

Feminist Ethics

ALISON M. JAGGAR

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. The practical goals of feminist ethics, then, 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. The meta-ethical goal of feminist ethics is to develop theoretical understandings of the nature of morality 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 either had been 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. A little later, feminists displayed increasing 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” itself 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, a rights framework was alleged by some to distort discussions of abortion insofar as it constructed 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. Contract theory, for instance, was criticized for postulating a conception of human individuals as free, equal, independent and mutually disinterested, a conception claimed by some to be contrary to the moral experience of most women. Even the requirement of 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 speculations were fuelled 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 supposedly less likely than males to make or justify moral decisions by the application of abstract moral rules; instead, she claimed 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 remains synonymous with an ethics of care. Just how an ethics of care should be delineated, however, was far from evident; nor was it clear whether it should supplement or supplant an ethics of justice. Many feminists today are exploring such questions, even though the connection between women and care is challenged by some psychologists who allege Gilligan's samples to be nonrepresentative, her methods of interpreting her data suspect, and her claims impossible to substantiate, especially when the studies are controlled for occupation and class.

Regardless of empirical findings in moral psychology, debate continues over whether the fundamental tenets of western ethics are male biased in some sense: if not in the sense that they express a moral sensibility characteristic of men rather than women, then perhaps in that they promote a culturally masculine image of moral psychology, discourage preoccupation with issues defined culturally as feminine, or in other ways covertly advance men's interests over women's. Since feminism is essentially a normative stance, and since its meaning is continually contested by feminists themselves, all feminists are constantly engaged in ethical reflection. In this sense, feminist ethics is practiced both inside and outside the academy. Within the academy, its main practitioners are scholars in philosophy, religion and jurisprudence. These scholars represent a variety of philosophical traditions, secular and religious, Anglo-American and continental European; in challenging perceived male bias in those traditions, they draw extensively on feminist scholarship in other disciplines, such as literature, history and psychology.

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. There are even grassroots journals of feminist ethics, such as *Lesbian Ethics*, published in the United States, and *Gossip: A Journal of Lesbian Feminist Ethics*, published in the United Kingdom. *Feminist Ethics*, published in Canada, seeks to combine academic scholarship with accessibility to a general audience. One may note striking parallels between many of the claims made by feminists inside the academy and those on the outside.

Those who currently claim the field of feminist ethics are mainly, though not exclusively, white western women. Nevertheless, a few male philosophers are doing significant work in feminist ethics, and people of color have produced a considerable amount

of writing, both fiction and nonfiction, that seems compatible with the moral and theoretical inspiration of feminist ethics. It is predictable that women would be more likely than men to identify themselves as feminists, and both nonwesterners and western people of color are less likely than western whites either to be philosophers or, because of feminism's racist history, to be feminists. "Womanist" is a term that many African American authors currently prefer to "feminist" but they might not object to the description of their work as feminist ethics if feminism could be cleansed of racism and ethnocentrism.

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 is 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.) 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 debates on reproductive technology are alleged to assume frequently 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. 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 are incapable of being 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 historically had been confined, 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 associated, empirically, normatively, or symbolically, with men. For instance, western ethics is alleged to prefer the supposedly masculine or male-associated values of independence, autonomy, intellect, will, wariness, hierarchy, domination, culture, transcendence, product, asceticism, war and death over the supposedly feminine or female-associated 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, prevailing western conceptualizations of the nature of morality, moral problems, and moral reasoning are also charged with being masculine insofar as they too are associated with men, an association 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 focussed 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 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 such 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, there is sharp feminist disagreement 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, however, it cannot be definitive of feminist ethics. This is because the formula, as it stands, raises more questions than it answers insofar as 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 is concerned to address issues of special concern to women, issues 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's and women's lives are inextricably intertwined, there are no "women's issues" that are not also men's issues; the availability or otherwise of child care and abortion, for instance, has significant consequences for the lives of men as well as women. On the other 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 starvation 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

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 women, or even feminists, therefore should be regarded as moral experts 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 the failure of insight or principle on the part of feminist leaders also demonstrate only too clearly that no women, even feminists, are 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; others value physical fragility, weakness or incompetence. But 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 seems 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 this is the case in certain respects in specific 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 blondness, affect different groups of women differently. Ultimately feminism's concern for *all* women means that feminist ethics must address not only "domestic" issues of racism or homophobia or class privilege but also such international issues as environmental destruction, war, and access to world resources.

2. In order to offer guides to action that will tend to subvert rather than reinforce the present 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 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 able to provide guidance on issues of so-called private life: intimate relations, sexuality and childrearing. 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. Though 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 moralists 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 non feminist, 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 the feminist moral debate.

CURRENT CONCERNS IN FEMINIST ETHICS

Despite the scope and diversity of feminist ethics, certain current preoccupations may be identified. These preoccupations are not definitive of feminist ethics, but they are characteristic of its present stage of development. (They are also, sometimes in different ways, preoccupations of much contemporary nonfeminist ethics.) They include concern with issues of universality and particularity, sociality and individuality, moral emotion and moral rationality. These concerns are not independent of each other and they may be discerned underlying many contemporary feminist approaches to practical issues, such as equality, health care, or the environment, as well as being foci of feminist reflection on such traditional philosophical issues as moral subjectivity and moral epistemology.

Feminist challenges to traditional views of moral subjectivity are not limited to assertions (*contra* Aristotle, Rousseau, Kant and Hegel) that women are as capable as men of moral virtue or rationality. Instead, many feminists have drawn on and extended nonfeminist criticisms of the basic model of the moral self most characteristic of Enlightenment moral theory, a model derived from Descartes (1596–1650) and portraying the self as disembodied, asocial, autonomous, unified, rational and essentially similar to all other selves. This model, of course, has been under attack for over a century from, among others, Marxists, Freudians, contemporary communitarians, and postmodernists. Feminists often share many conclusions with such nonfeminist critics of Enlightenment theory, but they arrive at those conclusions

by different routes, and often they add to them the claim that the Cartesian model is male-biased (as well as class- and possibly race-biased), in that it reflects the interests and values of European bourgeois men and either ignores divergent interests and values or portrays them as less than fully human.

One source of feminist challenge to the Cartesian self is a growing philosophical interest in embodiment. This itself springs partly from feminist outrage over the male control and exploitation of women's bodies, partly from the feminist recognition that much of the responsibility for physical reproduction and bodily maintenance traditionally has been assigned to women—both of which reinforce symbolic western associations between women and the body. Philosophical reflection that begins from the body tends to highlight features of human nature very different from those emphasized by Cartesianism: temporality rather than timelessness, growth and decay rather than changelessness, particularity rather than universality, sociality rather than isolation. These features, in turn, tend to generate concerns for ethics different from those that dominated much Enlightenment theory: inequality, dependence and interdependence, specificity, social embeddedness and historical community now must all be recognized as permanent circumstances of moral life, never to be avoided or transcended by focusing on equality, independence, autonomy, generality, isolated individuals, ideal communities or the universal human condition. It does not escape feminist authors that concern with precisely the former circumstances has been claimed by many to be distinctively feminine—preoccupying women in virtue of their social situation, associated symbolically with women or defined culturally as appropriate to women.

Conceiving moral subjects as embodied also has psychological implications: insofar as their identity is significantly constituted by their specific social relationships (relationships determined at least in part by the social meaning attributed to bodily characteristics such as parentage, age or sex), moral subjects conceived in this way are revealed as likely to be moved by considerations of particular attachment as much as abstract concern for duty, care as much as respect, solidarity as much as dignity, responsibility as much as right. Many

feminists currently argue that much Enlightenment moral psychology is inadequate insofar as it fails to take adequate account of these propensities, conceiving them at best as morally irrelevant, at worst as morally subversive. In addition, noting the ways in which the psyche is shaped by social practices, especially childrearing and other gendered practices, many feminists criticize the common Enlightenment assumption that people are essentially alike, rational and autarchic. Noting the significance of fantasy in our lives, they deny that consciousness is transparent and unified and that individuals always know their own interests best. In general, they challenge much Enlightenment moral psychology for its failure to recognize that, if autonomy exists at all, it is an achievement with complex material and social preconditions.

That people in fact have certain psychological propensities of course does not entail that those propensities are morally relevant, let alone morally desirable; on the other hand, an adequate moral theory cannot be grounded in a psychology that is descriptively inadequate. Many feminists claim that much Enlightenment moral psychology is so alien to the ways in which people in fact do act and think morally that it cannot serve even as an acceptable reconstruction of moral reasoning. For instance, by failing to appreciate the moral significance of the psychological characteristics noted above, it offers a model of moral rationality that is unduly narrow in disregarding emotion, and likely to generate morally repugnant conclusions that ignore our responsibility for the welfare of others, neglect the claims of conventional morality, and undervalue the moral weight of particular relationships. Some feminists go on to argue that most Enlightenment models of moral rationality are not only empirically and morally inadequate but also serve, insofar as they are culturally accepted, as oppressive norms for those social groups, including perhaps some groups of women, whose moral thinking is stigmatized as amoral or immoral for failing to conform to these models.

Morality on most Enlightenment views is a system of rationally justified rules or principles that guide action in specific cases. Many contemporary feminists, by contrast,

deny that morality is reducible to rules and assert the impossibility of justifying the claims of ethics by appeal to a universal, impartial reason. They charge that undue emphasis on the epistemological importance of moral rules obscures the crucial role of moral insight, virtue and character in determining the right course of action. Some give a feminist twist to this essentially Aristotelian criticism by claiming that excessive reliance on rules reflects a juridical-administrative interest that is characteristic of modern masculinity—contemporary women, by contrast, are claimed to be more likely to disregard conventionally accepted moral rules because such rules are insensitive to the specificities of particular situations. Some feminists assert, therefore, that a morality of rule devalues the moral wisdom of women and gives insufficient weight to such supposedly feminine virtues as kindness, generosity, helpfulness and sympathy.

Though many feminists continue to defend various versions of Enlightenment moral theory, many others are concerned not merely to criticize them but also to develop alternatives to them—alternatives that will avoid their perceived shortcomings while meeting the conditions of adequacy identified earlier. Thus, contemporary feminists are exploring ways of thinking about moral subjects that are sensitive both to their concrete particularity and their intrinsic shared value—the ideal expressed in Enlightenment claims about common humanity, equality and impartiality; developing “particularist” epistemologies that recognize the moral validity of immediate, emotion-laden responses to particular others while avoiding subjective relativism; and finding ways of simultaneously acknowledging and criticizing the claims of conventional morality—known colloquially as living with contradictions. They are exploring these approaches in the context of developing feminist perspectives on many of the most pressing moral issues of our time.

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