge that many contemporary ethical discussions continue the tendency to regard women as instrumental to male-dominated institutions, such as the family or the state; in debates on abortion, for instance, the pregnant woman may be portrayed as little more than a container or environment for the fetus, while much discussion of reproductive technology has assumed that infertility is a problem only for heterosexual married women, i.e., women defined in relationship to men.

Neglect of “women’s issues.” Issues of special concern to women are said to have been ignored by modern moral philosophers, who have tended to portray the domestic realm as an arena outside the economy and beyond justice, private in the sense of being beyond the scope of legitimate political regulation. Within the modern liberal tradition, the public domain is conceived as properly regulated by universal principles of right whereas the private is a domain in which varying goods may properly be pursued. Even philosophers like Aristotle or Hegel (1770–1831), who give some ethical importance to the domestic realm, have tended to portray the home as an arena in which the most fully human excellences cannot be realized. Feminist philosophers began early to criticize this conceptual bifurcation of social life. They pointed out that the home was precisely that realm to which women had been confined historically, and that it had become symbolically associated with the feminine, despite the fact that heads of households were paradigmatically male. They argued that the philosophical devaluation of the domestic realm made it impossible to raise questions about the justice of the domestic division of labor, because it obscured the far-reaching social significance and creativity of women’s work in the home, and concealed, even legitimated, the domestic abuse of women and girls.

Denial of women’s moral agency. Women’s moral agency is said to have often been denied, not simply by excluding women from moral debate or ignoring their contributions, but through philosophical claims to the effect that women lack moral reason. Such claims were made originally by Aristotle, but they have been elaborated and refined by modern theorists such as Rousseau, Kant (1724–1804), Hegel, and Freud (1856–1939).

Depreciation of “feminine” values. Western moral theory is said to embody values that are masculine, insofar as they are culturally associated with men. Such associations may be empirical, normative, or symbolic. For instance, Western ethics is alleged to prioritize the supposedly masculine values of independence, autonomy, intellect, will, wariness, hierarchy, domination, culture, transcendence, product, asceticism, war, and death over the supposedly feminine values of interdependence, community, connection, sharing, emotion, body, trust, absence of hierarchy, nature, immanence, process, joy, peace, and life. Claims like this are common in both popular and academic feminist writings on ethics.

Devaluation of women’s moral experience. Finally, some feminists also charge that prevailing Western conceptualizations of the nature of morality, moral problems, and moral reasoning are masculine insofar as they too are associated with men, rather than women, in associations that again may be empirical, symbolic, or normative. For instance, feminists have accused modern moral theory of being excessively preoccupied with rules, obsessed with impartiality, and exclusively focused on discrete deeds. In addition, feminists have charged modern moral theory with taking the contract as the paradigmatic moral relation and construing moral rationality so narrowly as to exclude emotions of assessment, sometimes called moral emotions. All these characteristics have been asserted to be masculine in some sense. A feminine (not feminist) approach to ethics, by contrast, has been supposed to avoid assuming that individuals ordinarily are free, equal, and independent; to take more account of the specificities of particular contexts; and to be more likely to resolve moral dilemmas by relying on empathic feeling rather than by appealing to rules.

Not all feminists endorse all of the above clusters of criticisms—and even where they agree with the general statement, they may well disagree over its applicability in the case of specific philosophers or debates. Despite differences of relative detail, feminists tend generally to agree on the first three clusters of criticisms, whose correction seems not only attainable in principle within the framework of Enlightenment moral theory but even to be required by that framework. However, they disagree sharply on the last two clusters of criticisms, especially the fifth, which obviously contains clear parallels with a number of nonfeminist criticisms of Enlightenment ethics made by proponents of, for example, situation...
ETHICS, VIRTUE ETHICS, COMMUNITARIANISM, and POSTMODERNISM.

Common Misconstruals of Feminist Ethics

Feminist ethics has sometimes been construed, both by some of its proponents and some of its critics, as a simple inversion of the criticisms listed above. In other words, it has sometimes been identified with one or more of the following: putting women’s interests first; focusing exclusively on so-called women’s issues; accepting women (or feminists) as moral experts or authorities; substituting “female” (or feminine) for “male” (or masculine) values; or extrapolating directly from women’s moral experience. These characterizations of feminist ethics are sufficiently pervasive that it is worth noting just why they cannot be correct.

1. Putting women’s interests first occasionally has been recommended as a way of achieving a “woman-centered” ethics that transcends the covert bias of a supposed HUMANISM grounded in fact on male NORMS. Whatever might be said for or against this recommendation, it cannot be definitive of feminist ethics because the formula, as it stands, raises more questions than it answers. It fails to specify not only which women’s interests should be preferred over which men’s (or children’s) and in what circumstances, but also what should be done about conflicts of interest between women and even how interests should be identified at all. Most obviously, feminist ethics cannot be identified with “putting women’s interests first” simply because many feminists would refuse to accept and, indeed, be morally outraged by what they would perceive as blatant PARTIALITY and immorality.

2. Feminist ethics certainly addresses issues of special concern to women that have been neglected by modern moral theory, but it cannot be identified with an exclusive focus on such issues. This is partly because nonfeminists as well as feminists have addressed these issues—and, indeed, are doing so increasingly as feminism grows stronger and more articulate. It is also because feminism rejects the notion that moral issues can be divided cleanly into those that are and those that are not of special concern to women. On the one hand, since men and women typically are not what lawyers call “similarly situated” relative to each other, it is difficult to think of any moral or public policy (“human”) issue in which women do not have a special interest. For instance, such “human” issues as war, peace, and world hunger have special significance for women because the world’s hungry are disproportionately women (and children), because women are primarily those in need of the social services neglected to fund military spending, and because women suffer disproportionately from war and benefit relatively little from militarism and the weapons industries. For these reasons, it would be a mistake to identify feminist ethics with attention to some explicitly gendered subset of ethical issues. On the contrary, rather than being limited to a restricted ethical domain, feminist ethics has enlarged the traditional concerns of ethics, both through identifying previously unrecognized ethical issues and by introducing fresh perspectives on issues already acknowledged as having an ethical dimension.

3. Feminist ethics certainly is being developed by feminists, most of whom are women, but this does not imply, of course, that any woman, or even any feminist, should be regarded as a moral expert whose moral AUTHORITY is beyond question. Not only are there deep disagreements among women and even among feminists such that it would be difficult to know whom to select as an expert, but many painful examples of failed insight or principle on the part of feminist leaders demonstrate only too clearly that no woman, or feminist, is morally infallible.

4. There are also serious difficulties with thinking of feminist ethics as the substitution of female or feminine for male or masculine values. These difficulties include problems with establishing that any values are male or female in the sense of being generally held by men or women, when both women’s and men’s values vary so much, both within cultures as well as across them. Similar problems confront attempts to establish that certain values are masculine or feminine in the sense of being considered socially appropriate for individuals of one gender or the other. Again, norms of masculinity and femininity vary not only between societies but even within the same society along such axes as class and ethnicity: some social groups, for instance, value physical health, strength, or athletic prowess in women;
feminist ethics

others value physical fragility, weakness, or incompetence. Even if certain values could be identified in some sense as male or female, masculine or feminine, the conclusive objection to identifying feminist ethics with the elaboration of female or feminine values is that the feminine is not necessarily the feminist. Indeed, since the feminine typically has been constructed in circumstances of male domination, it is likely to be quite opposed to the feminist. Personal charm, for example, may be valued not only in women but also by them; even if charm were, in these senses, a feminine value, however, it would seem at least as likely to undermine feminist goals as to promote them.

5. Similar problems apply to defining feminist ethics as the systematic extrapolation of women’s moral experience, exclusive of men’s. While no approach to morality can be adequate if it ignores the moral experience of women, it is most unlikely that women generally are similar enough to each other and different enough from men that a single distinctively female or feminine approach to ethics can be identified. Attempts to establish such an identification frequently commit the fallacy of generalizing about the experience of all or most women from the moral experience of some women; this seems to have been one flaw at least in Gilligan’s earlier work. Again, even if a distinctively feminine approach to morality could be identified, perhaps in terms of symbolic or normative connections with women rather than empirical ones, there is no reason to suppose that such an approach would be feminist. Indeed, given the feminist commitment to a critical rethinking of cultural constructions of both masculinity and femininity, there is good prima facie reason to suppose that it would not.

Minimum Conditions of Adequacy for Feminist Ethics

Even though feminist ethics is far broader and more open than it appears in the foregoing misconstruals, its goals are sufficiently specific, especially when taken in conjunction with its criticisms of traditional ethics, as to generate certain minimum conditions of adequacy for any approach to ethics that purports to be feminist.

1. First of all, feminist ethics can never begin by assuming that women and men are similarly situated—although it may discover that some women are situated similarly with some men in specific respects or contexts. In addition, not only does feminist ethics need constant vigilance to detect subtle as well as blatant manifestations of gender privilege, it must also be sensitive to the ways in which gendered norms are different for different groups of women—or in which the same norms, such as a cultural preference for slimness or blonddness, affect different groups of women differently. Ultimately feminism’s concern for all women means that feminist ethics must address not only “local” issues of racism or homophobia or class privilege but also such global issues as environmental destruction, war, and access to world resources.

2. In order to develop guides to action that will tend to subvert rather than reinforce the systematic subordination of women, feminist approaches to ethics must understand individual actions in the context of broader social practices, evaluating the symbolic and cumulative implications of individual ACTION as well as its immediately observable consequences. They must be equipped to recognize covert as well as overt manifestations of domination, subtle as well as blatant forms of control, and they must develop sophisticated accounts of COERCION and CONSENT. Similarly, they must provide the conceptual resources for identifying and evaluating the varieties of resistance and struggle in which women, particularly, have engaged. They must recognize the often unnoticed ways in which women and other members of the underclass have refused cooperation and opposed domination, while acknowledging the inevitability of collusion and the impossibility of totally clean hands. In short, feminist approaches to ethics must be transitional and nonutopian, often extensions of, rather than alternatives to, feminist political theory, exercises in non-ideal rather than ideal theory.

3. Since most of most women’s lives have been excluded from that domain conceptualized as public, a third requirement for feminist approaches to ethics is that they should be salient to issues of so-called private life, such as intimate relations, sexuality, and child rearing. Thus, they must articulate the moral dimensions of issues that may not hitherto have been recognized as moral. In addition, we have seen that feminist approaches to ethics must provide appropriate guidance for dealing with national and international issues, strangers and foreigners. In developing the conceptual tools for undertaking these
tasks, feminist ethics cannot assume that moral concepts developed originally for application to the so-called public realm, concepts such as impartiality or exploitation, are appropriate for use in the so-called private; neither can it assume that concepts such as care, developed in intimate relationships, will necessarily be helpful in the larger world. Indeed, the whole distinction between public and private life must be examined critically by feminist ethics, with no prior assumptions as to whether the distinction should be retained, redrawn, or rejected.

4. Finally, feminist ethics must take the moral experience of all women seriously, though not, of course, uncritically. Although what is feminist often will turn out to be very different from what is feminine, a basic respect for women’s moral experience is necessary to acknowledging women’s capacities as moral subjects and to countering traditional stereotypes of women as less than full moral agents, as childlike or close to nature. Furthermore, empirical claims about differences in the moral sensibility of women and men make it impossible to assume that any approach to ethics will be unanimously accepted if it fails to consult the moral experience of women. Additionally, it seems plausible to suppose that women’s distinctive social experience may make them especially perceptive regarding the implications of domination, especially gender domination, and especially well equipped to detect the male bias that feminists believe has pervaded so much of male-authored Western moral theory.

Most feminist, and perhaps even many nonfeminist, philosophers might well find the general statement of these conditions quite uncontroversial, but they will inevitably disagree sharply over when the conditions have been met. Not only may feminists disagree with nonfeminists, but they are likely even to differ with each other over, for instance, what are women’s interests, what are manifestations of domination and coercion, how resistance should be expressed, and which aspects of women’s moral experience are worth developing and in which directions.

Those who practice feminist ethics thus may be seen both as united by a shared project and as diverging widely in their views as to how this project may be accomplished. Their divergences result from a variety of philosophical differences, including differing conceptions of feminism itself, which, as we have seen, is a constantly contested concept. The inevitability of such divergence means that feminist ethics can never be identified in terms of a specific range of topics, methods, or orthodoxies. While feminist ethics is distinguished by its explicit commitment to developing approaches to ethics that will respect women’s moral experience and avoid rationalizing women’s subordination, attempts to define it more precisely or substantively than this are likely to disregard the richness and variety of feminist moral thinking and prematurely foreclose feminist moral debates.

Current Concerns in Feminist Ethics

Since the 1970s, feminists have made significant contributions to both practical and theoretical ethics. Because it is impossible to offer anything like a comprehensive survey of this work in the space available, this article will end by sketching a few illustrative examples of feminist work designed to counter male bias in ethics. Much of this work draws on the culturally feminine as a resource for reconceiving ethical norms or standards thought to be androcentric.

Giving equal weight to women’s interests. Eighteenth and nineteenth century feminist philosophers, such as Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill, responded to the fact that Western ethics had often accorded less weight to women’s interests than to men’s by demanding that women receive the same rights and privileges bestowed on men. They conceptualized sexual equality as formal equality; that is, as identity of treatment for both men and women under gender-blind laws. Their twentieth-century successors sought to enshrine this understanding of sexual equality in the U.S. Constitution via an Equal Rights Amendment (passed by Congress in 1972, it was not ratified by the minimum number of states) that would have made any sex specific law unconstitutional.

Formal equality does not necessarily result in substantive equality, however. Feminist work in practical ethics is characterized by its use of gender as a category of ethical analysis and its employment of this category has revealed that many formally gender-blind policies and practices are not gender-neutral in their outcomes but instead have a disproportionately negative impact on women. Many illustrations could be added to the examples of war, peace, and world hunger, noted above; for instance, women, especially poor women, are among those hardest hit by seemingly gender-blind economic policies, such
as structural adjustment measures; similarly, environmental degradation often has more serious consequences for women, especially for mothers, than it does for men. Such systematically gendered outcomes suggest that constraining sexual equality in purely formal terms may be inadequate for reaching substantive sexual equality. Because norms of gender situate women differently from men in most social contexts across the world, substantive equality may require establishing policies and practices that are gender-sensitive or gender-responsive rather than gender-blind.

Formulating policies and practices that respond appropriately to gender differences is controversial and complicated. For instance, providing women with special legal protections such as pregnancy and maternity leaves may promote a public perception that women are less reliable workers than men. Attempts to protect women's sexuality by restricting pornography or excluding women from employment in male institutions such as prisons may have the unintended consequence of perpetuating the cultural myth that women are by nature the sexual prey of men; by suggesting that sexual harassment and assault are in some sense natural, this myth implicitly legitimates these practices. Thus, gender-responsive interpretations of sexual equality may not only provoke an anti-feminist backlash, they may even undermine the prospects of long-term sexual equality by stigmatizing women's competences. In addition, although gender-responsive conceptions of equality are intended to reflect sensitivity to differences in the circumstances of men and women in general, they are sometimes insensitive to differences in the social situations of different women. They may fail to notice that broad social groups, like men and women, are characterized by internal differences that are systematic as well as individual, following the fault lines of other social divisions such as race and class. Thus, these conceptions are sometimes responsive to gendered differences in need that are characteristic of only some men and women but not of all; often those taken as paradigms are men and women from more privileged classes; for instance, a feminist demand that child care be provided for mothers in paid employment may be used to discredit other mothers' claims to welfare support.

Some contemporary feminists seek to avoid the horns of the so-called equality/difference dilemma by questioning its underlying assumptions about the normative individual who is taken as the standard against which others' equality is measured. These feminists argue that equal concern for women's interests requires reassessing major social institutions on the presumption that their users are likely to be women—including women who are not otherwise privileged. The revised institutions would still be formally gender-blind but they would not be designed primarily for people who were able-bodied and fully employed, people unlikely to be subjected to sexual assault or harassment, people without responsibilities for the primary care of dependents such as children or elders. For instance, they might offer workers paid leaves to enable them to care for family members or they might provide child care on the same basis as public schooling. If social policies and practices were revised according to a principle of what Christine A. Littleton calls "equality of acceptance," sex differences could become socially "costless."

Broadening the domain of ethics. In response to their recognition that mainstream, especially modern, Western ethics has defined the moral domain in such a way as to exclude many issues of special concern to women, contemporary feminists have sought to expand the ethical arena. In some cases, their questions have generated whole new bodies of research, such as feminist environmentalism and feminist bioethics. Issues that feminists have identified as morally problematic include: abortion; sexuality, including compulsory heterosexuality, sexual harassment, and rape; representations of masculinity and femininity, including those produced by the mass media and pornography; the domestic division of labor; self-presentation, including body image and fashion; and the role of language in reinforcing as well as reflecting women's subordination. Although these issues received little attention from mainstream ethics until recent years, all have significant implications for women’s lives, to the extent that they sometimes involve matters of life and death for women. As noted earlier, feminists resist characterizing such issues as exclusively women’s issues; instead, by presenting them as hitherto neglected human issues, they broaden previous conceptions of normative human experience.

Rethinking the moral subject. Feminists’ first response to Western philosophy’s disparagement of women’s moral subjectivity was to insist on women’s capacity for moral autonomy and rationality, soon,
however, they began to question prevailing understandings of autonomy, rationality, and even subjectivity. With respect to autonomy, for instance, feminist concern about women’s collaborations with male dominance and consequent interest in the social construction of gendered character structures provided insight into many ways in which choice can be socialized and consent manipulated. Some feminists have faulted much modern moral philosophy for failing to recognize that autonomy cannot be assumed but instead is an achievement with complex material and social preconditions.

Conceptions of moral subjectivity that privilege autonomy are especially characteristic of the European Enlightenment; they derive from the Cartesian model of the self as disembodied, asocial, unified, rational, and essentially similar to all other selves. In developing alternatives to this conception, some feminists have drawn on traditions such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, communitarianism and postmodernism; others have been influenced by the work of Carol Gilligan, who postulated that girls and women were more likely than boys and men to conceive themselves in relational terms. Viewing oneself as integrally related to others is said to promote systematically different moral preoccupations from those that have characterized much mainstream Western ethics, particularly modern ethics; for instance, such a view of the self encourages women to construe moral dilemmas as conflicts of responsibilities rather than rights. Many feminist philosophers argue that a relational conception of moral subjectivity is not only more adequate empirically than an atomistic model but that it also generates moral values and a conception of moral rationality that are superior to those characteristic of the Enlightenment. For instance, it encourages women to seek resolutions to conflicts by means that promise to repair and strengthen relationships, to practice positive caretaking rather than respectful nonintervention, and to prioritize the personal values of care, trust, attentiveness, and love for particular others above impersonal principles of equality, respect, and rights.

Feminist dissatisfaction with the Enlightenment conception of moral subjectivity springs partly from an interest in the body, which many feminists regard as key to women’s subordination. Some argue that this subordination is maintained by male control of women’s bodies, especially women’s procreative and sexual capacities, and that it is expressed in women’s traditional assignments for biological reproduction and bodily maintenance. They see Western philosophy’s symbolic association of women with the body as not only reflecting but also rationalizing and reinforcing these unjust social arrangements.

Attention to human embodiment has implications for moral psychology. The identity of embodied moral subjects is constituted in part by specific social relations, and these, in turn, are partially determined by the social meanings attached to bodily characteristics such as parentage, age, or sex. Recognizing human embodiment explains why moral subjects are often motivated more by considerations of particular attachment than by abstract concern for duty, more by care than by respect, and more by responsibility than by right. Some feminists have argued that devaluing the body in comparison with the mind has turned moral theorists’ attention away from bodily related differences among individuals, such as age, sex, and ability, and encouraged them to regard people as indistinguishable and interchangeable. They further contend that disparaging the body has encouraged ethical theory to ignore many fundamental aspects of human life and to posit ideals unattainable by human beings.

Philosophical reflection that begins from the body tends to give prominence to aspects of human nature that are very different from those emphasized by Cartesianism; for instance, it highlights temporality and situatedness rather than timelessness and nonlocatedness, growth and decay rather than changelessness, particularity rather than universality, socality rather than isolation. Reflection on these features reveals that inequality, dependence and interdependence, specificity, social embeddedness, and historical community must be recognized as permanent features of human social life. They generate ethical problems that cannot be adequately addressed by developing highly idealized conceptions of equality, liberty, autonomy, and impartiality or that posit isolated individuals, ideal communities, or some supposedly universal human condition.

The features of human subjectivity emphasized by many feminist philosophers are precisely those that Western culture associates with women and the feminine; they are features that tend to preoccupy women in virtue of their social situation, they are culturally defined as appropriate to women, or they are associated symbolically with women. However,
to point to these features of human subjectivity is not to imply that the paradigm moral subject should be a woman rather than a man, or even culturally feminine rather than culturally masculine. Instead, it is to suggest that previous conceptions of human subjectivity have often provided understandings and ideals of both women and men that are partial and distorted.

Revaluing the feminine. Feminists have frequently responded to Western philosophy’s disparagement of what it has constructed as feminine by insisting that the feminine should be revalued. We have observed already that feminist ethics cannot be identified with feminine ethics but we have also seen that ways of thinking that are culturally feminine may point toward less biased and more adequate approaches to ethics. Some feminists regard the ethics of care as a case in point.

The first articulations of the ethics of care represented it as an expression of women’s characteristic experience of nurturing or mothering particular others, but later studies had difficulty confirming a clear empirical link between women and caring. When subjects were matched for education and occupation, women often achieved almost identical scores with men on justice-oriented tests of moral development, leaving women who worked in the home as the main representatives of the care perspective; moreover, some men as well as women were found to employ care thinking. Recent advocates of an ethics of care acknowledge not only that some women think in terms of justice and some men in terms of care, but also that most people of each sex are able to adopt either perspective. Nevertheless, they still view care as feminine on the grounds that it emerges from forms of socialization and practice that, in contemporary Western society, are culturally feminine; these include nursing, maintaining a home, raising children, and tending to the elderly. Caring is also feminine in the symbolic or normative sense of expressing cultural expectations that women be more empathic, altruistic, nurturing, and sensitive than men.

Some feminists have associated the ethics of care not only with gender but also with race and class. Joan Tronto links the moral perspective of care with the work of cleaning up after body functions, tasks that in Western history have been relegated primarily to women but not to all women or to women exclusively; caring work is done not only by women but also by the working classes, especially, in most of the West, by people of colour. This analysis of the social genesis of care thinking fits well with Lawrence Blum’s argument that justice ethics expresses a juridical-administrative perspective that is indeed masculine but reflects the concerns specifically of men from the professional and administrative classes. Together, these arguments suggest that both the ethics of justice and the ethics of care express moral perspectives that are not only gendered but simultaneously characteristic of different races and classes.

Feminist philosophers are divided about the potential of care ethics. One concern is that it may be insufficiently sensitive to the characteristically feminine moral failing of self-sacrifice; another is that its emphasis on meeting the immediately perceived needs of particular individuals may lead agents to show unfair partiality to those closest to them. There also exist concerns about whether care’s characteristic focus on the details of small-scale situations can address problems that are rooted in social structures; such a focus may encourage what are sometimes called band aid or social work approaches to moral problems rather than attempts to address them through institutional changes. For these and other reasons, some feminists doubt that care ethics provides resources capable of adequately critiquing male dominance in both public and private life.

Despite these problems, many philosophers are continuing to draw on care’s “feminine” insights and values to develop alternative and more feminist approaches to democratic theory, to social and economic policy, and to international relations. Rather than dismissing the claims of justice, such approaches typically seek to reinterpreta them within a framework of care. Their goal is to reconceptualize social and even global institutions so that they will enable and reinforce caring relations among people.

Building on women’s moral experience. The ethics of care is often represented as an approach to ethics that is based on women’s moral experience; however, it has been presented here as an ethical revaluation of the culturally feminine. To illustrate ethical initiatives that are based on women’s moral experience, let us consider instead some recent feminist reinterpretations of HUMAN RIGHTS.

The concept of rights was central to the emergence of Western feminism but, because rights are central in most modern versions of the so-called justice tradition, some contemporary feminists have
dismissed them as reflections of a moral perspective that is characteristically masculine. These feminists regard rights as expressing an inherently adversarial morality that disparages the more basic and important human values of interdependence, cooperation, and trust. Some contend that appeals to rights may rationalize male power over women; for example, the right to freedom of expression may justify misogynist pornography. Others observe that legal equality of rights may obscure inequalities of power to exercise them, noting that the procedures associated with claiming and redressing rights are often degrading, intimidating, and humiliating for women, especially in trials for rape and sexual harassment. Still other feminists argue that focusing on rights ignores the ways in which women may be compelled by their social situations to exercise their rights in a manner that is harmful to them, for instance, by “choosing” prostitution or cosmetic surgery. In short, some feminists charge that rights talk may often be not only unhelpful to women but even rationalize their inequality.

It is certainly true that appeals to rights have had only limited success in promoting women’s equality. The United Nations identifies three categories or “generations” of rights, including civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights and, in each of these categories, abuses to women are often neglected or excused. Either women are seen as identical to men, so that substantive equality is equated with formal equality, ignoring salient differences between the social situations of men and women; or women are seen as “other,” inherently different from men, so that abuses of their rights have been represented as “normal,” “natural,” or “inevitable.”

Despite continuing systematic abuse and subordination of women, some feminists still believe that the rights tradition constitutes a valuable resource for women’s liberation. For instance, rights may be interpreted to take account of morally salient differences among rights holders and they may be assigned to groups as well as individuals. They may include “positive” as well as “negative” rights, which are “ENTITLEMENTS” rather than liberties and carry claims not only to noninterference but also to correlative duties on the part of others. Such rights may be thought of as embodying the supposedly feminine values of interdependence, social co-operation, and care.

Faith in the concept of rights is certainly evident in the currently burgeoning global feminist movement, which is united by the slogan, “Women’s rights are human rights.” This movement calls not simply for enforcing women’s human rights but for radically rethinking how human rights have been conceived. Many feminist proposals for reinterpreting rights begin by recognizing that violations of women’s rights are more often carried out by non-state than by state actors—often by male family members—and that they occur in the private as well as the public sphere. This recognition requires expanding the definition of state sanctioned repression to include acceptance of family forms in which brides are sold and in which fathers and husbands exert strict control over women’s sexuality, dress, speech, and movement; it also requires redefining SLAVERY to include forced domestic labour and prostitution. Because some violations of human rights take gender-specific forms, the definition of war crimes must be expanded to include systematic rape and sexual torture. Similarly, the definition of GENOCIDE must be expanded to include female INFANTICIDE; the systematic withholding of food, medical care, and education from girls; and the battery, starvation, mutilation, and even murder of adult women. Feminists have also noted that women’s rights are often indivisible from each other; for instance, many violations of women’s civic and political rights are made possible by women’s economic vulnerability. Fully protecting women’s human rights requires changing not only laws but also ECONOMIC SYSTEMS and cultural practices.

In the above examples, women’s gender-specific experiences have served as a resource for identifying covert male biases lurking in existing definitions of human rights and as a model for revising those definitions. However, to imagine the normative bearer of rights as a woman rather than a man is not to replace male with female bias. Because women are vastly overrepresented among the poor and illiterate of the world and among those most vulnerable to oppressive systems of power, this image instead exposes the false humanism of older conceptions of human rights; it also points toward new understandings of rights that are more inclusive and fully human.

The global movement for women’s human rights provides a final illustration of the trajectory followed by much feminist ethics; beginning by criticizing the exclusion of women and DISCRIMINATION against
feminist ethics

them, it moves to challenging the covert male bias of existing ethical frameworks, and finally draws on the culturally feminine to propose more ethically adequate norms and standards.

See also: ABORTION; AGENCY AND DISABILITY; AUTONOMY OF MORAL AGENTS; BIOETHICS; CARE; CHILDREN AND ETHICAL THEORY; COERCION; COMMUNITARIANISM; CONSENT; CULTURAL STUDIES; DE BEAUVIOR; DISCRIMINATION; DUTY AND OBLIGATION; EMOTION; ENGELS; ENTITLEMENTS; ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS; EQUALITY; EXPLOITATION; FAMILY; FIDELITY; FRIENDSHIP; GAY ETHICS; HETEROSEXUALITY; HUMAN RIGHTS; INEQUALITY; LESBIAN ETHICS; LIBERTY; LITERATURE AND ETHICS; MASS MEDIA; JOHN STUART MILL; MORAL ATTENTION; MORAL DEVELOPMENT; MORAL IMAGINATION; MORAL PSYCHOLOGY; MULTICULTURALISM; NARRATIVE ETHICS; NURSING ETHICS; OPPRESSION; PARTIALITY; PATERNALISM; PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS; PORNOGRAPHY; POSTMODERNISM; PSYCHOANALYSIS; PUBLIC AND PRIVATE MORALITY; PUBLIC HEALTH POLICY; PUBLIC POLICY; RACISM AND RELATED ISSUES; REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES; RESPONSIBILITY; RIGHT HOLDERS; SELF AND SOCIAL SELF; SELF-OWNERSHIP; SEXUAL ABUSE AND HARASSMENT; SEXUALITY AND SEXUAL ETHICS; STAEL; THOMSON; WELFARE RIGHTS AND SOCIAL POLICY; WOLLSTONECRAFT; WOMEN MORAL PHILOSOPHERS; WORK.

Bibliography

Fénelon, François

François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénelon was born into a noble but impoverished family in Perigord. He was ordained in 1675; named director of the New Catholics (former Protestants) in 1678; appointed tutor of Louis, Duc de Bourgogne (1682–1712, the grandson of Louis XIV) in 1689; elected to the Académie Française in 1693; and made Archbishop of Cambrai in 1697. At the center of major controversies of the period, he rejected the Jansenist interpretation of AUGUSTINE (354–430) and opposed Bossuet (1627–1704) in the Quietist debate, a debate precipitated by his refusing to condemn Mme. Guyon (1648–1717) as a heretical mystic. He set out his position in Explication des maximes des saints sur la vie intérieure (1697), in which he argues that saintly love of God is pure, radically disinterested love. Although his opposition to Bossuet was costly in the short term—he was banished from the court in 1697 and his book was condemned by Pope Innocent XII in 1699—his views on pure love, FREE WILL, predestination and grace soon thereafter found favor both in Rome and in France. He carried out pastoral functions as Archbishop in his war-ravaged diocese until his death.

Fénelon’s work in philosophy was apologetic, though he believed that the path to the best apologetics was that of reason and true philosophy. He admired the ancient philosophers—especially PLATO (c. 430–347 B.C.E.)—and sought a synthesis of Augustine and DESCARTES (1596–1650). In his earliest work, he maintains that MALEBRANCHE’s (1638–1715) metaphysics, contrary to good theology and sound reason, restricts the possible to the necessary and deprives God of free choice. On the contrary, he argues, owing to God’s infinite perfection and power, God is free to create or not to create any possible world entirely at his pleasure and does not, accordingly, choose a world because it is good, but makes the world good by choosing it.

And similarly by gratuitous choice does God make the chosen few good and worthy of salvation. To the objection that this is at once unfair to those who are not chosen and contrary to the scripture that says that God wills that all be saved, Fénelon replies as follows: First, it is evident that we have free will, the power to do or not to do A, even when A appears to us to be what we ought to do. Second—this is what it means to say that God wills that all