

Lévinasian Ethics and Feminist Ethics of Care

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In his account of the ethical life of the ancient Greek polis, Hegel posits an uneasy balance between two ethics, one male, the other female (Hegel 1977, 267 ff). Female ethics is described as a nocturnal world of the subterranean unconscious, remaining indoors, and concerned with the particular ends of family dynasty. Male ethics, by contrast, is the daylight and public realm of consciousness, the recognized laws of the polis, concerning itself with the ends of the city-state as a whole. In the struggle that ensues between these codependent but antagonistic ethics, an alienated version of the male ethics triumphs, while the female ethics, for Hegel, is not merely *aufgehoben* but annihilated, and this as early as ancient Rome. In recent decades, it has been suggested on at least two fronts that a female, "feminine," or feminist ethics, focused upon personal and proximate relations for which the family is a paradigm, and by some accounts unreflective if not unconscious,¹ has after all continued to exist alongside the male or "masculine" ethics of consciously acknowledged abstract principles which govern public life. Both Emmanuel Lévinas and feminist theorists of an ethics of care have formulated compelling critiques of the notion of the self and of its (non-) relation to others assumed by main- or male-stream ethical theories and have offered alternative understandings of an ethics that is concrete, non-generalizable, and that focuses upon the other and our responsibilities towards her rather than upon the self and its freedoms. Not unlike Hegel, both Lévinas and feminist philosophers of care have perceived mainstream ethics as "masculine"—Lévinas goes so far as to say "virile" and "military"—and have called the alternatives they offer "feminine" and "maternal" (Lévinas, 1998a, 185).²

Given these similarities, in the first section of this paper I will elaborate the correlations between the ethics of Lévinas and of feminist care theorists. In the second part I will consider the relation of ethics to justice both in Lévinas and in feminist care theory. Finally, I will note differences between Lévinasian "feminine" ethics and feminist ethics of care, and some of the strengths and shortcomings of Lévinas's ethics from a feminist care perspective.

Correlations

Lévinas argues against the Western philosophic tradition, and against Heidegger in particular, that ontology is not fundamental. Rather, for Lévinas, ethics, a relation to and for an other, is prior to being, *grounding* human existence. Before we “are,” we are already in a relation to others, whatever the order of the verb in this sentence. It is therefore a mistake to begin by theorizing what the being of the self is, independent of its relations of vulnerability and responsiveness to others, because the self never *is* independent of or prior to these ethical terms. Ethics is the fundamental human experience, and is grounded in relations to others. Mainstream ethical philosophy, however, has inherited notions of the self assumed by traditional metaphysics, and thus has been concerned with a subject it presumes to be autonomous and free, independent of others and faced with abstract questions about its own rights, duties, and freedoms.³ Even the duties towards others that such ethical theories imagine have typically been duties towards other abstractly conceived autonomous agents who are the same as ourselves, and first and foremost is the duty not to interfere in their rights and freedoms. Philosophy has thus not conceived of ethics as it occurs in our most fundamental experiences, as a responsiveness to others who are vulnerable to us and to whom we are vulnerable, and with whom we are in encounters and relations which involve difference and inequalities in power. Philosophy has not therefore approached ethics in terms of the situations in which it is perhaps most frequently and most desperately required, in relation to those who are exposed to us in need, requiring our interference and response.

For Lévinas, in contrast, and for many feminist care theorists, ethics is a face-to-face *encounter* with a specific, irreplaceable other. It is the face to which we respond, for Lévinas, or that compels us to responsibility. For both Lévinas and care theorists, we do not merely need to leave other politically equal agents alone and arrange for our own liberty. We do not merely need to agree to contracts of mutual noninterference. Rather, we must intervene, particularly for those who are not in fact equal, but who need us, suffer, call out to us. Importantly, because ethics on this view takes place in particular face-to-face encounters, unpredictable in occasion and outcome, it can never be generalized into rules of behavior or normative principles. The result is that Lévinas and care theorists recognize conflicting and ambivalent ethical experiences, the anguish of (in)decisions, and the impossibility of ever doing enough, the feeling of guilt for what one could not do, and even for what others do. Lévinas writes: “This means concretely: accused of what the others do or suffer, or responsible for what they do or suffer” (1998a, 112).

These are experiences of ambivalence and intersubjectivity familiar to maternity, for example, and experiences that the generalizable imperatives and conceptions of isolated subjectivity of Hobbes, Kant, and Rawls, to name a few, cannot satisfactorily account for.⁴

As feminist theorists have pointed out, most people—women, children, the socially, economically, politically, mentally and physically disadvantaged—have not often found themselves in a situation remotely like that of the ethical agent that mainstream ethical theory assumes, and thus have not been the subjects of ethics. Traditional ethical philosophy has theorized politically empowered, implicitly or explicitly male, agents and recipients of ethical rights and duties, such as Rawls’s “heads of households,” who have the means to disacknowledge their nevertheless always present relations to others. For Lévinas, however, the subject responds to others, even if in manners of abandonment and neglect, and thus is always already in relations of responsibility or ethics. The subject, then, has no choice but to respond, and responsibility is thus prior to questions of freedom and hence to questions of autonomy and agency. In Lévinas’s words, the subject is “[o]bsessed with responsibilities which did not arise in decisions taken by a subject ‘contemplating freely’” (1998a, 112). For feminist theorists of care, likewise, the emphasis on autonomy in mainstream ethics has raised the wrong question. Or, if we must pose it, autonomy must be conceived as relational, just as for Lévinas freedom is not primary, but lies in responsibility, “borne by the responsibility it could not shoulder” (1998a, 112). The significant questions are thus *how* we choose to govern ourselves towards those who are vulnerable to us, not whether we choose to, nor how to extract ourselves from these responsibilities in order to be free and to leave others free. As Marilyn Friedman argues,

Thus, one concern implicit in the feminist critique of mainstream conceptions of autonomy is that it is the wrong ideal to emphasize for our culture. Before encouraging people simply to be more fully and coherently what they already are, we should first *think* about what it is that they already are. At this historical juncture, rather than promoting autonomy, we might be better off urging that some of us *change* what we ‘really’ are—specifically, so as to avoid the patterns of socialization that lead males to focus obsessively on asserting themselves apart from or against others (Friedman 1997, 54).

While mainstream philosophy has assumed the subject needs to be free of dependencies in order to be ethical, for both Lévinas and feminist care

theorists the consequent attempts to remove the subject from dependency relations have amounted to a flight from ethics.

Both feminist care theorists and Lévinas have understood the receptivity towards others of ethics, the prioritization of responsibility over freedom, as "feminine," and both have conceived of maternity as a paradigm (among others) for caring or for being responsible for others.⁵ The theorizing of ethics as "feminine" occurs in Lévinas's earlier writings while his development of maternity as a trope for the ethical relation is explored in the major work of his mature philosophy, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. In his earlier works, such as *Time and the Other* and *Existence and Existents*, Lévinas develops an ethics of alterity against the Western tradition of the Same, while describing "the feminine" as having alterity as its essence (1983, 85), and as being "the other par excellence" (1978, 85). The feminine is not different in terms of qualities, nor different in relation to the masculine, but is difference itself, the very possibility of ethics.⁶ At this stage "the feminine" is the otherness of the Other whom one encounters in the ethical relation as well as being the principle of that relation. In *Totality and Infinity*, however, the Other of the ethical encounter has become generic, simply human, and yet "the feminine" continues to play a crucial role. As Catherine Chaler writes, the feminine in *Totality and Infinity* "stops the project of being," "stops this blind strength," and thus interrupts masculine ontology with ethics, disrupts military values with her welcome, replaces transcendence with proximity and intimacy (1991, 123). In "Judaism and the Feminine Element," Lévinas describes the masculine "outdoor" world as "hard and cold," alienating and ontological: "it neither clothes those who are naked nor feeds those who are hungry.... Spirit in its masculine existence ... *lives outdoors*" (1976, 33). In contrast, the feminine is called "dwelling," is indoors or domestic. As Lévinas notes, this "habitation is not yet the transcendence of language. The Other who welcomes in intimacy is not the you [vous] of the face that reveals itself in a dimension of height, but precisely the thou [tu] of familiarity" (1969, 155). At this stage, the feminine other seems no longer the Other of the ethical relation, and yet femininity remains the principle that interrupts masculinity and makes ethics possible.

In *Otherwise than Being*, as noted, the traditionally female role that Lévinas develops as a trope for his ethics becomes maternal subjectivity rather than "feminine" domesticity. Various feminist philosophers have discussed the significance of this shift from the feminine to the maternal in Lévinas's thought. Stella Sandford, for instance, asks:

What exactly is the connection between the notion of maternity and Lévinas's earlier analyses of 'the feminine'? Is the maternal a

further elaboration of the feminine, or a supercession of the very distinction between masculine/feminine? Is the notion of the maternal consistent with the analyses of the familial terms in the earlier work, or is it introduced as a corrective to the previous discussion of paternity, for example? (Sandford in Chanter, 2001, 13).

Sandford goes on to discuss various responses to these questions by other feminist philosophers. Chaler, for instance, notes that the feminine in *Totality and Infinity* had been the condition of ethics, but not admitted to the ethical itself. Now, however, the feminine is the paradigm of ethics, *but only as maternal*; the sole feminine ethical "achievement" for Lévinas, in other words, is maternity or maternalness.

Maternity in *Otherwise than Being* is, in Donna Brody's words, "not one term among others ... but a very reference to the density of sensibility as the one-for-the-other" or as "the face par excellence" (Brody in Chanter, 2001, 73). Lévinas writes: "The subjectivity of sensibility, taken as incarnation, is an abandon without return, maternity, a body suffering for another" (1998, 79). Rather than being the Other whom the subject encounters in the ethical relation, or the feminine principle that grounds that relation, the maternal is developed as ethical subjectivity itself. She is not the object of ethical care or response, but the model for ethical caring and responsibility. Brody writes: "this giving and this abandoning, this body suffering for another, is the dignity of the denuded feminine as face giving and given without return to herself. This giving and this subjectivity is given from her, as her, by her, but one hesitates, finally, over whether it is given *to her*" (in Chanter, 2001, 74). While a traditionally female subjectivity has now become the model for ethical subjectivity, rather than its mere "welcome" or condition of possibility, the problem now seems to be whether she can ever be, or if Lévinas ever thinks of her as, the recipient of ethical care herself. Moreover, Tina Chanter has resisted this reduction of femininity in ethics to the maternal role, and specifically the denial of the feminine as eros from the ethical realm in Lévinas's thought (Chanter, 2001).

Beyond calling the ethical principle or subject "maternal" or "feminine," feminist philosophers would further point out that persons gendered feminine have in fact done more of the face-to-face caring work in society than persons gendered masculine, or have been more responsible for others in proximate relations.⁷ They might fault Lévinas for neglecting to note this, and indeed for using the masculine pronoun for his maternal Self as well as his feminine Other. Nonetheless, Lévinas is certainly describing an ethics that applies to both sexes, which is most quintessentially achieved in maternal relations. He writes, for instance: "Perhaps

... all these allusions to the ontological differences between the masculine and the feminine would appear less archaic if, instead of dividing humanity into two species (or into two genres [also meaning 'two genders' in French]), they would signify that the participation in the masculine and the feminine were the attributes of every human being" (1985, 68; 1982, 71). Though never pursuing such concerns concretely, Lévinas would thus be recommending more "mothering" in society, and "mothering" on the part of both sexes.⁸

Feminist philosophers of care similarly want to maintain that women in fact have been more ethical than men in the sense of providing caring relations and labor. Maternity, for some of these theorists, is also a paradigm of ethics, and women have been more maternal than men. Care theorists are not generally content to assert care as women's ethics, and justice, or mainstream ethics, as men's ethics. They have not merely wanted women's ethics to be acknowledged as equally valuable to men's ethics; rather, most feminist philosophers of care argue for more care in the world, for the need for more caring on the part of men and "masculine" subjects, and a sharing of the responsibilities of care in society across genders and classes.⁹ Parting with Lévinas, the predominance of women in caring and maternal work is not only to be noted in praise of women, then, but must be recognized as having been an exploitation of women. While both Lévinas and feminist theorists such as Nel Noddings have explicitly described "feminine" ethics, mothering, as "natural," other care theorists, beyond recognizing that mothering is also ideological and enforced, point out that this "naturalness" has been an excuse for making that labor not only obligatory for women and undervalued, but also underpaid or unpaid. While feminist care theorists may want to maintain that responsibility to others is prior to, or must not be opposed to, freedom, they would also note, as Lévinas would not, that women's involuntary caretaking of others has often been a result of economic and patriarchal oppression. Similarly, although both Lévinas and care theorists want to maintain that responsiveness to the other need not be reciprocal, Lévinas never theorizes the maternal subject as the recipient of care, whereas most feminist philosophers have been concerned that this affirmation of non-reciprocity not entail further exploitation of women and other economically oppressed groups to which care labor has been traditionally relegated. These issues raise further questions regarding the significance of justice to the ethics of care, which I would now like to consider in relation to the ethical theory of Lévinas.

Ethics and Justice

Both Lévinas and feminist theorists of care have discussed concerns of responsibility, intimate relations of love and care, charity, and the demands of dependence at length, while sometimes saying little about justice and its relation to care. They have been concerned with bringing the attention of ethics towards relations with proximate dependents and have said less about our responsibilities towards those who are not proximate to us, and whom we may never meet, but who are nevertheless in need. In *Otherwise than Being* an extended discussion of justice occupies only part of the final chapter. One of the first theorists of an ethics of care, Nel Noddings, on the other hand, took the stance that caring is sufficient for ethics or, as she has been paraphrased, is the only "legitimate moral consideration" (Sherwin 1992, 47). Noddings does not discuss justice except in the ways that it is deficient: on her view, if we were caring enough, justice would be unnecessary. Noddings explicitly disacknowledges, however, ethical responsibility for persons outside of her personal sphere and for persons towards whom this care does not come "naturally." Noddings's is an ethics of care for those in some "natural" relation to her, emotive extensions of herself, as it were. One could therefore question whether hers is an ethics of caring for the *other*, the truly not-same, at all (Held 1995, 15). This lack of care for those not proximate would seem to imply that we need justice to help those to whom we do not feel an immediate responsibility, since our "natural" feelings of care may not always extend across continents or even across social, racial, or ethnic barriers in our own communities, and that care, at least on Noddings's version, unsupplemented by justice, is after all not enough. Noddings's position has been much criticized by other feminist theorists, however, and is far from indicative of a belief on the part of most philosophers of care that justice is unnecessary or less important than care. Annette Baier, for instance, writes that "there is little disagreement that justice is a social value of very great importance, and injustice an evil" (1988, 122). For Lévinas, likewise, care or responsibility does not render unnecessary a conception of justice. Rather, it is because care, love, charity, and responsibility have been undervalued and undertheorized in Western philosophy and society (and, perhaps consequently, gendered feminine) that they, and not justice, are seen as requiring these philosophers's ink. Nonetheless, Lévinas does have an account of the relation of justice to ethics, as do many feminist theorists of care, which I will highlight in this section.

Asked in an interview whether "justice and gentleness [are] dimensions alien to one another," Lévinas answers: "They are very close. I have tried to make this deduction: justice itself is born of charity. They

can seem alien when they are presented as successive stages; in reality, they are inseparable and simultaneous, unless one is on a desert island, without humanity, without a third" (1998b, 107). Ethics concerns a face-to-face relation with a particular other. However, as Lévinas makes clear, there is never only myself and the other; there is always also a third person who calls me, whether from near or far. Lévinas cites Isaiah: "Peace, peace to the neighbor and the one far-off" (Isaiah 57: 19 in Lévinas 1998a, 157), and thus there is always a need to choose between responses and responsibilities. To respond ethically *entails* making a decision based on justice, since there are always more calls than I can answer to. There is not first ethics, then, and only later a question of justice; there is always already a third person to consider in any relation, and thus there is always a question of justice as well as responsibility. I am always too late in my ethical response, guilty, for Lévinas, of having delayed too long, and yet, at the same time, it seems, I must stop and think of the third, think of justice.¹⁰ According to Lévinas, "Justice comes from love ... love is originary," and yet, he makes clear, temporally the two cannot be severed. Lévinas continues: "I think ... that charity is impossible without justice, and that justice is warped without charity" (1998b, 121), which is a view, as shall be seen below, also held by several feminist theorists.

Finally, according to Lévinas, we may be called upon to judge the other, to whom before we were said to respond passively, and this because he may be harming another, who also calls upon us and is unique:

It is the moment of justice. The love of one's fellowman, and his original right, as unique and incomparable, for which I am answerable, tend of their own accord to make appeal to a Reason capable of comparing incomparables, a wisdom of love. A measure superimposes itself on the 'extravagant' generosity of the 'for the other,' on its infinity (1998b, 195–6).

Lévinas goes on to underscore, however, that this immediacy of justice cannot allow us to forget the original ethical uniqueness of the other, or obscure his face beneath the mask of citizenship. There must always be a simultaneity of ethics and justice, of respecting general rights and responding to particular needs. While we separate these demands conceptually, they are always co-present.

In his insistence on the non-dyadic nature of ethics, and also in his emphasis on an inequality between self and other, Lévinas is responding to Martin Buber's notion of the I-Thou relation which is imagined as a quasi-romantic engagement of two equals alone with each other (Buber 1970). For Lévinas, contra Buber, two people are never alone, there is

always a third, and these seconds and thirds may be neither equal to nor fond of me. In this revising of Buber's account of the relation to the other, Lévinas is in agreement with Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher who, in defining care, insist that it is not dyadic or individualistic, a misconception that is based, Tronto argues, on an idealized notion of the mother-child relation, a "romantic couple in contemporary Western discourse" (Tronto 1993, 103). This critique of the romantic dyadic model of ethical relations put forth by both Lévinas and care theorists such as Tronto is based on a concern for justice, but those concerns for justice are very different: Lévinas insists on the presence of a third because he wishes to emphasize that we are always also responsible to other others. He thus problematizes the pair in Buber's ethics because he wants to underscore the magnitude and proliferation of the self's responsibilities, which are always beyond our capacity to respond, making us always guilty of not having done enough. The concern on the part of feminist care theorists, in contrast, is to *alleviate* the burden of responsibility on specific selves, and to place it on socially specified others. By stressing a traditional mother-child model of care, they note, all the work of care falls onto one person, and this is usually a woman or another economically underprivileged person, who could use some help and care herself.¹¹ Tronto, like Lévinas, emphasizes that there are thirds and fourths, but not to point out that the carer has *more* that he or she should do, but rather to direct attention to those other others—men, the affluent, the government—who should be helping caretakers in their work. Far from further burdening carers, feminist theorists want to redistribute care more fairly. For Lévinas, however, when he is describing ethics, redistribution of one's burden of responsibility to another is out of the question: the self's responsibility is an "infinite responsibility of the one for the other who is abandoned to me without anyone being able to take my place as the one responsible for him" (1998a, 153). This other is abandoned to *me* and to no other.

The positions of Lévinas and feminist care theorists on the issue of the redistribution of responsibility are not, however, so opposed as they first appear. Feminist care theorists are writing predominantly about female subjects who are already economically and socially exploited, of actual mothers and caretakers, and of women who, feminists worry, might not take enough care of themselves.¹² Lévinas, on the other hand, while also taking a maternal paradigm of care, may be assuming a male subject, as I shall argue in the following section. Though he may be criticized for this implicit assumption, in the context of the question of whether in his ethics of responsibility he is simply further burdening already overburdened caregivers, actual "maternal" subjects in particular, one could counter that in fact he is writing for a male subject who cares

or mothers and who cannot shirk his responsibilities of male nurturing, which feminist philosophers also advocate. For Lévinas's implicitly male, privileged subject, then, a further burdening of care, of guilt and responsibility, seems less inappropriate. Concerns of self-love and self-preservation, scenarios in which one might justifiably refuse to care for the other, are little developed in Lévinas's work because, not considering women and already exploited caregivers as subjects particularly, self-love is not what Lévinas sees lacking, either theoretically or in practice. Also in his defense, Lévinas, like Tronto and Fisher, suggests that I might consider myself as an other to whose needs I must respond to be ethical.¹³ He at least poses the question, "how can I appear to myself as a face?" and thus of self-care as possibly competing in a justifiable manner with the needs of others (1998b, 11). Furthermore, beyond care, it is clear in *Otherwise than Being* that I may seek justice for myself. Lévinas writes: "there is also justice for me" (1998a, 159), and "My lot is important" (1998a, 161). Justice for the third is not Lévinas's *only* concern with justice, then, but also justice for myself: I can be a third to myself, as well as a face. One can imagine, then, that Lévinas would allow the irreplaceable but over-burdened caretaker to let another take her place, in the interests of both self-care and justice.

If I abandon my responsibility to the other out of concerns of *justice* and self-care, however, one might ask whether I have compromised *ethically*, for Lévinas, even if he would acknowledge that this abandonment was permissible or even necessary. Nel Noddings, for instance, has written that to sever any relation of responsibility or care is to be under a "diminished ethical ideal" (Noddings 1984, 114), even if, in the interests of my self-love and self-preservation, I may or must do so. Other feminist theorists of care, however, have criticized Noddings for suggesting that a person in any form of relationship, including an abusive one, will be ethically diminished for severing that relation (Card 1990, 106), and Noddings has retracted her claim. It might appear that Lévinas may be similarly criticized for claiming that, ethically, I may let no other take my place of responsibility for the other, even if on lines of justice he will allow it. Lévinas recognizes, after all, that the other may be my persecutor, and claims me responsible nonetheless; indeed, in *Otherwise than Being* he describes the other as my persecutor *most of the time*, drawing consistently on language of abuse and violation to describe the other's relation to me. Yet for Lévinas when justice is ethically necessary it will "superimpose" itself, and ethics and justice will reconcile as "of their own accord." Justice is said here to be "capable of comparing incomparables," capable, in short, of doing the impossible, a miracle that allows me to measure love and self-love. Thus, Lévinas would not agree with Noddings's earlier position that one is ethically diminished when one

cedes the ethical relation to justice, as these, for Lévinas, are never opposed. Far from seeing ethics and justice as upon occasion conflicting, they are "warped" without one another and are of themselves in harmony.

That many feminist proponents of an ethics of care, like Lévinas, believe that issues of justice need to be considered simultaneously with relations of care is clear from their concern that care workers not be exploited, that care be distributed justly between genders and classes, and that care be fairly paid. Carol Gilligan has used the metaphor of drawings that can be seen in two different ways, depending how one looks, to conceptualize how we can consider the same situation either from a care or a justice perspective, and argues that both men and women should use both perspectives when considering moral dilemmas. Annette Baier suggests that justice needs to entail virtues such as care in order to be just; she writes that "justice is only one virtue among many, and one that may need the presence of the others in order to deliver its own undenied value" (1988, 122). Similarly, when discussing why care cannot be merely a voluntary or "optional extra" to justice, she invokes the necessity of a just distribution of caring responsibilities to avoid the exploitation of caregivers (1988, 125). Sara Ruddick has questioned whether in the case of actual ethical dilemmas we even need to think of ethics and justice as alternatives in temporal separation, or whether a good ethical decision will always already entail both at once. Ruddick has argued that an understanding of justice that is not caring is impoverished, as is Rawls's theory of justice, which care theorists have unfortunately taken as paradigmatic of an ethics of justice when in fact, being uncaring, it is not just at all. Ruddick notes that some Western philosophers of justice have manifested "a near-pathological denial and fear of dependency and connectedness," but concludes that "these denials are liabilities of justice reasoning, not one of its defining features" (1998, 9–10). If we took a more acceptable paradigm of justice, it would not so apparently be separable from an ethics of care. She writes: "If response to needs, for example, is relegated to 'care,' 'justice' is deprived of a language in which response to need becomes a matter of social justice" (1998, 6). Ruddick states that "it should be no part of an ethics of care to diminish [justice's] power"; moreover her suggestion is that justice must involve care to be properly just. Likewise, "[t]he meaning of 'care' is also prematurely limited by its opposition—or marriage—to 'justice,'" and indeed matters of justice are central to caring. Caring that is not just, Ruddick notes, can be "intrusive, humiliating, and domineering" (1998, 7). On her view, it seems that a good understanding of justice and a good understanding of care might be nearly indistinguishable, or would at least each have the other as a strong component.

Some feminist theorists of care (such as Noddings) have wondered whether justice would be necessary if we were caring enough. Following Ruddick's claims, however, I would argue that to make such an argument viable, one's notion of care would necessarily involve coopting justice into care. This would allow the claiming of care as prior, even if temporally simultaneous and entirely reconcilable with justice, as would be Lévinas's argument. Such a position does not, however, truly disavow the need for justice, and other feminist and non-feminist philosophers have argued, in the opposite direction, that justice can be expanded to include care without the need for two distinct ethics.¹⁴ For both Lévinas and many feminist care theorists, in short, justice and care, on rich understandings of each, both require the other, whether as embedded or co-present: "charity is impossible without justice, and ... justice is warped without charity," or perhaps, more simply still, charity is just, and justice is charitable. The terms are "inseparable," as Lévinas states, yet remain analytically distinguishable. Thus we may choose to emphasize care over justice against or to heal the "near-pathological" and gendered biases of Western philosophy, as have both Lévinas and philosophers of care. It is just that we do so, and to the advantage of justice, which requires more care.

"Feminine" Ethics and Feminism

Susan Sherwin has distinguished feminist ethics from "feminine" ethics insofar as the former "involves more than recognition of women's actual experiences and moral practices; it incorporates a critique of the specific practices that constitute their oppression" (1992, 49). As seen, Lévinas offers an ethics of care that he understands as "feminine," but which does not concern itself with the fact that it is women and other politically and socially disempowered groups *in particular* who are in the position of the "feminine," nor with the specific political injustices and exploitations that arise from this positioning. Unlike Noddings, who also uses the word "feminine" uncritically (rather than the "feminist" of later care theorists), Lévinas is not even concerned with women subjects, but arguably assumes a masculine subject, though a masculine subject very often in traditionally "feminine" psychological, physical, and emotional states. For instance, in terms that evoke a feminized victim of domestic abuse, Lévinas describes the subject in proximity with and vulnerable to the other "he" cares for, describing "his" relation to that other with metaphors of "persecution" and "exploitation," being held "hostage," being a victim of "trauma," "vulnerability," "exposure" of the body ("nudity") to "wounds and outrages." Evoking, as Cynthia Willett has noted, both the "violation" of a feminized subject and "pregnancy against one's will"

(1995, 84), Lévinas writes that the subject has the other "in his skin," is "penetrated-by-the-other," and this involuntarily, "despite itself," "a sacrificed rather than sacrificing itself" (1998a, 49–51). One is "torn up from oneself in the core of one's unity," in a "a nudity more naked than all destitution," and "whitens under the harness" in the "form of a corporeal life devoted to expression and to giving. It is devoted, and does not devote itself" (1998a, 49). Drawing, intentionally or otherwise, on metaphors of concubinage, rape, and involuntary impregnation, this subject is responsible for the other who is now in "his" skin, like a phallus, like a fetus, whether or not "he" chose to have it there. Despite this language of sexual violence, Lévinas insists that the relations with which he is concerned, ethics, are not erotic, the reason seeming to be that eroticism is too voluntary and self-interested to be ethical (1998a, 177). Recalling Chanter's reproach, the exclusive form of feminine ethical subjectivity that Lévinas allows is modeled on the maternal relation, and the feminine as eros is barred from ethicality. Returning to his critique of Buber's I-Thou relation, eroticism as Lévinas conceives it is excessively romantic and self-absorbed to be ethical. This view of sexuality as necessarily voluntary and self-interested is an example of Lévinas's tacit assumption of a privileged, masculine subject, a subject for whom sex as a violation, economic necessity, servitude, or as an expression of love, charity, and care, of un-self-interested being-for-the-other, or as part of a socially necessitated prudential calculus, goes entirely unthought. Paradoxically, this subject so privileged that sex can only be experienced as egoism is nevertheless imposed on what are otherwise passive and persecuted roles and experiences, on metaphors of ethics as "feminine" bondage and servitude cast frequently in erotic terms.¹⁵

In "From Eros to Maternity," Claire Elise Katz defends Lévinas's separation of eros and ethics from the critiques of Luce Irigaray and Tina Chanter. For Katz, Lévinas is correct to argue that eros is not ethical since she accepts that the ethical relation is reciprocal. Katz writes: "If we understand Lévinas's ethics as asymmetrical, and if we see the merits of defining ethics as such, then we need to be very careful if we want the erotic to be ethical *in Lévinas's terms*" because "[i]n eros, reciprocity is—and should be—expected" (161). In fact, however, reciprocity is quite commonly *not* expected or experienced in erotic relations, and eros is *not* always "fun-loving, consuming, and light," "silly, and often wild and animal-like" (161) for both parties, as Katz would describe it. In Liv Ullman's production of Ingmar Bergman's *Private Confessions*, a wife tells her husband that she has slept with him over the years not out of desire but because she thought it was better than refusing him, a decision apparently made out of compassion for him as well as out of a calculation of what was required of her to make her marriage function

for the sake of her children and husband and the community which they serve as well as for herself. In response, her husband exclaims, "You call that love!" and she answers, "Yes, perhaps that is love"—a love, an eroticism, and a calculation which are everyday and life-long experiences for many subjects, but of which Lévinas does not conceive and for which Katz's own description of what eros "is—and should be" does not account. Even setting aside cases of paid sexual labor, many persons, and perhaps most often women, have sex which is dissatisfying for themselves out of love for the person with whom they are having sex, or out of a psychological, emotional, or economic need to keep that person content and in their lives. This experience is not "consuming" but self-aware and prudential, and it is not "silly," "wild," or "light" but may well be quite serious. For Katz to write that eros "should" not be like this is to involve the ethical in eros, and so the relation between eros and ethics seems further complicated. Katz writes that "[e]nvisioning an apparent absence of the ethical from the erotic does not represent an accurate reading [of Lévinas]," and thus we see that even if eros is not ethical, ethical responsibility still applies to it in some way. As such Katz says: "I do not mean to imply that Lévinas's philosophical thought holds that lovers have no responsibility for the other" (161). For Katz, the *relationship* between lovers is not outside of ethics, and yet the actual experience of eroticism apparently is. Yet, once again, this only describes a circumscribed form of erotic experience, one that is "light" and "silly," and thus many other forms of erotic experience continue to be untheorized within a Lévinasian reading of eros and ethics. This is perhaps because for Katz these experiences are not what eros "should" be about; a leap between "should" and "is" is taking place, and yet we can imagine cases in which having sex for another person's sake, perhaps not acknowledging to him or her that the pleasure is not reciprocal, could be a form of care, care for the other person's self-esteem as well as for his or her body, an instance of responsibility and self-sacrifice, whether or not we think that such a scenario is ever justified. Moreover, we need to theorize the cases in which such areciprocal erotic experiences occur as a result of gendered and economic injustices, which are problems which statements such as "The erotic is not asymmetrical or serious" and "In eros, reciprocity is—and should be—expected" simply skim over.

From an explicitly feminist care perspective, in contrast, the feminine as eros may be theorized as ethical, and the sexual relation is not set outside of ethics: sex and eroticism may be explored not only as possibly involuntary, areciprocal, and unpleasant for the self, but as a site of ethical responding-to and -for-the-other. Ruddick, for instance, writes:

Among the many emotions entangled with care is sexual desire. There is nothing simple to say here. Sex sometimes is, but typically is not, 'work'; the work of care, although often erotic, is not usually explicitly sexual. Sex notoriously intrudes upon care; care, with less fanfare, qualifies sex (1998, 16).

Ruddick notes that care as sex and sex as care have not been given attention "because of inattention to care's relationships," even among feminist philosophers (1998, 16). We may go further, and say that feminist care ethics needs not only to attend to care's relationships, including those of sexuality, but particularly to these sexual relationships from the perspectives of disempowered groups such as lowly paid care workers and women, as Lévinas, writing from a masculine perspective, does not recognize the need to do.

Despite the implicitly masculine perspective from which he describes traditionally female experiences of subjectivity, Lévinas at different stages in his writing is nevertheless calling this ethics "feminine" and "maternal" respectively, which from a feminist perspective cuts both ways: first, because Lévinas is deeming such experience ethical, and positing it on a *male* subject, he is tacitly attributing ethicality to women and advocating that men share more in the experience that has traditionally been women's, for which feminist care theorists have also argued. Indeed, Lévinas sees such a "feminine" ethics as a necessary antidote to the masculinist and militarist values of recent European thought and history, in which he can be compared to Sara Ruddick and Virginia Held: both Ruddick and Held advocate an exportation of mothering values into the public realm, which for Held would counter marketplace values and for Ruddick would result in greater pacifism and antimilitarism (Ruddick 1984a and 1984b; Held 1987, 122). On the other hand, calling these values—as well as phenomenological descriptions of exposure to violence and abuse—"feminine," particularly in the absence of any concrete political critique, continues to associate these relations, kinds of labor, and forms of exploitation and exposure to violence, with women, naturalizing them and giving them an ethical aura (the consolations of martyrdom), even if Lévinas is somewhat subversively, somewhat problematically, imposing them on a male subject, a masculine pronoun. Calling care "feminine," as in the work of various care theorists, is already problematic because it naturalizes the social stratification of women as caretakers without always recognizing their victimization as such. Lévinas, however, *emphasizes* the victimization of the for-the-other relation, and emphasizes it as "feminine," but without problematizing (indeed ethically idealizing) this victimization, and without

explicitly recognizing that it is particular gendered persons, not the "feminine" self per se, who are most often in the position he describes.

Leora Batnitzky, in a chapter in which she compares feminist care ethics to Jewish existentialist philosophy, notes that Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, along with Lévinas and care theorists, deem the virtues of care and responsibility "feminine" and "maternal" (Batnitzky, 2004). Batnitzky is sympathetic to the reconceptualization of the self as dependent and vulnerable, as this notion of the "feminine" has signified for both Jewish existentialists and care theorists. Compellingly, however, she problematizes the use of the word "feminine" on the part of both schools of thought, seeing it as "undermining" the philosophic value of their claims about the human (2004, 143). She recognizes that while no such disclaimer can be made for the male existentialists, feminist theorists of care are at least using the gendered term critically, yet, she asks, "when does the notion of 'the feminine' do more damage than it does critical work?" (2004, 145). Batnitzky raises Joan Tronto's concerns on this matter regarding the classing of care, the dangers of paternalism/maternalism, and most fundamentally the fact that

'care is not a parochial concern of women, a type of secondary moral question, or the work of the least well off in society. Care is a central concern of human life. It is time that we began to change our political and social institutions to reflect this truth.' That we are all dependent and vulnerable means that ethics must be based upon this recognition (2004, 146).

Batnitzky goes on to note that it is not surprising that it would be Jewish existentialist philosophers who advocated a "feminine" ethics, as Jews, like women, were conceptualized as Other and thus feminized by dominant Christian thought. Batnitzky notes that the Jewish self-conception as "feminine" comes not only from their self-understanding as "receptive" and in relation to God, but from their historically oppressed relation to Christianity. She writes: "What we see in regard to Lévinas, Rosenzweig, and Buber's use of 'the feminine' are some of the ways in which oppressed communities knowingly and unknowingly reproduce majority prejudice" (2004, 144).

This points to another problem with Lévinas's association of an ethics of responsibility or care as "feminine," a concern that has been raised by various feminist philosophers worried by the "politically suspect origins" of the virtues of care (Sherwin 1992, 51). Batnitzky cites Sandra Harding's influential research, which has shown that similar forms of reasoning to those associated with women in Carol Gilligan's studies are prevalent in African Americans of both genders. As Sherwin writes, "the

nurturing and caring at which women excel are, among other things, the survival skills of an oppressed group that lives in close contact with its oppressors" (1992, 50), which partly explains why African Americans, and perhaps Jews in a dominantly Christian culture, would develop and value the same skills as women. Even if we want to maintain that these forms of responding to ethical dilemmas are of value, it is to be noted that they are, in Sherwin's phrase, "virtues of subordination" (1992, 50). We need therefore to approach these virtues critically, recognizing that we need less to inculcate them further in historically oppressed groups through flattery of their ethicality and bipolarized naturalization of their values than to ensure that they become recognized and valued by the groups that have traditionally done the oppressing and enforced the caring of themselves. Lévinas *does* impose the virtues of care on both genders; unlike the feminist philosophers he approaches these virtues uncritically and does not recognize their historical polarization beyond his use of the word "feminine," which term is itself problematic for the reasons Batnitzky and Tronto have highlighted.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn out the correlations in the conception of the self as dependent on and responsible for others that characterize both Lévinas's ethics and feminist theories of an ethics of care. It has further noted their common problematizations of the emphasis on questions of autonomy and freedom in mainstream philosophy, and their shared views on the inseparability of justice and ethics. Despite these similarities, Lévinas's philosophy cannot be called "feminist" because it is not concerned with particular political contexts and specific oppressed groups. Furthermore, his theory resists being applied to some categories of experience in which women have most experienced oppression, under the twin ideologies of naturalized maternity and compulsory heterosexuality. That is, Lévinas may only conceive of the maternal subject as provider of care, but never as its recipient, and he refuses to extend his ethical phenomenology to theorize sexual relations. As such, women's exploitation as mothers as well as their sexual exploitation and oppression become difficult if not impossible to theorize on his terms, as it is not with a feminist ethics of care. Lévinas's philosophy is nevertheless useful to feminist care theorists in several ways. First, like other writers on "feminine" ethics, Lévinas advocates care on the part of both genders, and perhaps especially on the part of men. While he can be criticized for not specifically acknowledging that it is women who do most of the caring, his writing is perhaps more subversive in *assuming* a male subject, imposing feminine virtues on males in the very writing of his text, even if not in

politically contextualized terms. Further, in common with many feminist care theorists, Lévinas recognizes the need for justice simultaneous with care, even if he failed to elaborate concretely on the need for justice for those who do care-giving work as they have been historically gendered, or the injustice of this very gendering. Lévinas's philosophy can further feminist theories of care because it offers phenomenological arguments for conceptions of the self as dependent and relational, of involuntary caring and relational autonomy, of an ethics of responsibility, and of a justice inseparable from charity, with each of which feminist philosophers of care are also concerned. Indeed, Lévinas's redefining of subjectivity as relational rather than primarily autonomous is more philosophically developed and more radical in its break with Western tradition than is found explicitly formulated in most feminist care theory. Further, Lévinas's philosophy develops these arguments in response to a different tradition of philosophy and to other figures in the philosophy of history than feminist philosophers of care, who have been primarily responding to Anglo-American philosophy. He thus attends to a different, but equally problematic, masculinist tradition, in a manner that shares many insights with feminist theory.

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Notes

1. Leora Batnitzky notes that both Lévinas and Nel Noddings view mothering as natural and unreflective, but that Noddings has been strongly criticized on this point by other feminist philosophers of care, including Ruddick and Joan Tronto, who emphasize maternal thinking and the

particular forms of reflection that mothering entails. See Leora Batnitzsky, "Dependency and Vulnerability: Jewish and Feminist Existentialist Constructions of the Human," in *Women and Gender in Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Hava Tirsosh-Samuels (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 13–4.

2. For Lévinas, in a positive reappropriation of these terms, as "passive" and "weak."

3. A deontologist such as Kant, as Susan Sherwin notes, "explicitly disallows consideration of the specific circumstances of the agent or of other parties affected," or, for Rawls, the agent should make ethical decisions under a "veil of ignorance." See Sherwin, "Chapter 2: Ethics, 'Feminine' Ethics and Feminist Ethics," in *No Longer Patient: Feminist Ethics and Health Care* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 37. Not dissimilarly, contractarians, to take a second dominant stream of philosophical ethics, "propose that only the abstract features common to all persons can have moral significance" (ibid., 41).

4. Annette Baier notes that "Rawls can allow that progress to Gilligan-style moral maturity may be a rational life plan, but not a moral constraint on every life-pattern. The trouble is that it will not do just to say 'let this version of morality be an optional extra. Let us agree on the essential minimum, that is on justice and rights, and let whoever wants to go further and cultivate this more demanding ideal of responsibility and care.' For, first, it cannot be satisfactorily cultivated without closer cooperation from others than respect for rights and justice will ensure, and, second, the encouragement of some to cultivate it while others do not could easily lead to exploitation of those who do. It obviously *has* suited some in most societies well enough that others take on the responsibilities of care (for the sick, the helpless, the young) leaving them free to pursue their own less altruistic goods.... The liberal individualists may be able to 'tolerate' the more communally minded, if they keep the liberals' rules, but it is not so clear that the more communally minded can be content with just those rules, not be content to be tolerated and possibly exploited." "The Need for More than Justice," in *Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues* (Toronto: Thompson Learning Inc., 2004), ed. Barbara MacKinnon, 125.

5. Maternity is not the only paradigm for caring, however, in either Lévinas or feminist care ethics. Other gender-neutral caring relations, such as that between teacher and students, or between caregivers and the elderly or the ill, are explored by both Lévinas and feminist care theorists. In *Totality and Infinity*, for instance, the paradigmatic ethical relation for Lévinas is between teacher and student, while responsibility towards widows, orphans,

and strangers are also frequently evoked.

6. See Diane Perpich, *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Lévinas*, 29–30.

7. For instance, the father may be responsible for income, but the mother for actual responsive and proximate care. For a discussion of the gendering as well as racial and classed aspects of care, see the section, "How Care is Gendered, Raced, Classed" in Joan Tronto, "Chapter 4: Care," in *Moral Boundaries* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

8. An interesting article on this topic is Stella Sandford's "Masculine Mothers? Maternity in Lévinas and Plato," in *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Lévinas*, ed. Tina Chanter (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001). Whether Lévinas really meant at all times to have this degree of gender flexibility is less important than that we can compellingly read him as arguing for male, though *not*, it is to be noted, "masculine" mothering.

9. Nel Noddings, for instance, writes of "mothers" as "people who do the work of attentive love—usually but not always women," in "Chapter 8: Attentive Love," in *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 176. She recognizes that mostly women have mothered, but does not see this as essentially or preferably so. Lévinas, in contrast, merely assumes that men may mother, uses a male pronoun to refer to the subject of an ethics the paradigm of which is maternity, but explicitly notes neither that this should be so nor that it has not usually been the case.

10. In *Otherwise than Being*, Lévinas writes: "In approaching the other I am always late for the meeting" (150), and "I opened ... he had disappeared" (88).

11. Catharine MacKinnon has written: "Women value care because men have valued us according to the care we give them, and we could probably use some." Cited in Sherwin, 51.

12. See, for instance, Helen O'Grady, "An Ethics of the Self," in *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, eds. Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

13. See Tronto, "Care," 103, for her and Fisher's definition of care, which includes care for "our bodies, our selves, and our environment," as well as for others.

14. For instance, Jean Grimshaw 1986, cited in Sherwin, 46–7.

15. Men, often "feminized" men, though they cannot be impregnated, can of course be raped, penetrated, sexually violated, sexually exploited, and forced to have involuntary sex, or sex without pleasure for money, and men may also be the victims of domestic violence. Nevertheless, as noted, these men are "feminized," for instance male prostitutes (servicing male clients), and statistically it is overwhelmingly women who work as prostitutes, are raped, and are the victims of domestic abuse, and who, whether as wives, concubines, or prostitutes have had sex not merely for pleasure, or purely voluntarily, but out of financial dependency, exploitation, and need.

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