

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 16 – Mike Watson – Tell Tale Heart

Feminist Voices and the Ethics of Care

And now a personal word,

When Mike Watson talks about heart-centric leadership, I'm reminded of what moral philosophers call the ethics of care.

The starting point of modern Western moral theory is that the individual is separate and apart from everyone else and seemingly independent. Man stands alone. The central task of moral philosophy then is how should we treat each other as strangers. What responsibilities do we have to people we neither know nor care about? What universal rules can we construct that would allow independent strangers to peacefully coexist?

I say 'man' because moral philosophy has been primarily written by men about men. The philosophers we study in school are nearly always only men: Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Marcus Aurelius, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Fredrick Nietzsche, John Paul Sartre. Nearly all of these philosophers see man as competitive and self-interested and that it is mutually beneficial transactions and social contracts that holds society together. They appeal to impersonal logic and impartial calculations to work out what is the right thing to do. Morality by and for men can be a cold and disheartening business.

Notably absent in most university course work is the moral thinking of women. The long history of women philosophers is barely footnoted in our textbooks, from Hyapatia of Alexandria to Mary Wollstonecraft to Sarah Margaret Fuller to Simone de Beauvoir.

In recent years that has begun to change. Feminist ways of thinking about our moral lives are finally entering our classrooms. And so is a whole new view of humanity and a basis for living together and realizing the higher angels of our moral selves.

In 1982, Carol Gilligan, a developmental psychologist, published a book called *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. The book has had a profound impact on philosophy, religious studies, clinical psychology, history, political science and leadership theory. In her work, Gilligan talked about 'women's voices,' instead of abstract theories. The idea of 'voices' introduced perspectives embodied in

the distinct lives of individuals in relationship to each other. The ground shifted from what is right to who needed to be heard.

Gilligan interviewed hundreds of women around the world about moral issues. She reported that women have an entirely different view about the nature of humanity and how we should go about living together. We are not separate and competitive. We are connected and cooperative. Relationships are more important than rules. Caring is more important than strict justice. Our voices matter more than ideas. Ethics then is not an ideology but a conversation. A conversation about what we care about.

This is feminist ethics...and the approach that may yet save...man.

All of which brings me back to Mike Watson. If you listen to him, like Carol Gilligan, he is inviting us to an ethics of care. One centered in our heart. One that values connection to sources of wisdom within ourselves and listening to each other's heart-filled voices.

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