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LOYOLA  
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SEX AND FINITUDE:  
THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION  
OF WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE

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The title of my talk is "Sex and Finitude: The Social Construction of Women's Experience". Some of you may be wondering what the word 'finitude' refers to.

By finitude I mean the limitedness of human beings. (Infinite means unlimited. So if humans are finite, that means they are the opposite of infinite. They are not unlimited, but rather limited.) In philosophical and theological discussions, human finitude or human limitedness is often linked to the materiality or the bodiliness of human existence. Human finitude is usually seen as a function of human participation in the physical and biological, spatial and temporal world. Human finitude usually refers to the way in which human powers (such as for example knowledge, physical strength, or the ability to impose order) never attain perfection but are always limited. Another way to look at human finitude is to think of it as human openness to the world, the ability to be affected by things in the world which one has not willed. (The things in the world which one has not willed include one's own unwilled and unconscious aspects). If one thinks of the goal of human existence as a state of complete control and mastery over oneself and one's environment, then this openness (which is one way of describing human finitude) is undesirable. It is a vulnerability to influences that will inevitably detract from one's ability to achieve the goal of complete mastery over oneself and one's environment. If, however, one values the spontaneity, the richness and the creativity that come from a mix of contingencies (or chance events), one's emotional reactions and spontaneous impulses, and one's ability to make decisions and carry them out, then one will also value the openness and vulnerability that is human finitude. In addition, if one values experiences in which one reacts to and receptively appreciates or appropriates what one has not willed— other people, unwilled aspects of oneself, and one's environment, then one would never want to do away with the vulnerability which is also the sensitivity which makes possible these experiences and interactions. In other words, human finitude is not only human limitedness, but also an openness and receptivity to the world. Human finitude is the basis of the creativity and spontaneity of human existence.

A starting point for my talk is a generalization — the generalization that there has been a prevalent tendency in the Western philosophical and theological traditions to devalue human finitude. In other words, human finitude has been seen largely as an inevitable but regrettable limit to human strivings. Because the goal of human life has been seen largely in terms of control and mastery over oneself and one's environment, finitude has been seen as something towards which one may be resigned, but not as a feature of human life that could be celebrated and valued.

Feminist theorists are among those who have pointed out and criticized this tendency in Western philosophical and theological traditions to devalue human finitude, and it is their criticisms which will be the focus of my talk.

Both secular and religious feminists have had good reasons for objecting to the devaluation of human finitude. Thinkers in the Western tradition who have

tried to explain why women are less human than men or why women should have different roles than men have often warranted these claims with the observation that women are, in some sense, more limited by human finitude than are men. In other words, traditional opponents of equal rights for women have justified their views with the claim that women are linked to human finitude more closely than men. Thus the devaluation of human finitude has also been a devaluation of women. Feminists, in addition to objecting to this devaluation of women, have also claimed that the devaluation of human finitude has, by denying the material roots of human life, impoverished our general conceptions of the possibilities of human life. Thus, another feminist claim has been that the devaluation of finitude has harmed both women and men.

Feminists within the Christian tradition have additional reasons for objecting to the devaluation of human finitude. In Christian theology, the devaluation of human finitude is a devaluation of God's creation. If one devalues God's creation, one ultimately casts aspersions on God's own goodness.

To illustrate the tendency to devalue human finitude in Christian theology, let me read to you a passage from a novel, Mary Gordon's The Company of Women, in which a priest, named Cyprian, who is dying, describes what he sees as the goal of his spiritual life.

Love is terrible. To disentangle oneself from the passions, the affections, to love with a burning heart which demands only itself and never asks for gratitude or kindness. In that I have failed. I have hungered for kindness; I have hungered for gratitude.

But the love of God, untouched by accident and preference and failure, this I long for. Lumen lumens. The light giving light.

And yet we are incarnate. I look around me at the faces that I love, at the slant, imperfect sun this evening on the mountains, and I pray neither to live nor to die, but to be empty of desire.<sup>1</sup>

I do not fear judgment; I do not fear purgatory, where I hope to go; I fear the moment of longing for a human face. And yet I long to be free of this body, only an encumbrance to me now, to enter into the realm of simple light that is the face of God.<sup>2</sup>

Cyprian sees the goal that he is striving for, the perfect vision of God, as something that does not have anything to do with the body. He also sees the goal of human existence as something that will eliminate the human desire for warmth and response from other human beings. In other words, he sees the goal of human life as the elimination of the finitude and the material context of human love.

Not only the fictional Cyprian, but much of real-life Christian theology has had an ambivalent attitude towards human bodiliness and finitude. This is despite the fact that the goodness of human beings as creatures of God is a basic premise of traditional Christian theology. The biblical creation story, the incarnation of God in fully human form, and the resurrection of the body, not only of Christ, but of all

believers, all affirm the basic goodness of human creatureliness in its finitude and bodiliness. The biblical creation story teaches that God did not create the world with sin. This implies that the problem with human beings does not lie in their finitude or in their bodiliness. Sin may be part of human nature, but it is a second nature; it is secondary to the basic goodness of God's creation. Despite these affirmations of the goodness of human finitude and bodiliness, there is an internal conflict in much of Christian theology between the desire to affirm the basic goodness of human beings as created by God, and a seemingly pervasive tendency to label certain features of human creaturely existence as inherently sinful, the result of sin, or at least something that needs to be overcome.

I am in agreement with the main aims of the feminist criticisms which say that traditional ways of thinking about what it means to be a human person tend to devalue human finitude. However, in the rest of this talk I am going to take a critical look at different ways in which feminist theorists themselves think about what it means to be a human person. I want to show that feminist theorists are sometimes themselves unaware of how their own assumptions about what it means to be human conflict with their desire to affirm the value and full scope of human finitude.

## I. TWO FEMINIST VIEWS OF HUMAN NATURE

Various schemes for the classification of types of feminism have been discussed in the literature on feminism.<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this talk I will make use of a distinction between two types of feminist approaches to human nature: single-anthropology and dual-anthropology feminism.<sup>4</sup> (The word anthropology here refers to philosophical views about human nature.) Single-anthropology feminism holds that there is one human nature which is the same for both men and women. The essence of this human nature is seen as the ability to transcend or rise above human life on the natural, biological level; in other words, the essence of being human is considered to be the ability to function on the level of culture. Dual-anthropology feminism holds that there are two human natures, women's nature and men's nature. According to dual-anthropology feminism, women's nature includes a distinctive closeness to the natural realm, the body, and the emotions. Women's experience is an immediate experience of the natural realm, which is available to women in a way that it is not available to men. (Thus dual-anthropology feminists think that women have a different relationship to human finitude than do men, and single-anthropology feminists think that men and women, in their common humanity, have the same kind of relationship to human finitude.)

Most feminists agree that theories about human nature have often been used to thwart women and to prevent them from realizing their full potential as human beings. Although theories of human nature have varied greatly in Western philosophical and theological traditions, full humanity has often been seen as the fulfillment of capacities which are considered distinctive to the human species and which are also valued more highly than capacities that humans share with other species. These distinctively human capacities have been given content in various terms: such as rationality, memory, the capacity for the imaginative construction of

projects that will transform present realities into a yet unseen future shape, control and manipulation of one's environment, free choice, moral responsibility, and the awareness of one's relationship to God. Despite variations in content, these distinctively human capacities have often been seen as non-material: as mental or spiritual capacities that are distinguishable from and sometimes opposed to bodily, biological, or physical capacities. Because these distinctively human capacities enable humans to rise above the biological, material realm that they share with other creatures, some modern thinkers have referred to them as the capacity for self-transcendence. Others talk about the distinctively human capacities as the capacity for transforming nature into culture. In the language of Christian theology, these distinctively human capacities have usually been subsumed under the concept of the image of God in humans. These capacities are seen as making the human species qualitatively different from and more valuable than other species that inhabit the world.

Historically, women have been seen as less capable than men of exercising the most valued, distinctively human capacities. Women have been considered either as part of a single humanity, but flawed in comparison to men and thus incapable of achieving full humanity, or they have been seen as a separate and unequal form of life. In either case, the claim has usually been (and often still is) that women are constrained by their bodies, by their participation in the material and biological realm, in a way that men are not. The biological fact that women bear children and lactate has been seen as binding women to the material world and to their bodies and thus making it difficult for women to exercise the distinctively human, mental and spiritual capacities. The biological constraints on women have thus also been seen as dictating certain social roles and psychological characteristics for women which are subordinate to and less valued than the social roles and psychological characteristics of men.

Not only have women been seen as incapable of full humanity, but the achievement of full humanity has itself often been defined in opposition to what has been considered feminine. Human rationality in particular has often been defined in terms of the purification of the mind by the removal of contaminating elements associated with femininity, including the effects of bodiliness, emotion, and personal concern.

Single-anthropology and dual-anthropology feminists agree that women are not worth less than men, but they differ in how they respond to the claim that women are not capable of exercising the highest human capacities—the ones which involve a transcendence of the material realm.

Single-anthropology feminism agrees with the traditional view that the most valuable human capacities are non-material, mental or spiritual capacities which are distinctively human and that these capacities consist of a transcendence of the material, biological aspect of human existence. However, single-anthropology feminism disagrees with the identification of women with the material, biological aspect of human existence. Proponents of single-anthropology feminism argue that women, as well as men, are capable of achieving full humanity as it has been defined in traditional views of human nature. In other words, according to single-

anthropology feminism, women, as well as men, are capable of transcending their embeddedness in the material, biological realm, and of thinking clearly, rationally, objectively, and purposefully, of making moral decisions, of participating in the distinctively human realm of culture, and, in Christian theological terms, of fully imaging God. The argument of single-anthropology feminism is the following: because there is one human nature common to both men and women, women should be given rights and opportunities equal to those given to men.

Dual-anthropology feminism, on the other hand, agrees with the traditional identification of women with the material, biological aspect of human existence. According to dual-anthropology feminism, women's perspectives and women's experiences differ from those of men, precisely because of women's distinctive closeness to the natural world and the material, biological aspect of human existence. Thus dual-anthropology feminism agrees that women are somehow more closely linked to human finitude than are men. However, dual-anthropology feminism disagrees with the traditional claim that human finitude, or the material, biological aspect of human existence is less valuable than the human capacities which transcend the material realm. Dual-anthropology feminists claim that women's closeness to nature, far from implying that women are worth less than men, is the source for women's special strengths. Because women have easier access to the natural world and to their bodies and emotions, they define themselves in relationship to their environment and to other people in ways that men do not. Therefore, according to dual-anthropology feminism, women are in a unique position to develop new, ecologically and socially beneficial values for all of society. Proponents of this view urge women to discover their essentially female nature, to experience it to the fullest, and to develop the positive values that inhere in women's distinctive closeness to nature and the material, biological aspect of human existence.

The dual-anthropology claim, that women's experience differs significantly from men's experience, is a response to those traditional views of human nature which devalue both human participation in the material, biological realm (that is, human finitude) and also women. The dual-anthropology claim is also a response to single-anthropology feminism, which, from the dual-anthropology feminist view, accepts uncritically the traditional view of human nature which devalues the material, biological aspect of human existence (that is, human finitude) and, implicitly, women. The aim of the dual-anthropology view is to affirm both the value of characteristics which have traditionally been associated with women and also the full scope and goodness of human finitude (that is, human participation in the material, biological realm).

## II. THE NATURE/CULTURE DISTINCTION

Both dual-anthropology and single-anthropology feminism assume that nature and culture are clearly distinguishable and separable realms of human existence. This means that both types of feminism also see human self-transcendence and human participation in the material, biological world as clearly distinguishable and separable aspects of human existence. I think that this assumption is

problematic, especially for feminists who intend to affirm the basic goodness and the full scope of human finitude.

Philosopher Jean Grimshaw, in her book Philosophy and Feminist Thinking, shows how several single-anthropology feminists, including Kate Millett, Betty Friedan, and Simone de Beauvoir, assume the separability of natural and cultural levels of human experience. She shows how all three devalue what have been traditional activities and preoccupations of women — domestic work and childrearing, by claiming that these activities fail to transcend the natural or biological level of human life. All three seem to assume both that typical women's work is purely material or biological and that the cultural level consists of rising above the constraints of the material or biological realm.

According to Millett, women, by having been assigned the role of childrearing and domestic work, have been arrested "at the level of biological experience," at the level of the animal rather than the level of the distinctively human.<sup>5</sup> According to Friedan, women have adjusted themselves to dealing mostly with food, things, and childrearing. By doing so they have "been blocked at the physiological level" of human life, the level which human beings have in common with other animals. At this level, humans, as other animals, are dependent on the material environment and not free and self-determining.<sup>6</sup> For Simone de Beauvoir, the achievement of full humanity consists of being a subject, as opposed to an object. Subjectivity puts one into the realm of human culture, the realm in which humans transcend nature. Women have not been allowed to become subjects, to achieve transcendence, to participate in the realm of culture, to be fully human. For example, although women are in a sense creative in giving birth, de Beauvoir sees this as a passive, rather than an active kind of creation. The child growing in the mother's body is not the object of a genuinely creative act, because the act of producing a child does not occur on the level of human subjectivity; "it is still only a gratuitous cellular growth, a brute fact of nature."<sup>7</sup> Thus, for single-anthropology feminists, nature and culture are clearly separable and distinguishable levels of human existence and the level of culture is the more valuable.

Dual-anthropology feminists, on the other hand, attempt to provide a corrective for single-anthropology feminism's devaluation of the natural level—the material, biological aspect of human existence. But, in the process, dual-anthropology feminists also assume the possibility of a pure experience of 'nature' and thus demonstrate that they think that nature and culture are clearly separable and distinguishable levels of human existence. Dual-anthropology feminists see women's essential nature as 'natural', in other words, as clearly distinct and separable from their cultural environment. In many of the writings of dual-anthropology feminists, it seems that women, when they discover and become aware of their essential nature, have direct access to the material, biological realm. In other words, women are seen as having a kind of direct and immediate access to human existence as finite.

Poets and writers Adrienne Rich and Susan Griffin are two examples of dual-anthropology feminism. Adrienne Rich, for example, sympathizes with single-anthropology feminists: "the body has been made so problematic for women that it

has often seemed easier to shrug it off and travel as a disembodied spirit".<sup>8</sup> But she herself believes that the real task for feminists is not to deny the body but to show how true knowledge arises from one's experience of the body. For Rich, women's experience of the body is distinctively female. She says, "female biology—the diffuse, intense sensuality radiating out from clitoris, breasts, uterus, vagina; the lunar cycles of menstruation; the gestation and fruition of life which can take place in the female body—has far more radical implications than we have yet come to appreciate."<sup>9</sup> This is an affirmation of the concreteness and particularity of the human experience of bodiliness. But women's experience of their bodiliness, for Rich, also seems to be unmediated and direct. This is evident when Rich focuses on women's experiences of motherhood. Most people would want to say that women's experiences of motherhood can be in conflict with what women have been taught to feel about motherhood, but Rich goes further than that. She claims that there is an experience of the body available to women that is "actual—as opposed to . . . culturally warped."<sup>10</sup> Thus according to Rich, women's biology, if women do not deny their experience of it, provides women with a kind of direct and unmediated awareness of their participation in the material, biological realm.

Susan Griffin also centers much of her writing on women's experience of what is natural, as opposed to experience that has been distorted by cultural influence. As Grimshaw notes, Griffin denies the necessity for the opposition between culture and nature but also reaffirms the distinction. Griffin criticizes our culture, which "opposes spirit to the flesh and which uses culture as a way to deny the power of the natural."<sup>11</sup> She claims that in the ideologies that she opposes (sexism, racism, and the anti-nature bias of our culture) what is denied in the self is projected onto 'the other', whether 'the other' is nature or people of another sex or race. Yet when Griffin speaks of the persistent power of the natural in the face of ideologies that attempt to repress it or to deny its existence, she seems to assume the possibility of a direct experience nature—an experience of the natural that is not mediated by any culturally constructed categories. Thus Griffin turns around and reaffirms nature and culture as clearly distinguishable and separable.

We can see that the goal of dual-anthropology feminism is to affirm the goodness and full scope of human finitude and thus also the values and strengths of women. The problem, from my point of view, is that most dual-anthropology feminists, while denying the possibility of an area of cultural, mental, or spiritual activity that is not conditioned by human finitude and human bodiliness, also assume the possibility of an experience of the material, biological realm that is not mediated by human cultural constructions. Thus they implicitly deny an important implication of human finitude—the culturally and socially mediated nature of human experience.

My point is that both single- and dual-anthropology feminism involve a denial of the full scope of human finitude because they both see the natural and the cultural as two clearly distinguishable and separable levels of human existence. It is easier to see this in the case of single-anthropology feminism. Single-anthropology feminism thinks of full humanity as the development of capacities which escape the conditioning of human bodiliness and finitude. Dual-anthropology feminism,

on the other hand, explicitly affirms that even the so-called 'higher' spiritual capacities are conditioned by human finitude and bodiliness and that this state of affairs is something that should be welcomed and celebrated. What dual-anthropology feminism denies, however, is that all experiences of human finitude and bodiliness are themselves mediated through cultural and social environments. The openness and sensitivity and dependence of human beings on their cultural and social environments is another aspect of human finitude. Most dual-anthropology feminists are aware that the concepts of human nature that have been used to oppress women have been constructed and internalized by human beings in cultural, social groups. However, many dual-anthropology feminists seem unaware that the experiences of the body and of human participation in the material, biological realm that they recommend are also mediated by concepts that are culturally and socially constructed and internalized.

### III. WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE AS CULTURALLY MEDIATED

Despite my criticisms of the use of the concept of women's experience to refer to an unmediated experience of the natural realm, I also think that differences between masculine and feminine experiences of what it means to be human are significant and worthy of study and examination. The notion of an experience of self and the world which is more common among women than men does not need to be used in a way that denies the culturally mediated nature of human experience. Feminist thinkers who observe significant differences between men and women do not need to explain those differences in a way that assumes women's experience as an unmediated experience of the natural realm.

For example, Valerie Saiving's essay, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View"<sup>12</sup> and Judith Plaskow's book, Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and The Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich,<sup>13</sup> are similar as to the substantive challenges they present to theology, yet they have different approaches to the concept of women's experience. Both Saiving and Plaskow describe what they see as "significant differences between masculine and feminine experience".<sup>14</sup> Both claim that Christian theologians have conceptualized sin and grace on the assumption that male experience is equivalent to human experience. They argue that the introduction of women's experience into the theological picture would require changes in the content of Christian theology, not just the inclusion of women into previously male-dominated areas of activity.

Both Saiving and Plaskow analyze sin and grace in the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, a representative twentieth-century theologian, as one example of how the assumption that male experience is equivalent to human experience has influenced theology. They see Niebuhr's analysis of the human situation and of sin as slanted in the direction of the experience of men. For Niebuhr, the human situation consists of a tension between finitude and self-transcendence. He defines two categories of sin: pride, which consists of denying one's creaturely limitations or one's finitude, and sensuality, which consists of denying one's capacity for self-transcendence and for fulfilling the image of god. Despite his schema of two categories for sin, Niebuhr sees pride as the basic sin. He analyzes sensuality as

rooted in the basic sin of self-assertion, so that sensuality, the attempt to lose oneself in a particular part of one's own self or of the created world, is still basically a prideful assertion of one's self-will. Thus for Niebuhr, the primary human temptation is to resolve the anxiety inherent in the human situation by denying the limitations of human creatureliness. If the human situation and sin are seen in this way, salvation consists of a breaking apart of the pride of a self that thinks itself equal to God and able to resolve the anxiety that is basic to the human situation. Correspondingly, the content of salvation is a resigned humility and a self-sacrificing love which is the opposite of a self-absorbed and self-serving pride.

Women's temptation, on the other hand, according to both Saiving and Plaskow, is towards self-abnegation and the underdevelopment of the self. The problem for women has not been that they have pursued self-transcendence or the fulfillment of the image of God in an excessive and prideful way, so as to usurp the prerogatives of God himself. Rather, most women have been prone to the temptations of passivity, a resigned acceptance of the concrete contingencies which limit their lives, distractibility, and to losing themselves by defining their own identities in terms of others. Resigned humility, the acceptance of finitude as a necessary but unpleasant condition, and self-sacrificial love reinforce the primary temptations of women. The traditional goals of salvation are thus irrelevant or positively harmful for women (and also incidentally for other marginalized social groups).

The most obvious implication of Saiving's and Plaskow's discussions of women's experience of sin as different from that of men is that women need a concept of salvation that encourages them to develop a healthy striving towards self-assertion and the development of their capacities for transcendence. In addition, Saiving's and Plaskow's discussions of women's experience of sin also imply that Niebuhr overestimates the universality of the temptation to deny one's finitude and creatureliness. While women's tendency to wallow in human finitude is destructive, it does also point out that human beings do not need to experience finitude as an unpleasant though unavoidable fact of life.

Niebuhr's emphasis on sin as pride involves a negative view of human finitude.<sup>15</sup> For Niebuhr, sin is the attempt to become like God, an attempt which is mistaken and doomed to failure, but also a natural way in which humans go wrong. Niebuhr assumes that human beings will naturally chafe at the limitations set upon them because of their creaturely status. He sees the desire to deny one's human limitedness and creatureliness by usurping God's prerogatives as the primary human temptation. For Niebuhr, finitude is so onerous a burden that human beings are prone to attempt to overcome their finitude through self-deception and the assertion of their will to power. Plaskow's claim is that this negative view of finitude is not the only possible attitude towards human finitude and that many women, especially, do not share this attitude.

To summarize, on the surface, both Plaskow and Saiving seem to take the dual-anthropology approach. But Saiving bases her description of differences between men and women in biological facts, which she thinks provide "a substratum or core of masculine and feminine orientations."<sup>16</sup> Plaskow, however, does not do this. She makes no universal claims for her descriptions of the differences

between women's experiences and men's experiences. She says that her view of women's experience is particular and concrete: it is "one view of modern, white, western, middle-class 'women's experience.'" <sup>17</sup> She defines women's experience as the interrelation between "male definitions of women and the lived experiences of women within, in relation and in opposition to these definitions."<sup>18</sup> Thus the concept of women's experience for her is not based in a foundational and universal feminine nature which is unaffected by social circumstances. She rejects the idea of a basic women's experience and nature that underlies indoctrination by male culture and education and that will appear once the distorted layers have been stripped away.<sup>19</sup>

The result is that Plaskow preserves one of the primary claims of the dual-anthropology use of the concept of women's experience—that who you are (including your gender) determines how you see yourself, the world, and your relationship to the world. She thereby affirms one feature of human finitude. By rejecting the concept of women's experience as a direct, unmediated experience of the natural realm, she avoids the implicit denial of another aspect of human finitude—the culturally-mediated nature of human experience.

I will now turn to the work of two feminists in the social sciences whose work provides a way to conceptualize both the distinctiveness and the culturally-mediated nature of women's experience.

The work of psychologist Carol Gilligan provides an account of differences between women's experience and men's experience that elaborates, from a social scientific perspective, one aspect of human finitude — the sensitivity of human beings to their social environment. Gilligan, though she describes differences between women's experience and men's experience, does not think that these differences are inevitable given the biological differences between men and women. She explains differences in terms of the social relationships that human beings experience as children and as adults. According to Gilligan, women's experience differs in significant ways from men's experience, not because women are closer to nature by virtue of a distinctive female nature that provides an unmediated, direct awareness of the natural realm, but because women develop characteristic patterns and concepts for interpreting their experience from the social relationships that they experience as children and as adults.

Gilligan is well known for her description of two different perspectives on morality—the justice perspective and the care perspective.<sup>20</sup> She and her colleagues have also shown that these moral perspectives correlate with two different ways of looking at one's self and others.

In the justice perspective, moral problems are seen as decisions about how to adjudicate conflicts between the claims of the self and the claims of others. These conflicts are resolved by means of impartial standards, which consist of universal rules that are applied to all alike. Someone who looks at moral issues in terms of this perspective focuses on issues of injustice, such as oppression and inequality. The Golden Rule epitomizes this perspective: It says, you should do to others as you would like them to do to you. The warrant for this is the claim that individuals are equivalent units with equal rights. This ethical perspective correlates with a view of

the human self in which individuals are seen as independent and separate in relation to others. It is important to see that the justice perspective considers relationship as an important part of being human; nevertheless, it does not see relationships as constitutive of individuals, but rather as based in reciprocity between separate, independent individuals.

In the care perspective, moral problems are seen as issues of relationship or response. A solution of an ethical problem from the care perspective aims to maintain relationship, to promote the welfare of all the people involved in as far as possible, and to prevent harm. The ethical concerns of someone in the care perspective would focus on how to respond to the needs of others, particularly where someone is detached and disconnected from others, or vulnerable to abandonment and the indifference of others. This ethical perspective correlates with a view of the human self in which individuals are seen as connected in relation to others. The individual is, to some extent, seen as constituted by means of its relationships to others. Relationships are based, not necessarily on reciprocity, but on responsiveness to the other in his/her own terms. Others are seen as unique individuals in their own situations and contexts.<sup>21</sup>

Gilligan and her colleagues, using Gilligan's theoretical framework of two perspectives, have discovered that most people are capable of using both perspectives, but that a phenomenon of focus appears. That is, given a particular moral dilemma or asked to spontaneously discuss a real-life moral dilemma, most people will use predominantly one perspective. Gilligan and her colleagues have shown that the use of these two perspectives is gender-related though not gender-specific. Not all men have a justice focus and not all women have a care focus; however, a majority of women have a care focus and a majority of men have a justice focus.<sup>22</sup>

Gilligan explains the differences between the two perspectives in terms of their origins in early childhood relationships. Children of both sexes have experiences of inequality and experiences of attachment. According to Gilligan, the justice perspective is based in transformations of the child's experiences of inequality and the care perspective is based in transformations of the child's experiences of attachment.

The child's experiences of inequality are based in the child's awareness that he/she is not equal to adults and is relatively weak and dependent. The child usually looks forward to his/her growth towards equality and independence. In the process of growth, the child discovers that justice offers protection to the unequal in the face of oppression. The child learns to say, "That's not fair" or, "You have no right" when he or someone else faces oppression or injustice. These experiences are the basis of the justice perspective.

The child's experiences of attachment consist of the child's awareness that he or she is capable of caring for and hurting others and that others are capable of caring for and hurting him/her. The child loves those who care for him/her and discovers that love and attachment offer protection in the face of abandonment. The child learns to say, "You don't care" when faced with abandonment or indifference and also learns to say, "Don't turn away from others in need."<sup>23</sup> These experiences are the basis of the care perspective.

Gilligan proposes that differences between the use of the two moral perspectives by men and women are based in differences in the transformations of these basic childhood experiences. In the very young child, feelings of inequality in relation to the parent "who otherwise seems unmovable and all-powerful" may be mitigated by the experience of attachment to the parent. Girls usually continue to identify with and are attached to their mothers throughout childhood. The girl's feelings of inequality in relation to the mother "may be less overwhelming" than they would be without this identification and attachment. Girls, because of this typically positive experience in connection to attachment, may focus most of their attention on their connections with others and be less concerned about inequality in their relationships. Boys usually remain attached to their mothers throughout childhood but begin to identify with their fathers at an early age. The difference between the experience of girls and boys is that the boy is less likely to experience the kind of attachment to the father that the girl is able to feel towards the mother. In the boy, an experience of attachment to the father would mitigate the feelings of inequality with respect to the father. Instead, a concern for equaling or bettering the father's physical strength and position of authority may overtake the boy's concerns about attachment. Because of the lack of experiences of attachment that might mitigate feelings of inequality, boys may come to focus mostly on issues of equality with less concern about issues related to disconnection with others.<sup>24</sup>

The work of sociologist and psychoanalytic theorist Nancy Chodorow further explains the origins of the differences between women's experience and men's experience in terms of social relationships in childhood.<sup>25</sup> Chodorow explains the origins of these differences in terms of psychoanalytic object relations theory. An assumption of this theory is that the development of personality is not only the result of the parents' or the child's conscious intentions. The child also forms his or her personality by internalizing features of social relationships, a process which is largely unconscious.

Chodorow proposes that differences between feminine and masculine personality can be accounted for by considering the effects of the fact that "women, universally, are largely responsible for early child care and for (at least) later female socialization."<sup>26</sup> Because women mother and because one of the social purposes of families is to produce heterosexually marrying offspring, both gender identity and sexual object choice must be established differently for girls than for boys, resulting in differences between feminine and masculine personality.

I will focus here on Chodorow's account of the differences in the development of gender identity in boys and girls. In some respects, the process of developing a gender identity is easier for girls than for boys.<sup>27</sup> For both boys and girls, the mother is the first person with whom the child identifies. Thus girls do not need to give up their primary identification with the mother in order to take on their adult role. Also, the mother is usually more often present and also more accessible to the children emotionally than is the father. Thus girls can more easily develop into what they see as their mother's role. The ease with which girls can adopt a feminine gender identity is reinforced by the fact that in our culture feminine gender identity is not seen as something that requires effort to be achieved or proved. All a

girl needs to do is wait for her body to mature.

Boys, in contrast, need to actively reject their primary identification with the mother in order to establish their gender identity as masculine. Since the father is usually more distant than the mother, emotionally if not physically, and since the father's masculine role is not as visible, it is more difficult for boys to achieve masculine gender identity by identification with the father than for girls to achieve feminine gender identity by means of identification with the mother. Because of the relative unavailability of the father, masculine identity is seen largely as a negation of femininity. Boys may feel the need to vehemently reject or control what they perceive as feminine traits in themselves. Also, masculinity is seen in our culture as something which needs to be continually proven. Because of the difficulties of achieving a masculine gender identity, boys may reactively deny their own feminine traits, which are the result of their early identification with the mother, and also denigrate women and femininity in general.

The development of a feminine gender identity does not require a rejection of the girl's bond with the mother but rather promotes the feelings of attachment, relationship, and emotionality which are associated with the bond to the mother. Because the development of gender identity is easier for girls, a feminine sexual identity includes a sense of security. On the other hand, a girl who has achieved a feminine sexual identity may have doubts about whether or not she wants this identity. Western middle class women learn that feminine qualities are not valued in school and in the public realm. Therefore a girl may question the value of her feminine gender identity, which is "reliant on her ability to inhibit herself and to respond to the demands of others" and which leads "eventually to an adult fate where her role and her dependence upon it doom her to bring up sons and daughters resentful of her and the femininity she represents."<sup>28</sup>

The basis of Gilligan's and Chodorow's suggestions as to reasons for the differences between women's experience and men's experience is the sensitivity of the human person to his/her social environment. Women and men experience themselves and the world differently because their development as children differs. The differences in the development of girl children and boy children are not based in an unmediated experience of sexual biology, but are shaped by the social structures of families.

Gilligan's and Chodorow's work supports the substance of the claims of dual-anthropology feminists as to significant differences between women's experience and men's experience. However, the advantage of approaches such as Gilligan's and Chodorow's is that they take account of and elaborate an important aspect of human finitude—the openness and vulnerability of human beings to their environment. Thus Gilligan's and Chodorow's work gives content to the concept of women's experience as distinctive yet also socially constructed and culturally mediated.

To conclude, I have argued that the use of the concept of women's experience to refer to women's direct awareness of some aspect of reality, without the mediation of concepts provided by linguistic and cultural communities, implies a



view of human persons that does not acknowledge the full scope of human finitude and thereby also devalues it. On the constructive side, I have argued that explanations of the differences between women's experience and men's experience that see these differences in terms of the sensitivity of human beings to their social environment acknowledge human finitude more fully than explanations in terms of women's direct, unmediated awareness of some aspect of reality. Feminists, if they want to be consistent with their affirmation of the value and scope of human finitude, cannot afford a concept of women's experience that denies the socially constructed nature of women's experience.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Mary Gordon, The Company of Women (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980) p. 289.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 287.

<sup>3</sup>See for example Alison M. Jaggar, Feminist Politics and Human Nature (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1983) and John Charvet, Feminism (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1982).

<sup>4</sup>My main source for the distinction between these two types of feminist approaches to human nature is philosopher Jean Grimshaw's book, Philosophy and Feminist Thinking (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). See especially Chapter 4, "Human Nature and Women's Nature", pp. 104-138.

The terms 'single anthropology' and 'dual anthropology' are used by Roman Catholic theologian Anne Carr in the chapter on "Theological Anthropology and the Experience of Women" in her book Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience, (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1988, pp. 117-133). Carr's description of feminist views of human nature in terms of this distinction corresponds roughly to the distinction made by Grimshaw.

<sup>5</sup>Kate Millett, Sexual Politics (London: Virago, 1977) p. 26. Cited by Grimshaw, op. cit., p. 114.

<sup>6</sup>Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963), pp. 272-273, 266. Cited by Grimshaw, op. cit., p. 115.

<sup>7</sup>Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, (Penguin, 1972; 1st edn., 1949) p. 514. Cited by Grimshaw, op. cit., p. 116.

<sup>8</sup>Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986, 1976) p. 40.

<sup>9</sup>Adrienne Rich, op. cit., pp. 39-40.

<sup>10</sup>Idem.

<sup>11</sup>Susan Griffin, Made from this Earth: An Anthology of Writings by Susan Griffin (New York: Harper & Row, 1982) p. 166.

<sup>12</sup>Reprinted in Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion, Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) p. 25-41. First printed in The Journal of Religion (April, 1960).

<sup>13</sup>Judith Plaskow, Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and The Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich (Lanham: University Press of America, 1980).

<sup>14</sup>Saiving, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>15</sup>Plaskow, op. cit., pp. 69-70.

<sup>16</sup>Saiving, op. cit., p. 29.

<sup>17</sup>Plaskow, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>18</sup>Plaskow, op. cit., pp. 10-11.

<sup>19</sup>Plaskow, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>20</sup>Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) and Mapping the Moral Domain: A Contribution of Women's Thinking to Psychological Theory and Education, Carol Gilligan, Janie Victoria Ward, Jill McLean Taylor, with Betty Bardige, eds. (Cambridge: Center for the Study of Gender, Education and Human Development, 1988).

<sup>21</sup>My summaries of Gilligan's two perspectives on morality and self are based on Nona Plessner Lyons' "Two Perspectives: On Self, Relationships, and Morality" in Mapping the Moral Domain: A Contribution of Women's Thinking to Psychological Theory and Education, Carol Gilligan, Janie Victoria Ward, Jill McLean Taylor, with Betty Bardige, eds., pp. 21-48. See especially Tables 1 and 2, pp. 33, 35.

<sup>22</sup>When Gilligan began her work, psychologists saw moral development in terms of the individual's development towards an understanding of the idea of justice. Female subjects were not used in the empirical work which was the basis for these developmental schemas. When Lawrence Kohlberg's model of moral development was applied to girls and women, they were seen to have less sense of justice than boys and men.

In Gilligan's analysis, neither moral perspective is an immature stage on the way to the other perspective. The two perspectives are two ways of seeing and organizing reality. Both perspectives are based in life-long concerns of human individuals and also have a developmental history in the life of the individual (Carol Gilligan and Grant Wiggins, "The Origins of Morality in Early Childhood Relationships" in Mapping the Moral Domain, p. 111).

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., pp. 114-115.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>25</sup>Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) and Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>26</sup>Nancy Chodorow, "Family Structure and Feminine Personality" in Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory, p. 45.

<sup>27</sup>Nancy Chodorow, "Being and Doing: A Cross-Cultural Examination of the Socialization of Males and Females" in Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory, pp. 23-44.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 42.