

# Carol Gilligan's hermeneutic method for ethics

## O método hermenêutico de Carol Gilligan para a ética

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### ABSTRACT

This article aims to elucidate the method employed by the American philosopher Carol Gilligan to investigate ethics. It argues that her *Listening Guide* aligns with the assumptions of Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. By conducting her empirical research using this method, Gilligan contributes to addressing the contemporary problem of the grounding morality and to articulating a plausible ethical concept from a feminist perspective – namely that of responsible care.

**Keywords:** Ethics. Method. Listening Guide. Hermeneutics. Responsible care.

### RESUMO

Esse artigo tem o objetivo de explicitar o método adotado pela filósofa estadunidense Carol Gilligan para pensar a ética. Defende-se aqui a hipótese interpretativa de que seu *Listening Guide* está de acordo com os pressupostos da hermenêutica filosófica de Hans-Georg Gadamer. Como resultado de ter conduzido suas pesquisas empíricas com esse método, a autora contribui para o enfrentamento do problema contemporâneo da fundamentação da moral e constrói um conceito ético plausível desde uma abordagem feminista, que é o de cuidado responsável.

**Palavras-chave:** Ética. Método. *Listening Guide*. Hermenêutica. Cuidado responsável

## 1 Introduction

Some contemporary ethical concepts incorporate hermeneutics as a methodological approach to ethics and, in doing so, provide broader and more equitable guidance for human actions in the face of moral conflicts. We hypothesize that Carol Gilligan's ethics of care constitutes one such ethical theory. It is not self-evident, however, that the foundation of the method she employs to develop her ethical concept of responsible care is rooted in hermeneutics, understood as a philosophical theory, such as Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.

However, when Gilligan's method for apprehending and analyzing discourses, known as the *Listening Guide*, is compared with the dialogical method proposed by philosophical hermeneutics, this correspondence appears plausible. Moreover, both hermeneutics and Gilligan's theoretical and methodological approach to ethics explicitly oppose theories and methodologies justified by epistemologies with universalist orientations, such as rationalism, constructivism, and positivism. For Gadamer and Gilligan, one limitation of these perspectives is their neglect of the historical, contextual, and psychological origins of their ideals, thereby overlooking various other forms of human praxis and the alternative approaches they may offer to philosophical inquiry.

In the case of ethics, what these theories fail to adequately consider are the accounts of concrete moral agents regarding the solutions they have found to address real-life conflicts, since their priority lies in defending their concepts and judgments as universally valid rather than subjecting them to revision when empirical observation indicates it is necessary. In contrast, Gilligan emphasizes attending to the ways in which individuals speak, particularly those who have been silenced because they do not conform to the parameters of universalist ethics. She recognizes that morality is lived in connection with our relationships with others and with the cultures in which we live, and that, as such, an ethical concept constructed independently of these contexts may be subject to both observational and evaluative biases.

Analogously, philosophical hermeneutics, in addressing the theme of truth in general, is oriented toward interpreting the activity through which factual life opens itself to the linguistic world – an activity that encompasses diverse and equally plausible truths. It does so not through abstraction, but by taking into account our dialogue with others and the context from which we inquire into meaning, thereby establishing the conditions necessary for interpretation. Our aim is to highlight Gilligan's contribution by situating it within the history of thought from the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics, emphasizing its relevance not only for ethics and psychology but also for philosophical and scientific inquiry more broadly.

## 2 Statement of the problem

Contemporary ethics, as moral philosophy, not only presupposes reflection on the language of morality but may also serve to guide actions and apply the results of such reflection across different spheres of social life. This is possible because ethics "traces back to reflection on the different moralities and the different ways of rationally justifying moral life [, potentially indicating] which moral conception is more reasonable" (Cortina; Martínez, 2015, p. 9). The capacity of ethics to provide a foundation for morality, and thereby guide action, derives from the recognition that morality exists as a fact across different societies. Considering this possibility,

it is prudent to take advantage of it by adopting, at the very least, a morality grounded in rational argumentation, "instead of a morally dogmatically imposed code or [reasons for action characterized by the] absence of moral references" (Cortina; Martínez, 2015, p. 21).

However, according to Ernst Tugendhat (2019, p. 12-13), when confronted with the complexity of numerous contemporary moral conflicts – such as abortion, global poverty, and the responsibilities toward future generations – and recognizing that multiple plausible moral conceptions exist, each claiming greater reasonableness than the others, the following question arises: Can morality be justified? This philosophical problem may also be formulated as follows: How can one claim greater plausibility for a particular moral conception over others if absolute justification is deemed unacceptable in today's context? (Tugendhat, 2019). In response to this problem, some strands of contemporary ethics that advocate for some form of moral justification proceed by defending an absolute justification for morality, thereby rejecting moral relativism. Carol Gilligan's ethics, however, rejects the possibility of absolute justification for morality; yet her defense of the concept of responsible care as a foundation for morality contrasts sharply with a defense of moral relativism<sup>1</sup>.

Gilligan is an American feminist, ethicist, and psychologist who has made significant contributions to the fields of moral development psychology<sup>2</sup> and ethics since the 1970s. She is best known for her book *In a Different Voice*, published in 1982. In this work, she critiques hegemonic moral theories of moral development, such as that of Lawrence Kohlberg<sup>3</sup> (1981), and presents the stages of the ethics of care, grounded in responsible care. Her approach involves conducting empirical investigations as well as interpreting and evaluating their findings, while rejecting rationalist, constructivist, and positivist epistemologies. At first glance, this distinction may suggest that Gilligan adopts a naturalistic methodology in *In a Different Voice*, as she had done in an earlier study (Gilligan; Belenky, 1980). However, she later clarifies (Gilligan *et al.*, 2006) that in conducting and interpreting the interviews fundamental to the construction of her ethics of care, presented in her 1982 work, she had already been employing a method she herself had developed – namely, the *Listening Guide* – which we understand to be a hermeneutic method.

Indeed, the idea that ethical inquiries should incorporate scientific knowledge and empirical investigation is referred to as the attempt to naturalize ethics. One argument in favor of naturalizing ethics is that the progress of scientific knowledge has enabled the

<sup>1</sup> The idea that the justification of morality is not absolute does not necessarily lead to the thesis of moral relativism – that is, to the view that "it would be a mistake to make judgments about [moral codes vastly different from our own] or to try to conform them to our own code" (Wong, 2013, p. 896). In fact, those who adopt this perspective assume that either a moral conception must be justified absolutely, or, if this is not the case, that it cannot be justified at all. However, even the relativist, who denies that morality can have universal validity, does not reject the possibility of asserting "that only one moral code has universal validity (perhaps because human nature and the human condition impose that there is a 'better' code)" (Wong, 2013, p. 896).

<sup>2</sup> Moral development psychology is a science grounded in empirical research, focused on the "construction of theoretical models aimed at finding an adequate explanation of the processes that guide and define the adoption of individual values across the various spheres of human activity" (Branco; Martins, 2001, p. 169). In theoretical models that present stages of moral development, the foundation of morality is represented in the final stage. Similar to ethicists, moral development theorists may claim that their theoretical models possess universal value. This means that their descriptions and explanations of the psychological processes motivating moral actions constitute scientific knowledge relevant to the ethical problem of moral justification (Cadilha, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Kohlberg is known for his theory of stages of moral development, which originated in his doctoral dissertation (1958), when he presented the process of adopting moral values as a long and complex path divided into three levels and six stages: Level I – Pre-conventional (Stage 1: obedience and punishment orientation; Stage 2: self-interest orientation); Level II – Conventional (Stage 3: interpersonal expectations orientation; Stage 4: maintaining social order orientation); Level III – Post-conventional (Stage 5: utilitarian and contractual orientation; Stage 6: orientation by universalizable ethical principles). Assuming that this classification was valid and universal, although he did not include women in his doctoral studies, Kohlberg continued his research in 1968, extending it to studies across different cultures" (Pereira, 2023, p. 215).

integration of human beings into the world around them (Cadilha, 2010) in a way that allows us to consider the ethical possibilities we aim to realize, particularly those that we are able to implement in practice. These conditions encompass the motivations for action, which influence human behavior in concrete situations, their needs as human beings, and the ways in which societies tend to function<sup>4</sup>. According to naturalistic ethicists, ethics is concerned with understanding moral phenomena themselves, rather than our philosophical concept of moral phenomena (Kornblith, 2017).

According to this argument, "any approach to epistemology today [, including, therefore, moral epistemology,] that [...] seeks to present a view of knowledge and justification informed by an account of human psychology will need to take into account current work in the cognitive sciences" (Kornblith, 2017, p. 141), such as psychology. In this sense, even if one could argue that reflection on which ethical possibilities, we aim to realize is not reducible to scientific knowledge, the absence of such knowledge undermines ethical reflection. The cognitive sciences enable engaging with moral phenomena in a manner that does not dissociate what we believe ought to be the case (norm) from what we value<sup>5</sup> and are able to realize (ethical ideal).

However, how far can naturalism extend in ethical reflection? Drawing on cultural anthropology, we can assume that human beings have the capacity both to learn norms and to question the norms they have learned (Tugendhat, 2003). Drawing on moral psychology, we can assume that there are psychological processes that influence and shape the adoption of individual values. Nevertheless, determining the foundation of morality and the content of the stages of moral development are tasks that exceed the scope of attempts to naturalize ethics and moral development psychology. The only aspect that can be empirically verified regarding the foundation of morality is that human beings within a specific cultural context consider and defend certain actions as good or bad, and consequently, as acceptable or reprehensible (Pereira, 2020). For this reason, some naturalist theorists tend to assert that morality cannot be justified as having universal value (Brito, 2023), even provisionally. However, acknowledging the contributions of naturalism to ethics – such as its insistence that morality cannot be empirically justified - does not imply that morality cannot be justified in any way.

### 3 Carol Gilligan's method for ethics

Gilligan sought to conduct empirical investigations grounded in scientific knowledge, while also attempting to determine the stages of moral development and, consequently, a foundation for morality. Indeed, her contributions were both interpretative and evaluative, yet they remained closely tied to what real individuals communicated (Jaggar, 2000). For this purpose, she considered naturalistic studies important (Gilligan; Belenky, 1980), but only insofar as they provided sufficient material for her interpretations and evaluations – so much so that

<sup>4</sup> This is a direct critique, particularly of religious moral conceptions, which assume that morality originates from a divine entity within us. She also critiques metaphysical ethics, such as Immanuel Kant's, which assumes that morality is accessible to human beings as members of a kind of "virtual community" of rational agents, known as the "kingdom of ends" (Kant, 1911; Cadilha, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> "The idea that morality can constitute a last refuge for philosophical speculation, safe from attempts at naturalization, and that moral reflection is, and ought to be, purely *a priori*, is based on a more radical thesis with significant philosophical 'weight' – the idea of the separation between fact and value. [...] [In other words,] there is a difference between wanting to know why we have the norms we have and wanting to know why we believe to be right is, in fact, right" (Cadilha, 2010, p. 349-350). In contrast, naturalist ethicists maintain that what ought to be the case is largely aligned with what we value.

she was criticized, from a naturalistic perspective, for deriving “very general conclusions about women from a sample that was highly unrepresentative” (Jaggar, 2000, p. 460).

However, Gilligan's (1982) aim was not to advocate a naturalistic methodology, but rather to observe particular experiences and social contexts, especially those of women – who, according to her, had been described and evaluated in an insufficient or biased manner – in order to investigate if and how women's insights, as moral agents, are shaped by these experiences. In 1980, together with Mary Field Belenky, she published the study *A Naturalistic Study of Abortion Decisions*, in which she “began to study moral judgment and moral action by interviewing women about their decision-making in a real dilemma situation they faced: whether or not to have an abortion”<sup>6</sup> (Kohlberg, 1982, p. 513).

This study demonstrated that “discrepancies between hypothetical judgments and reasoning about an actual choice can predict the clinical outcome of the crisis and the occurrence of developmental change”<sup>7</sup> (Gilligan; Belenky, 1980, p. 69); in other words, it revealed that examining a morally complex real choice uncovers a different form of morality. To support this thesis, in her book *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan “uses [these] interviews [about abortion dilemmas and interviews from two other studies<sup>8</sup>] to obtain individuals' verbal explanations of their normative moralities” (Addelson, 1993, p. 290, n. 11). In the case of women facing the abortion dilemma, she observed moral judgment and moral action grounded in care and responsibility for relationships — that is, a greater understanding of the choice between one's own needs and the care for others as fundamental to decision-making. Through this, Gilligan uncovered the ethics of care<sup>9</sup> and its stages.

“The logic underlying an ethic of care is a psychological logic of relationships, which contrasts with the formal logic of fairness [(equality and reciprocity)] that informs the justice approach” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 73). Indeed, “care becomes the self-chosen principle of a

<sup>6</sup> In 1973, abortion was legalized in the United States by the Supreme Court in the case *Roe v. Wade*.

<sup>7</sup> Another form of normative morality can emerge, particularly when individuals occupy certain social roles in which adherence to a given moral standard is not possible.

<sup>8</sup> “The college student study explored identity and moral development in the early adult years by relating the view of self and thinking about morality to experiences of moral conflict and the making of life choices. Twenty-five students, selected at random from a group who had chosen to take a course on moral and political choice, were interviewed as seniors in college and then five years following graduation. [...] The abortion decision study considered the relation between experience and thought and the role of conflict in development. Twenty-nine women, ranging in age from fifteen to thirty-three, diverse in ethnic background and social class, some single, some married, a few the mother of a preschool child, were interviewed during the first trimester of a confirmed pregnancy at a time when they were considering abortion. [...] Of the twenty-nine women referred, complete interview data were available for twenty-four, and of these twenty-four, twenty-one were interviewed again at the end of the year following choice. [...] The hypotheses generated by these studies concerning different modes of thinking about morality and their relation to different views of self were further explored and refined through the rights and responsibilities study. This study involved a sample of males and females matched for age, intelligence, education, occupation, and social class at nine points across the life cycle: ages 6-9, 11, 15, 19, 22, 25-27, 35, 45, and 60. From a total sample of 144 (8 males and 8 females at each age), including a more intensively interviewed subsample of 36 (2 males and 2 females at each age), data were collected on conceptions of self and morality, experiences of moral conflict and choice, and judgments of hypothetical moral dilemmas” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 2-3).

<sup>9</sup> “The three moral perspectives revealed by the abortion decision study denote a sequence in the development of the ethic of care. [...] In this sequence, an initial focus on caring for the self in order to ensure survival is followed by a transitional phase in which this judgment is criticized as selfish. The criticism signals a new understanding of the connection between self and others which is articulated by the concept of responsibility. The elaboration of this concept of responsibility and its fusion with a maternal morality that seeks to ensure care for the dependent and unequal characterizes the second perspective. At this point, the good is equated with caring for others. However, when only others are legitimized as the recipients of the woman's care, the exclusion of herself gives rise to problems in relationships, creating a disequilibrium that initiates the second transition. The equation of conformity with care, in its conventional definition, and the illogic of the inequality between other and self, lead to a reconsideration of relationships in an effort to sort out the confusion between self-sacrifice and care inherent in the conventions of feminine goodness. The third perspective focuses on the dynamics of relationships and dissipates the tension between selfishness and responsibility through a new understanding of the interconnection between other and self” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 73-74).

judgment that remains psychological in its concern with relationships and response but becomes universal<sup>10</sup> in its condemnation of exploitation and hurt" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 74). Thus, this concept of care serves as a guide for judging moral good even in complex situations of moral conflict, such as the abortion dilemma. Seeking "to offer 'a pathway into relationship rather than a fixed framework for interpretation'", Gilligan *et al.* (2006, p. 254) ultimately developed a method for use in qualitative research interviews called the *Listening Guide*, a relational, voice-centered method<sup>11</sup>. Although she does not attempt to explain her empirical findings based on fixed hypotheses, it can be understood that she operates under certain hermeneutic assumptions.

First, Gilligan adopts a feminist perspective based on her own experiences as a woman and her role as a researcher (Pereira, 2023). She then assumes that her method is universally applicable, "because every person has a voice or a way of speaking or communicating that renders the silent and invisible inner world audible and visible to another" (Gilligan *et al.*, 2006, p. 253). She also asserts that her method is relevant to ethics because, according to her, "the way people talk about their lives [...], the language they use, and the connections they make reveal the world they see and in which they act" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 1-2). Furthermore, Gilligan *et al.* (2006, p. 254) assume "that human development occurs in relation to others and, as such, our [moral reasoning] is inextricable from our relationships with others and with the cultures within which we live", or from our particular experiences.

Similarly, Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics is recognized for its universal applicability in cases involving the interpretation of differences in language use (Gadamer, 2010). However, strictly speaking, as Summa (2011, p. 47) observes, it cannot "be equated with a purely methodological or transcendental" orientation, because hermeneutics is far more concerned with praxis than with the application of rules (Pereira, 2024). As a philosophical theory, its object is understanding in general – that is, the activity of opening factual life to the linguistic world, through which meanings transmitted by tradition, carrying diverse and equally plausible truths, are discursively actualized (Pereira, 2015). It achieves this not through abstraction, but by considering our dialogue with others and the context from which we inquire into meaning, thereby obtaining certain conditions for interpretation. In other words, philosophical hermeneutics takes hermeneutic consciousness as its principle, developed in each concrete situation whenever a meaning is appropriated through dialogue. This process never completes for the human task of understanding language, whether due to incomplete awareness of the particular way in which we use language or because we never exhaust the possible "actualizations" of a meaning transmitted by someone other than ourselves.

<sup>10</sup> With this statement, Gilligan demonstrates that the discovery of the ethical concept of responsible care is not the result of a naturalistic description of a female morality. She further defends her claim to universalize this concept, which stands in contrast to a naturalist philosophical orientation.

<sup>11</sup> "The *Listening Guide* method is a way of analyzing qualitative interviews that is best used when one's question requires listening to particular aspects of a person's expression of her or his own complex and multilayered individual experiences and the relational and cultural contexts within which they occur. It is a particularly useful tool for discovery research; to uncover new questions to pursue through focusing in on and learning from individual experiences. It is a relational method in the sense that it intentionally brings the researcher into relationship with the participant through making our responses, experiences, and interpretive lenses explicit in the process, and by listening to each participant's first-person voice before moving in to listen for answers to our own research questions. It is also relational in that the specific way the method is operationalized changes in response to, and via the process of, analyses. Through each of these steps we actively bring ourselves and our research question into relationship with the person's spoken experience to direct the analytical process, creating an opening for that person to shift our way of listening, the question that we ask, and the ways in which we ask them" (Gilligan *et al.*, 2006, p. 267-268).



Although hermeneutics proposes a dialogical method, it does not endorse a relativist position (Pereira, 2024). Certain experiences – such as the experience of questioning, metaphorically understood as an experience of listening – can lead a broader and more just understanding than others. In the context of ethically particular moral conceptions, hermeneutics assumes an even more important role, since what is considered the best model for virtuous conduct has no objective reference except in the observation of particular experiences within specific contexts and in evaluating their relevance in relation to other, distinct contexts. Although philosophical hermeneutics has been highly influential in reflections within the field of ontology, it is currently being considered in an “empirical-anthropological turn”, such that, based on these ontological assumptions, we can conceive, according to Gjesdal (2017, p. 338), of “a hermeneutic methodology to clarify and enhance our approaches to understanding and interpretation”, both in ethics and in other areas of knowledge.

## 4 Final considerations

As Gilligan *et al.* (2006, p. 254) argues, ethics cannot be definitively justified, but it is possible to “provide a way of systematically attending to the many voices embedded in a person’s expressed experience” and to justify a moral concept thus obtained by arguing for its greater applicability and fairness in comparison with another moral concept, as she did in contrast to Kohlberg’s ethics of justice.

In *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan drew attention to a normative morality of a social group – namely the group of women she interviewed. Researchers conducting qualitative empirical studies are unlikely to be surprised by Gilligan’s empirical findings; what may attract their attention are her interpretations of those findings. However, particularly in contexts of discrimination against certain social groups, such as women – whether through conscious or unconscious refusal to recognize the integrity and validity of their perspectives – studies like Gilligan’s have proven pioneering in advocating for the inclusion of diverse voices. Indeed, this continues to exemplify the work of a philosopher today.

As a result, according to Jaggar (2000, p. 460), her work “was enormously influential in encouraging feminists to naturalize their approaches”, in advocating for the applicability of the ethics of care in other spheres of thought, such as education, as Noddings (2013) did; in reflection on the connections of the ethics of care with other areas of philosophy, such as political philosophy, as shown by Zirbel (2016) and Kuhnen (2021); in developing a philosophy of care, as argued by Mortari (2018); and in applying her *Listening Guide* method to qualitative research in different fields of knowledge (Gilligan; Eddy, 2017).

This method, in turn, is closely associated with her ethical concept of responsible care and alerts philosophers and scientists to the limits and influences of our theoretical claims, and consequently, to the risks of exclusion and objectification inherent in these theories. The alternative suggested by Gilligan to address this challenge is to make a sustained effort to listen to voices different from those to which we are accustomed. In *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan was able to expand the understanding of human development precisely because she succeeded in suspending her preconceived definition of what it means to be human and effectively began to consider diverse voices.

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