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Carly Martin
Macalester College

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Feminism, the Self and Narrative Ethics

Carly Martin

Any ethical theory involves a conception of the self, in that it invokes an agent who carries out moral decision-making and action. Further, as a framework for distinguishing right from wrong actions, an ethical theory must recognize certain elements of human life as relevant to decision-making – as *moral* – and other elements as irrelevant – as *non-moral*. The moral aspects of a person’s life determine that person’s moral self.

According to universalist ethical theories, such as utilitarianism and Kantianism, the moral agent is purely rational, employing only abstract principles in decision-making. Examining these dominant Western theories, however, many feminist philosophers find that their definition of the moral agent dismisses as non-moral those agents whose sense of self derives from emotion and relationship to others. The conceptual dismissal of these agents, feminists argue, contributes to the actual oppression of persons – often feminine persons, who may also be persons of color, working class persons or queer persons¹ - in society whose sense of self differs from the dominant, rational model. In order to empower these agents in society, feminists work to develop an ethical theory that recognizes emotion and relationship to others as integral parts of the moral self. In this paper, I analyze three ethical theories – Kantian ethics, the ethics of care and narrative ethics – and interpret the type of moral self that each entails. Based upon this analysis, I argue that narrative moral theory² is best suited to the feminist project of articulating a model of the moral self that includes emotions and relationships to others.

¹ I will focus my inquiry on the relational, emotional self, which has historically been labeled as feminine. At the same time as the dismissal of the relational self as non-moral has led to the disempowerment of actual women, it has simultaneously resulted in the oppression of persons along the lines of race, class and sexuality. The actual experience of femininity is simultaneously an experience of race, class and sexuality. Accordingly, when I write, on a conceptual level, about a feminist project to develop a model of the self that includes emotion and relationship to others, I write with the understanding that the motivation for this project is to recognize not only marginalized gender identities, but marginalized racial, class and sexual identities as well. I also recognize that conceptions of the self associated with a certain race, economic class or sexual orientation may be different from, and conflict with, the concept of a relational self. While an analysis of intersectionality is beyond the scope of this paper, I emphasize that the feminist project I discuss is a multi-dimensional one.

² In this paper, I analyze feminist narrative moral theory and not narrative moral theory in general. Although I will continue to use the phrase ‘narrative moral theory’ and not ‘feminist narrative moral theory,’ I do not claim that the general philosophical body of work on narrative ethics is compatible with feminist aims.

In Section I, I analyze the first formulation of Kant's Categorical Imperative and the version of the moral self that this theory entails. In Section II, I demonstrate that Kant's ethical theory dismisses as non-moral an agent who derives her sense of self from her particular context. I explain how the societal oppression of actual persons who understand their moral selves in this way leads feminists to reject Kant's theory and to call for an alternative theory; I outline two criteria that such a theory must meet. Then, in Section III, I consider a feminist alternative to universalist ethical theory, the ethics of care of Joan Tronto. I argue that care ethics entails a relational moral self, and posing two objections to this version of the self, I prove it to be an insufficient model for the feminist project at hand. In Section IV, I consider a second alternative moral theory, narrative ethics, analyzing the deliberative framework put forth by Margaret Urban Walker. Next, in Section V, I argue that the narrative moral self is captured by Walker's concept of the moral persona. This narrative moral self is relational, yet uses certain skills, such as analytic or reasoning skills, in moral decision-making. Finally, in Section VI I argue that narrative theory is the most useful tool for feminists who seek to define the moral person in terms of her concrete relationships to others, and I answer several objections to narrative theory.

Section I: The Kantian Moral Self

I begin by examining the concept of moral selfhood that follows from universalist ethical theories, or theories that claim that the relevant considerations for an agent's decision are the same for any other agent in similar circumstances. The first formulation of Kant's Categorical Imperative serves as an example of such a universalist theory. According to Kant, an agent must "act only on to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Kant 89). In other words, for any act that an agent undertakes, the agent must also be able to will that anyone else in a similar situation act in the same way. Since all agents share the ability to reason, an agent can decide upon a right action by exercising the same rationality as any other agent would in her situation. Thus, as feminist philosopher Genevieve Lloyd writes in her book *The Man of Reason*, under Kantian theory, "what is genuinely ethical about an act derives from its falling under rational, universalizable principles, which are binding regardless of the disparate desires and emotions which differentiate and divide rational beings" (Lloyd 68).

Since rational principles form the basis of moral deliberation under the Categorical Imperative, the Kantian agent is defined by her ability to employ these principles; any aspect of this person's life that differentiates her from other rational beings is therefore a non-moral quality. Thus, particular relationships to other individuals and emotions like love, anger or admiration are irrelevant to and must be transcended in moral decision-making. Stated more briefly, the moral agent of Kant's theory is a purely rational agent. Since Kant excludes contextual, non-universalizable qualities from the moral self, his ethical theory "splits human life, on the one hand, into truly moral universal concerns, and, on the other, into the particularities of the merely personal" (Lloyd 69).

Section II: A Feminist Critique of the Kantian Moral Self

Feminist philosophers such as Lloyd criticize Kantian ethics and its purely rational agent. These thinkers note that in recent Western history, the feminine person, as a concept, has often been defined through her concrete relationships to others. Since women's roles in society have often involved attending to others' particular needs, such as rearing children or carrying out household tasks, the feminine person has become associated with caring actions in the context of relationship to and emotions towards others. Without claiming that all women hold or should hold these qualities, these feminists note the historical association of the feminine person with emotion and relationship to others. In short, femininity has been associated with contextual, rather than universalizable action.

A universalist ethic such as the Categorical Imperative, as aforementioned, labels an individual who derives her sense of moral self from emotion and relationship to others as a non-moral person. Since these qualities have been historically associated with femininity, the result is that universalist theories, on a conceptual level, dismiss a historically feminine agent as non-moral. Analyzing the societal implications of this view, feminist philosophers such as Lloyd find that this conceptual dismissal corresponds to the oppression of actual individuals, often women (who may be persons of color, working class or queer), in society. In order to empower these actual individuals who hold an alternative sense of self, feminists work to build emotion and relationship to others into ethical life on a conceptual level.

The project of this paper, then, is to evaluate various ethical theories in terms of their ability to account for the role of emotions and relationships in ethical life. I argue that a theory suitable for the feminist project at hand must meet two requirements. First, it must entail a concept of the moral self that includes emotion and relationship to others. Second, such a theory must prescribe moral action that accords with our intuitions about moral life.

To begin with, then, I argue that the first formulation of Kant's Categorical Imperative fails to meet the first requirement above and must be rejected by feminists working to build a model of the moral self that incorporates emotion and relationships. Not only does Kant's theory dismiss such an alternative self as non-moral, but, more centrally, the very assertion by feminists that "reconstructing the concrete context of a moral problem is...decisive for a moral judgment" (Maihofer 384)¹ entails the rejection of Kant's Categorical Imperative. For it cannot be true that only acts based upon universalizable maxims are right acts if contextual factors like emotion and relationships can determine moral decisions. In light of this rejection of Kant's theory and other universalist ethical theories, feminist philosophers call for alternative ethical theories that recognize emotion and relationship to others as determinative factors of moral life.

Section III: The Ethic of Care and the Relational Self

In response to this call for an alternative to universalist theories, certain feminists, beginning with Carol Gilligan in the 1980's, have developed an ethic of care. Under care ethics, an act is right if it preserves that agent's relationships to others; restated, genuinely moral acts are displays of care for others. A most updated version of the ethic of care is

¹ A proof of this assertion is beyond the scope of this paper. I assume this statement to be true, and I go on to evaluate various ethical theories based upon their ability to recognize a contextual moral self and the plausibility of their prescriptions for moral life.

that of Joan Tronto. According to Tronto, moral practice involves four elements: attentiveness to the needs of others, willingness to care for others, competence in carrying out the work of care, and the ability to receive care from others (Tronto 105-108). Andrea Maihofer further illuminates the contextual nature of moral decisions under Tronto's theory: "Tronto proceeds on the assumption that forms of knowledge, insights, and values develop in concrete social praxes, and she seeks to construct an ethic of care from the everyday praxis of care for others" (390).

First, then, what version of the moral self does an ethic of care, such as that of Tronto, entail? Evaluating care ethics in term of this first criterion, I find, needless to say, that since concrete interactions – displays of care in contextual relationships – determine the morality of an act under this theory, care ethics does include emotion and relationship as qualities of the moral self. The care agent is defined by his ability to acknowledge and preserve his particular relationships, not by the rationality that he shares with all other agents. Tronto's care agent is a *relational* agent who bases his sense of self on his emotions towards and his relationships to others.

While care ethics successfully accounts for the contextual moral self, I argue that it fails to meet the second criterion for the feminist project at hand. Various objections to care ethics, from both within and without feminist circles, prove that this theory fails to account for our intuitions about moral life. One significant objection is that care ethics is a form of moral relativism (Maihofer 385). An agent, this objection proceeds, may justify any act with the claim that it is right only in his situation; care ethics, then, fails to provide any set of prescriptions for moral life.

Most notable for the present discussion of moral personhood, however, is the objection that a care agent, defined by her relationships with other agents, is unable to "make, or keep, this life her or his 'own,'" (Walker 1996: 108) and is thus committed to unending self-sacrifice. This agent takes care of others' needs but is not bound to herself in moral decision-making; this agent could act rightly by consistently making decisions that are beneficial to others but detrimental to her. While Tronto's claim that an 'ability to receive care' is essential to moral practice seems to ensure that the agent can be tended to by others, the objection remains that all of the actions *she* resolves upon could be actions that harm her but benefit others. A care agent, then, may be powerless to actively preserve her own well-being; for this reason, it is implausible as a framework for moral decision-making. I conclude, then, that since care ethics fails to account for our intuitions about moral life, it must be rejected as unsuitable for the feminist project at hand.

Section IV: Narrative Ethics

In light of the problems that a care ethic poses for feminists, I consider a second alternative to Kantian ethics, narrative ethical theory, and evaluate this theory based upon the criteria outlined in Section II. Narrative theory places each moral decision an individual makes within that individual's life story. In other words, according to narrative theory, an individual's past history, present state and future plans bear upon the morality of any decision that the individual makes (Meyers 288). In the present analysis, I consider the narrative ethical theory of Margaret Urban Walker, as articulated in her 1989 article "Moral Particularity."

Walker's theory assumes that each agent seeks to develop a unique and coherent life-story; the agent seeks to define himself as the protagonist of a narrative. Walker understands this narrative to be a uniformity of commitments to other people, institutions and values over the course of a person's life. This uniformity of commitments, according to Walker, is an agent's *moral persona* (Walker 1989: 177).

Walker articulates her narrative moral theory as a three-step deliberative process. To illustrate this theory, I use the example of a college student, Jack, whose brother Nathan just graduated from college. Suppose that Nathan is in the process of finding a job and needs a place to stay for a month while he finalizes his job plans. Jack shares a large room with his friend Reid, but they also have a couch on which Nathan could sleep. Reid enjoys sharing a room with Jack, but will feel crowded with Nathan living in the room as well. Should Jack invite Nathan to stay in his room?

In the first step of Walker's deliberative process, Jack "...identifies particulars ...alongside or in terms of more general values, exploring their relevance not simply to this kind of situation, but to himself in this kind of situation" (178). In other words, Jack decides which particular relationships are relevant in this situation; he would likely decide that his relationships to his brother and to his friend are relevant in this example. He also, at this time, must examine the degree of commitment to these relationships he showed in past moral decisions that involved these relationships.

Second, Jack determines a course of action that either affirms his past commitments to these relationships or establishes new commitments; he decides whether to "...sustain an extant moral course or...chart (or at least set) a new one" (178). The course of action that Jack chooses reflects the importance he places on certain particular relationships. His course of action, then, may either reinforce or modify the weight he accorded these relationships in past circumstances. Perhaps Jack's brother has been one of the most important people in Jack's life, and not to invite his brother into his room would mean for him an abandonment of that relationship. He may then decide to uphold his past commitments to his brother by inviting him to live in his room; this decision may equally change or uphold Jack's commitment to his friend and roommate, Reid.

Third, whether the agent decides to uphold his past commitments to his relationships or to change these commitments, he undertakes to value these relationships, where they apply, to a similar degree in the future. If Jack's current decision upholds the commitments he made in past decisions, he binds himself more strongly, by making this decision, to uphold these commitments in future decisions. If the agent's current decision establishes a new precedent of commitment, 'charting a new moral course,' the commitment that he now shows to certain relationships must be one that he can agree to hold in future decisions.

Section V: The Narrative Moral Self

In order to evaluate Walker's theory in relation to the feminist project described in the beginning of this paper, I first ask whether the moral self of narrative ethics includes emotion and relationship to others. In response, I argue that a narrative agent's moral self *is*, in effect, his moral persona, and that this moral persona does include contextual factors like emotion and relationships to others. To begin with, under Walker's three-part moral theory, an agent's moral persona is central to her moral deliberation. An actor, as we have seen, makes a moral decision by first considering the

relationships, institutions and values relevant to that decision and the weight that he has accorded these relationships in the past, then deciding on a course of action that either reaffirms these past commitments or establishes a new set of commitments, and finally agreeing to hold similar commitments in future decisions. Each time a person following this model makes a decision that reinforces commitments that he held in past decisions, he strengthens his moral persona. However, when the agent establishes a new course of action by shifting the weight he places on certain relationships, he changes this moral persona and disrupts the uniformity of his commitments. By following these new forms of commitment in future situations, however, the agent can re-establish uniformity in his moral persona. In other words, by following these commitments in future actions, an agent can strengthen the narrative-quality of his moral life.

The central role of the moral persona in an agent's decision-making indicates that the narrative moral self *is* the moral persona. An agent's sense of self derives from the moral persona, the agent's history and future of commitments to other people, institutions and values. This moral self is relational, then, because the determinative factors of an agent's decision derive from her concrete, irreducible situation. This situation includes her relationships with and emotions towards others, as well as her unique commitments to institutions and values.

At the same time, however, the agent is not *simply* her commitments to other people, values and institutions. The moral persona, the moral self, is a *uniformity* of commitments. An agent who holds this uniformity must exercise reasoning and analytic skills in order to, for example, apply past moral situations to the present, predict plausible future situations or even to understand one's life as a coherent narrative in the first place (Meyers 302).

In light of these two seemingly disparate claims, I argue that the narrative agent encompasses both: the agent is, at base, relational, yet she uses certain skills to develop a unique identity. The exercise of certain skills, in other words, is necessary for the development of a narrative agent's sense of self, but does not negate the centrality of particular context to this agent's moral decisions. Rather than applying analytic and reasoning skills to abstract principles as a Kantian agent would, a narrative agent uses these skills to organize her unique past and future into a narrative that serves as a guide for her moral actions. In this way, I argue, narrative ethics meets our first criterion: it includes contextual factors like emotions and relationships in its account of the moral self.

Section VI: Conclusion

While narrative theory succeeds in presenting a model of the moral self that includes emotion and relationships to others, does it succeed, unlike care ethics, in presenting a plausible account of moral life? After considering several objections to narrative ethics, I conclude that narrative ethical theory does meet this second requirement, and I draw final conclusions about narrative ethics in relation to the feminist aims outlined in the beginning of this paper.

First, narrative ethics meets the two objections to care ethics discussed earlier in this paper. To begin with, narrative ethics escapes the objection of moral relativism. A narrative agent can make a mistake, and others can demonstrate her error to her by using a narrative framework. For example, a person can hold a mistaken understanding of an

action in her past. An agent might mistake past possessiveness to a friend as dedication; she may realize this at a later time, or another person may point this out to her. If possessiveness is not a value that she includes in her moral persona, then she has acted wrongly in the past if she has acted in a controlling way toward her friend. Additionally, a person could make a mistake by committing a moral act in the present that he cannot sustain in the future. If Jack's decision to allow Nathan to stay in the room jeopardizes Jack's relationship with his roommate, such a decision may not be one he can replicate if he is to continue living in his room. As Jack himself may realize or another person may demonstrate to him, Jack's action in the present is not one that he can follow through on in the future if he is to cultivate a coherent moral persona.

Similarly, a narrative agent does not succumb to the self-sacrifice of the care agent. A narrative agent, by using the reasoning skills that all agents share, is able to reflect upon his own sense of self and his own needs, as well as the needs of others. Unlike the care agent, Jack the narrative agent is able to reflect upon his past roles, such as his relationship to his brother, and decide whether or not to continue to carry out these roles in the same way. Jack, in our example, can decide, when reflecting upon his past, that he has devoted too much time and attention to his brother, to the detriment of his relationships with his college friends. In this way, Jack can avoid sacrificing parts of himself that he values, such as his friendships, for the sake of his brother's needs.

Narrative theory, then can answer the two objections that proved care ethics to be insufficient for the feminist project at hand. A critic might pose other objections to narrative theory, however. For example, a critic could claim that, under narrative moral theory, an agent could cultivate a moral persona based upon a series of conventionally reprehensible acts. A person could, in such an instance, lie repeatedly to a friend and still hold a coherent narrative. I assert, however, that a conventionally reprehensible act would not be acceptable under Walker's narrative theory. Such an act would not be repeatable because, even through the intention of lying to a friend, and more so if he lies and the friend finds out, an agent dissolves the friendship itself. An agent cannot commit to a relationship, let alone reaffirm a commitment, through an action that tends to dissolve that relationship.

A second objection to narrative moral theory itself is that, under such a theory, an agent could isolate his relationships to include only a restricted group of people who support actions that are conventionally reprehensible. For example, a hit man may hold relationships only with mob members, and he dissolves relationships only with people he doesn't know or doesn't care about. Walker's narrative theory, according to this objection, would permit the hit person to kill non-mob members.

In response to this objection, I argue for the addition of a consensus criterion to Walker's narrative theory. In her narrative theory, for example, Diana Tietjens Meyers requires that agents hold and utilize communication and listening skills in order to "...get the benefit of others' perceptions, background knowledge, insights, advice and support..." (301). Seyla Benhabib, another narrative theorist, claims that an agent must be able to "[tell] a story about who one is that makes sense to oneself and to others" (Benhabib 344).¹ The addition of a consensus criterion demonstrates that if only a very restricted group of people can accept a person's actions, these actions are impermissible.

¹ Cited in Meyers, Diana, "Narrative and Moral Life." In *Setting the Moral Compass: Essays by Women Philosophers*, ed. Cheshire Calhoun. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. 288-305. 289.

In this way, the hit man acts wrongly because others, who live in non-mob society and must preserve relationships with a greater circle of people, would not be able to place his action in the context of a coherent narrative. I conclude that, since it meets the objections of moral relativism and self-sacrifice, as well as excluding the possibility of a moral narrative built upon a series of reprehensible acts or acts accepted only by a restricted community, narrative moral theory successfully accounts for our intuitions about the moral permissibility of actions.

Overall, narrative moral theory, with its model of the relational self and its ability to account for our intuitions about moral life, meets the criteria outlined in the beginning of this paper for the feminist project at hand. Narrative moral theory allows feminists to empower, on a conceptual level, those agents in society who understand themselves in terms of their contextual situation and history. In fact, narrative moral theory may be useful even for thinkers who choose not to engage in politics, but who recognize the value of context in moral decision-making. A tool for feminists and non-feminists alike, narrative moral theory effectively accounts for the moral value of concrete human interaction.

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