

VENUS AND MARS

Though we strive for gender equality in our politically correct, postfeminist world, our ethical lives are not immune to mammalian biology. We cannot understand men and women's different ethical lives without acknowledging these bodily differences. In fact, much of our scientific knowledge about empathy is drawn from studies on parenting and gender distinction, the odd ways that men and women differ in how we choose mates, remain faithful (or not), reconcile with each other in couples and groups (or not), and approach questions of selfishness, justice, harm, and respect.

Sex is an excellent starting point for understanding these differences. The anatomical difference between the sex cells of men and women is extreme. The human egg is eighty-five thousand times larger than the human sperm, and the implications of this vast disparity complicate human sexual life enormously. A woman produces only about four hundred eggs during her entire lifetime (of which only twenty or so can actually become infants). Men release in the neighborhood of a hundred million sperm with each ejaculation. As E. O. Wilson has described it, "Once he has achieved fertilization, [the male's] purely physical commitment has ended."¹ Although the man's genes will benefit as much as the woman's, his investment will be far less than hers unless she can convince him to stay and help raise the kids. That, of course, is the ethical rub.

"If a man were given total freedom to act, he could theoretically inseminate thousands of women in his lifetime, while women must protect their precious few children," Wilson writes. "It pays males to be aggressive, hasty, fickle, and

undiscriminating...[and] for females to be coy, to hold back until they can identify the males with the best genes . . .”² Female humans are relative prudes compared to our ape cousins, by the way; at her sexual prime, a female chimp advertises her wares with a large pink patch of sexual skin, and for ten days during a thirty-six-day cycle, copulates several dozen times a day with every male she can get her hands on. Human males are “moderately polygynous,” on the other hand, and initiate most of the changes in sexual partnership. While three-fourths of all human societies permit the taking of multiple wives (and most of them encourage the practice by law and custom), a woman’s marriage to multiple husbands is sanctioned in fewer than one percent of societies.

Is it any wonder that marriage counselors, divorce lawyers, prostitutes, and the corporation that runs Hooters do such thriving business? Because women’s bodies have seven times more oxytocin (the “love molecule”) than men’s, females commit more readily, and easily, than men do. While males tend to focus on autonomy, females emphasize relationship. Women need to be more selective about choosing partners, especially under short-term mating conditions, because they’re the ones who must care for their young. Men get to have the commitment issues. Women, who need men to stick around, react more aversively to *emotional* jealousy, while men – who, before DNA testing appeared, could never be sure about a child’s paternity (and inherit a primate aversion to supporting another man’s offspring) -- react worse to *sexual* infidelity. This isn’t to say that women are okay with being cheated on – or that men are fine when they’re emotionally displaced. But women do tend to focus on threats of abandonment while ape-headed, territorial males are fixated on the violation of their chosen female’s genitals. In the light of natural selection and biology, such common relationship issues

start making greater sense. Women who have dependent children are more at risk from a mate who commits an emotional infidelity, while men are limited by the fact that they can never be certain of paternity because they do not bear offspring themselves. So another thousand Othellos are born.

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The women's liberation movement was crucial to balancing the prevalent patriarchal way we used to think about moral issues. In 1975, feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan introduced the radical notion that care and kindness have as much to do with ethical wisdom as fairness and justice do. This feminine perspective was long overdue. Until Gilligan appeared on the scene, the party line had been that being good depended mostly on rules, laws, and the long arm of justice. This male-tilted emphasis focused more on autonomy than relationship, Gilligan argued -- more on what was wrong with us than on what was right. The emphasis on rules and punishment implied that morality's first concern was to rein in human selfishness and brutality rather than to enhance love. Gilligan disagreed with this formulation. She suggested, instead, that empathy, connection, and care were the starting point of moral life, prefigured in the bond between mother and child and radiating out from there. This "ethic of care" emphasized relationships and interdependence over ethical impartiality. It focused on those individuals who are particularly vulnerable to our choices, giving extra moral consideration to need and unprotectedness. "Men do not know the women whom they say they love," Gilligan claimed in her landmark book *In a Different Voice*. "But while women have taken care of men, men have, in their theories of psychological development . . . tended to assume or devalue that care."³ Injecting emotional wisdom into a

conversation dominated by rational principles and abstract standards, her theory personalized the way we think about human nature, with an emphasis on context, relationship, and the importance of being our brothers' keepers.

“Psychologists were studying white men and talking about humans,” Carol Gilligan said with a chuckle, when we met recently at an espresso bar in Greenwich Village. At seventy-two, Gilligan looks like she could be Carole King’s long lost twin, with her Nefertiti nose and free-flying hair. “I always said that when women’s voices entered what’s called ‘the human conversation’”— Gilligan makes air quotes and smiles — “that it would change the voice of that conversation. Thankfully, it has.” In our therapy-laden, postfeminist age, it may be hard to appreciate how threatening Gilligan’s juggernaut was at the time. The androcentric approach to morality had been that individuals have certain basic rights, which must be respected, and that in order for a society to work, restrictions must be imposed on what we can and cannot do. This is true as far as it goes, but it isn’t the whole story. The feminist message that goodness is mirrored, cultivated, and honed by the imperative to care for others (the “responsibility” orientation) provided a humane balance to the predominant rules-driven “justice orientation.” At first, there was great resistance to this estrogenic storming of the penile palace. Gilligan’s male colleagues mocked her “touchy feely” approach to ethics, the galling idea that feeling is as important as thinking. “The blind willingness to sacrifice people to truth has always been the danger of an ethics abstracted from life,”⁴ she wrote in *In a Different Voice*.

Studies show that boys and girls differ in moral temperament from an early age. Where boys tend to be more focused on winning, girls are more interested in maintaining

relationships even at a high cost to themselves. Frans de Waal, the primatologist, agrees with Gilligan that impersonal rights and wrongs are not a top priority for females; compromises that leave social connections intact are. When fights break out in groups of boys, the injured party is expected to get out of the way so that the competition can continue. When the same thing happens among a group of girls, the game stops while all the players gather around to help the girl who is crying. 5 Is it any wonder that Mars and Venus collide in their opposing orbits of fair-versus-care? These different-not-unequal orientations can benefit from each other's example, however. While men are called on to grasp the possibility that there are no absolute moral truths, and that not all people have equal needs, women can be encouraged to separate feeling from thinking long enough to protect themselves from unfair treatment, and to curtail interactions that discount their independence.

Think about your own life. Are you aware of where your own stresses fall? How often do you sacrifice friendships on principle, for starters? Are you a person for whom winning is everything? How willing are you to negotiate to achieve a win-win resolution? Do you obey a monolithic belief in Truth – or will flexible, case-by-case truths suit you just as well? Would you rather be right or happy? Do you find yourself saying, “It’s nothing personal” a little too often? Or are you the type of person who takes things a bit too personally and lacks objectivity when you need it? Are you a follower when you should be leading, or someone who needs to be in charge even when you don’t know what you’re doing? Are you loyal to your group – whether it’s a team, company, nation, or faith – even when they’re in the wrong (as we find in the “don’t snitch” policy popular among some gangs)? Or are you willing to speak truth to power even when it

means standing alone, outside the in-group's popular ethic? Your answers to these questions will not correspond to black-and-white, male-female stereotypes, of course. We all know overly devoted, self-abnegating men and women who are philanderers. What's useful to understand is how these *orientations* affect your ability to make ethical choices. Neither approach is more right than the other since both are needed for moral integration. "The heart is the seat of the mind," the Talmud tells us. One part without the other cannot make a whole.

Swedish researchers did an interesting experiment recently, showing how the mind can be tricked into being more empathic (a possible boon for both sexes).⁶ These scientists came up with a device that allows people to step outside their own skins and observe how their behavior appears to someone else. Using goggles linked to cameras trained on themselves, test subjects -- in this case, a group of teenagers with anger issues -- were invited to take a good hard look at their behavior from the outside in. Their brains tricked by optical and sensory information, these teenagers were able (through a sort of artificial mirror neuron system) to feel as if they were actually *in the body* of the therapist observing them. The results of such self-mirroring were remarkable. Researchers found that the human mind can "quickly adopt any other human form, no matter how different, as its own" through the creation of a sort of out-of-body experience. This empathy technology could turn out to be a watershed for marriage counselors attempting to help Mars and Venus connect; in fact, it might be extremely useful for anyone "more interested in changing everyone in their lives but themselves," the Swedes found. Think what this could do for the Mideast peace process. In a similar study using whites and blacks, researchers found that whites who spend time inhabiting black

people's "avatars" – or virtual bodies – "become less anxious about racial differences."⁷

The scientists are calling this the Proteus Effect.

Perspective directly affects our feelings. These feelings then create our ethical lives, which arise from caring enough to notice how we behave with respect to others.