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Different Voices, Still Lives: Problems in the Ethics of Care

SUSAN MENDUS

ABSTRACT *Recent writings in feminist ethics have urged that the activity of caring is more central to women's lives than are considerations of justice and equality. This paper argues that an ethics of care, so understood, is difficult to extend beyond the local and familiar, and is therefore of limited use in addressing the political problems of the modern world. However, the ethics of care does contain an important insight: if references to care are understood not as claims about women's nature, but as reflections on the extent to which moral obligations are both unchosen and conflicting, then an ethics of care can supplement an ethics of justice, and can also provide a more realistic account of both men's and women's moral life.*

The moral imperative . . . [for] women is an injunction to care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate the 'real and recognizable trouble' of this world. For men, the moral imperative appears rather as an injunction to respect the rights of others and thus to protect from interference the rights to life and self-fulfilment . . . The standard of moral judgement that informs [women's] assessment of the self is a standard of relationship, an ethic of nurturance, responsibility, and care. [1]

Since the publication of Carol Gilligan's *In A Different Voice* feminist theorists have embraced a distinction between an ethic of justice and an ethic of care. Moral theories couched in terms of rights, justice and abstract rationality have given way to moral theories which emphasise care, compassion and contextualisation. And it is widely argued that these latter values reflect women's lives and women's concerns far more accurately than do the abstract and atomistic values inherent in, for example, John Rawls' theory of justice, or Kantian conceptions of morality generally. As the quotation demonstrates, Gilligan's account, which is based on the findings of empirical psychological research, contends that the justice perspective is predominantly male, the care perspective predominantly female. But moral and political philosophy have ignored the findings of psychology and in consequence have emphasised the (male) perspective of justice to the near exclusion of (female) conceptions of care. In this respect they have shown a distinct gender bias, and feminists now urge the need for rectification and an acknowledgement of the moral (as well as the psychological) importance of the language of care.

However, in urging a move from abstraction to contextualisation, and from considerations of justice to considerations of care, feminist theorists tread on sensitive ground. From Aristotle to Hegel, woman's 'special' nature or 'different' voice has been used as the primary justification for her confinement to the domestic realm and her exclusion from political life. Thus, notoriously, Hegel tells us that 'When women hold the helm of government, the state is at once in jeopardy, because women regulate their actions not by the demands of universality but by arbitrary inclinations and opinions'. [2] Similarly, Rousseau declared

that 'a perfect man and a perfect woman should no more be alike in mind than in face', [3] and western political philosophy is replete with similar examples of arguments which move from the assertion of woman's different, caring nature to the conclusion that she is unfitted for public life. Against this background, the aspiration to employ an ethic of care in pursuit of feminist ends must be treated with considerable caution.

The converse also applies: difference theorists not only appear to ally themselves with arguments which have been used to women's disadvantage, they also, and in the process, distance themselves from a long tradition of feminist theory and practice — a tradition which has embraced abstract rights as the most important single means of escaping from oppression. Anne Phillips says;

The liberal language of individual rights and freedoms has a tremendous resonance for women . . . much of the personal impetus towards a feminist politics is to do with claiming the space to choose who and what you are — not to be defined, contained and dictated by notions of 'woman'. [4]

Thus, difference theory in general, and the ethics of care in particular, raise serious problems for feminists. My aim in this paper is to draw attention to those problems, and to suggest ways in which they might be avoided or overcome. Specifically, I shall argue that on the individual level the ethics of care runs the risk of adopting too unitary and static a conception of woman's identity, and of ignoring the conflicts inherent in women's lives. Connectedly, I shall suggest that on the political level the concept of care is too narrow to do the work required of it: considerations of care are largely limited to those whom we know, and are problematic if extended to the wider world of unknown others which is the central sphere of politics. Finally, however, I shall suggest that the ethics of care does identify important defects in justice theory: if interpreted not as a theory about the activity of caring, but as a theory of the passivity of life, it may provide the foundations for a political philosophy which recognises our need for just treatment in virtue of our inherent vulnerability. This conclusion serves, moreover, to suggest that we should not interpret 'the ethics of justice' and 'the ethics of care' as distinct and alternative ethical systems, but rather as complementary facets of any realistic account of morality.

Care, Difference and Politics

There are two features of an ethic of care to which I wish to draw attention: the first is its emphasis on the differences which divide people rather than the similarities which unite; the second is the centrality it accords to small-scale, face-to-face relationships. Each of these features promises to mitigate the impersonality associated with an ethic of justice but, I shall argue, the price is high. As we have seen, emphasis on difference threatens political exclusion: it has uncomfortable associations with the arguments of the great dead philosophers, who claimed that women's different nature justified their confinement to a separate domestic sphere, distinct from the sphere of politics. Moreover, emphasis on small, face-to-face relationships compounds the difficulty when once we recognise that political problems are characteristically large scale. Typically, they do not arise at the level of individual relationships, and therefore an ethic which concentrates on the small scale may have little to contribute to their solution. At the very least, argument will be needed to show

whether and how the features characteristic of small-scale relationships may be extended in such a way as to inform political practice.

Firstly, then, an ethic of care as an ethic which emphasises difference rather than similarity. References to this feature can be found throughout feminist philosophy, and I shall mention just two places where the argument is prominent.

In her article, *Liberty and Equality from a Feminist Perspective*, Virginia Held asserts; 'We give birth, and you do not. This is a radical difference, and the fact that you lack this capacity may distort your whole view of the social realm'. [5] And similarly Cheshire Calhoun argues that;

Too much talk about our similarities as moral selves, and too little talk about our differences has its moral dangers . . . Unless moral theory shifts its priority to knowledgeable discussion of human differences — particularly differences tied to gender, race, class and power — lists and rank orderings of basic human interests and rights as well as the political deployment of those lists are likely to be sexist, racist and classist. [6]

An ethic of care, unlike an ethic of justice, takes the differences between people as central and as the appropriate starting point for both moral and political philosophy.

Secondly, and connectedly, the ethic of care concentrates on the particularities of actual relationships rather than the dictates of universal reason. Kittay and Meyers draw the contrast as follows;

A morality of rights and abstract reason begins with a moral agent who is separate from others, and who independently elects moral principles to obey. In contrast, a morality of responsibility and care begins with a self who is enmeshed in a network of relations to others, and whose moral deliberation aims to maintain these relations. [7]

Unlike an ethic of justice, an ethic of care emphasises the extent to which people are at least partly constituted by their relationships with those around them. It is these relationships which define their moral responsibilities and which should therefore inform our discussions of moral and political life. Emphasis on the differences which divide people (particularly the differences which divide men and women), and on the importance of actual relationships as constitutive of individual identity and moral responsibility, are therefore central to the distinction between an ethic of justice and an ethic of care. There are, however, two ways in which these features are problematic. On the individual level, they imply a conception of female identity which is altogether too simplistic and unitary; and on a political level, they assume a kind of society wholly different from that which exists in the post-industrial world of the late twentieth century.

Insistence on female difference, specifically on the 'radical' differences which divide men and women, is often ambivalent between an assertion of biological difference, rooted in women's status as child *bearers*, and an assertion of social difference, rooted in women's traditional role as child *carers*. Proponents of the ethic of care tend to vacillate uneasily between the claim that women's biological nature as child bearers renders them especially sensitive to considerations of care and compassion, and the claim that women's status as child carers makes them more conscious of those considerations. But either way feminist politics is jeopardised, for the former account renders women prisoners of their own biology, and the latter advocates for all women a single, defining role which in fact only some women occupy.

Of course, in so far as an ethic of care points to the importance of virtues other than the virtue of justice, it is powerful and important. Held is surely right to note that equality and justice are only two virtues amongst many and that, in ordinary life, the claims of care and compassion may be more central and more compelling. But she and others go further, implying a deep and defining connection between an ethic of care and women's identity. For her, the specification of women's identity contains essential reference to birth, care, and the raising of children. The same is not true of men, and this difference, it is claimed, generates a dramatically different perspective on moral problems and moral responsibilities. Thus Held concludes;

When we dare to give voice to how we think the world ought to be, we can imagine that whether one adopts the point of view of those who give birth or whether one does not may radically change one's perspective on most of what is most important. [8]

Well, we can imagine that, but it is a risky activity and not, on the whole, one which has delivered much by way of improvement in women's political condition. On the contrary, it is emphasis on common humanity *despite* difference which has served women far better, since it has provided standards of impartiality which are necessary in the pursuit of equality. [9]

There is, however, a further implication of the ethic of care which I wish to note here. This is that, in addition to emphasising differences *between* the moral perspectives of men and women, it also threatens to ignore the acute conflicts of identity which occur *within* the lives of many women. Thus, while Held correctly notes the extent to which considerations of care inform women's moral judgements, she is silent on the extent to which care, compassion and the raising of children also generate conflicts within women's lives as they strive, for example, to combine domestic duties with professional duties. In the modern world, being a mother is only one role which is occupied by many women, and this role must be reconciled with other, often incompatible, roles. Again, this is not to deny that, for example, considerations of compassion ought to enter into the workplace, or into wider society. It is simply to note that care is a problematic concept: at the individual level, it may become 'chronic self-denial', whilst at the political level it may serve as an inadequate (and financially expedient) substitute for justice.

Put bluntly, the identification of women with care has nostalgic overtones, and threatens to result in a dangerously romantic conception of domesticity: romantic, because it idealises the maternal role, while remaining almost wholly silent as to its frustrations. Dangerous, because it implies a conceptual link between maternal virtues and political virtues. In fact, however, the disanalogies between the two are quite striking, and it is far from clear how maternal virtues are related to political ones. Specifically, mother-child relationships are characterised by an intimacy wholly lacking in relationships between citizens. As Mary Dietz has pointed out;

the bond among citizens is not like the love between a mother and child, for citizens are not intimately, but politically involved with each other . . . citizens do not, because they cannot, relate to one another as brother does to brother, or mother does to child. We look in the wrong place for a model of democratic citizenship if we look to the family (even when we have carefully defined the family). [10]

Moreover, the relationship between mother and child, unlike the relationship between citizens, is not one of equality, but one of hierarchy, and in this respect too the mother-child relationship is simply not analogous to the relationship between citizens. Maternal virtues are therefore different from citizen virtues both in respect of intimacy and in respect of hierarchy. Feminist emphasis on care and compassion thus generates three distinct but related worries: the first is that its emphasis on difference implies a view of women which, historically, has been associated with policies of political exclusion. The second is that it implies an over-simple, and static, view of female identity, which mis-describes women's role in modern life, and the third is that it appeals to an inappropriate analogy between familial and political relationships.

However, Dietz's argument that there is a difference of kind between familial and political relationships ignores the persuasive power of the analogy both for feminists and for communitarians. Feminists are not alone in urging that politics should be informed by the actual relationships which invest individuals' lives with meaning and significance, and it is here that the nostalgic nature of both feminism and (some forms of) communitarianism becomes most apparent.

By urging the centrality of face-to-face relationships, proponents of the ethics of care hope to render political life an extension of family life. This may be an appropriate aim in societies which are small-scale, and where face-to-face relationships are the norm. But in large, anonymous, post-industrial societies the analogy becomes diminishingly useful or plausible. In brief, an ethic of care seems best suited to small-scale societies where face-to-face relationships are the norm. But these societies are not the ones which we now have. Modern society is large, sprawling, and anonymous. And whilst we might wish that it were not so, the insistence on an ethic which emphasises actual relationships may nevertheless appear nostalgic and untrue to the realities of modern life.

In this respect, the problems inherent in an ethic of care are akin to the problems encountered by those forms of socialism which emphasise the importance of small communities and the face-to-face relationships which they foster. Speaking about these forms of socialism David Miller notes;

Socialism became a popular ideology precisely in response to the breakup of traditional communities under the impact of the industrial revolution. It became popular because it promised to restore the coherent moral life found in disappearing communities, whilst at the same time providing all the material (and other) benefits of industrialization. But these two promises could never be fulfilled together. In industrial societies the appeal to community is always nostalgic and backward looking, whatever its proponents may think. [11]

And we may have a similar worry about the ethic of care, for in so far as this too promises to restore the coherence of moral life, it too is vulnerable to the charge of nostalgia and lack of realism about the facts of the modern world. The theoretical worry which is generated by these thoughts is simply that, in the modern world, the concept of care is too weak to do the work required of it: unsupported by considerations of justice and equality, care may simply not extend reliably beyond the immediacy of one's own family, or group, or clan, to the wider world of unknown others. If identity and morality are constituted by actual relationships of care between particular people, they will not easily translate to the wider political problems of world hunger, poverty and war, which involve vast numbers of unknown people. Writing on this subject, Michael Ignatieff says;

We recognize our humanity in our differences, in our individuality, our history, in the faithful discharge of our particular culture of obligations. There is no identity we can recognize in our universality. There is no such thing as love of the human race, only the love of this person for that, in this time and not in any other. [12]

Ignatieff's concern (that we are psychologically unable to extend care beyond those whom we know) may be supplemented by a further concern, which is whether care remains a good when applied undiluted to large-scale, political problems. Perhaps our problem is not simply that it is psychologically difficult to care for those who are distant from and unknown to us, but rather that care may be morally transformed when it is extended to such contexts.

This point may be clarified if we concentrate less on the perspective of the carer, and more on the perspective of the recipient of care. The ethics of care draws our attention to qualities which are prominent in dealing with those whom we know and love, and it urges that, via an extension of sympathy, those same qualities may be extended to unknown others. Thus, we should construe our relationship to (unknown) fellow citizens on the model of our relationship to members of our own family. So expressed, the ethic of care merely urges an enlargement of the scope of individual sympathy. However, from the recipient's perspective, the situation may be rather different: to be the recipient of sympathy from a stranger can often be offensive and unwelcome. Often, what is desired is not the compassion of someone better off than ourselves, but rather a recognition of our claims in terms of justice and equality. The substitution of compassion for justice at the political level was, after all, responsible for some of the most morally disreputable aspects of Victorian Poor Law, and this should serve as a warning against unbridled enthusiasm for the extension of care in addressing the problems of politics in the modern world.

In making this last point, I am not suggesting that compassion from a stranger can never be welcome or appropriate. Nor am I suggesting that compassion from friends and family is always welcome. Rather, the point is simply that, on the political level, too much emphasis on care may serve to disguise the requirements of justice and equality. Anne Phillips makes a similar point in noting that

the contrast between (male) abstraction and (female) specificity is running like wildfire through much contemporary feminist debate, and if the implication is that the latter is superior to the former then I simply do not agree. Compassion cannot substitute for the impartiality of justice and equality, for compassion is potentially limited to those we can understand — and hence those who are most like ourselves. For feminists in particular, this would be a risky road to pursue, and it was precisely the demand for equality across seemingly impassable barriers of incomprehension and difference that gave birth to the feminist tradition. [13]

In the political context, therefore, the language of care presents two threats: the first is that it will simply result (indeed, has resulted) in those who present themselves as caring being required to carry the entire burden of welfare provision: the history of care in the community has been the history of dependence on women, whose role as carers has substituted for state provision. Thus, in Britain, the 1981 White Paper (*Growing Older*) asserted that

the primary sources of support and care for elderly people are informal and voluntary. These spring from the personal ties of kinship, friendship and neighbourhood . . . It is the role of public authorities to sustain and, where

necessary, develop — but never to displace — such support and care. Care *in* the community must increasingly mean care *by* the community. [14]

Where the family unit, or the neighbourhood, has been seen as the primary locus of care, women have taken a disproportionate responsibility for the provision of that care. And the situation is unlikely to be improved by feminist adherence to an ethic of care which emphasises women's 'natural' propensities in this area.

More worrying even than this, however, is the consideration that care is necessarily particularised. It is not mere lack of imagination, but logic (the logical problem inherent in legislating care or compassion) which precludes its extension beyond friends and family. Of course, we may well feel compassion for the inhabitants of 'Cardboard City', for the unemployed, or for the hungry, but it does not follow that this emotion, on its own, provides the best foundation for political policies of welfare. On the contrary, the development of the modern welfare state was self-consciously a development away from the model of rich caring for poor and towards a model of entitlement for all, whether rich or poor. Such a development need not be motivated by scepticism about people's willingness (or ability) to extend care to a wider public. It may also be motivated by the recognition that when care is so extended, it can imply a loss of dignity for the recipient, and a convenient way of disguising the fact that he or she has claims in justice.

Put bluntly, the dilemma which faces care theorists is this: if caring is contained within the family, it will tend to lead in the direction of increased insistence that women are the most appropriate carers. But if extended beyond the family to public policy, it will threaten a return to a conception of the welfare state which is based not on entitlement but on charity.

My concern about the ethic of care therefore has two facets: on an individual level, it gives a simplistic and static account of modern identity, one which ignores the conflict and fragmentation inherent in it; and on a wider, political level it renders problematic our response to the needs of strangers. Nevertheless, I believe that an ethic of care does contain important insights which can avoid these difficulties, and I therefore turn now to a proposed reconstruction which, I hope, will indicate the importance of care in moral and political philosophy.

Care and the Case of Antigone

In criticising the language of care as a language appropriate for the political problems of modern society, I urged a distinction between the perspective of those who provide care, and the perspective of those who are the recipients of care. Displaying compassion for unknown others may seem (for the donor) merely a matter of enlarging and extending the virtue of sympathy. But receiving compassion from unknown others is often perceived (by the recipient) as morally different from receiving compassion from friends and family. Specifically, when care is institutionalised, it may undermine the claims of justice, and present entitlements as mere favours. By concentrating on the perspective of the donor rather than the recipient, therefore, an ethic of care runs the risk of mis-understanding its own central virtue.

Similarly, but more generally, we may wonder whether the ethics of care would acquire a different status if we were to shift attention from the 'active' to the 'passive', and think about care not as something chosen by the carer, but rather as an obligation upon the carer, which is often unchosen, yet remains an obligation. It is this issue which I shall now address.

Earlier in the paper I made reference to the contrast drawn by Kittay and Meyers between an ethic of care and an ethic of universal reason. They say;

A morality of rights and abstract reason begins with a moral agent who is separate from others, and who independently elects moral principles to obey. In contrast, a morality of responsibility and care begins with a self who is enmeshed in a network of relations to others and whose moral deliberation aims to maintain these relations. [15]

As we have seen, proponents of an ethic of care then concentrate on the particularities of actual relationships and on the emotions and commitments which sustain them. In other words, they concentrate on the *activity* of the moral agent as one who exhibits qualities of care. But there is a second insight in the contrast, which often goes unremarked. This is that moral life may be a matter of what is given, just as much as it is a matter of what is chosen. What is characteristic of women's lives is not simply that they give priority to the activity of caring, but also that their traditional role as carers constrains their ability to determine their own lives: as carers, women are frequently victims of their circumstances, rather than creators of their lives. Thus, where a morality of rights emphasises the individual as *agent* (as one who *elects* moral principles to live by), feminist morality should emphasise the individual as *recipient* (as one who *recognises* and *accepts* obligations which must be discharged).

The classic example here is Antigone, who is the tragic victim of the conflicting obligations dictated by her roles as sister, daughter, and citizen. Sophocles' play is replete with references to these obligations and the effects of their claims upon Antigone. Thus, it begins with the cry 'O sister!', and Antigone goes on immediately to describe 'the death of our two brothers' and how she and Ismene are doomed to suffer 'for our father'. Modern feminists have sometimes interpreted Antigone's situation as one in which familial, or domestic considerations take priority over political ones. They understand her tragic choice as a choice of private over public virtue; of care over justice. Thus, Jean Elshtain argues that the play is to be seen as the drama of a woman pitted against 'the arrogant insidencies of statecraft', a defender of 'the domain of women' and 'primordial family morality'. [16] Faced with conflict, Antigone defies the abstract obligations of the state and rejects public life in favour of familial bonds: she rejects the 'male' language of justice in favour of the 'female' language of care. But read in this way, both the tragic nature of the play, and its political dimension, remain unexplained.

Responding to the demand for a political interpretation of Antigone's dilemma, Mary Dietz argues that Elshtain's account is both anachronistic (since the public-private distinction is essentially a liberal construct) and blind to the transformation of private into public which characterises Antigone's action. Dietz says;

The reason why Antigone is a heroine and Ismene is not has nothing to do with 'private' or 'familial' virtues, for both sisters loved their brother. The difference between them has to do with political consciousness. Antigone understands that Creon's refusal to allow Polynices's burial is not just a singular personal insult, but a collective political threat. The former may be countered with a 'modest silence' or supplication; the latter demands decisive political action. Antigone takes such action; Ismene does not. [17]

But neither Dietz nor Elshtain provides a full explanation of the essentially *tragic* nature of

Antigone's dilemma: it is not the battle between private and public, nor the transformation of private into public which makes Antigone a tragic heroine. For tragedy, what is required is reference to the inevitability and inescapability of her situation. The references to conflicting roles (sister, daughter, citizen) none of which may voluntarily be renounced, provide the clue to Antigone's tragedy and also, I suggest, to the way in which feminist theory may have application to political practice.

What is of crucial importance to the tragedy of Antigone is the extent to which the roles she occupies are multiple, unchosen, and in conflict. She is not simply the champion of domesticity who must suffer for her cause; nor is she merely the translator of private actions into political language. Her role is essentially one which is given rather than chosen — she is the bearer of inconsistent obligations which she neither controls nor chooses, yet which she must honour. Since her obligations conflict, she cannot discharge them all. But since they are all, and equally, obligations, she cannot renounce them without dishonour. Thus, the key moral distinction is not between the family and the polity, nor between the private and the public, but between the chosen and the given.

Antigone is characterised by her recognition of the 'givenness' of moral life and of the extent to which it renders us vulnerable to the inconsistent demands of different duties. If we understand feminist ethics as an ethic which emphasises this, then we will, I believe, be in a position to alleviate the two problems mentioned earlier: we will be able to construct an account of female identity which answers to the complex realities of women's lives, and we will have a more fruitful perspective on the relationship between feminist morality and the claims of politics.

This way of interpreting Antigone's situation enables us to distinguish between two distinct objections to an ethic of justice. We may note that justice is only one value amongst many, and that different kinds of people will give priority to different values. This objection, which has been emphasised by feminists, is powerful but also problematic, for it threatens to create an unbridgeable gulf both between men and women, and between those who are the natural recipients of our care (those who are close to us) and those who are not (those who are distant from us). Unless we can extend care indefinitely, an ethic of care, so understood, will remain unhelpful in dealing with political problems which concern a wider world of unknown others. But as we have seen, the indefinite extension of care is both psychologically and conceptually problematic.

By contrast, if our objection to an ethic of justice is to its assumption of voluntariness, then we may overcome both these problems. On this account, what is important about the experience of women is not simply that as mothers they care for their children, but also that, as mothers, they are the occupiers of a role. The duties associated with that role constrain women's ability to lead the life of an independent free chooser (they exhibit the incompleteness of an ethic of justice understood as an ethic of choice), and they also conflict with the duties associated with other roles. [18] Moreover, these features of moral life are neither a function of biological determinism nor of social conditioning. They are facts about human life quite generally, but facts which may be more apparent to women, particularly to women who straddle the public-private divide as they attempt to combine the role and status of mother with other roles and aspirations. Emphasis on mothers as the occupiers of roles thus suggests and reflects the unchosen nature of much of moral life: it suggests, with Antigone, that there are responsibilities which are ours 'whether we like it or not', and it suggests that those responsibilities may not always fit very easily together. Connectedly, if we understand an ethic of care as an ethic which emphasises the 'givenness' of moral life, we

may also be better placed to avoid regressive or conservative political conclusions. Earlier I suggested that the assertion of difference, coupled with the implication of moral superiority, may generate an ethic with distinctly elitist political implications. To avoid this, feminist ethics must eschew the language of difference and concentrate instead on the similarities which unite us all. But isn't this to revert to an ethic of justice, with all its associated problems of alienation and impersonality? Not necessarily.

An ethic of justice is characterised not simply by the centrality it accords to universality, but also by the emphasis it places on individual autonomy and the role of choice in the selection of moral ends. Feminist theorists have concentrated on the former and, in so doing, have drawn attention to psychological differences between the moral development of men and women. But the latter claim also stands in need of scrutiny. Communitarians, objecting to the prominence of choice in liberal theory, insist that we are 'partly defined by the communities we inhabit', that we are constituted by our attachments to others and by the social context in which those attachments occur. And these societal values and constitutive attachments are almost invariably interpreted as both valuable and benign. Thus Sandel notes that I may owe to others more than justice requires or even permits, 'not by reason of agreements I have made but instead in virtue of those more or less enduring attachments and commitments which taken together partly define the person I am'. [19] By drawing attention to the unchosen roles which we occupy, communitarians hope to exhibit the deficiencies in the liberal conception of the self as autonomous chooser. But, so understood, communitarianism lacks a political dimension. The neighbourhoods, homes, and communities in which identity is formed are private not public arenas. And, as Kukathas and Pettit have recently pointed out, 'when political questions arise, they often do because of conflicts among these antecedently individuated communities and persons — among these already existing identities'. [20]

Thus, communitarianism recognises that our social and moral situation is often given rather than chosen, but is silent as to the conflicts which may occur between it and a wider public world. A feminist ethic of care can make good this defect if it responds *both* to liberalism's insistence on choice, *and* to communitarianism's neglect of conflict. Again, the experience of mothers may be useful in one of two ways: we may employ it to draw attention to the fact that obligations are not invariably chosen, and we may also employ it to draw attention to the fact that obligations are not always consistent. If feminist ethics simply extols maternal virtues, then it will conspire with communitarianism to exclude women from the political realm.

There are therefore three conditions which feminist ethics must satisfy if it is to have any hope of generating feminist politics. Firstly, it must avoid appeal to women's 'special' or 'different' voice, since the different voice is a domestic voice, and domestic virtues are deformed when they are translated to a public world. Secondly, and connectedly, it must reject liberal emphasis on the activity of moral life and concentrate instead on the extent to which moral obligations are associated with roles and are unchosen (in this sense, it must ally itself with the communitarian critics of liberalism). Finally, and most importantly, it must distance itself from communitarianism by insisting that the social contexts in which obligations arise are diverse and conflicting. They are the source of pain and, at the limit, of tragedy. Since historically women have often been defined by their social roles, this is a point which they are well-placed to make. It is not, however, a point unique to women, but a quite general point about human beings. Indeed, it is an unavoidable consequence of any attempt to move between different communities, and therefore a necessary condition of feminist

theory's ability to deliver a practical politics which will do justice to the facts of women's lives. [21]

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NOTES

- [1] CAROL GILLIGAN, *In A Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 159–160.
- [2] G. W. F. HEGEL, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: University Press, 1952), 264.
- [3] J. J. ROUSSEAU *Emile: Oeuvres Completes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, IV, 693.
- [4] ANNE PHILLIPS, 'So What's Wrong with the Individual?', *Socialism and the Limits of Liberalism*, Peter Osborne (ed.) (London: Verso, 1991), 147.
- [5] VIRGINIA HELD 'Liberty and Equality from a Feminist Perspective', *Enlightenment, Rights and Revolution*, N. MacCormick and Z. Bankowski (eds.) (Aberdeen: University Press, 1989), 225.
- [6] CHESHIRE CALHOUN 'Justice, Care, Gender Bias' *Journal of Philosophy*, LXXXV (1988), 456.
- [7] EVA FEDER KITTAY and DIANA T. MEYERS (eds.) *Women and Moral Theory*, (U.S.A. Rowman and Littlefield, 1987), 10.
- [8] op.cit. note 5, 225–226.
- [9] For a full discussion of this point see ANNE PHILLIPS, op.cit., note 4.
- [10] MARY DIETZ, 'Citizenship With a Feminist Face: The Problem With Maternal Thinking', *Political Theory*, 13 (1985), 31.
- [11] DAVID MILLER, 'In What Sense Must Socialism Be Communitarian?' *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 5 (1989), 66–67.
- [12] MICHAEL IGNATIEFF, *The Needs of Strangers* (London: Hogarth, 1984), 42.
- [13] op.cit. note 4, 156.
- [14] As quoted in GILLIAN PARKER *With Due Care and Attention: A Review of research on Informal Care* (London: Family Policy Studies Centre, 1985), 5.
- [15] op.cit. note 7, 10.
- [16] JEAN ELSHTAIN, 'Antigone's Daughters' *Democracy*, 2, (1982), 46–59. As quoted in Dietz, 'Citizenship With a Feminist Face'.
- [17] op.cit. note 10, 29.
- [18] David Miller has suggested to me that, in fact, Gilligan objects only to the conception of justice as a system of formal rules; not to the assumption of voluntariness in many theories of justice. His point draws attention to Gilligan's unwillingness to consider the possibility that there might be different conceptions of justice. I do not consider this here, but the point is admirably discussed by ANDREW MASON in *Journal of the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 1990.
- [19] MICHAEL SANDEL, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: University Press, 1982), 179.
- [20] CHANDRAN KUKATHAS and PHILIP PETTIT, *Rawls: A Theory of Justice and Its Critics*, (Oxford and Cambridge: Polity, 1990), 109.
- [21] I am grateful to David Miller for his incisive written comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and also to Sally Baldwin, Gillian Parker, Julia Twigg, and other members of the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York for helpful discussions on the social policy of care. My thanks also go to the anonymous reader for the *Journal*, who provided very constructive suggestions for revision, which I have tried to incorporate.