Introduction: locating feminist ethics

Ethics is the philosophical study of morality. As Sterba (1998, p. 1) notes there are a number of ethical questions to which philosophers have constantly returned including what is the nature of morality, what are its requirements and justification and what challenges can be made to different systems of morality? These are clearly ancient questions and a consideration of them underscores the way in which ethics is prior to politics and the law – ultimately our systems of governance and legislation rest on our beliefs about how people ought to treat one another, in other words our systems of morality. In this chapter I concentrate on describing the main ethical theories prevalent in Western philosophy and feminist critiques of them. This discussion is followed by an extended consideration of the feminist ‘ethics of care’ as a potential alternative. Coupled with the discussion of Chapter 2, this prepares the theoretical armoury for the discussion of computer ethics which follows in Chapter 4.

As feminist philosophy had developed apace, over the last twenty-five or so years, it is not surprising to find that feminist ethics is one of the major parts of the new feminist philosophy. Jaggar (1992) has described the rise of feminist ethics, particularly within North American academic feminism, and its search for possible models. Feminist ethical discussion in the 1960s and 1970s focused on grass roots issues such as sexualities and domestic labour, in other words more pragmatic equal opportunities concerns. This strand of research merged with theoretical critiques of traditional ethical theory from about the 1970s onwards. Further research focused on the question of whether there is a distinctively feminine moral experience. These vectors came together in the publication...
of Gilligan’s much quoted work (1982) which mounts the best known challenge, to date, against the idea that women’s moral development is somehow inferior to men’s.

Feminist ethics has two major roles. The first is to challenge the traditional ethical canon which is seen to be masculine in inspiration; the second to develop theoretical ideas derived, in part, from the challenge to mainstream ethics to develop a new ethics with which to make normative judgements on ethical problems from a wide range of domains, and, in particular, on areas where women assume a subordinate role, or where their experiences have proved negative on account of their gender.

Feminist ethics involves rethinking and revising aspects of traditional ethics which devalue the moral experience of women (Tong 1999). Arguing that traditional ethics fails women, in that it ignores the possibility that their experiences may be different to those of men, at the same time it places an emphasis on traditional masculine ways of ethical reasoning which are based on individual, rationalistic, rule-based ethical models. The overall aim of feminist ethics is ‘… to create a gender-equal ethics, a moral theory that generates non-sexist moral principles, policies and practices’ (ibid.). So, although feminist ethics, in common with feminist thinking in general, starts from the position of acknowledging that women in most walks of life are in a subordinate position to men, in seeking to redress this balance, I believe that it should not confine itself to ‘women’s issues’. Apart from anything else, in a world where the two genders exist in (almost) equal numbers, nothing can really be a women’s issue without its being a men’s issue too. For instance, in Chapter 6, it will be argued that the majority of cyberstalking cases involve women as victims and men as perpetrators. It is not possible to attempt a convincing explanation of women as victims without, at the same time, questioning why it should be that the perpetrators are mostly men.

Feminist ethics can help to expose the power inequalities which exist in ethical case studies which mainstream ethics renders invisible in its pursuit of traditional ethical views often resting on individualistic, rationalistic ethical theories. It is this critical edge which has proved appealing to many feminist authors. The challenge is then to harness this energy into a constructive critique of traditional forms of ethics.

Feminist ethics has grown out of long-running debates about the special nature of women’s morality which date from at least the time of Wollstencroft’s (1988), A Vindication of the Rights of Women, in the eighteenth century and Mill’s concerns (1970) about the virtue of