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Carol Gilligan's Philosophy of Psychology as Resistance to Injustice and Patriarchy

A filosofia da psicologia de Carol Gilligan como resistência à injustiça e ao patriarcado

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the contribution of Carol Gilligan's philosophy of psychology to moral philosophy. It argues that Gilligan provides a suitable philosophy of psychology in the sense demanded by Elisabeth Anscombe – one that allows moral philosophy to acknowledge the social and psychological origins of its ideals. Given the interpretative challenges posed by Gilligan's work – stemming from the diversity and complexity of her themes and her writing style – this article aims to clarify her philosophical contribution. After exploring the influence of modern moral philosophy on contemporary psychological theories, its entanglement with patriarchy, and the injustices it perpetuates, Gilligan's approach is presented as both an alternative framework and a form of resistance. Her philosophy of psychology defends relational justice and responsible care as foundational principles, aligning with Anscombe's call for a more psychologically grounded moral philosophy.

KEYWORDS: Philosophy of Psychology, Moral Philosophy, Patriarchy, Justice, Resistance.

RESUMO:

Esse artigo examina a contribuição da filosofia da psicologia de Carol Gilligan para a filosofia moral. Sustenta-se que a autora propõe uma filosofia da psicologia adequada, nos termos exigidos por Elisabeth Anscombe, de modo que a filosofia moral possa reconhecer a gênese social e psicológica de seus ideais. Considerando os desafios interpretativos que a obra de Gilligan impõe – em razão da diversidade e complexidade dos temas tratados, bem como de seu estilo de escrita –, o artigo busca elucidar sua

contribuição filosófica. Após analisar a influência da filosofia moral moderna nas filosofias da psicologia contemporâneas, sua relação com o patriarcado e as injustiças dele decorrentes, apresenta-se a filosofia da psicologia de Gilligan como uma alternativa e uma forma de resistência. Trata-se da defesa da justiça relacional e do cuidado responsável como fundamentos de uma filosofia da psicologia adequada, tal como reivindicado por Anscombe.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Filosofia da psicologia, Filosofia moral, Patriarcado, Justiça, Resistência.

INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Anscombe (1919-2001), in her influential essay *Modern Moral Philosophy*, contends that "it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy […] until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology"(Anscombe. 1958, p. 1) – that is, a philosophy capable of accounting for how morality manifests in the human mind. According to Anscombe, engaging in moral philosophy is futile without considering, for instance, the variability of mental processes, including the diverse forms of moral motivation and their interaction with social context. Her diagnosis reflects the condition of moral philosophy in her historical moment, in which non-religious moral systems were either: (1) secularizing the legalistic framework of religious moralities – particularly the notion that we are bound to act according to certain moral laws; or (2) attempting justify the moral domain through an overly reductive understanding of the psychological foundations of moral behavior.

In the first case, Immanuel Kant's ethic is exemplary. Kant sought to ground morality transcendently – that is, he argued for the existence of an *a priori* moral law of reason, one that processes unconditional value and is independent of human motivations, intentions, or contextual factors (Kant. 2011, p. 31–32). This law provides objective criteria for determining what is morally right, and we are bound to it through a feeling of respect – an affective response that arises from the recognition of something as rational in a specific sense. In the second case, the utilitarian ethics of British philosophers such as John Stuart Mill serve as paradigmatic. Mill attempted to ground morality psychologically, asserting that the existence of the moral domain is justified by the psychological motivation to seek pleasure and avoid pain (Mill . 2000, p. 187). Accordingly, the moral principle to which we commit ourselves becomes the pursuit of what is useful for achieving this end.

According to Anscombe, both strands of modern moral philosophy fail "to realize the necessity for stipulation as to relevant descriptions, if [their] theory is to have content"(Anscombe. 1958, p. 2), as

they focus on grounding morality[1] in a neutral and definitive manner – as thought their principles were unrelated to any concrete moral code. Anscombe argues that even if, within a given moral code, it is considered unjust to cause a certain harm to someone (e.g., failing to repay a debt) this does not imply that one is, in that moment, morally obliged not to cause such harm unless relevant descriptions are specified that contextualize the situation (e.g., one's inability to repay the debt) (Anscombe. 1958, p. 3–4). While modern philosophers were correct in asserting that morality cannot be grounded empirically – since such grounding would merely describe how individuals from specific social groups in fact behave morally (Pereira, 2020, p. 6–7) – they erred in conceiving of human morality in an abstract, decontextualized manner, as if it were an intrinsic part of human nature, rather than a historical and collective construction.

From an ethnological standpoint, the only thing that can be affirmed about morality is that it "consists in those regularities of behavior that are based on social pressure. [However,] the systems of norms [that constitute it] may change historically depending on the conditions of the social environment" (Tugendhat, 2003, p. 15). While modern moral philosophy recognizes the existence of diverse moral codes, it errs in assuming that these norms – emerging from everyday life – can be justified or corrected through a procedure that authentically expresses what everyone could will. It overlooks the fact that the very notion of a moral obligation grounded in interests presumed to be universally sharable (Cortina; Martínez, 2015, p. 110–111) has a specific social and psychological genesis.

The notion that the sphere of justice must be limited to actions performed in accordance with specific laws – laws that entail obligation – can be traced back to the legalistic conception in moral philosophy, according to which acting justly means doing what is required by divine law. This view, in turn, presupposes belief in a divine legislator, or at least the persistence of this idea in a secularized form, such that it continues to function even after its original theological basis has been abandoned (Anscombe, 1958, p. 4–5). Beyond this social genesis, the legalistic conception of ethics may also have a psychological origin – namely, the motivation to possess power and to exercise coercion over others – especially when this conception legitimizes the exploitation of others.

If the fundamental ethical challenge today is not to discover procedures for validating interests that are, in themselves, universalizable, but rather to defend something that can be upheld as a practical good – fostering bonds of social cohesion – then the question becomes: how can we conceive of an

[1] Ernst Tugendhat (2019, pp. 25–26) summarizes the problem of grounding morality as follows: "all current ethics seems to me to commit two fundamental errors. First, it is assumed that must either be a single (absolute) foundation or none at all [...]. Second, [...] the moral principle is taken to be established[, although] [...] modern moral thought [has led us] to a variety of principles that partially overlap but, as principles, ultimately compete with one other."

ethics that acknowledges the socio-psychological genesis of its ideals, thereby giving meaning to the collective prioritization of certain good as something "we could all will", not in the abstract, but in the context of our lived reality? Anscombe contend that what is most urgently needed is an adequate philosophy of psychology. In this article, I argue that the philosophy of psychology developed by moral psychologist Carol Gilligan (1936–) offers a compelling response to this problem.

HOW MODERN MORAL PHILOSOPHY SHAPED THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS OF PIAGET AND KOHLBERG

Even before the publication of Anscombe's *Modern Moral Philosophy*, there were already philosophies of psychology attentive to moral concerns. A prominent example Jean Piaget's (1896-1980) theory of moral development, which inherits some notions of Kantian ethic[2]. Piaget engaged with the conceptual foundations of his moral psychology – particularly the notions of justice and autonomy – offering both a normative model that delineates the criteria of morally advanced development and a method for the psychological and philosophical interpretation of his empirical findings. However, in her landmark work *In a Different Voice* (1982) – which synthesizes the results of three studies she conducted in the 1970s in the field of moral developmental psychology[3] – Carol Gilligan contends that both Piaget's and her contemporary Lawrence Kohlberg's (1927-1987) theories of moral development are inadequate due to observational biases and as well as normative (value-laden) assumptions.

In *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (1932), Piaget (1994, p. 23) argues that his studies on the rules of children's games – which he regarded as models of social institutions – demonstrated that, as boys gradually came to understanding the interests of other participants, they became "increasingly fascinated with the legal elaboration of rules and the development of fair procedures for adjudicating conflicts" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 10), a behavior he associated with an advanced stage of moral development. By contrast, according to Piaget, girls "have a much less developed legal spirit than boys. [...] they are less explicit than boys, and [...] less concerned with legal elaboration. As long as the game is possible, the rule

[2] "All morality consists of a system of rules, and the essence of morality must be sought in the respect that the individual acquires for these rules. Kant's reflective analysis [...] aligns with this view: doctrinal divergences arise only when one attempts to explain how conscience comes to respect the rules. It is this 'how' that we will attempt to analyze independently, within the field of child psychology." (Piaget, 1994, p. 23)

[3] "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. […] The *abortion decision study* considered the relation between experience and thought and the role of conflict in development. […] 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." (Gilligan, 1982, p. 2-3)

is good. The tolerance of the female players is [...] high" (Piaget. 1994, p. 69, 73–74), a tendency he interpreted as indicative of moral deficiency. Underlying this normative assessment of empirical observations is a conception of legalistic and procedural morality, in which justice consists in compelling individuals to do what is morally right, and the moral advancement is associated with a movement toward personal autonomy – namely, the capacity to determine one's actions according to a rationally self-legislated moral law, independent of particular emotions or interpersonal relationships.

Taking a step further, Kohlberg , in his unpublished doctoral thesis titled *The Development of Modes of Moral Thought and Choice in the Years 10 to 16* (1958), adopts Piaget's conception of morality (Kohlberg. 1984, p. 340). Despite not including girls in his thesis sample[4], he claims (1982, p. 514) to have described and demonstrated an invariant sequence of moral development, structured in three levels and six stages, with the final stage corresponding to Piaget's notions of justice and autonomy. Although Kohlberg defended himself against accusations of sexism in his research – stating that he "never directly stated that [boys] have a more developed sense of justice than do [girls]"(Kohlberg. 1984, p. 340), as Piaget did – studies in moral psychology based on his theory and methodology tend to show that girls perform worse than boys[5].

As Gilligan argues in *In a Different Voice*, the very "standard format of Kohlberg's interview procedure, the description of the dilemma itself"(Gilligan. 1982, p. 25-26) – such as the well-known Heinz dilemma[6], which involves choosing between private property or preserving a life – is already oriented toward electing a decision about the "right thing to do". Respondents who struggle to make such a choice are interpreted as exhibiting moral confusion or failure. Moreover, moral development was assessed using a standardized scoring manual. According to this metric, most girls and women were classified as reaching only the third stage of development, where moral reasoning is based primarily on conformity to group expectations in order to avoid disapproval and rejection from others.

[4] The sample consisted of 72 white middle-class boys from Chicago, aged 10, 13, and 16 (cf. Kohlberg, 1981, p. 185). This was a longitudinal study designed to track their moral development through interviews conducted every three years until reaching adulthood. Following this initial research, Kohlberg continued to carry out empirical investigations in which he "explores moral development in other cultures" (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 23) but only began to include girls in his studies starting in 1969.

[5] Such was the case in the *college student study* conducted by Gilligan and Murphy (1980) – her collaborator – in the 1970s, in which moral judgment continued to be assessed using Kohlberg's methodology.

[6] The Heinz dilemma is described by Kohlberg (1981, p. 12) as follows: "In Europe, a woman was near death from a very bad disease, a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her [...]. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. [...] The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could get together only [...] half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, 'No [...]'. Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife. Should the husband have done that? Was it right or wrong?"

Observing this result, Gilligan puts forward the thesis that the psychological theories of these authors exhibit not only observational but also value based biases – insofar as they promote a conception of justice and moral rationality grounded in autonomy –, one that excludes women by disregarding their experiences and omitting "certain truths about life" (Gilligan. 1982, p. 1-2; 6; 11). As a consequence of this exclusion, it becomes evident that, although legalistic and procedural conception of morality offer several benefits – such as recognizing individuals as autonomous moral agents and creating predictability in social and institutional relations – the application of the norms it justifies may result in injustices by failing to account for relevant contextual descriptions and human vulnerabilities. Moreover, such conception of morality may be permissive of exploitation, for instance by devaluing caregiving functions – functions that, in certain contexts, are largely or exclusively assigned to women, "especially those situated in particular social positions" (Kuhnen, 2023, p. 15).

Although Gilligan later acknowledges that Piaget, at least to some extent, recognized the issue – inasmuch as (1) he identified the limitations of both testing and purely observational methods in psychological research, given their entanglement with the worldview of the tester or observer (Gilligan. 2023, p. 57), and (2) he argued that only through the clinical method can one uncover not where someone fits within a given worldview but rather how that person conceives reality – she nonetheless invokes Audre Lorde (2018) to remind us that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house".

TOWARD AN ADEQUATE PHILOSOPHY OF PSYCHOLOGY: RELATIONAL JUSTICE AND RESPONSIBLE CARE AS FOUNDATIONAL ASSUMPTIONS

In order to develop an adequate philosophy of psychology aligned with human development – one that (1) takes into account "particular aspects of a person's expression on her or his own complex and multilayered individual experiences and the relational and cultural contexts within which they occur" (Gilligan et al., 2006, p. 267–268), and (2) identifies whether social cohesion bonds have emerged from these experiences, through which a collectively determined good is prioritized – Gilligan devised and applied a new method of moral inquiry. This is the "listening guide", a voice-centered relational method[7], the use of which led Gilligan – already in the second and third studies conducted in the 1970s and

[7] "It is a relational method in the sense that it intentionally places the researcher in relationship with the participant by making our responses, experiences, and interpretative lenses explicit in the process, and by hearing the first-person voice of each participant before proceeding to hear the responses to our own research questions. It is also relational in the sense that the specific way the method is operationalized changes in response to, and through the process of, analysis. Through each of these steps, we actively place ourselves and our research question in relationship with the spoken experience of the person to guide the analytical process, creating an openness for that person to change our way of listening, the question we ask, and the ways in which we ask it." (Gilligan et al., 2006, p. 267-268)

presented in *In a Different Voice* – to formulate a new concept of justice and of what could be considered morally mature.

Especially from the second study presented in *In a Different Voice*, in which she applies this listening guide method to interviews with women facing a real-life dilemma – namely, whether or not to have an abortion – Gilligan identifies a distinct form of moral judgment and moral action grounded in care and relational responsibility. This form of judgment emerged from an expanded understanding of the tension between attending to one's own needs and caring for others, and the moral action that follows is not the application of a general rule to a particular case. Rather, it results from a kind of "calculus decision" in which multiple perspectives are considered, and contextual factors are taken into account. Through these findings, Gilligan came to believe she had uncovered the ethic of care and its developmental stages (Jaggar, 2000, p. 459) – a sequence of moral development comprising three levels, marked by two transitional shifts.

For Gilligan (Gilligan. 1982, p. 74), two key transitions mark the progression of moral development: (1) from an understanding of self-care oriented toward individual survival (level 1) – perceived as selfishness – to the development of a sensitivity to the needs of others and a sense of responsibility for their care (level 2); and (2) from the realization that the socially constructed link between this care and feminine goodness (level 2) – understood as self-sacrifice – to a form to responsible care grounded in the reconsideration of responsibilities and the recognition of both the self's and the other's needs (level 3). At this third level, justice, as emphasized by Gilligan and Naomi Snider (2018, p. 119), "depends on equal voice and responsive engagement" – that is, on the recognition (1) that all individuals possess vulnerabilities and a voice[8] that deserves to be heard, and (2) that real needs are effectively met. In this sense, the moral maturity can be understood, in my own words, as a form of "knowing how to care" and "caring effectively", in a responsible way, both for oneself and for others.

I understand this "knowing how to care" and "caring effectively" as an expansion of the concept of autonomy. This would not refer to a personal autonomy centered on obeying self-legislated moral principles, but rather a relational autonomy, grounded in responsibilities and relationships – relationship that, in fact, make any kind of autonomy possible. From childhood to old age, we depend on others' care in order to develop the capacity for autonomous decision-making. Of course, since Gilligan does not build a moral conception from theoretical abstraction but rather begins with concrete praxis – a common

[8] According to Gilligan (2011, p. 9), "voice" is both "a concept or metaphor for the self" and "an instrument of expression". Referring to a "different voice", or the human voice, Gilligan (2003, p. 20) characterizes it as "an unmediated voice [of the cultural acoustics that distort its experience], a voice that broke free, a wild voice or [...] 'the natural voice': the voice that carries rather than covers the person's inner world".

morality lived by women – it must be acknowledged that, before this form of responsible care she observes is developed, caregiving roles were already being performed. This has led to criticism of Gilligan's ethics of care by feminist authors[9], who argued that such a theory could reinforce the idea that women should continue to perform the moral role of caregiving – a role that historically subordinated them and excluded them from full citizenship.

I believe this criticism is partially valid. Although I acknowledge that the ethic of care, as concretely lived, has involved the sacrifice of relationships or even self-sacrifice, I begin from the assumption that no morality is lived outside of a social context. If the ethics of care proves to be plausible and grounded in an adequate philosophy of psychology, then the problem of women's subjugation does not lie in the theory itself, nor in the concrete praxis, but rather in the fact that caregiving roles are socially devalued and disproportionately assigned to certain groups, rather than being shared by all. This reveals much more about our social arrangements than about the ethical framework per se. If we accept that care is a fundamental human need and imagine it as a collectively valued good, then an ethic of care only complicit in exploitation and harm within a social context – namely, one structured by patriarchy.

Moreover, Gilligan acknowledges that "care [...] remains psychological in its concern with relationships and response" (Gilligan. 1982, p. 74) but emphasizes that the psychological motivation inherent in the ideal of care is not merely about preserving relationships – it is about seeking relationships based on trust. The insistence on staying connected, on pursuing relationships in which one can be authentically oneself with another person – that is, above all, a vulnerable being with needs – is a form of resistance to patriarchy. According to Gilligan, this social organization, more than imposing caregiving roles on women, is embedded at the heart of relationships, promoting "psychological separations that have long been justified in the name of autonomy, detachment, and freedom" (Gilligan. 2021, p. 15). In *The Birth of Pleasure* (2002), Gilligan argues that what sustain the power of patriarchy – despite robust philosophies of psychology and other critical theories – is its capacity to inflict a deeper harm than mere exclusion. It endures because it sacrifices love and pleasure and is perpetuated by the "foundational stories we tell about Western civilization" (Gilligan, 2003, p. 18)[10]. In any case, I maintain that there is no morality, nor any meaningful change, that arises from nowhere. This is why Gilligan and Snider argue that even "within the psychology of loss that holds patriarchy in place are the seeds of resistance and transformation" (Gilligan; Snider 2018, p. 119).

[9] Benhabib (2021) presents three types of feminist critiques of Gilligan's ethic of care, as well as the limits of such critiques.
[10] In *The Birth of Pleasure*, Gilligan (2003) offers various examples of such foundational narratives, including Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Rex*.

CONCLUSION

Patriarchy establishes a social hierarchy that remains deeply entrenched, largely due to the hierarchical structure embedded within intimacy itself. Within this framework, the father or husband is positioned as the unquestioned authority figure – one who must be respected and never challenged. He is also exempt from relational obligations and need not emulate the culturally prescribed model of feminine goodness[11]. Women, along with children and those who serve him (such as slaves or servants), are expected to prioritize his needs, to please him, and to submit to his will. It is this internalization of hierarchy at the heart of intimate relationships that renders patriarchy, in Gilligan's words, "inherently tragic". Its inevitable consequence is violence – violence that manifests both in obedience to paternal authority, through subjugation, silencing, and even self-effacing love, and more acutely when that authority is contested.

Furthermore, since the consequence of violence is trauma – that is, "the shock to the psyche that leads to dissociation: our ability to separate ourselves from parts of ourselves" (Gilligan, 2003, p. 18) – it also separates us from certain truths about life, which are present in our honest voices (2001, p. 7), silenced many times by ourselves. Among the symptoms of dissociation are, according to Gilligan: "loss of voice, difficulty in seeing or saying what one knows, dizziness, a sense of dislocation or the 'as if' feeling of alienation"(Gilligan. 2003, p. 162). Symptoms of dissociation can also be perceived through the body, because through it we equally separate ourselves from our sensations and, therefore, from the world around us. While in girls it is common for this dissociative process to begin, according to the author's empirical findings, in adolescence, in boys it occurs very early, around four- and five-years-old, to such an extent that it is hardly noticed (Gilligan, 2003, p. 26). Consequently, not only is the opportunity to become who one is lost early on, but also the possibility of love and pleasure present in relationships of trust.

Despite this dissociative process, challenging the authority that causes trauma is almost inevitable, as there exists within us a natural response to the loss of autonomy and pleasure – namely, protest. However, this protest does not necessarily lead to transformation. As Gilligan observes, "like all trauma survivors, we keep telling the story we need to listen to and understand" (Gilligan. 2003, p. 19). In this light, the challenge lies in listening to the voice of protest as a voice of angry hope and healthy resistance

[11] In another text, I point to an example of this form of goodness as described in the religious tradition grounded in sacred scriptures. As I noted (Pereira, 2020, p. 6) "a woman being submissive (dependent and obedient) to a man (in this case, the husband) is seen as good, because this is how everyone should behave – pleasing and nonconfrontational – and the woman is precisely the being chosen by God to embody this example of perfection (Bible, 2018, p. 495, I Peter 3:1-7)".

– one capable of repairing the ruptures in relationships on which patriarchy depends. Since this tragedy affects not only women but all human beings, this voice is not a female voice but rather "a human voice"[12]. Given the way gender roles are constructed by patriarchy, this voice is not quite feminine – because it expresses anger[13] – nor is it quite masculine – because it conveys vulnerability and care (Gilligan & Snider, 2018, p. 119). That this voice has historically been associated with women is precisely because it emerges within the context of patriarchy, where its expressions of protest are often silenced.

In *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan associated the voice of protest with women, particularly those in more vulnerable situations. However, when examining the violent and traumatic context of patriarchy in *The Birth of Pleasure*, and listening to other voices, it becomes evident how it sustains a morality grounded in power and violence, while neglecting the need for care, thus harming boys and men. Gilligan envisions that healing the ruptures in relationships – by fostering relationships rooted in love among equals, responsive to one another's needs, demands, and concerns – would help prevent the sacrifice of love. In turn, this would also avert the sacrifice of justice[14], since both love and justice rely on equal voice and responsive engagement.

My concern, however, regarding this repair of ruptures in relationships and the adoption of Gilligan's philosophy of psychology, lies in the real possibility of collectively overcoming the psychological trauma inflicted by patriarchy. Is it psychologically possible, as Anscombe analogously asks, to stop repeating the same story – to break this cycle? For such transformation to occur, the driving psychological force must be love rather than power, manifest in relationships of trust (Anscombe. 1958, p. 1). Concretely, this means that boys and girls must no longer feel compelled to suppress their sense of self when relating to other; their emotional expressions should not be stifled in the name of mere social conformity to a dominant rule-based system. We must ensure that their voices are not silenced – that the voice of protest against violent and traumatic loss is heard and given resonance.

Thus, I do not view the voice of care and responsibility as one that reinforces traditional gender roles, but rather a voice that offers hope and meaning to our lives. This voice, however, is currently facing – much like it has throughout the history of resistance to patriarchy – renewed attempts at silencing. In any case, I find it difficult not to align myself with the moral ideal of relational justice and responsible care, or with the conviction that we must cultivate relationships grounded on love among equals. Perhaps,

[12] Gilligan reaffirmed this point decisively by naming her most recent book, published in 2023, *A Human Voice*.

[13] Although patriarchy associates masculinity with intellect and femininity with emotion, anger is nonetheless accepted and even encouraged in men as a sign of strength, authority, and assertiveness.

[14] Later, Gilligan and Richards (2009) argue that resisting patriarchy is equally essential, from a political standpoint, for the future of democracy.

as Gilligan writes, "love is like rain. Sometimes gentle, sometimes torrential, flooding, eroding, quiet, steady, filling the earth, collecting in hidden springs. When it rains, when we love, new life grows. [...] The sacrifice of relationship is the ritual of initiation into patriarchy [because] [...] love erodes patriarchy."(Gilligan. 2003, p. 15; 79).

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