

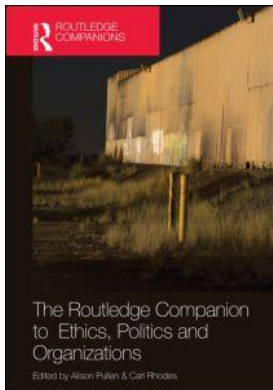
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Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



## **The Routledge Companion to Ethics, Politics and Organizations**

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### **Working the grey zones**

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203566848.ch30>

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**Published online on: 28 May 2015**

**How to cite :-** Sheena Vachhani. 28 May 2015, *Working the grey zones from:* The Routledge Companion to Ethics, Politics and Organizations Routledge

Accessed on: 20 Mar 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203566848.ch30>

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# Working the grey zones

## Feminist ethics, organizational politics

*Sheena Vachhani*

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Conventionally there has been a separation between ethics and politics in organization theory, one in which each has been constructed as a distinct academic domain. As Parker (2003: 188) notes, 'within the domain of ethics, the questions and problems that pertain to politics are made distant. And, within the domain of politics, ethics is an irrelevant matter that can be legitimately bracketed with others kinds of conversations.' When there is recognition of a connection, ethics are seen as either a way to morally evaluate political action or are perceived as a restraint to the politics of organization (Cavanagh et al., 1981; McMurray et al., 2011). Ethico-politics arise from a variety of ethical positions manifest in political actions and where ethics mobilize and direct politics (Parker, 2003). Set against the spotlight and moral outrage of a number of corporate scandals, organizations as entities or assemblages replete with power become a key site for analysing these relationships. As Parker (2003) argues, business ethics has privileged moral philosophy and failed to address broader questions of politics and why certain sets of beliefs, often associated with market managerialism, are reproduced with such enthusiasm. In addition, the reliance of business ethics on certain versions of moral philosophy has an ideological function. 'By commission or omission, this is an area of thinking that seems to prefer to keep its sights lowered, and hence avoids seeing some pressing problems concerning the justice, freedom, rationality and democracy of modern forms of organizing' (Parker, 2003: 198).

More recently, there has been an emergence of interest in particular ethical subjectivities (Bardon and Josserand, 2011, McKinlay, 2002; McMurray et al., 2011) as they are practised in localized settings that serve to highlight the tensions and complexity of enacting ethics as individuals and the formation of the subject (Ibarra-Colado et al., 2006; Iedema and Rhodes, 2010). What we see is that much attention has been devoted to theories and practices of ethics and the state of ethics in the study of organization (Jensen et al., 2009; Roberts, 2003; Rhodes and Wray-Bliss, 2013; Wray-Bliss, 2002, 2009). However, within these debates there has been a tendency to assume either a gender-neutral or universal subject. This assumption has been challenged by feminist ethics which shine light on how business ethics, and moreover the study of ethics and organization, has reflected a gender-neutral or gender-troubled historical trajectory (Borgerson, 2007; see also Jaggard, 1991; Card, 1991). Feminist ethics have been taken up limitedly in current discussions of organizational ethics, where the role of ethics *in* organizations tends to emphasize improved decision making and the need to strengthen ethical 'responses' to

organizational activities (some notable exceptions being Borgerson, 2007; Hancock, 2008; Parker, 1998; Pullen and Rhodes, 2014). Amidst these discussions it is important to examine how discourses of the ethically responsive organization overlap with the increasing politicization of organizations (Painter-Morland, 2008; Phillips, 2014).

Gendered differences, if they are taken into account at all, often manifest in reductive and essentializing differences between men and women and their relation to ethics or responsibility where women are constructed as empathetic or relational and men as rational or calculating, for example. In discussions of business ethics and corporate social responsibility in particular, there is often a conflation of concepts such as ‘feminist’ and ‘feminine’ ethics (see Phillips, 2014; Tong, 1993). I explore these differences throughout the chapter and argue that feminist ethics, through the work of scholars such as Card (1991), Jaggar (1991), Tong (1993), Gilligan, (1982) and Noddings (1984) offer more expansive yet distinct possibilities for understanding ethical dilemmas beyond restrictive differences ascribed under the category of gender. Feminist ethics thus ‘calls attention to relationships, responsibility, and experience and their cultural, historical, and psychologic contexts’ (Borgerson, 2007: 479). I centralize the relationship between feminist ethics and organizational politics where the ethical subject is always a political subject (Hancock, 2008; McMurray et al., 2011; Parker, 2003; Pullen and Rhodes, 2014; Wray-Bliss, 2002, 2009). A turn to organizational ethics allows us to explore how the legitimacy of organizational action is established (Parker, 2003; see also, Barker, 2002, Phillips and Margolis, 1999; Rhodes et al., 2010; Sims, 1991; Verkerk et al., 2001) alongside its moral claims. Thus, in this chapter I outline the contribution of feminist ethics in unpacking the relationship between gender, morality and ethics and turn to the hyphen between the term ‘ethico-politics’ to further explore the relationship between ethics and politics. I argue that feminism, ethics and politics have always been intimately entwined even when the latter terms have not been explicitly invoked. For example, numerous feminist approaches to identity politics explicitly concern ethics (Ferguson, 1996, 1998; Weir, 2008). By taking feminist ethics as its basis and in doing so also taking up the question of the hyphen in ethico-political, I consider how this space in/of/between the ethical and political involves ‘grey zones’ which Card (1999) explores as the twin conditions of privilege and oppression (Card, 1999). Card explains that grey zones are ‘areas inhabited by agents who are at once victims of oppression and involved in perpetrating oppression on others’ (Card, 1999: 3). Card’s work enables us to make sense of such twin conditions and the moral compromise practised by individuals in organizations. Grey zones thus inform moral agency and the ethical demand (Critchley, 1999).

The chapter unfolds as follows: first, I contextualize my discussion by developing the (neglected) and possibly uneasy relationship between feminist ethics and studies of organization. Second, I examine the differences between approaches to feminist ethics, in particular the distinction between feminine and feminist ethics and what Tong (1993) refers to as feminine and feminist consciousness and their relation to politics. I discuss a variety of feminist approaches that enable deeper questioning of the critical relationship between gender, ethics and psyche, such as psychoanalytic feminism, that inform different feminist politics. Third, I explore care-focused and relational approaches to ethics (as ostensibly ‘feminine’ ethics) and their effects on understanding gendered moral experience and question the universality of such experience. Finally, I illustrate the tensions and complexities manifest in invoking a feminist ethics based on tacitly or explicitly reproducing problematic ideas of ‘femininity’ and privileging women’s experiences. I discuss Claudia Card’s use of the term ‘grey zones’ to explore the twin relation between privilege and oppression which becomes central in rearticulating the relationship between gender, ethics and politics.

## Feminist ethics and organization – an emergence

Feminism has always existed according to Jaggar (1983) and in some ways feminism as a philosophy has always been directed at the political whether it be in terms of examining inequalities, redressing the subordination of individuals and groups or fighting social oppression (Brennan, 2009). The opening chapter of Card's (1991) edited collection on feminist ethics is entitled 'The Feistiness of Feminism', a rather apt title for the challenges feminism poses to the study of ethics and its interconnections with politics and resistance. Such feistiness encompasses creative and exciting challenges, ones that feminists have taken up in a variety of ways. Feminist approaches to ethics have questioned how the tradition of ethics has been directed towards the moral experience of a neutral, universal subject typified as ostensibly male or masculine in orientation. For some, feminist ethics 'is born in women's refusal to endure with grace the arrogance, indifference, hostility, and damage of oppressively sexist environments' (Card, 1991a: 4). Broadly conceived, feminist ethics

seeks to identify and challenge those ways, overt but more often and more perniciously covert, in which western ethics has excluded women or rationalized their subordination. Its goal is to offer both practical guides to action and theoretical understandings of the nature of morality that do not, overtly or covertly, subordinate the interests of any woman or group of women to the interests of any other individual or group.

(Jaggar, 1989: 91)

On this basis, feminist theorists such as Jaggar (1992) amongst others have argued for a rethinking of traditional ethics which have hitherto left silent the importance of women's moral and ethical experience (see Ruddick, 1989; Lorde, 1984; Willett, 1995).

The key issues for feminist ethics have centred around not only critiquing the universality of the subject of ethics but exploring the question of gender and morality through perspectives such as physiology/materiality (ethical relationships with the body; see Bartky, 1998; Diprose, 1994; Irigaray, 1993), psychology and psychoanalysis (the psychic experience of women; Chodorow, 1978; Copjec, 2002; Vachhani, 2012a) and affect (emotional and resonant intensities of ethics; Brennan, 2004; Vachhani, 2013). This raises fundamental questions, long since of concern to feminism, of whether 'feminine' traits are the product of nature/biology and/or social construction and conditioning (Vachhani, 2012b). The central dilemma has remained, however, as to whether men and women differ in their ethical experience and, if so, in what ways and how it can inform ethical theory. Whilst those practising feminist ethics share a concern for unpacking or questioning the gendered nature of morality, they diverge greatly in how this project may be accomplished resulting from differing and varied conceptions of feminism; a perennially contested concept itself (Jaggar, 1989). Similarly, gender as a contested terrain has troubled the conception of female, femaleness and femininity and its associations with male, maleness and masculinity (Butler, 1990) and whether feminist ethics and politics should, for example, encompass the bonds among women in creating better environments now and for the future. What is perhaps central is that developing and reflecting on our own experience and committing to overcoming the damage already done by sexism (Card, 1991), and the benefits of reflection upon choices we have faced, is where ethics becomes a fruitful basis for politics.

These debates have led to the emergence of a vibrant and diverse field of feminist ethics, many aspects of which have been explored albeit limitedly in studies of ethics and organization. However, as Borgerson (2007: 477) asserts, the

common and consistent failure in the business ethics context to make basic differentiations between feminist and feminine ethics, as well as conflating feminist ethics with care ethics has resulted in misapprehension, theoretical misunderstanding, and, most importantly, missed opportunities to benefit from feminist ethics' extensive and flexible assets. 'Feminist ethics,' 'feminine ethics,' and 'care ethics' each designates potentially fertile, yet at times wholly discrete, realms of philosophical insight. Crucial and fundamental discord exists among them.

For Borgerson, the potential of feminist ethics relies on distinguishing rather than conflating these radically different forms (cf. Borgerson, 2001).

### **The politics of feminine and feminist ethics – distinctions and definitions**

Tong (1993: 4; see also Gilligan, 1995) explores the distinction between feminine and feminist ethics. Drawing on philosophers such as Betty Sichel and Susan Sherwin, she defines how 'feminine' tends to refer to women's unique voice and an advocacy of care, nurturing, networks and compassion whereas 'feminist' tends to refer to theorists (whether they be radical, liberal or other) who argue against patriarchal domination and/or seek equal rights, and fairness and justice in the distribution of resources. Feminine approaches to ethics address the notion that conventional and traditional ethical theory fails to fit the moral experience of women and, as Tong notes, their 'intuitions'. Feminist approaches apply political perspectives and suggest how ethics must be revised if they are to understand and address patterns of domination and oppression facing women (Tong, 1993, 1996). Whilst the two are related these distinctions offer us important, but crucially different, insights for ethical theory and practice. The differences between feminine and feminist in this context enable us to distinguish how feminine approaches (which Tong explains can be understood through feminine consciousness) regard gendered traits traditionally associated with women. Feminine consciousness thus takes (undervalued) traits such as nurturance, compassion and care as positive human traits. The central debate is the source of these traits and whether biological factors rather than social factors impose themselves in ways that shape women's consciousness and whether concrete physical experiences such as pregnancy, childbirth and feeding also extend caring skills outside the home into the workplace, for example (Gatrell, 2011).

However, as with critiques of gender essentialism and arguments based on biology, this explanation has been heavily critiqued as politically trapping women in a paradigm of care in which women give care and men receive it, thus making it difficult to change society (Tong, 1993, 1997) and address the unjust distribution of different forms of domestic labour.

Perspectives focused on psychosexual development and the development of agency traced from childhood emphasize the idea that boys require separation from the mother in order to form a masculine identity and individuate, girls are able to maintain the emotional bond with the mother and this results in a stronger capacity to build relationships and relate importance to these relationships as a source of interconnectedness (Chodorow, 1978). One major criticism has been that psychosexual perspectives tend to limit girls' autonomy, freedom and desires and echo similar criticisms of biological determinism. Alternatively, social and cultural explanations of feminine consciousness lie in how women may undertake the social responsibilities of care in domestic and private spheres, and socialize children, but may neglect how such consciousness changes when dualisms such as female/private and male/public are troubled. Thus, feminine ethics, in an attempt to explain gendered roles and identity, are focused on the experiences of

women, whether they are different from that of men's experiences and the effects of this difference whether socially determined, biological, psychological or economic. In comparison, Tong (1993) distinguishes feminine approaches with feminist consciousness which is defined as political in terms of identifying and seeking redress for women's subordination.

### **Feminist consciousness and politics**

Tong emphasizes the multiplicity of feminist consciousness as it is interpreted by different schools from radical, socialist, liberal and Marxist to psychoanalytic and postmodern. Liberal feminists, for example, are concerned with how women have historically been seen as less capable and thus excluded from decision-making power. The fight for education and access to opportunity in current economic and social structures is paramount in order to achieve equality. Marxist feminists, in comparison, see women's equality being achieved by questioning the structures of the economic system under capitalism. Capital, rather than men, are seen as the source of achieving economic equality. Radical feminists concerned with the overturning of patriarchal power are not only concerned with the economic but social and cultural institutions (for example, the explicit and implicit acceptance of sexual violence) that need to be effaced in order to achieve fairness often through solidarity between women. Thus, feminist ethics, as they are broadly conceived for Tong, have different political aims and different ethical bases (Bar On and Ferguson, 1998).

Liberal, radical and Marxist feminism provide a variety of explanations for the subordination of women based on institutional, structural, social and economic issues such as cultural norms, institutionalized laws and patriarchal values. Socio-economic structures that reproduce women's lower social status require change, but in addition as Mitchell (1974) explains, women's psyches and their interior world must also be understood and transformed. Psychoanalytic feminism considers the development of male and female sexuality. In the pre-Oedipal stage infants are symbiotically attached to their mothers. This changes during the Oedipal stage in which the infant's break with the mother enables his integration into culture. 'As a result of submitting his desires (the id) to the law of society (the super-ego), the boy fully integrates into culture. Together with his father he will rule over nature and woman, she whose power is just as irrational as nature's . . . the girls' integration into culture is incomplete. She exists at the periphery or margin of culture, always to be ruled over and never to rule' (Tong, 1993: 9). Dual parenting is seen as one way to break this problematic reproduction; however, it has attracted a variety of critiques based on problematic heterosexual assumptions of parenting. This discussion serves to highlight not only the different politics at play in feminist ethics and its possible connections to organizational ethics but as Borgerson (2007: 479) elucidates, 'the field of feminist ethics simultaneously draws upon and develops theoretical foundations that question and pose alternatives to traditional ontological and epistemological assumptions. Fundamental reflection unveils productive possibilities' (see also Kittay and Meyers, 1987).

### **Caring about care**

Care-focused feminist approaches have historically expanded on the similarities and differences between male/masculine and female/feminine ethics and this has raised questions regarding the epistemologies and ontologies that underpin the different approaches to ethics (Tong, 1993). An ethics of care has, for some time, been central to a number of discussions surrounding feminist ethics and politics that arise from this engagement. For example, more broadly, care-focused approaches question the individualization of ethics and the presupposition of the universal, rational subject (Gilligan, 1982, 1995). Moreover, there is emphasis on interconnections and relationality

as a source of ethics along with epistemological emphasis on how the world is actually experienced and the importance of emotional *and* rational knowledge. Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984) emphasize the idea that traditional ethical theory and the practices and principles on which it is based tend to devalue or ignore values culturally and socially associated with women. Gilligan's analysis is rooted in a critique of Freudian psychoanalysis which centres on questioning the moral inferiority of women. Gilligan, in the influential book *In a Different Voice* (1982) empirically illustrated that women were more likely to espouse an ethics of care based on relationships and responsibilities, whereas men focused on an ethics of justice based on rules and rights (Tong, 1993). However, Gilligan was clear that not all or only women identified with the caring voice (Borgerson, 2007). She critically examines the work of Lawrence Kohlberg whose methodology she considers focused on the voices of male rather than female morality. Gilligan (1982: 173) explains

the need to delineate in women's own terms the experience of their adult life . . . the inclusion of women's experiences bring to developmental understanding a new perspective on relationships that changes the basic constructs of interpretation. The concept of identity expands to include the experience of interconnection. The moral domain is similarly enlarged by the inclusion of responsibility and care in relationships.

This turn institutes a shift from knowledge through mind/body to the process of human relationships. Through these studies, care retains a connection to the 'feminine' and, for Gilligan, rather than moral inferiority there should be focus on women's moral difference especially in terms of language. She writes,

My research suggests that men and women may speak different languages that they assume are the same, using similar words to encode disparate experiences of self and social relationships. Because these languages share an overlapping moral vocabulary, they contain a propensity for systematic mistranslation, creating misunderstandings which impede communication and limit the potential for cooperation and care in relationships. At the same time, however, these languages articulate with one another in critical ways. Just as the language of responsibilities provides a weblike imagery of relationships to replace hierarchical ordering that dissolves with the coming of equality, so the language of rights underlines the importance of including in the network of care not only the other but also the self.

(Gilligan, 1982: 173)

Whilst influential, a number of critiques of Gilligan's work concern her distinction between justice and care (which some argue is not new) as different rather than complementary approaches and whether justice and care are gender-correlated at all, although Gilligan does not state that care and justice are correlated in infallible ways. Justice and care tend to be juxtaposed as perspectives of the oppressor and oppressed and privileging care may worsen the position of the oppressed (Card, 1991; Tong, 1993). This is a point I explore more closely later in the chapter; however, even if justice and care are gender-correlated Gilligan has been criticized for the cultural effects this may have on women and whether associating women with care ultimately has negative consequences (Bartky, 1990), especially if care is centred around selflessness and self-sacrifice. Bartky (1990), in *Femininity and Domination*, takes up the point that even if women are seen as better carers than men then ethically and politically it is ill-conceived to

promote ideas of women's automatic self-sacrifice or the impetus for women to care which imprisons them into a paradigm of selflessness. An example Bartky uses is the emotional labour of cabin crew – a theme extensively explored in organization studies – that leads to a disconnection of feelings and sentiments (Hochschild, 2012; Taylor and Tyler, 2000; Wolkowitz, 2006). Bartky is aware that care may also give meaning and empower women but is keen to emphasize the pitfalls and temptations of caregiving and how care may be a seductive discourse. As Tong (1993: 89; emphases in original) intimates, 'we must examine *who* cares about *whom* and *why* before we give the feminist stamp of approval to a "caring" act'. Mullet (1988) expands on this point by considering the political effects of caring and distinguishes between distorted and undistorted caring. Distorted caring attends to the psychological, economic or social conditions under which women are coerced into care under unequal circumstances. As long as there is gendered domination and subordination undistorted caring cannot occur. As Sherwin (1996: 51) also notes, if we are to envisage a place for caring in ethics this needs to be done in relation to a 'political evaluation of the role of caring in our moral deliberations'. She goes on to write that 'others have rejected caring outright as the central element of feminist ethics' (ibid.: 51) and that an ethics of care is not necessarily specifically feminist. This distinction is key in evaluating the political potential of an ethics of care.

## Organization and relational ethics

Borgerson (2007) notes that the business ethics literature fails to recognize key differences between feminine and feminist ethics as well the complexities of the care debate, especially the key point that not all versions of care ethics are premised on feminine traits. She attends to the confluences between care, feminine and feminist approaches in key business ethics texts such as Crane and Matten (2004). In so doing, she highlights the often problematic conflation between sex and gender and the direct contrast between 'male approaches' and 'feminist approaches' (Borgerson, 2007: 489). In a time when the relationship between 'business' and 'ethics' has come to the fore with continued focus on increasingly complex supply chains and the negation of corporate responsibility, exploitative work practices, promotion of moral values by organizations and numerous scandals, the importance of care approaches is increasing (Hawk, 2011). The distinctions between these conceptual, political and practical modes of action and how a progressive ethical/political practice may be achieved if constituted through a genuine openness to dialogue and those affected by organizational action (Roberts, 2003) seem even more important. Approaches to relational ethics, for example, emphasize practical moral action by valorizing proximity and response.

Nel Noddings's (1984) relational ethics, similar to Gilligan, explores a feminine approach to ethics by seeking to valorize values and virtues most associated with women. Noddings's approach concerns a critique of the traditional focus of ethics on logical and moral reasoning as a source of principles and propositions and a neglect of 'human caring and the memory of caring and being cared for'. The relationships between these two parties, for Noddings (1984: 1), 'form the foundation of ethical response' and 'have not received attention except as outcomes of ethical behavior' (Noddings, 1984: 1). Noddings sees a role for reasoning so does not rely on a dichotomous or inseparable division between masculine reasoning and feminine care; however, she suggests that ethics begins at an emotional level. In this regard, *eros*, the feminine spirit, offers a 'natural' and 'stronger' approach than *logos*, the masculine spirit. In explaining gendered differences, Noddings suggests that women can also speak the language of justice but it is not their 'native tongue' (Tong, 1993: 109). Proximity is also important in Noddings's view of relational ethics; care is achieved in encounters with individuals as opposed from afar. Tronto



(2006) argues that Noddings sees care as essentially unprincipled where it is guided by the needs of those we are closest to. Similar to Gilligan, Noddings has been criticized for contributing to women's oppression. In addition, she focuses primarily on unequal relationships of the one-caring and the one-cared-for (Hoagland, 1991; Tong, 1993). Similarly, Card (1990) problematizes Noddings's distinction between 'feminine' and 'masculine' approaches to morality in which the former is typified as being attached, whilst the latter detached. Noddings overemphasizes close attachments which, for Card, neglects those we are both detached from but affect in some way. There are significant connections here to business ethics and exploited labour in 'sweatshop' conditions, namely how consumers affect the working lives of exploited labour from afar and what care might look like within this relationship.

Tronto (1993, 2006: 428) attempts to traverse the impasse of care ethics being traditionally tied to women's experiences and labour and its potential exploitation by suggesting that 'care was best understood not as a gendered account of ethics, but as an alternative way to think about ethics'. A review of care-centred approaches serves to highlight the distinctions and conceptual clarity between feminine and feminist ethics that make up the complex field of feminist ethics and politics. Whilst care is contested, it continues to be an important concept that helps navigate and rethink the values that structure social and political institutions (Held, 1993, 2006; Hoagland, 1988; Tronto, 2006). The major challenge has been in what ways it can be conceptualized as part of a credible ethics. This enables us to attend more closely to the political impetus of feminist ethics to which I now turn.

### **Working the grey zones – ethico-politics and organization**

Thus far I have taken approaches to feminist ethics as the basis for discussing various politics and in doing so I also take up the question of the hyphen in ethico-political and how this space in/of/between the ethical and political involves 'grey zones' (Card, 1999, 2000). As Manning (2002: 233) notes, the grey zone that is of interest to Card is the 'moral ambiguity that accompanies actions, moral judgments, and theorizing under the twin conditions of privilege and oppression'. Grey zones are 'areas inhabited by agents who are at once victims of oppression and involved in perpetrating oppression on others' (Card, 1999: 3). Taking inspiration from Primo Levi's work on prisoners collaborating with Nazi prison guards whose studies demonstrate these twin conditions, Card refers to 'women who "do patriarchy's dirty work", in other words, women who are both the victims and the perpetrators of oppression in misogynist societies' (Mendus, 2001: 128; see Lovibond, 2001). As Mendus notes, Card is vigilant of the stark and somewhat shocking analogy and does not want to trade on the horrors of the period, rather she is concerned with the broader problems which arise in grey zones in which our ordinary concept of moral responsibility and our relation to moral evil is destabilized. Card explains that this forces individuals to rethink these concepts and the judgements that result but this rethinking is likely to be in vain as their choices implicate them in the machinery of evil (Card, 1999, 2002; Mendus, 2001). Evil, for Card (2002: 16), is defined as 'harm that is (1) reasonably foreseeable (or appreciable) and (2) culpably inflicted (or tolerated, aggravated, or maintained), and that (3) deprives, or seriously risks depriving, others of the basics that are necessary to make a life possible and tolerable or decent (or to make a death decent)'.

Whilst the dichotomy between privilege and oppression is precarious at best, the exploration of 'grey zones' allows us to situate feminist ethics not simply as the inclusion of marginalized individuals and groups, or the responsibilities of the privileged to the oppressed, but provides a way of exploring the twin play between privilege and oppression that circumscribe moral agency (see also Borgerson, 2001; McNay, 2000). In addition, Card's work sheds light on the

relationship of accountability and complicity in organizational action. This focus gives rise to exploring feminist ethics within a social and political framework (Card, 1991, 2002) where justice, joy, inclusion and oppression manifest through organizational politics and give rise to particular moral agencies. This enables a more complex view of alternative organizations, where ethics are mobilized into action and where politics are directed by ethics (McMurray et al., 2011), for example counter-movements that represent resistance to institutional power (cf. Fleming and Sewell, 2002) and challenge the influence of elite, privileged groups such as the global Occupy movement and civil society organizations.

The ways in which individuals, and the organizational dynamics in which they operate, negotiate or institute tricky ‘grey zones’ are particularly apparent in ‘situations in which privilege meets disadvantage, wealth meets poverty, or power meets constraint – constantly emerging for example in globalized labor, or international health research practices (Borgerson 2005b) – decision-making processes to avoid real harms in the face of apparent benefits become ever more opaque’ (Borgerson, 2007: 502). This is complicated by the oppression of ‘grey zones’ in which agents are at once victims and perpetrators of evil (Card, 2002). Card (1991a: 25) reflects on Rawls’s theory of justice as ‘ideal’ theory which assumes that most people ‘could count on each other to comply with the rules of their mostly just common practices’. Card (1991, 1999) is thus interested in problems of agency under oppression, for example, in contexts such as state oppression and how ethically responsible agency is possible under oppression (Card, 2002). In taking a stance that addresses privilege *and* oppression as central to organizational politics, the question arises as to how ethically responsible agency is possible under coercive oppressive practices (ibid.). Power inequalities give rise to oppressive organizational conditions and through this we are able to question and critique, following Card, ways in which ‘oppressed social groups can partly overcome unfavorable circumstances and repair moral damage by consciously developing virtues such as integrity, reliability, and self-esteem – often through strong, supportive interpersonal relationships – and by taking responsibility for themselves and for social institutions’ (Norlock and Veltman, 2009: 4).

For Card (2002: 24–25; also cited in Borgerson, 2007):

One reason that many evils go unrecognized is that the source of harm is an institution, not just the intentions or choices of individuals (many of whom may not share the goals of the institution, even when their conduct is governed by its norms). Another is that the harm is the product of many acts, some of which might have been individually harmless in other contexts. Victims are more likely than perpetrators to appreciate the harm. But when the source is an institution, even victims can be hard-pressed to know whom to hold accountable.

These twin conditions resonate with discussions of the ethics of control and resistance in organizations (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Iedema and Rhodes, 2010; Mumby, 2005; Thomas and Davies, 2005) and structure/agency dilemmas (Knights and Willmott, 1989) that address the ethical accountability of management and organizational actors. Card helps us to imagine and investigate the hyphen of ethico-political by examining moral agency embodied under a range of social oppressions across different dimensions of gender, race, sexuality, disability and class and with particular attention to complicity and the moral powers of victims (Norlock and Veltman, 2009). Furthermore, such an approach emerges as a site of reflection on contemporary situations and relates to individual embodied subjects rather than as a hypothetical ideal (Wray-Bliss, 2009).

A theme Card (1996) explores in *The Unnatural Lottery* is the concept of moral luck and how bad moral luck is experienced by the oppressed. As Norlock and Veltman (2009: 4) explain,

She also adds to feminist discourses on oppression by using the language of moral luck to make sense of constricted agency. Distinguished from chance and from fate, moral luck designates the luck of circumstantial starting points and significant life incidences that influence the development of character, the ability to do what is right, or the justification of moral decisions. Survivors of domestic violence or childhood abuse, for example, may sustain moral damage that constricts possibilities for character development and complicates moral responsibility . . . Card shows that appreciating the impact of moral luck on our lives can deepen our understanding of responsibility and heighten the significance of moral agency.

The concept of moral luck is important in rethinking organizational relationships in this regard. In relation to globalized labour, moral luck provides a way of understanding how individuals and groups partly overcome unfavourable circumstances and are able to repair moral damage and develop virtues through supportive relationships (Friedman, 2009; Tessman, 2009). This necessitates a reimagining of how choices for moral agents are constrained through luck, which Card considers ubiquitous and best understood by those who experience bad luck. The freedom to choose is imperfect and enables rethinking how choices become constrained especially in relation to institutional luck.

Bad luck springing from misogyny, in particular, ‘is often an element that complicates women’s choices, presenting special possibilities and temptations’ (2002, 228). Card explores women’s experiences and moral luck in inseparable ways, proceeding from feminist methods ‘influenced by long habits of attending to emotional response, relationships . . . and the significance of the concrete particular’ (2003b, 64).

(Norlock and Veltman, 2009: 4; see also Wray-Bliss, 2009)

What this approach lends us is, first, an examination of complicity by focusing on the nature of evil and responsibility, where evil is constructed in the broadest sense as, for example, gender oppression. Second, it enables us to question what constitutes ‘evil’ and a more concrete, sophisticated understanding of the relationship of women to notions of victimhood and agency as they are experienced in particular situations (Tronto, 2006). Third, and relatedly, it allows us to attend to notions of moral repair. As Tronto (2006: 430) explains, ‘virtually all people are complicit in some way in systems that deny people their moral agency . . . How should individuals make up for wrongs done in the past?’ Moral repair is particularly important for the study of organizations. For example, if we take women and leadership (Cockburn, 1991; Due Billing and Alvesson, 2000; Ledwith and Colgan, 1996; Mavin, 2006) the twin conditions of privilege and oppression render complex ethical subjectivities for women leaders in which they are required to navigate spaces of being complicit and oppressed. Broadly then, for Card, ‘a decent life entails moral agency, including the ability to respond to oppression and evils, even as options for response are constrained’ (Norlock and Veltman, 2009: 6).

### Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have argued that the ethical and political are intimately entwined in studies of organization, especially as we have seen through the trajectory of research on feminist ethics including its confluences with ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984) and care-focused

ethics which assume different ethical experiences between men and women. I critically examined how the notion of 'femininity' is deployed in both feminine and feminist ethics and how feminist scholars explore the fundamental question of women's moral experiences alongside its implications for studying organizations. A turn to Card's (1999, 2000, 2002) work on grey zones allows us to make sense of the twin conditions of privilege and oppression which are central to understanding moral compromise as it is practised by individuals in organizations and helps us to investigate the relationship between individuals and institutions. Grey zones inform moral agency and inform the ethical demand (Critchley, 1999). As McMurray et al. (2011: 541) note, 'the ethical subject is always a political subject; the one who takes action in response to the call of the ethical demand. It is answering the call to political action by the ethical subject – a subject prepared to act in response to the experience of injustice while not resting easy on their own ethical righteousness – that provides an affirmative possibility for researching and theorizing ethics within a critical framework'. In addition, Card enables us to problematize moral agency in relation to constrained choices, resisting complicity and the moral powers of victims. 'Bad luck' experienced from misogyny complicates women's choices and presents special possibilities and temptations (Card, 2002: 228; Norlock and Veltman, 2009). Thus, women's experiences and moral luck are inseparable and necessitate close attention to the concrete particular where 'ethical subjectivity attends to how people manage to define their ethical position in relation to their everyday practice' (McMurray et al., 2011: 543; see also Keleman and Peltonen, 2001).

This discussion raises a number of questions for the study of ethics and organization through critical perspectives. As Borgerson (2007: 482) explains, 'feminist ethics pays attention to who tends to benefit from a particular way of viewing, evaluating, and philosophizing about the world, and who tends to bear the burden'. A fundamental contribution of feminist ethics has therefore been to elucidate structural, institutional, embodied and psychical experiences and the marginalization of individuals and groups which have always implicitly had a political flavour (see also Jaggar, 1991). The politics referred to in this chapter are multilayered and complex. These range from the relationship to Politics (with a capital P) such as nation-states, law and government to politics such as: the micro-politics of organization; the revaluation of the feminine; personal relationships such as friendship or love (Lorde, 1984); and the critical turn to the body as a source of ethical and political thinking (Diprose, 1994; Irigaray, 1993). In addition, 'Feminist scholars are now much more aware of their own location in a position of relative privilege . . . In such a setting, the ongoing and haunting questions of whether to apply universal standards or to recognize local context, who may make judgments for whom, and who are the subjects and objects of feminist change, remain knotty' (Tronto, 2006: 430). Thus, it is not a question of foreclosing the possibilities of feminist ethics to questions of gender but to examine how particular circumstances render complex and political ethical subjectivities ambivalent through the tensions and contradictions that arise from privilege and oppression and the call to act (Critchley, 1999). My aim has been to locate feminism and ethical theory in the context of its social and political claims and in so doing address its role in the study of organization.

What is apparent are the lines of confluence and divergence between different approaches to resolving women's subordination, social inequality and the agonism of this difference. Bar On and Ferguson (1998: xiii) put it succinctly,

one camp (those reacting to and correcting liberal political discourses) is engaged in rethinking politics, while another camp (those reacting to the limitations of mainstream ethical theory) is engaged in rethinking and producing oppositional feminist values. Each camp can be critiqued by those in the other camp for not having completely answered the central ethico-political question of feminism: what is wrong with our current state,

government, economy from a feminist perspective, and what ethical and political alternative values, visions, strategies should feminists stand for and engage in?

Whilst I do not want to reproduce feminism as a singular project, or indeed that schools of thought are always easily distinguishable, I suggest that we need to take seriously the need to build feminist ethico-political discourse that is able to coherently tackle inequalities in organizations in ways that do not foreclose ethics. These manifest in concrete experiences and complex relationships between responsibility and justice and address, as McMurray et al. (2011: 543) write, ‘a politics through which ethical subjectivity in organizations is not a matter of firming up a singularly righteous self, but is a divided self willing to address the fragile and undecidable character of its own constitution in practice’.

Thus, as Borgerson (2007: 505) notes, ‘feminist ethics does more than displace traditional ethical voices, only to assert a “different” voice with alternative concerns’. It sheds light on the apprehensive path of change and the conditions, effects and sacrifices of moral choices in relationships between individuals in organizations and their intersubjectivity (Borgerson, 2001). Moral agents face grey choices

when they are in decision-making positions of power to perpetuate the oppressive features of institutions of which they are also victims, and when the choices open to them involve harm to themselves or others. Not all the choices involve inflicting evil, but grey choices all involve moral compromise. Even the choice to decline participation in institutions may come at heavy cost to oneself; retaining integrity can involve rejecting relationships with those invested in compromising institutions.

(Norlock and Veltman, 2009: 5–6)

By attempting to bridge these insights it is possible to imagine a more central and coherent place for feminist ethics and politics. The approaches discussed here offer more than a critique of the foundational and universalized principles circumscribed by traditional views of ethics. They offer new possibilities for observing and resisting subordination, oppression and marginalization without reinstating an alternative sovereign subject and potentially offer new ways of living. It is here where the practice of feminist ethics and organizational politics become most powerful.

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