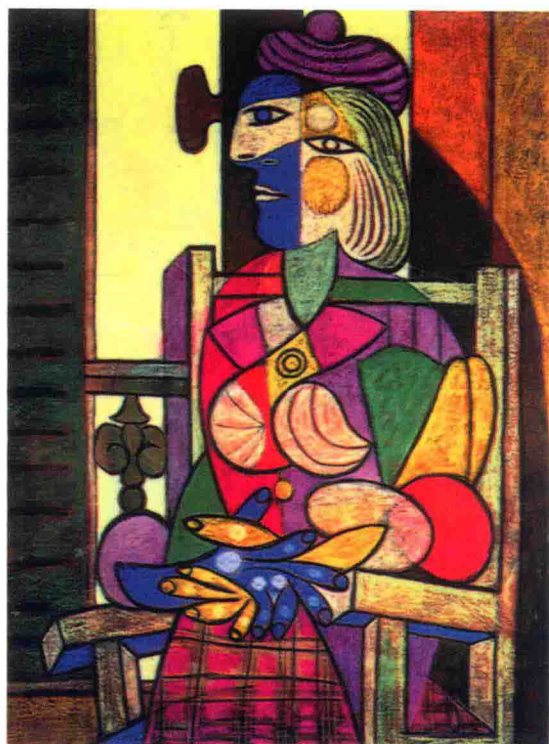

moral voices moral selves



Carol
Gilligan
and
Feminist
Moral
Theory

SUSAN J HEKMAN

W1

Moral Voices, Moral Selves

Carol Gilligan and Feminist Moral Theory

Susan J. Hekman

Polity Press

Copyright © Susan J. Hekman 1995

The right of Susan J. Hekman to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in 1995 by Polity Press
in association with Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Reprinted 2005

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge, CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purposes of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

ISBN 0 7456 1421 3
ISBN 0 7456 1502 3 (pbk)

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in Palatino on 10/12 pt
by Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Marston Book Services Limited, Oxford

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.polity.co.uk

Moral Voices, Moral Selves

In memory of Douglas Anders

Acknowledgments

In their acknowledgments authors usually declare that writing the book was a cooperative task, that it would not have been possible without the help of many colleagues and friends. This is true of this book as well. But it is also true that writing this, or any book, is a lonely endeavor. It requires what seem like endless hours of solitude, sitting at a desk accompanied only by a recalcitrant, sometimes hostile manuscript. In this situation the written comments of friends and colleagues become like conversations. Reading these comments in the solitude of my study, I feel as if I am engaging the authors in extended conversations and replying by revising my manuscript. These conversations relieve the necessary solitude of writing, and for this I am very grateful.

I have been very fortunate in my conversational partners in the writing of this book. Keith Burgess-Jackson read the whole manuscript with care and gave me a meticulous catalog of my numerous errors. My "conversations" with Keith were not always harmonious, and I have not always corrected the errors he identified, but I am grateful nonetheless. C. Jan Swearingen and Harry Reeder read portions of the manuscript and helped me avoid even more errors. Dick Flathman also gave me comments on portions of the manuscript and, most important, encouraged me at a crucial point in my writing to believe that what I was saying about Wittgenstein was not crazy. I am grateful for his assistance on this project. But my debt to him goes much beyond this. He has given me unstinting support throughout my scholarly career. He is, simply, the best mentor anyone could hope for.

The University of Texas at Arlington provided a Faculty Development Leave for the completion of this book. My sister, Judy Thompson, provided a stunningly beautiful and tranquil environment in which to write. Both were essential to the completion of the project. I would also like to thank Tony Giddens for his support through what is now three book projects. Tony has set new standards of excellence as a scholar and as an editor. I and the academic world owe him a great debt.

Finally, this book could not have been written without the scholarly and emotional support of my husband, Evan Anders. His agreements and disagreements with my ideas have shaped the direction of my arguments and helped me to clarify my positions at crucial points throughout the project. My dear friends Kathleen Underwood and Laurin Porter made the years spent writing this book richer and fuller, both intellectually and personally. And Mike Moore helped me conquer the labyrinthine complexities of WordPerfect. My thanks to them all.

Contents

Acknowledgments	viii
1 The Different Voice	1
<i>In a Different Voice</i>	3
Subsequent work	8
Interpreting the different voice	21
Displacing the tradition	25
2 Alternative or Displacement?	34
"The tradition"	34
The "alternative tradition"	37
Feminism and the communitarian critique of liberalism	50
Feminist ethics	62
3 Subject Strategies	71
The relational self	72
The postmodern subject	76
Feminist theories of the subject	85
Race, ethnicity, and subjectivity	102
The discursive subject	109
4 Back to the Rough Ground: Theorizing the Moral Subject	113
The moral language game: constituting the moral subject	114
Paths to moral truth	131
A postmodern ethics/politics?	139
A discursive morality for feminism	159
Notes	164
References	170
Index	185

1

The Different Voice

In 1982 Carol Gilligan published an empirical and interpretive analysis of the decision-making process of a sample of girls and young women confronted with both hypothetical and real-life moral dilemmas. Gilligan, a Harvard psychologist who specializes in moral development, challenged the influential approach of the moral development theorist Lawrence Kohlberg, who was also her teacher at Harvard. Against Kohlberg, Gilligan argued that the women and girls she interviewed articulated their moral dilemmas in a "different voice." Kohlberg's studies had concluded that women clustered at an inferior stage of moral development; few women attained what he defined as the highest stage of moral reasoning. In order to avoid the "distortion" that female subjects created, Kohlberg conducted his studies using primarily male subjects. Gilligan's study opposed Kohlberg's findings, as well as his interpretation of them. She attempted to define a separate but equal moral sphere for the different voice and thus to reform Kohlberg's theory by describing women as equals rather than inferiors.

It does not overstate the case to say that Gilligan's work has revolutionized discussions in moral theory, feminism, theories of the subject, and many related fields. *In a Different Voice* is unquestionably one of the most influential books of the 1980s. It has been both criticized and praised by feminists, moral philosophers, and moral psychologists. Gilligan's work has been hailed both as the harbinger of a new moral theory and as the final blow to the exhausted masculinist tradition of moral philosophy. It has also been condemned as methodologically unsound, theoretically confused, and even antifeminist. Gilligan's critics and defenders have cast her, respectively, as either villain or savior in the ongoing intellectual debate of the 1980s and 1990s. Probably the only point on which they agree is that, more than a decade later, the moral, epistemological, and methodological ramifications of her work are still being explored. A pertinent question at this point

in the debate is why Gilligan's study of women's and girls' moral reasoning has stirred up such a hornet's nest of controversy and evoked such vehement reactions from both critics and defenders.

One of the aims of this study is to answer this question. It is my contention that Gilligan's work is both an indication of, and a major contributor to, a sea change that is under way in late twentieth-century intellectual thought. In almost every branch of intellectual life, the twentieth century has witnessed a move away from the universalism and absolutism of modernist epistemology toward conceptions that emphasize particularity and concreteness. The linchpin of this move is the attack on the centerpiece of modernist, Enlightenment epistemology: "man," the rational, abstract, autonomous constitutor of knowledge. In opposition to this conception of the subject, many twentieth-century thinkers posit a subject who is embedded and situated, constituted by language, culture, discourse, and history.

Literary theory, deconstruction, cultural anthropology, and relational psychology have been on the cutting edge of the articulation of this new paradigm, developing a theory of the subject that deconstructs the Enlightenment edifice and proclaims the "death of man." One of the discourses that has resisted this transition and thus represents one of the last bastions of the modernist subject is moral philosophy. The reason for this is clear to anyone familiar with the still dominant tradition of modernist moral theory. It is the rationality and autonomy of the modernist subject, which provides the necessary basis for contemporary moral philosophy. The paradigm of this tradition is Kant's self-legislating moral subject. For this subject, rationality and morality are mutually dependent; this explains why Kant excludes those incapable of full rationality, such as women and idiots, from the moral sphere. Essential to this moral tradition is the ability of the subject to abstract from the particularity of his (as the writers in this tradition invariably designate the subject) circumstances and to formulate the universal principles that define the moral sphere. The situated, embedded, discursively constituted subject that is being defined in other disciplines obviates this conception of the moral agent.

Gilligan does not explicitly attack the subject of modernist thought in her work. She is not a moral philosopher; she does not define her project in terms of a deconstruction of the Enlightenment moral subject. Yet her work contributes significantly to that deconstruction. Gilligan articulates a relational subject that is the product of discursive experiences, a subject that undermines the very possibility of the autonomous, self-legislating agent. Her work has had a profound effect on the discipline of moral theory. Yet she comes from outside that discipline – indeed, from an empirical rather than a philosophical discipline. This in itself should not be surprising. In his work on the "death of man," Foucault argues that epistemological shifts necessarily originate

on the fringes of intellectual life; they come from the periphery, not the center. The revolutionary impact of Gilligan's work is a function of her status outside the tradition of moral theory; it is outsiders, not insiders, who articulate new paradigms.

Although Gilligan is not offering a new, fully developed moral philosophy, theory of the subject, methodology, or epistemology, the implications of her work have radical consequences in all these areas. She is not concerned with moral philosophy per se; yet her findings have led her to an understanding of the development of moral voices that undercuts the very foundation of modernist moral theory. Gilligan is not the only contemporary theorist to advance the concept of the relational subject; yet her description of the evolution of this subject's moral voice in gendered terms reveals the radical implications of the concept in unique ways. Her work is not explicitly methodological; yet her counter to Kohlberg's method suggests a definition of the relationship between truth and method that has implications for contemporary disputes in the philosophy of social science and feminist methodology. Finally, the epistemological issues raised by Gilligan's account of woman's voice parallel those raised in many recent critiques of the modernist concept of truth. My aim in this book is to draw out the strands of meaning embedded in Gilligan's work and to relate them to the issues now being discussed in these fields. My goal is both descriptive and prescriptive: I want to describe the new paradigm of moral knowledge that I see emerging and, at the same time, to argue for its utility for feminist theory.

In a Different Voice

In the introduction to *In a Different Voice* (1982) Gilligan articulates the issues that will concern her both in that book and in her subsequent work. At the center of all these issues is what might be labeled the "woman problem": the fact that women fail to fit the existing models of human moral development (1982: 2). Beginning with Freud, theorists of moral development have cited the "failure" of woman's development (1982: 6). Piaget and other development theorists "solved" this problem by ignoring women and articulating a developmental theory based solely on the experience of men (1982: 10). Erikson and Bettelheim skirted the issue by asserting that women's development is "different" from that of men but showed little interest in defining the difference (1982: 12-13). It is precisely this "difference," however, that Gilligan wants to address. But the way in which she does so, even at this early stage in her thinking, indicates that she will be departing from the epistemological and methodological assumptions of her male predecessors.

The goal of the theories that Gilligan critiques is to find the "truth" of human moral development. Each of these theories employs the standard procedures of scientific method in order to attain this truth: hypotheses, factual evidence, empirical studies of representative subjects, and so forth. The most straightforward way to counter these theories from a feminist perspective is to assert that they are "biased" – that is, that they are incomplete, because they ignore the reality of women's experience. Following this line of argument, the solution to the problem appears to be quite simple: the theories should be completed by including women in the empirical studies, thereby supplying the missing element – women's development – and thus bringing them up to the standard of completeness and objectivity to which they aspire. Many passages of *In a Different Voice* suggest that this is precisely Gilligan's goal. She states that her intention is to yield a "more encompassing view of the lives of both of the sexes" (1982: 4), to find "the truth of women's experience" (1982: 62) and thus of human experience (1982: 63). She wants to force development theorists to "admit the truth of women's perspective" (1982: 98), because women's experience provides clues to the "central truth of adult life" (1982: 172). In what appears to be a direct appeal to the legitimizing force of standard scientific method, she argues that "by looking directly at women's lives over time, it becomes possible to test, in a preliminary way, whether the changes predicted by the theory fit the reality of what in fact takes place" (1982: 21). She concludes her study by asserting: "Yet in the different voice of women lies the truth of an ethic of care" (1982: 173).

Yet, other elements in Gilligan's work suggest that her approach departs significantly from the methodological assumptions that inform the work of the theorists she examines and that her concepts of "truth" and "method" differ significantly from theirs. At the outset, she notes that recent trends in social science have called into question the "presumed neutrality of science," recognizing instead that "the categories of knowledge are human constructions" (1982: 6). This almost offhand reference to an epistemology of science starkly opposed to that employed by standard developmental theorists continues to be a theme throughout the book. Gilligan defines women's voice as "an alternative concept of maturity" (1982: 22) and a "new line of interpretation" (1982: 26). Women's experience, she asserts, is a "vision" that "illuminates" a hitherto unseen realm (1982: 62–3). At the end of the book she brings these reflections together with the assertion that women's "underdevelopment" according to previous, male-biased theories was a result of the *construction* of those theories and not of "truth" (1982: 171). She claims that her work on the different voice results in a "new perspective" on relationships, which changes the basic constructs of interpretation and consequently expands the moral domain (1982: 173).

These passages require a good deal of unpacking. Gilligan is here appealing to an alternative conception of scientific analysis, which radically shifts the terms of the debate in which she is engaged. Advocates of this alternative conception assert that the categories of analysis create the parameters of the data analyzed. Gilligan applies this perspective to moral development theory with startling results. She asserts that defining moral development in terms of the evolution of autonomous, separate selves who are eventually capable of applying abstract universal principles to moral problems produces a particular definition of the moral realm. This definition entails that only such autonomous subjects applying such abstract principles can be considered fully moral. It defines the "truth" of moral development as the evolution of moral subjects who meet these criteria. It also relegates the different voice of women to, at the very least, moral inferiority. A strict application of this theory yields an even harsher conclusion: that women, who fail to meet the criteria of fully moral subjects, do not inhabit the moral realm at all. What Gilligan proposes in her work is a radically different perspective on moral development, which results in a different definition of the moral realm. By developing this new concept of the moral subject, she redefines the "truth" of moral development and the constitution of morality itself. She proposes a dual vision of the moral realm, one in which two interacting and intertwining voices replace the unitary view.

This way of reading Gilligan contrasts sharply with the first reading, I have suggested. On the first reading, Gilligan seems to be arguing that she is replacing one truth with another, attempting to correct the biased and incomplete masculinist theories of moral development by introducing a truer, more objective theory. On the second reading, however, she is doing something quite different. On this reading she is introducing a new interpretation of the moral realm, which wholly reconstitutes it. She is opposing the "truth" of the masculinist theories with other "truths." But if we interpret this statement in the context of the alternative scientific methodology, the conclusions that follow differ from those entailed by the first reading. Most important, it follows that Gilligan cannot claim that her interpretation is truer or more objective, because she has defined truth as a function of theoretical perspective. The "truth" that Gilligan claims for her perspective is thus a truth that is internal to the theoretical perspective itself, just as the "truth" of the dominant conception is internal to that perspective.

It is possible to interpret *In a Different Voice* from the perspective of either of these two readings. I employ the second reading in my analysis of Gilligan, for a number of reasons. First, in the studies she has published since *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan quite explicitly adopts what I am calling the second reading, embracing an alternative scientific methodology that departs from standard empiricism. In these

works she employs what, in the jargon of the philosophy of science, amounts to a coherentist scientific method. Second, employing the second reading of Gilligan accomplishes a redefinition of the moral realm and the reconstitution of moral theory that are the goal of my study. Defining the moral realm as constituted by conceptions of the moral subject and of morality itself fosters an approach that is pluralistic and nonhierarchical, an approach that highlights the constitution of moral voices. Third, the second reading emphasizes the necessary connection between method and truth – that is, that the method employed in the analysis of morality cannot be divorced from the moral truths that the method produces.

In chapter 3 of *In a Different Voice*, entitled “Concepts of Self and Morality,” Gilligan ties her redefinition of the moral realm to a concept of self that challenges the autonomous self of the masculinist tradition. One of the major themes of Gilligan’s work – and also one of her most significant contributions – is the claim that selfhood and morality are intimately linked. Gilligan argues that subjects develop moral voices as a function of the emergence of selfhood and that the definition of the moral realm is necessarily structured by the concept of self that informs it. Moral development theory as defined by Piaget and Kohlberg is grounded in the separate, autonomous self of the modernist tradition. This separate self is both the precondition and the goal of the moral stages that Kohlberg posits. Against this, Gilligan proposes what is now called “the relational self.” She defines a self that is formed through relational patterns with others, particularly in the early years of childhood. Following the psychological approach of object-relations theory, she describes the way in which girls, because they are not encouraged to separate from their mothers, develop a sense of self in which relationships are primary. Boys, by contrast, because they succeed in separating from their mothers, develop a sense of self as separate and autonomous. Thus, as a result of their different relationships with their mothers, girls develop relational skills and find autonomy problematic, while boys fear relationships but develop autonomy skills.

It is tempting to read Gilligan’s argument about the constitution of the self in an empiricist vein. She seems to be proposing a corrective to the incomplete, erroneous, and biased view of the self propounded by masculinist theorists. These theorists listened to the accounts of male subjects only; Gilligan, by listening to women as well, can be interpreted as completing the faulty accounts of masculinist theorists. As is evident from the passages quoted above, there is evidence in the text for this interpretation: Gilligan several times refers to her goal as uncovering the “truth” of human development. But here, too, there are grounds for a second reading. At the very beginning of her account, Gilligan states that she is interested in listening to the “stories” that

women tell about their lives (1982: 2). Her emphasis on narrative, listening, and voices introduces a different approach to the study of moral development, an approach that is incompatible with the empiricist studies she challenges.

Two points are crucial here. First, Gilligan is well aware that theorists such as Kohlberg *have* listened to women's stories, but, because they employed the interpretive framework of separate selves, they were forced to classify these stories as deficient and those who told them as lacking the qualities necessary for moral agency. What Gilligan is proposing is an alternative framework in which these women's stories are interpreted as genuine moral statements. If, as Gilligan proposes, we interpret relationship, care, and connection as integral to human life and development, then we will interpret women's stories as genuinely moral narratives, distinct from, but every bit as moral as, those based on abstract principles. Implicit in Gilligan's articulation of the different voice is the assumption that what we, as listeners, hear is a function of the interpretive framework we impose. What Gilligan is proposing is a different interpretation of the same moral experiences. These moral experiences, the voices of women that Kohlberg dismissed as deficient, Gilligan hears as genuine moral statements.

Second, Gilligan's use of the term "stories" here is significant. Kohlberg does not claim to be telling a "story" about moral development. The word *story* connotes fiction, whereas Kohlberg claims to be discovering an antecedently given truth. "Stories" suggests multiplicity, invention, interpretation; Kohlberg is searching for facts and evidence. By claiming that she is listening to women's "stories," Gilligan is advancing two key theses: first, that we need to alter our interpretive framework in order to hear these stories as *moral* stories, and, second, that women (and men) make sense of their lives by telling stories about themselves. The link between narrative and selfhood has been explored by a number of contemporary theorists.¹ Narrative theorists argue that subjects make sense of their lives and constitute themselves *as* subjects by the very activity of constructing stories about themselves. At this point in her work Gilligan does not elaborate on the role of narrative in her theory. It is clear, however, that viewing subjectivity as a function of narrative is incompatible with the empiricist accounts she is challenging. Two themes emerge from her account: that women's moral stories were not heard by her male colleagues as *moral* and that it is her intention to replace their interpretive framework with one that does not ignore or silence the moral voice of women.²

What, then, is the story that Gilligan wants to tell about human experiences, a story that includes the moral voice of women? And, most important, how does this story relate to the story of separate selves that has dominated accounts of moral development? In the course of her work, Gilligan proposes several different understandings of this

narrative. In *In a Different Voice* her account can best be described as additive or dialogic: she proposes that women's relational, caring voice be added to the voice of the separate self. Thus she asserts that "Adding a new line of interpretation, based on the imagery of the girls' thought, makes it possible not only to see development where previously development was not discerned, but also to consider differences in the understanding of relationships without scaling these differences from better to worse" (1982: 26). She suggests that both voices are integral to the human life cycle, that "we know ourselves as separate only insofar as we live in connection with others, and that we experience relationships only insofar as we differentiate other from self" (1982: 63). The result, she claims, is a "dialogue between fairness and care" (1982: 174), a kind of complementarity of the two voices.

There are many problems with this formulation, problems that occupy Gilligan's attention in subsequent work. One is that of the relationship between gender and voice. Throughout her work, Gilligan claims that the different voice is identified by theme, not gender (1982: 2). Yet, in her descriptions it is exclusively women who speak in the different voice. Another problem concerns the issue of hierarchy. Gilligan is consistent in her claim of equality for the two voices. Here she describes their interaction as complementary and dialogic; later it becomes the interplay of themes. Yet, as she herself admits, it is difficult to claim difference without implying better or worse (1982: 14). Although, in a logical sense, positing differences or distinctions may be innocent, in a social and political context it is not. Identifying a group or social practice as "different" from an established social norm implies an inferior status for that difference, despite protestations to the contrary. As will become evident in the following discussions, this issue has continued to be problematic for Gilligan's thesis. Several feminist moral theorists have used Gilligan's work to proclaim the superiority of women's moral voice. Yet there is virtually no textual evidence for this claim in Gilligan's book.³ The equality thesis, however, is far from satisfactory. It is naive to assume that the inferiority of women's moral voice can be overcome simply by asserting its equality. Several millennia of subordination are unlikely to be overcome by little more than a proclamation.

Subsequent work

The themes introduced in *In a Different Voice* also inform Gilligan's subsequent work, but in the later work these themes have been expanded and, in some cases, even transformed. My interpretation of this later work is guided by two theses. The first is that it is impossible to separate questions of substance from questions of method in Gilligan's

discussions. In working through this literature it becomes evident that her substantive claims about justice and care are a function of the method with which she approaches the issue of moral development. Second, although Gilligan continues to claim that she is merely adding another “voice” to existing moral theory, I argue that in an epistemological sense this is not an adequate description of the theoretical import of her work. Her concepts of the moral domain and the moral subject are incompatible with the definition of morality found in modernist moral theory; thus she cannot *add* the different voice to that theory. Gilligan frequently backs away from an outright rejection of contemporary moral theory; she claims that she wants to reform rather than reconstitute it. But the elements of a radically different approach to moral theory are nevertheless present in her work.

The issue that has received most attention from critics is the relationship between the two moral voices that she analyzes: justice and care. *In a Different Voice* characterized this relationship as one of complementarity, of a dialectical interplay of two voices. As early as 1985, however, Gilligan developed a different characterization of the relationship, what she calls the “focus phenomenon.” Her ongoing studies revealed that a significant majority of people interviewed – 70 percent in one study (Marcus and Spiegelman 1985: 48) and 75 percent in another (Gilligan 1988a: xviii) – described their moral conflicts in terms of either justice *or* care, but not both. Building on this evidence, Gilligan argues that the two moral perspectives are grounded in different dimensions of relationships that give rise to moral concerns. Justice and care, she argues, are not mirror images but, rather, different ways of organizing the basic elements of moral judgment. Appealing to the duck/rabbit figure to illustrate her point, Gilligan claims that individuals can see moral conflicts in terms of either justice or care but not both at once. Moral problems are thus not resolved by balancing justice and care but by taking one perspective rather than the other (1987a: 20–6; Bernstein and Gilligan 1990).

Gilligan’s discussion in these articles complicates the description of moral voices which she presents in *In a Different Voice*. On the one hand, she emphasizes a theme that was present in the latter: the universality of justice and care. In a more recent discussion, for example, she asserts that, “Although these two dimensions of relationship may be differently salient in the thinking of women and men, both equality and attachment are embedded in the cycle of life, universal in human experience because inherent in the relation of parent and child” (1986a: 286). This passage is compatible with what I identified above as the first reading of *In a Different Voice*. It emphasizes Gilligan’s attempt to define the universal parameters of morality, the human moral condition. But there is also another tendency that is present in this work: a movement toward the particular, away from the universal. *In a Different Voice*