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Paradoxes of gender Ethical and epistemological perspectives on care in feminist political theory¹

S.L. Sevenhuijsen

Introduction

Care has been an object of theory and research in feminist sociology and political science for more than ten years by now. Looking back it strikes me that the production of knowledge about gender and care has proceeded along different disciplinary tracks. I will distinguish here two of these 'tracks', each with its own structures and goals of knowledge, and also with its characteristic discussions.

Firstly, extensive work has been done on caring as an activity, the 'labour of love'. Sociologists have done field work among women carers, for example about the activities, attitudes and problems of mothers, of women who care for their elderly relatives, of homehelps, nurses and midwives. Women have been made visible as recipients of care, for example where their needs are distorted or only partially met by husbands, social services, welfare provisions, and legal regulations. Political scientists have done extensive research, often of a comparative nature, of the way in which modern welfare states are built on a social structure where women do the major part of the caring work. So in this 'track' of research, women are prominently present, and the overriding place of gender in modern welfare states now belongs to the feminist wisdom.

Secondly, there has been an extensive feminist debate, situated at the crossroads between psychology, moral philosophy, political theory and feminist jurisprudence about the so-called 'ethics of care'. After several years of serious and often justified critique, but also of confusion and sometimes ridiculing and stereotype talk about the ethic of care, it looks as if the concept is gradually becoming accepted.² Authors on diverse subjects in political theory recognize the contributions of 'care-reasoning', not only for matters in the so-called 'private sphere', but also for public issues like environment-policies, international affairs, family law or criminal law politics.³ Many descriptions have been given about the core characteristics of an ethic

of care. In this article I will take as a working definition the description that has been formulated by the American political theorist Joan Tronto. In her words an ethic of caring focusses on values like the following: a commitment to attentiveness to the needs of caring, a willingness to assume responsibility for others, a commitment to the consequences of actions and a commitment to responsiveness. Tronto states that 'this collection of values: attentiveness, responsibility, responsiveness, and preservation form the core of an ethic of care'. (Tronto 1991a, p. 8). This corresponds with characteristics of an ethic of care as mentioned by other authors, like a focus on a contextual or situated ethics and on the dialogic, open-ended characteristics of moral reasoning (Urban Walker, 1989).

But in spite of the growing trust in the possibilities of an ethics of care, the role of gender remains contested among those feminist thinkers who can be seen as its proponents. Some thinkers see women and gender-difference as the epistemological foundation of care-reasoning (Held, 1987, 1990). Others see the future of an ethic of care in the loosening of the methodological ties between gender and care. Joan Tronto argues in one of her most recent papers for a strategy of 'exploring the ethic of care as a moral theory without first associating it with gender' (Tronto, 1991a, p. 6).

So while gender is a prominent factor in the political sociology of care, it is as if feminist political theory can only accept the value of care as a moral concept by loosening its connections with gender (Davis, 1991). This looks like a paradoxical situation. While feminists were the first to explore and promote the potential fruitfulness of an ethic of care, its ideas are only reluctantly accepted, not seldom by discarding the very motive behind its invention. And while from empirical sociological work we now know a lot about women and care, on a normative level many feminists are only willing to argue at morality and care by speaking as non-gendered subjects and by employing a gender-neutral language.

In this paper I will argue that feminist political theory and social research on an ethics of care cannot do without gender. But in order to develop a fruitful 'gender-methodology' in this field, we must reflect on the theoretical unease about gender and sexual difference when it comes to thinking about care. I will argue that part of the problem resides in the lack of clarity and inconsistencies in the concepts of 'gender' that are being employed in the discourses on care. While the concept of care has been developed in a sophisticated way by the work of scholars like Hilary Graham, Kari Waerness, Clare Ungerson, Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto, the concept of gender deserves the same 'careful' treatment, especially when we are using it in the context of political theory and epistemology of care.

I could start then by presenting a definition of what I understand gender

to be, and how it can be integrated in research on care. I will not proceed that way, because it would be too simple. Concepts don't have a meaning of their own: they get their meaning within the context of wider discourses, as part of specific ways of naming, arguing, judging and acting. Hence the title of this article: epistemological and ethical perspectives on care. Care and gender are not things 'out there' that can be understood by simple definitions. A lot depends on the question of how we come to 'know' care and its genderedness, as well as on the question in which normative framework and from which position we conceptualise it.

This startingpoint poses a serious problem for a political theorist like me, educated in political science in the sixties and seventies. The discipline as I have learned it had virtually nothing to say about care. Political scientists talk about power as decision-making in the public sphere, about interests, rights and justice, and about the distribution of resources and values by governing bodies among individuals. Political theory concerns itself with the sources of authority, obedience and resistance, with normative questions about justice, legitimate government, tolerance and the good life. Care has had hardly any place in discussions of the good life. It only figures in the margin, as something that is simply there and by necessity has to be done, but also has to be transcended in order to arrive at the independent state of mind that is necessary for reasoning about justice. One could say that modern political theory has constructed its object domain in such a way that care is outside its vision, as it associates care with the private sphere. Care has in its discourse to do with affections, bodies, particularity, love and the home, and thus with femininity and women. In its own self-image political theory simply has a different object domain. Gender-divisions in that way are inscribed in the frontiers between the disciplines: it is more suitable to study sociology or psychology when you want to understand something about care. Even large-scale processes such as the political/legal structuring of private caring activities and the public regulation of health care belong more to the domain of sociology than to that of political science.

Since there are many links between academic political theory and the ways in which social and political movements conceptualise an issue, this state of affairs has complex consequences for the way feminists can integrate care in their political reasoning. Not only is there a lack of an adequate political language, in which to speak in public about care, the discipline is also inadequately equipped to ask questions in its existing languages. How should we, for example, frame questions about gender and the justice of caring arrangements in our society, if care is outside the vision of reasoning about justice? And how could we integrate considerations of care and concern in what counts as justice and injustice?

One way of overcoming this discursive handicap is to stretch the conceptual apparatus of the discipline to its limits, and try to frame some of the feminist concerns about care in its language. The most prominent example of this strategy is Susan Moller Okin's proposal to integrate gender and care in the paradigm of distributive justice. In what follows I will try to show that this can lead to a contradictory and selective way of reasoning about gender and care. I will then make some proposals for a conceptualisation of gender, which I consider to be fruitful for developing feminist social research and political theory about care and ethics.

Gender and care in the paradigm of distributive justice

In her book *Justice, Gender and the Family* Susan Okin addresses the problem of the discrepancies between accepted values of equality, justice and democracy in western societies on the one hand, and the existence of a great amount of inequality between men and women on the other (Okin, 1989). Her argument for distributive justice for women is built on the idea that the family is the main source of distribution of gender-inequalities, not only because it contains an unfair distribution of labour and dependency, but also because it is the source of gendered 'identities', of gendered character structures, psychological dispositions and moral attitudes. Okin sees gender as the historically produced differentiation between the sexes, and thus places her thoughts in the feminist tradition which demarcates sex from gender and links this to a nature-culture divide. In her view nature knows no difference. Although she sees the unequal treatment of women in the law as a major source of injustice, the main problem resides in her view in the effects of socialization, which reinforces sex roles 'that are commonly regarded as of unequal prestige and worth'. (Okin, 1989, p.6)

She bases her argument on the object-relations theory of Nancy Chodorow in order to argue that gender resides in the assignation of primary parenting.⁴ Following Chodorow she states that this causes a unevenness in the division of individuation and nurturing. In order to counter this defect, the family has to be brought under the paradigm of distributive justice. The public-private divide has to be exposed as 'false ideology' and should be broken up in order to redistribute resources and to reform personality-structures. A major part of Okin's book is aimed at developing the normative principles that can justify this attitude, mainly by bringing it under the epistemological rules of objectivity, impartiality and justified unequal treatment. The injustice of gender is something that can be 'known' by rational argument and by transcending one's own situatedness via the Rawlsian

instruments of the original position and the veil of ignorance. This will not only lead to 'just families', but also to objective and impartial legal rules, that can count on legitimacy, because everybody will agree on them.

Now, this all sounds rather logical, and for many feminists it is part of their common sense about the goals of feminist politics. Isn't more fairness in the distribution of child-care, and thus opportunities and positions between men and women one of the most consensual aims of feminism? In Okin's book we find an argument that makes these aims acceptable in the dominant paradigm of politics and justice.

There are, however, several points in Okin's approach to gender and care that are highly problematic from an ethical and epistemological perspective. I will mention several of them, not to blame Susan Okin that she sees it all wrong, but more in order to open up spaces to reflect on the complexities of a specific type of equality-discourse when it comes to conceptualising issues concerning gender and care. Okin's approach is representative for the liberal humanist discourse that is embedded in public policies in many Western countries, as well as in the common sense understanding of many people who are sympathetic to 'women's cause'. So her ideas are not just ideas, but should rather be analysed as a 'paradigm' or as a discourse in the Foucauldian sense⁵: as an intertwined style of knowledge construction and political intervention, aimed at the construction of a specific type of subject. By analysing her approach in this way, it becomes possible to 'see' more precisely the (often hidden) normative elements in the way 'care' has been conceptualised by many feminists and by influential knowledge-practices in women's studies.

First of all it must be said that Okin's argument on the overriding importance of object-relations is rather formalistic, circular and speculative. It is striking that she cites Chodorow as proof of the 'truth' that men and women in our society represent two genders. Apparently we can attribute empirical differences between men and women to their 'gendered identities', and then to the patterns of their socialisation. However Okin reflects little on the exact empirical differences in behaviour; they are mainly extracted from the same discourse that is invoked to explain them, namely object-relations theory. So this is a rather closed or circular way of arguing. The argument is also speculative, because it takes an 'obvious' point of different 'treatment' between men and women, namely differences between caring activities of women and men and the socialisation-patterns that are supposed to result from this, and then projects the expectation that when we follow a natural equality, this will lead to equality and fairness in outcome.

In this way Okin not only constructs two homogeneous categories of

'men' and 'women' (apparently one person cannot have something of both); also in her approach 'gender' is the most basic factor for women's identities. Although at one point in her book she acknowledges differences of race, class, religion and ethnicity among women, this does not prevent her from stating that gender, namely the gendered nature of the family, affects 'virtually all women' (Okin, 1989, p. 7). She even states that feminist critique on a homogeneous concept of gender detracts 'our' attention from gender as a fundamental factor:

'Some feminists have been criticized for developing theories of gender that do not take sufficient account of differences among women, especially race, class, religion and ethnicity. While such critiques should always inform our research and improve our arguments, it would be a mistake to allow them to detract our attention from gender itself as a factor of significance.' (Okin, 1989, p.6)

So in her point of view, female primary parenting not only divides humanity into two clearcut categories, it also creates homogeneity within each category, while one's gender figures as the most prominent factor that forms identity.

In this way Okin not only marginalises the many voices that disagree with her on this point⁶, she also works with an idea of identity and subjectivity that is problematic on epistemological and moral grounds. For how can a theorist 'know' what a woman's identity is, when the employed way of thinking trivialises and excludes subjective experience, and when it promotes a 'unified' idea about selves, instead of listening to the identities, dilemma's, fragmentations, and the values that individuals and groups formulate for themselves? The phrase 'gender itself' is revealing in this respect: it is as if 'gender itself' can only be represented in our theorising if we abstract from lived social realities from the start on. But how then can we speak as women and about women, when we take such an abstraction as epistemological starting point?

Seen from this perspective the question of why Okin is so keen to promote this unified idea about human personalities becomes relevant. Why does she embrace this ideal of a universal subject that only has to be undone from its gender-divided character structure in order to reach the right decisions about a just society? The clue lies in the way she favors the Rawlsian epistemology of the original position, his 'brilliant idea' as she calls it. According to Okin this should be even the central tool for feminists in their political critique. In order to use this instrument, a presupposition of genderless subjects is required. Or to state it in Okin's words:

'For if the principles of justice are to be adopted unanimously by representa-

tive human beings ignorant of their particularistic characteristics and positions in society, they must be persons whose psychological and moral development is in all essentials identical. This means that the social factors influencing the differences between the sexes - from female parenting to all the manifestations of female subordination and dependence - would have to be replaced by genderless institutions and customs' (Okin, 1989, p. 107)

And elsewhere she speaks of the 'abolition of gender' or a 'genderless society' as the main goal of changing the division of caring labour in the family. Equality in parenting thus figures as a strong 'sine qua non' for the development of good and acceptable forms of moral reasoning:

'Only children who are equally mothered and fathered can develop fully the psychological and moral capacities that currently seem to be unevenly distributed between the sexes. Only when men participate equally in what have been principally women's realms of meeting the daily psychological and material needs of those close to them, and when women participate equally in what have been principally men's realms of large scale production, government and intellectual and artistic life, will members of both sexes be able to develop a more complete human personality than has hitherto been possible.' (Okin, 1989, p. 107, emphasis added)

So at points like this we are presented with an ideal of an ungendered subject, a necessity of sameness - in the name of consensus and impartiality, the hallmarks of a universalistic reasoning of justice. Feminists are invited to insert all their moral reasoning in this discourse.⁷ At other places, however, Okin shows some sensitivity for the arguments of an ethics of care, although in a rather ambivalent and contradictory way. First, she discards feminist writers on the ethics of care with the reproach that 'too much energy' has been put into an intellectual endeavour, that by the promotion of difference necessarily leads to naturalism, traditionalism and conservatism (Okin, 1989, p. 15). In a later chapter, however, she takes on some of the ideas of the same authors in order to revise the Rawlsian way of arguing about just rules and regulations. Here she accepts Gilligan's ideas on a systematic difference between men and women in moral reasoning as an empirical given. Women's moral voice should then be valued and re-distributed in order to arrive at a more fully human way of moral reasoning.

In accordance with these ideas Okin reformulates the basic starting points of Rawls' theory of justice. In her description of what goes on behind the veil of ignorance, she departs from the Rawlsian language of rational choice by insisting on empathy and listening in order to be able to think from the perspective of everybody, instead of adopting a position from nowhere. So here the moral attitudes of care are invoked to arrive at an even more per-

fectly universalist position than Rawls himself. Again we are caught in a circular argument. Reasoning about justice must by necessity see the injustices of gender divisions, but in order to be able to see this, gender must be abolished. Only androgenous characters, who are equally cared for by fathers and mothers are expected to have the moral ability to find the right balance between listening and designing fair and impartial rules.

What, then, does this imply for arguing about the ethics of care from an epistemological perspective? I would like to sum this up by stating that care in Okin's conceptualisation does too much and too little. It does *too much* because it gets overloaded with the expectation that all social problems concerning gender will be solved when care is distributed fairly and equally among men and women.⁸ It also does too much because care reasoners are supposed to be able to see all issues from the position of everybody. This is not only a sheer impossibility, it can also lead to serious and unnoticed forms of paternalism (or should I say maternalism in this context?).⁹ Care does *too little* in Okin's approach because it is denied an existence on its own as a moral activity, a moral theory or a way of moral arguing. Care reasoning is only valued in so far as it can be integrated in the hegemonic epistemological norms of impartiality, objectivity, universality and the construction of an homogeneous subject, which is visible in Okin's conflation of equality and sameness.

This contradiction in the meaning and the applicability of care is, in a sense, multiplied when we ask the question of how feminist political subjectivity can be connected to care reasoning when we follow Okin's conceptual schemes. The first thing that is noticeable is that women who practice 'care reasoning' as a style of moral reasoning are marginalized by being denoted as 'conservative feminists' or 'traditional women', surely a category which few of us would eagerly enter on a voluntary basis. And if feminists take the step of arguing about care in public politics, this is only possible by invoking an 'original position' or an imaginary future, where everybody will automatically 'know' what good care is because everybody is equally cared for by men and women. Thus feminists are supposed to talk in hypothetical terms and to adopt a style of reasoning where they act as if they are 'ungendered' beings right now.¹⁰

I think this gives feminist women and pro-feminist men an impossible task when it comes to 'politicising' care, and to integrating considerations, experiences and visions about care in their ideals of citizenship. Feminists are then only allowed to participate in the normative reasoning of citizenship when they present themselves as neutral beings, who only have to catch up on their arrears. Care figures basically still as a handicap for women, something that they have to escape from because it hinders them in their individuality. In that way the marginalisation of care in standard political

theory is reproduced instead of being questioned.

This is not only a serious problem for the voices with which feminism can speak in the public domain, it also limits feminist scholars in their epistemological strategies when doing research about care. When we continue to see women who care as a category of 'traditional women', carers are constructed as an 'outsiders group', as others, as women who can at best be an object of knowledge. This puts at least two limits on the proliferation of feminist knowledge about care. Firstly, this consolidation of a split between subject and object of knowledge limits the possibilities of taking the complexities and dilemmas in gendered identities and feminist political practices as valuable sources of reflexive moral reasoning. For example what about the dilemmas between the needs for autonomy and connection, or the tensions caused by asymmetries in caring, which cause women to often 'receive' less care than they give? Secondly, it solidifies the walls between the (political) sociology and the normative political theory about care, the two 'tracks' that I referred to at the beginning of this article. Listening to the way carers frame their moral dilemmas, their considerations and rationalities about care can thus hardly influence public debates on care and ethics. Public discussions on provisions of health and care then remain the domain of the scientific 'experts', the people who discuss care in academic languages of economic, technical and juridical rationality that are not seldom far removed from the everyday experiences of caring for, caring about, and taking care of.¹¹

Rethinking gender and care

These considerations have consequences for the development of a 'sensible' gender methodology on care and ethics. I will conclude this article by summing up some points that I consider useful for the conceptualisation of gender in this context. Though inspired by discussions on gender in historiography, philosophy, literary theory and feminist psycho-analysis, these elements of a 'gender-methodology' are, in the first place, aimed at developing starting points for feminist social research on gendered processes of care, ethics and moral reasoning. One of my aims in developing these methodological starting points is to see if it is possible to reduce and/or undermine the above-mentioned walls between the sociological and normative tracks in feminist knowledges on gender and care. This implies studying ethics and moral reasoning as everyday social/political processes, as discursive practices and forms of communication and interpretation, instead of as elevated activities in an isolated academic castle. It is not my aim to devel-

op a 'grand' theory about gender, morality and care or to reach conclusions about the 'best' ethics or moral theory for feminism. It is rather to reflect upon the ways 'care' is conceptualised in moral reasoning as a practical socio-political activity, and to look for situated ways of reflecting about gender and care that can do away with oppressive elements for women.

My first remark about gender is that instead of a binary concept of two genders, in which sex stands for sameness and gender for difference, we would do better to see gender as a continuum.¹² There is indeed a wide variety in the meanings of femininity and masculinity, as well as major historical and cultural shifts in them. 'Gender' thus conceived refers to the meanings that are attached to sexual difference in a wide range of social practices, institutions and forms of behaviour. If we see gender as a continuum, it also becomes possible to see that one person can combine different aspects of gendered feelings, behaviours, and attributes, and that individuals and groups experience many frictions in this respect. For example: although caring is culturally still mainly attributed to women and femininity, many men practice care as an activity and a moral attitude. Both women and men have to find their way of dealing with the gender-symbolism attached to care, like the asymmetrical ascription of responsibilities and stereotypes, and the connected feelings of guilt, recognition and remuneration.

Secondly, instead of embracing a homogeneous concept of gender identity, feminist research should open up the concept of gender in order to allow for different aspects of identity and affinity in one person and in social groups. An ideal of sameness often results in a strategy of assimilation on the conditions of dominant groups, as we can see in political philosophy as well as in everyday political life.¹³ Assimilation always goes hand in hand with marginalisation, objectification and disqualification of those groups who are constructed as different and deviant.¹⁴ Of course this applies not only to sexual difference, but also to ethnicity and class, and the complex crossroads between them. This process, which also takes place in scientific practices, can only be countered when women's studies allow a large amount of cognitive and normative space for the situatedness of knowledge and moral reasoning¹⁵, and thus for agency, interaction, communication and culture as well as for the symbolic and psychodynamic aspects of gender relations. And it is for this reason that reasoning on justice, care and ethics cannot do without a solid conceptualisation of power and oppression, as Iris Young has convincingly argued in her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Young, 1990).

Thirdly, once and for all, gender should be freed from the (false) oppositions between nature and culture and between equality and difference. In the first phase of feminist theory the critique of gender as socially con-

structed identities was useful as a tool for undermining standard ideas about natural character-structures. In the end the nature-nurture debate brought feminist theory to a dead end. This becomes visible as soon as it is realised that all ideas about a natural 'sameness' are speculative, and can have adverse effects, as I hope to have made clear in this article. A one sided concept of gender as something that is constructed by culture easily slips into the idea that gender is only something that is wrongfully imposed upon women as a top down process. Contrary to this I would like to stress that gender is, at the same time, something women feel and act upon in meaningful and often empowering ways.

This implies that something like 'the abolition of gender' should be declined as the central goal of feminism, because it is unworkable and undesirable.¹⁶ Gender constructions will always pervade feelings of identity and individual and collective ways of reasoning, knowing and acting, of which care reasoning is one. This means that it is more productive to engage in a normative reflection and discussion about the question of where sexual difference *does* matter, and where not, instead of disqualifying women's voices in the normative frameworks of feminism. The development of an ethics of sexual difference should then form an integral part of feminist ethics in general. Difference thus conceived is not a set of essentialising characteristics: it should be seen rather as mode of thinking and being, of arguing about the meaning of being women in concrete cultural and political settings. This is important to counter non-productive foundationalist urges in some feminist concepts of an ethics of care, like for example the idea that motherhood or childbirth are the best foundations of good care reasoning.¹⁷

Fourthly, gender cannot be located in one social sphere, nor can it be reduced to patterns of socialisation and care in the family. Rather it is situated at different levels of social structures and action. So gender is not only to be conceptualised as a continuum, but also as a multi-layered phenomenon. Here I want to distinguish four of those 'layers'.¹⁸ Gender operates as a social category that relegates men and women to social positions, which enable and/or constrain their possibilities for meaningful agency. It is a principle that operates in organisations, professions and institutions. It is a part of feelings of personal identity or subjectivity. And it operates as a basis of normative symbolic dichotomies, structuring social value systems about, for example, what counts as work, rationality, ethics, moral deliberation or citizenship.

This implies, for instance, that feminist research on an ethics of care should not start by looking for differences in moral reasoning between men and women. When care-reasoning is acknowledged as an ethics in its own right, sex-differences do not matter that much. When we take sex-differ-

ences as a starting point, the use of 'gender' easily slips into a 'sophisticated' way of talking about actual men and women, thus forgetting the symbolic binary constructions of gender and the workings of discursive power in that respect. So research on this topic should always contain an element of decoding the gender-loading of conceptual schemes and thought traditions on morality and care.¹⁹ If we want to break through a binary logic of gender, this means, for example, that the gender-laden opposition between rationality and emotion, which relegates care to the realm of emotions, should be decoded and overcome.²⁰ It should then be realised that concrete and contextual forms of care-reasoning can have their own characteristic structures of rationality and principles of action and interaction.²¹

Care is indeed a cognitive and a moral activity in itself, an idea that is difficult to grasp when care is conceptualised in the dichotomy of labour and love. Care is not just the changing of nappies, cleaning the house or looking after the elderly. Also, when we see care as an activity, it is still basically about needs: not just the 'meeting of needs', but more the ability to 'see' and 'hear' needs, take responsibility for them, negotiate if and how they should be met and by whom. Care is fundamentally a relational activity, in which self-other feelings and connections are central and certainly so, when the caring activity concerns intimate and proximate strangers, or when caring for the self is at stake. Moral deliberation not only enters where the carer has to negotiate balances between his or her own needs and those of the cared for, morality is also of importance because caregiving often takes place in situations of inequality, dependence and major differences in the possession of power-resources. Some of those problematic aspects can be overcome by looking for more possibilities for reciprocity and autonomy for both the carer and the cared for. Others are, however, inherent to situations of care, at least in situations where care is given to persons who cannot meet all of their own needs. This means that an ethics of care has to deal with questions of vulnerability and the vicissitudes of life. Caring as a moral activity implies not only dealing with feelings of love and empathy, but also – and often intertwined – of distance, grief, fear, anger, abjection, guilt, shame and aggression.²² This, in turn, implies that equality and reciprocity are not sufficient as overriding values of moral life, and certainly not when they are exclusively framed in the language of rational choice. The moral repertoire should, for example, be supplemented with values of trust, respect for difference(s), and the promotion of self-respect.²³ One of the ways of opening spaces for reflection on those feelings and moral deliberations about them is to listen to and interpret moralities of care of both the givers and the receivers of care.

Research along these lines can be done by talking with women about

their dilemmas on caring, in professional and informal situations, and in networks of families, relations and friendships.²⁴ By using gender concepts detached from the negative connotation of difference, this kind of research can be distinguished from research traditions on sex differences that flourish in behavioural psychology. It is not the difference between men and women that should interest us in the first place, if only because it is difficult to reach valid and useful conclusions about that. The extensive discussions on Carol Gilligan's work have indeed been immensely confused by the conflation of sex-differences and feminist discourses on gender and sexual difference.²⁵ The importance of research among women is more that it can provide a reflection of different styles of situated moral reasoning, and that it can do justice to the moral considerations of women who care. And why should one always compare men with women?

By arguing for the development of research and moral understandings like this, I do not want to say that situated moralities of care are by definition the source of a superior ethics, neither that the whole field of feminist ethics can be covered this way, nor that feminism can dispense with reasoning in terms of equality, justice, and rights. The opposition between care and justice is exactly one of those fruitless oppositions that need a great deal of rethinking. For example we need concepts of justice that are not exclusively framed in distributive terms and do not force us to see sameness, where difference(s) might be a better starting point for political argument (Young, 1990). More fairness in the distribution of caring activities among men and women should, not by necessity, be framed in the paradigm of rational choice and distributive justice. It can also be argued along the lines of social justice for oppressed groups, or from a norm of equal opportunities. Of course, it is more difficult to construct a (hypothetical) consensus when arguing along these lines and it is not possible to construct a forceful argument that equality has to be the yardstick in all aspects of (legal) politics. This absence of strong universal criteria might, however, be the strength of these approaches instead of a weakness. After all, politics also has to do with developing arguments in specific situations, directed at the solution of specific needs and problems: open forms of situational and consequential forms of moral reasoning then constitute indispensable elements of a 'good' or responsible politics.

And to take another example: processes of care harbour a lot of aspects that need reasoning in terms of justice, for instance the question of where, for whom or for what caring is just, and where it is justified to put limits on the availability of caring or to refuse care. These questions cannot, however, be decided upon in an abstract or general mode. The distribution and the quality of care will remain contested issues.²⁶ Care can hardly be defined

without thinking about the qualitative aspects of it. What counts as 'good' care will be evaluated differently from the perspective of carers or that of recipients of care. And these are not 'fixed' positions, but rather positions that are circulating among individuals and groups. The moral and epistemological characteristics of an ethics of care, like listening, responsiveness, attentiveness and the commitment to see issues from different perspectives give, however, a sound basis for situated 'moral talk' about questions like that. It is in this way that we can arrive at a valuable politics of 'need-interpretation', that is, a prerequisite for discussions about which needs should be met and how, in individual as well as in collective contexts. And only thus we can come to more balanced judgments about the meaning and applicability of universal norms and values when thinking about the political and legal aspects of care.

Notes

1. This article is a revised version of a paper for the BSA/PSA conference 'The Politics of Care', London School of Economics, February 1992. Many of the ideas in it are the result of the individual and collective intellectual work as developed in the Department of Women's Studies in the Social Faculty of the University of Utrecht. I owe especially a great deal to the thoughts and the work of Kathy Davis, Ine Gremmen and Myra Keizer. Besides this I have gained a lot of inspiration from the discussions with my colleagues Joyce Outshoorn, Jeanne de Bruijn and Willy Jansen in the context of the development of the interuniversity Research Program 'Gender and care: labour, identity, morality' (Gender and Care, 1992). I want to thank Joan Tronto for her inspiring thoughts and discussions about care, political theory and ethics. Finally I want to thank Diemuth Bubeck, Diana Coole and Ann Showstack Sassoon for their encouragement and detailed comments on an earlier version.

2. Kathy Davis has made an excellent rhetorical analysis of the so called 'Gilligan-debate'. See: Davis, 1992. See also: Houston, 1988.

3. For relevant discussions see a.o.: the latest volumes of *Hypatia*, a Journal for Feminist Philosophy; Feder Kittay and Meyers, 1987; Sevenhuijsen, 1991a, b and c. For an overview over the literature in the field, see: Krol and Sevenhuijsen, 1992.

4. Chodorow, 1978 and Okin, 1989, p.6-7.

5. See for example Iris Young's chapter on the 'Distributive Paradigm of Justice', in: Young, 1990; and my own thinking on the power of the distributive paradigm in the context of family law politics, in: Sevenhuijsen, 1991b.

6. See for a substantial critique on homogeneous concepts of gender: Hooks, 1981; Spelman, 1989; Butler, 1990; Haraway, 1991; Gatens, 1991.

7. I have elaborated this 'dilemma' more fully in: Sevenhuijsen, 1991c.

8. This not only attaches too high an expectation to the redistribution of childcare, it also seriously discredits the quality of the moral arguments of those who do not live in or are not raised in this privileged form of family life. In that way Okin's approach contains serious forms not only of white middle class bias but also of heterosexism: lesbians only figure in her book as representative of tolerable 'different forms of family life', not

as lesbian women as such. The family can thus be saved as the privileged lifestyle and the kernel of democratic society.

9. P/maternalism is a serious risk when one sticks to the supposition that a 'true' morality can be arrived at by *one* (hypothetical or existing) subject. Even when this subject has the ability to see everything from the position of everybody, it is still his/her interpretation of 'other' moral voices that mediates the moral viewpoint or the best or most just rules. Of course moral life can hardly exist without interpretation. 'Empathy' in itself however gives insufficient guarantee that moral considerations are not led by serious projections and misinterpretations that spring from within this subject. Objectification of otherness and thus sexism and white ethnocentrism are in this respect the greatest risk, embedded as these are in the dominant strands in Western philosophy. 'Listening', 'understanding' and 'communication' should, from this perspective, be seen as the more important elements of an ethic of care than 'empathy' in itself, while the promotion of diversity could, for the time being, be a better goal of moral deliberation, than the construction of hasty forms of consensus. For a philosophical essay on the complexities of empathy as an epistemic practice, see: Code, 1992.

10. Phyllis Rooney has argued that it is against the basic characteristics of the virtues of caring that they be invoked in hypothetical situations. Compassion and sympathy usually refer to concrete situations: 'The limit imposed on theorizing by means of hypothetical deliberations is not simply a practical one, but, more importantly for our purposes, a logical one. Hypothetical reasoning is quite appropriate for consideration of situations which require only the application of principles of rationality and impartiality. This is because one can hypothetically invoke impartiality and rationality, but one cannot hypothetically invoke compassion and empathy. One can certainly articulate consideration of principles of compassion and empathy; one can rationally argue for the need for compassion in a particular type of situation, but that can never be the same as invoking compassion in the situation itself.' Rooney, 1991, p. 351.

11. Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto have elaborated this distinction in the context of their analysis of care as a process, which is aimed at overcoming the dichotomy between labour and love. Fisher and Tronto (1990). For an application on the recent discussions on the Dutch health care policies, see: Parlevliet en Sevenhuijsen (1993).

12. See also: Gremmen (1991). By using this metaphor of a continuum I do not want to suggest that individuals occupy fixed points on a line. It should rather be stressed that individuals (can) show a great deal of flexibility and change over a life-cycle, and that 'gender' as an element of identity intermingles in complex ways with other elements. See Flax (1991) for an inspiring essay on gender and subjectivity in political theory.

13. See: Young, 1990. In this context it is important to acknowledge the 'double move' that was present in equality reasoning in the first phase of modern feminism. The argument for equality went hand in hand with a wish 'not to become like men' and a wish not to be what men had made of women. In fact the friction between these two moves can be seen as one of the sources of feminist consciousness.

14. In this respect I strongly disagree with those who argue that a unitary or unambiguous concept of 'women' is needed as the basis for the political proliferation of feminism. Such a wish for non-ambiguity not only marginalises or silences oppressed groups and distorts social reality, it also protects the cultural and psychological myth of an homogeneous subject, that can be the centre of political activity. It too often serves the denial of the genderedness, the embodiment and the class and ethnic identity of the speaking subject. The political proliferation of feminism is thus better served by stressing alterity, ambiguity, plurality and dissension than by denying it.

15. For an elaborated philosophical justification of this epistemological strategy, see: Code, 1991.

16. Moira Gatens has criticized the sex-gender distinction by stating that it springs from a will to see psyches as tabula rasa and bodies as passive mediators of gender inscriptions. She places this in the liberal tradition of 're-education' of subjects: 'The effect of the use of the sex-gender distinction .. has been to encourage or engender a neutralization of sexual difference and sexual politics. This neutralizing process is not novel, it can be traced to nineteenth century liberal environmentalism where 're-education' is the catchcry of radical social transformation. Much of contemporary radical politics is, perhaps unwittingly, enmeshed in this liberal tradition. A feminism based on difference rather than on a priori equality is representative of a decisive break with this tradition.' Gatens 1991, p. 140.

17. Examples of this are to be found in: Noddings, 1983; Held, 1987; Held, 1989. For a sustained critique of this line of argument, see: Hoagland, 1991; Spelman, 1991. This critique should, however, not imply that the moral reasoning of mothers is, again, marginalised in feminist discourse. The point is that 'mothering' should not be seen as paradigmatic for 'women's condition' or 'women's identity', something that underlies the work of Nancy Chodorow as well as that of Carol Gilligan. For a further elaboration of this argument see: Sevenhuijsen, 1993.

18. The idea of gender as a multi-layered concept is introduced by authors like Sandra Harding, 1986, Joan Scott, 1986 and Carol Hagemann White, 1989. Ine Gremmen has elaborated this idea for application in her research on the ethics of care among home-helps: Gremmen, 1991. See also: Gender and care, 1991. The concept of 'layers' facilitates asking questions of where and when we can see 'lines of fractures' between on the one hand institutionalised ideologies of gender and care and, on the other, the way people frame their ways of coping with oppression and their own selfimages, experiences and wishes for change.

19. See: Sevenhuijsen, 1991c. Phyllis Rooney argues that when we follow the gender-discussion in philosophy, this has to lead to a renewed understanding of moral vision, moral situation and moral deliberation. Rooney, 1991.

20. Rooney argues this as follows: 'In other words, the gender dimensions of principles must be examined in both directions, in terms of the tendency to automatically hear male voices as essentially involving principles deliberations, and the corresponding tendency not to hear principles operating in female deliberations. In the end, of course, this should help propel a reconceptualization of the role of principles and 'rational' deliberation in moral theorizing itself'. Rooney, 1991, p. 341.

21. See: Waerness, 1987; Rooney, 1991.

22. When love and empathy are taken as the central 'feelings' connected to care, one works with a connotation of care as characterised by dominant gendered (binary) definitions of 'female character'. This problem is inherent in conceptualisations of care that start from the motivation of the carer. See: Fisher and Tronto, 1991.

23. See for example: Jackson, 1989; Baier, 1990; Baier, 1991.

24. One of the risks of this limitation to situations that are defined as 'caring' is that an ethic of care is conceptualised as having to do with close relations. As Sarah Hoagland has stated, an ethic of care has, however, not only to deal with 'proximate intimates', but also with 'proximate strangers' and 'distant strangers'. Concentrating on care for proximate intimates may even strengthen the fear for proximate and distant strangers. Or, to quote Hoagland: 'If an ethic of caring is going to be morally successful in replacing an ethics located in principles and duty, particularly within the context of oppression, then

it must provide for the possibility of ethical behavior in relation to what is foreign, it must consider analyses of oppression, it must acknowledge a self that is both related and separate, and it must have a vision of, if not a program for, change. In my opinion, care stripped of these elements, isn't caring that benefits us.' Hoagland, 1991, p. 261.

25. While Gilligan was 'just' looking for different styles of moral reasoning and for differences in moral development between men and women, feminists immediately took her to task for a supposed political reproduction of gender-stereotypes. Indeed *In a Different Voice* does not display a multi-faceted conceptualisation of gender in the context of moral philosophy, just as it has its shortcomings in a methodological respect. But that is also a reason why political reproaches like this are besides the point. The reproach fits into a feminist discourse that equates 'difference' with conservatism and opposes it to equality as sameness. It is thus the result of the same way of thinking that evaluates 'gender' in a negative mood, as something that has to be overcome as soon as possible. Gilligan, 1982. For an unravelling of the arguments about her work, see: Davis, 1992.

26. See: Fisher and Tronto, 1990; Komter, 1991.

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