

The Weaker Sex **Why Men are Morally Inferior to Women**

By
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The title of this message is meant to be more provocative than precise. I don't actually believe that gender has much to do with moral superiority. Indeed, I think this kind of ridiculous bias has directly resulted in the past oppression of women in our society and continues to do so in many countries around the world. But what are we to expect from a civilization whose myths portray women as the originators of immorality, whether in the Greek myth of Pandora opening a box and unleashing all manner of evil on the world, or of disobedient Eve who first eats the forbidden fruit? In many countries to this day, women are forced to hide their own faces in public with a *sham*, the root of the word *shame*. And in our own country, which likes to think it is more enlightened than these backward Muslim nations, women, unlike men, must always cover their breasts, that most distinctive characteristic of their female form, while in public, even while doing something as nurturing and natural as breast feeding their children. Just recall what happened a few years ago when Janet Jackson flashed her breast for less than a second during the Super Bowl halftime show. Fines were levied and laws were changed almost immediately. At the same time the Attorney General covered the marble breasts on a statue of Lady Liberty during his entire time in office.

So I don't mind attempting to balance the account just a little by exaggerating what I perceive as a morally superior perspective that is, in general, a more feminine one. But my real hope today is to offer some insight that will not only challenge the dominator morality of "might makes right," and singles out those heroic figures, that is, those rugged individuals, who successfully distinguish themselves from the pack; and, more importantly, to validate those women who have been made to feel weak and inferior precisely because their moral decisions are generally more considerate of others.

Let me begin by outlining the trinitarian hierarchy that is not only, and not surprisingly, both the basis of western religion, and the basis of western morality. Just as Christianity teaches that God can be divided into three personalities, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, developmental psychology tends toward a three-stage ascent up the moral stairway to heaven. Lawrence Kohlberg, a leading pioneer and founder in the field of moral judgment and cognitive development, classified the stages of moral development as *pre-conventional*, *conventional*, and *post-conventional*—one, two, three. Long before him, the Danish philosopher and father of Existentialism, Soren Kierkegaard, described similar stages which he called, *aesthetic*, *ethical*, and *religious*. Likewise, psychologist, Erich Fromm's discussion of theological development is also a three-tiered movement from viewing God as a sadistic despot that can do whatever it wants, to a God bound by a covenantal relationship with its worshippers, to a God that is no longer a person at all, but exists as various principles, like love, truth, and justice. Even Freud held a trinitarian view of the human psyche, *Id*, *ego*, and *superego*, similar to what Transactional psychologists mean when referring to the *Child*, *Adult*, and *Parent* that is in all of us.

So it seems more than coincidental to me that a society's Trinitarian hierarchical theology is reflected in its understanding of psychology and morality. The only question is which came first, the chicken or the egg—our religion or our psychology? It seems more likely to me that our religion is more an outgrowth of our psyche, but I'll leave that question open for another discussion.

What should be noted, however, is that our psychological theories not only reflect the same Trinitarian and hierarchical aspects of our religion, but also its patriarchal perspective. In other words, most the work done in developmental psychology has been from a decidedly masculine perspective—men researching men! It was Carol Gilligan, herself a brilliant Harvard professor, and a student, friend, and colleague of Lawrence Kohlberg, who first brought this discrepancy to light with her book, *In a Different Voice*, subtitled, *Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. In it she writes, "Prominent among those who thus appear to be deficient in moral development when measured by Kohlberg's scale are women..."¹ In other words, women don't measure up to men when it comes to being moral. For Kohlberg they seemed to get stuck in the middle stages of development, and can't achieve the higher levels of morality unless, as Gilligan explains, "...women enter the traditional arena of male activity will they recognize the inadequacy of this moral perspective and progress like men toward higher stages where relationships are subordinated to rules... and rules to universal principles of justice..."² In brief, women aren't as good as men unless they act like men!

Gilligan does a good and important job of countering this view, but before exploring her findings, it's probably necessary to give a brief explanation of the traditional stages of moral development that are, again, trinitarian, hierarchical, and patriarchal. The first stage, which Kohlberg called *pre-conventional*, Kierkegaard called *aesthetic*, Fromm called *despotic*, and Freud called *Id*, reflects a perspective in which we determine right and wrong based upon our own immediate needs and desires. It is the infantile perspective that demands it gets whatever it wants right now! It's an important stage for infants who are unable to care for themselves and must, therefore, cry out to have their needs met from others. But as the infant becomes more conscious of others, it very quickly begins to move into what is considered the second stage of morality, the *conventional*, in which it learns that if it is to get, at least, some of its needs met, it must make certain others also get their needs met. This stage, which Fromm called *covenantal*, is when children learn to share, take turns, and play by the rules. The third stage of moral development, and that which, from a male/patriarchal perspective is considered the highest level, occurs when we cease to adhere purely to the rules of society, but devote ourselves to the underlying principles from which they stem—again, like truth, faith, justice, equality, etc., etc. Kohlberg called this the *post-conventional* level, but I like how Fromm suggests it plays out theologically, "In this development God ceases to be a person, a man, a father; he becomes the symbol of the principle of

¹ Gilligan, Carol, *In a Different Voice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1982, p. 18.

² Ibid.

unity behind the manifoldness of phenomena...”³ It’s also played out in Henry David Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience* in which violating the rules of society is permissible when necessary to uphold these greater principles. I think most of us here would agree with this, and we would be in good company. Gandhi, King, and Jesus all practiced civil disobedience. Yet we must not, in valuing the accomplishments of these extraordinary individuals, forget the many instances of those who have violated the rules in the name of principles with less favorable outcomes. Most recently, the Bush Administration violated privacy and torture laws in favor of those principles he called *patriotism, freedom, and protecting our country*. This is typical of men who feel they have achieved a level of moral superiority over others—they sink back into a despotic mindset in which they feel justified in doing whatever they want—that they are above the law, above society, and, more succinctly, as we shall see, above responsibility for their relationships with others.

Now, although there is really much more setup that should be done regarding the male perspective, before time eludes us, we must get to the heart of the matter by outlining the more feminine perspective. It might surprise you to learn that Carol Gilligan also has a somewhat “Trinitarian” explanation of how women develop morally, though it is not hierarchical, and certainly not patriarchal. For brevity’s sake, I will discuss her explanation in my own terms based upon my interpretation of her work. I like to call her three stages, *Me, You, and Us*. Her first “stage,” if you will, the *Me* stage, is similar to Kohlberg’s *pre-conventional* mindset and Freud’s *Id*, in which a woman is entirely selfish in her moral behavior. The one caveat, however, is that Gilligan associates this stage with *survival*. Just as infant behaves in the way it does to survive, women stuck at this early stage of moral development are in survival mode. This is particularly important for women who, like infants, live under circumstances in which they are unable to fend for themselves and must depend upon others for their food, shelter, and clothing. Such will often do whatever it takes just to survive, and in male dominated societies this is often the case.

But, like all of us, such women want to be able to consider themselves good people, and, so, attempt to redeem themselves for being so selfish by moving into the *You* morality, marked now by self-sacrifice. At this level women tend to give up their own needs to attend, often to their own detriment, to the needs of others, traditionally to the needs of their husbands and children. I consider this a particularly tragic stage because it is what our hierarchical patriarchal society typically defines as “a woman’s place,” and many women, because they’ve internalized the cultural paradigm, feel ashamed if they don’t sacrifice their own needs for the good others, or even if they do anything for themselves at all, even if it doesn’t negatively effect others. In describing this difference between a girl and a boy she interviewed, Gilligan writes, “for him the limiting condition is, ‘Don’t let yourself be guided totally by others,’ but for her it arises when ‘other people are counting on you’... To Jake, responsibility means *not doing* what he wants because

³ Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1956, 1972, p. 57.f.

he is thinking of others; to Amy, it means *doing* what others are counting on her to do regardless of what she herself wants.”⁴

But if girls and women can move beyond this mentality that they must sacrifice their own interests for the sake of everyone else, they come to see that they must include themselves and their interests in the moral equation. This *Us* stage occurs when women understand that behaving in a way that is harmful to themselves is also immoral. It is a non-violent perspective—*ahimsa*, no harm—in which they now realize it would even be wrong to harm themselves and that, whatever moral decisions they make, they can be neither entirely selfish, nor entirely self-sacrificing. But herein lies the real difference between the masculine and feminine perspective. Men tend to consider morality in terms of principles, namely, the principle of justice, whereas women tend to see it always in terms of *relationship*. How do our actions effect others? Gilligan writes, “While an ethic of justice proceeds from the premise of equality—that everyone should be treated the same—an ethic of care rests on the premise of non-violence—that no one should be hurt.”⁵

This brings us to the point, to the reason folks like Kohlberg view women as morally inferior, in general, to men, because, according to his trinitarian, hierarchal, patriarchal strategy, the highest morality demonstrates blind devotion to a principle, even if such devotion means hurting others, the way George W. Bush, and, more recently, Barack Obama justify the killings of innocent civilians, in the name of a “just cause.” But the highest level of feminine morality continues to make relationship its fundamental priority. Women don’t drop bombs on innocent people, unless they’re acting like men, unless, again, as Kohlberg’s theory suggests, they, “...enter the traditional arena of male activity will they recognize the inadequacy of this moral perspective and progress like men toward higher stages where relationships are subordinated to rules... and rules to universal principles of justice...”⁶

If you’ll recall, the primary characteristic of the middle stage of morality as defined by men, whether we call it the *conventional* stage of Kohlberg, or the *ethical* stage of Kierkegaard, or the *covenantal* stage of Erich Fromm, is one of relationship. It begins developing, again, when children learn to share, take turns, and play by the rules, in other words, when they begin relating to others. This middle stage is oriented not toward principles, but, like women, toward relationships. So, from the males perspective, women who feel morally obligated to remain in right relationship with others are considered morally retarded. Again, as Gilligan puts it;

Thus women not only define themselves in a context of human relationships but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care. Women’s place in man’s life cycle has been that of nurturer, caretaker, and helpmate, the weaver of those networks of relationships on which she in turn relies. But while women have thus taken care of men, men have, in their theories of psychological development, as in their economic

⁴ Gilligan, *ibid.* p. 38.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 174.

⁶ *Ibid.*

arrangements, tended to assume or devalue that care. When the focus on individuation and individual achievement extends into adulthood and maturity is equated with personal autonomy, concern with relationships appears as a weakness of women rather than as a human strength.”⁷

Now, and here’s where I must move fast and be succinct, in Freud’s trinitarian model, the third level of development, that of the superego, or what TA calls the *Parent*, is not the highest level, but is merely an outgrowth of the unconscious and an inflation of our neuroses and unfulfilled desires. This explains why Freud saw devotion to certain principles, including “loving our neighbors as ourselves,” and, especially, “loving our enemies,” not as morality, but as expressions of the superego, that is, of our own need to feel righteous, blown out of reasonable proportion. Freud’s middle way is the way of the ego, that which he called our interface with reality—and reality, is always about our relationships, with ourselves, with each other, and with our environment.

You see, it is one thing to be devoted to justice as a principle, and quite another to practice justice in reality. Justice is, in practice, a quality of relationship and does not exist as a principle. Principles don’t really exist anywhere. They are only as good as they are lived out, and can only be lived out in relationship. Justice, as I so often say, is not something you can bring people to, but something you can only bring to people; as, I hope, President Obama learned this week when U.S. forces accidentally killed dozens of civilians in Afghanistan. Even Gandhi, as much as he managed to accomplish for his country through his unyielding devotion to his principle of Truth, was often incapable of relating well to those closest to him. “Gandhi, whom Kohlberg cites as exemplifying the [highest] stage of moral judgment...” writes Gilligan, “...is criticized by a judgment that refuses to look away from or condone the infliction of harm. In denying the validity of his wife’s reluctance to open her home to strangers and in blinding himself to the different reality of adolescent sexuality and temptation, Gandhi compromised in his everyday life the ethic of nonviolence to which, in principle and public, he steadfastly adhered.”⁸ Gandhi was, of course, more than on the right track with his ethic of nonviolence, but he practiced it within the context of his devotion to the principle of Truth, which meant he had some trouble applying it to ordinary circumstances. But all he really needed, perhaps, was a “woman’s touch;” for it is nonviolence, again, that is the primary quality of a woman’s morality too, only she practices it not abstractly, but only within the context of relationship.

So, if you’ve been able to keep up with what has been a very fast oversimplification of a lengthy and complex, perhaps even dry, subject, I will explain, in closing, why I believe the feminine perspective on morality is superior to that of the masculine perspective. This is so, primarily, because the abstractions to which men are so prone to devoting ourselves to, are not real, yet, in fact, we value them above reality. By my definition, that makes us delusional. And, in this sense, they become impractical at best, and expressions of superego, that is, inflated feelings of superiority, at worst. The feminine perspective, on the other hand, always returns to what is real, to relationship.

⁷ Ibid. p. 17.

⁸ Ibid. p. 104.

How do our beliefs and behaviors effect others?

This middle way, according to Kohlberg, is also, the Middle Way of Buddha, in that it shuns both the excesses of aestheticism and the extremisms of asceticism. It exists between selfishness and sacrifice, and it is toward the *middle* when it comes to moral development that women tend to remain, not because they are morally retarded, but because they are more grounded in reality, in the meaning of morality, which has no meaning if it is not lived out. Men, on the other hand, because of our dominator myth requiring us to be heroes, outstanding, standing out, separating ourselves from ordinary people, becoming extraordinary rugged individuals on our ascent up Mount Olympus to dwell as demigods, feel we must rise above our relationships, believing them to get in our way of doing what's right, of someday dwelling with those unreal principalities at the summit of our journey.

But the truth is, neither of these perspectives is really limited to gender. There are many women living in La La Land atop Mount Olympus, or struggling to get there by being out of touch with the lives of those they hurt on the way up; just as there are many man who remain caring and compassionate despite cultural expectations for them to become cold and dispassionate. Perhaps the differences Carol Gilligan outlines in her interviews with women stem not so much from an estrogen perspective, but from a perspective of those who have long been oppressed in a male dominated society. Perhaps it is from this perspective, from the perspective of those who have been left out completely, unless they become willing to do whatever it takes to survive, or else sacrifice themselves to the system completely, that we find morality's Middle Way, the way that says, "no harm, no, *really*, no harm!"