



---

January 2005

## From in a Different Voice to the Birth of Pleasure: An Intellectual Journey

Carol Gilligan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/ndlr>



Part of the [Law Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Gilligan, Carol (2005) "From in a Different Voice to the Birth of Pleasure: An Intellectual Journey," *North Dakota Law Review*: Vol. 81 : No. 4 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/ndlr/vol81/iss4/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Law at UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in North Dakota Law Review by an authorized editor of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [zeineb.yousif@library.und.edu](mailto:zeineb.yousif@library.und.edu).

# FROM IN A DIFFERENT VOICE TO THE BIRTH OF PLEASURE: AN INTELLECTUAL JOURNEY\*

CAROL GILLIGAN

To retrace a journey means to go back and revisit the beginning in light of the end. In the late 1960s, five years after completing my Ph.D., I returned to Harvard to do some part-time teaching, and as luck would have it, I had the opportunity to teach with Erik Erikson in his course on the human life cycle, and then with Lawrence Kohlberg in his course on moral and political choice. Inspired by Erikson's analysis of crises or turning points in people's lives and by Kohlberg's attention to the moral questions that were so alive in American society at that time, I became interested in studying people's responses to actual situations of moral conflict and choice. I started with men who were facing the Vietnam draft, but in 1973, when President Nixon ended the draft and the Supreme Court legalized abortion, I decided to interview women who were pregnant and considering abortion. Thus, I started on a path that would lead to *In a Different Voice*.

It is easy now to impute intention to a journey that began through the fortune of history. I can trace a line leading directly from *In a Different Voice*<sup>1</sup> to *The Birth of Pleasure*<sup>2</sup> and describe myself as coming gradually to see more and more clearly into the core of a problem that first appeared as a dissonance between women's voices and psychological theory and that led to a paradigm shift. I can see the consistencies in my approach: listening for different voices, following the stream of consciousness and breaks in a narrative, tracing the interplay of inner and outer worlds. But my experience was one of epiphany: moments of sudden, radical illumination that shifted my perception and led me to turn in directions I had not anticipated.

## I. THE BEGINNING

I remember sitting with pregnant women in the year immediately following the Supreme Court ruling that had given women a decisive voice

---

\*This paper was initially presented at the conference, *Con Voci Diverse*, held at the University of Milan on March 13, 2003, and published in Italian in Bianca Beccalli e Chiara Martucci (Eds.) *Con Voci Diverse: Un confronto sui pensieri di Carol Gilligan*, La Tartaruga edizioni, Baldini Castoldi, Dalai editore, S.p.A., Milano, 2005.

1. CAROL GILLIGAN, *THE BIRTH OF PLEASURE* (Vintage Books 2003) (2002).

2. CAROL GILLIGAN, *FROM IN A DIFFERENT VOICE TO THE BIRTH OF PLEASURE* (Vintage Books 2003).

with respect to abortion decisions. I was listening for how they constructed the decision they were making, who was involved, what were the parameters of their thinking about whether to continue or to end their pregnancy. I remember the sound of dissonance, a voice that did not fit into the categories of psychological theory or the terms of the public abortion debate.

In college, I had taken courses in perception and experienced the phenomenon of figure-ground reversal. A picture seen as a vase could also be seen as two faces in profile, depending on what was perceived as figure and what as ground. Figure-ground reversal illuminated perceptual organization—how we structure a visual field. I was hearing a different way of structuring moral conflict. It was not a matter of choosing relationships over self or self over relationships, but rather a fundamental shift in the way of seeing and speaking about the human world. The women whose voices caught my attention were starting from a premise of connectedness rather than separateness. What had long been seen as a problem in women, leading women to be described as lacking a clear sense of self or morality, suddenly appeared in a different light. Women's voices were elucidating a problem in psychological theory, a problem that pervaded intellectual discourse and public debate. The very terms of the conversation were called into question by a voice heard now not as deficient but as different.

A different voice, a different way of speaking about the human condition. Women's voices were changing the human conversation, and in this time of changing resonances and shifting frameworks, men and women were finding it possible to see and to speak about themselves and their lives in new ways. For women, this meant challenging the policing of conversation by the word "selfish," the internalized accusation that women carried within cultures where goodness for women implied being selfless: responsive only to others' desires and perceptions, taking on their feelings and thoughts as one's own. This was the morality of "the angel in the house," the woman whom Virginia Woolf said she had to kill if she wanted to write. But it was also a morality of relationship that exploded in its own contradiction, because while selflessness was extolled in the name of relationship it signified an absence of the self from relationship. A self held in abeyance, at best forgotten or at the very least silent. In the name of responsiveness and responsibility in relationship, women were questioning the morality of the angel in the house. What had seemed the epitome of feminine goodness—the women who empathized with and responded to others, who never spoke or thought for herself—suddenly seemed morally problematic. The abdication of voice signified an evasion of responsibility and of relationship. It was an ethical and also a psychological problem. But it also

had political ramifications, breaking what had seemed a perfect circle: autonomous men and selfless women. Both women and men articulating men's experience.

This was the condition of psychology at the time when I entered the field: theories of development had been framed from a male standpoint, research on men and boys only was the basis for theory construction, women and men were assessed according to the categories and standards derived from the study of men only. What passed for objectivity was a reading of culture as nature. Reflecting the intellectual traditions within which they were working, psychologists had taken man to be the measure of all things human. It was a huge methodological error, and also a startling demonstration of how culture can blind us to the obvious.

## II. THE MIDDLE PHASE

In discussing *In a Different Voice*, the Italian psychologist, Silvia Vegetti Finzi<sup>3</sup> singled out the voice of eleven-year-old Amy and offered a brilliant exegesis of Amy's approach to resolving moral conflict. Women often find the voice of this preadolescent girl arresting. Presented in contrast with Jake, the eleven-year-old who observed that "moral dilemmas are like math problems with humans," Amy's voice shines with a different intelligence—one that women readily discern. But Amy's is a voice that also sounds naïve and indecisive when moral dilemmas are taken to be math problems with humans, where one isolates competing rights or claims and then as with an equation, solves for justice.

The riddle of femininity—the riddle of girls' adolescence and women's psychology—is how does an intelligent voice come to sound stupid or wrong or naïve or crazy. I began to study girls' development because I could not discern the line of development connecting Amy's voice with the voices of the women who filled the pages of my book. As they struggled against the dueling terms of selfishness and selflessness, they would recover as a hard-won insight what to Amy would have seemed obvious: that relationship implies the presence, rather than the absence of oneself. What happened during adolescence—the time when girls became young women? I turned to the 1980 *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*<sup>4</sup> and discovered that "adolescent girls have simply not been much studied."<sup>5</sup> Like

---

3. Silvia Vegetti Finzi, "Carol Gilligan e l'influenza del suo pensiero in Italia." In Beccalli e Martucci, op. cit.

4. HANDBOOK OF ADOLESCENT PSYCHOLOGY (Joseph Adelson ed., 1980).

5. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Problem of Generations, in THE CHALLENGE OF YOUTH*; (E. Erickson ed., Doubleday Books 1983). Joseph Adelson & Margery J. Doehrman, *The*

psychology in general, the psychology of adolescence was “the study of the male youngster writ large.”<sup>6</sup>

In the fall of 1981, after completing the manuscript for *In a Different Voice*, I began a four-year longitudinal study of adolescent girls.<sup>7</sup> My intention was to learn from girls about adolescence and to fill in a stretch of women’s life-history that previously had been the province of women’s coming-of-age novels. I did not anticipate that listening to girls would prove so radically illuminating and also affect the women involved in the research so profoundly. The moment of epiphany came after my students and I had extended our study backward in time to include younger girls and track girls’ development between the ages of six and seventeen. Then we encountered a girl we had not expected: a girl we knew but had not remembered.

At the edge of adolescence, around nine or ten or eleven, girls can be remarkably clear-eyed and outspoken. They will say what they see, listen to what they hear, know what they know. But then our yearly interviews and more intensive work with girls in week-long or weekly writing and theater clubs caught the onset of dissociation: girls beginning not to know what in another sense they knew. Observing this process through which girls became divided from their own experience, we saw evidence indicating that they were splitting their minds from their bodies, their thoughts from their emotions, themselves from their relationships. Girls would describe themselves as facing a choice between having a voice or having relationships. They were narrating a paradoxical initiation that required them to give up relationship (living in connection with others) for the sake of having “relationships.” This sacrifice of relationship in order to have relationships marked the gateway from girlhood into womanhood. It was a passage that girls resisted.<sup>8</sup>

Like the immune system of the body, the healthy psyche resists disease, and this resistance takes the form of a fight against losing voice and losing relationship—the grounds of psychic health. One confiding relationship, meaning a relationship that invites one to say what is on one’s mind or in one’s heart—a relationship where you can be yourself with another person, had been found repeatedly to be the best protection against most

---

*Psychodynamic Approach to Adolescence*, in HANDBOOK OF ADOLESCENT PSYCHOLOGY 99, 114 (Joseph Adelson ed., 1980).

6. *Id.*

7. C. GILLIGAN ET AL., MAKING CONNECTIONS (C. Gilligan et al. eds, Harvard Univ. Press 1990).

8. See, C. Gilligan, *Joining the Resistance*, MICH. Q. REV. (1990); and LYN MIKEL BROWN & CAROL GILLIGAN, MEETING AT THE CROSSROADS (1992).

forms of psychological distress, especially in times of stress. The discovery of our studies of girls' development was that the very possibility of such a relationship was at risk for girls at adolescence when they felt that they had to be someone other than themselves in order to be with other people. Seventeen-year-old Iris explained, "If I were to say what I was feeling and thinking, no one would want to be with me, my voice would be too loud," and then noting my skepticism, she adds, "But you have to have relationships." I say, "But if you are not saying what you are feeling and thinking, then where are you in these relationships?" Iris sees the paradox in what she is saying: she has given up relationship in order to have "relationships," muting her voice so that "she" could be with other people. It is at once understandable and absurd: a cultural adaptation that is psychologically incoherent. In making this adaptation, girls will split their minds from their bodies, their thoughts from their emotions, themselves (in the sense of a voice that says what they are thinking and feeling) from their relationships, and in doing so, they will come not to know what [is] in the core of themselves they know.

I had a dizzying sensation, captured in a dream of taking off a set of lenses that had corrected my perception, an unsettling experience of seeing clearly into a process of initiation that reorganizes the psyche. Following the initiation, it becomes difficult to recapture the past.

The research with girls was profoundly unsettling. Girls' resistance to an initiation that was socially enforced and culturally scripted posed a dilemma for anyone invested in girls' development: how to encourage girls' psychological strengths which were the wellspring of their resistance without jeopardizing their ability to live in the world. Heard in their own right and on their own terms, girls' voices were unsettling an adaptation in women. Put simply, the research in elucidating girls' passage from childhood in adolescence illuminated a process of initiation: the psyche's induction into patriarchy. With the internalization of patriarchal structures (the gendered hierarchies and binaries), the psyche lost its resilience, its connectedness with the body, and the voice of experience, grounded in the body and in emotion, gave way to the voice of authority.

In describing this initiation in *The Birth of Pleasure*, I note that it bears some of the hallmarks of trauma: a loss of voice, gaps in memory, the inability to tell one's story coherently. But trauma also affects the body, and leads to changes in our neurological hard-wiring. My research on psychological development converged with the findings of Antonio Damasio's<sup>9</sup>

---

9. Antonio Damasio, *Descartes Error and The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*.

research in neurobiology. The connections between mind and body, thought and emotion which girls resisted losing are built into our bodies—part of our human nature. Girls were resisting what Damasio refers to as “Descartes’ Error,” but in doing so, they were resisting a civilization aligned with Descartes. In resisting the split between self and relationship, they were resisting the ethic of feminine goodness that would have them become selfless for the sake of relationships that were not, as girls knew, connections in any meaningful sense of the term. But they also were resisting selfishness, the loss of connection with others that would compromise their ability to move with confidence in the human world.

It was a short step to seeing the connection between adolescent girls and young boys. Adolescence for girls and the end of early childhood for boys are times in development marked by a heightened risk to resilience and a sudden high incidence of signs of psychological distress. More specifically, the signs of distress (depression, learning and speech and eating disorders, suicidal acts, various forms of out of control or out of touch behavior) signal a loss of relationship. Boys around the age of five and girls at adolescence undergo a process of initiation that is orchestrated around issues of gender: what it takes to be a “real boy” or, his counterpart, a “good girl.”

I am speaking of patriarchy, the implanting of patriarchal structures within the psyche, the internalization of a father’s voice or law. Patriarchy is an anthropological term signifying cultures or families that are ruled by fathers, where a father or fathers constitute a priesthood, a hierarchy that controls access to truth and power and salvation and knowledge. By elevating some men over other men and subordinating women, patriarchy is an order of domination. But by dividing some men from other men and all men from women, by splitting fathers from mothers and daughters and sons, patriarchy creates a rift within the psyche, dividing everyone from parts of themselves. The psychic rift is created by dissociation—the process through which we can separate ourselves from parts of ourselves. By splitting our minds from our bodies, our thoughts from our emotions, ourselves from our relationships, we can come not to feel what we are feeling or to know what we know.

Nine-year-old Judy locates her mind in her body. Asked how she knows how her friend will feel, she says, “I just feel it in my mind,” pointing to her gut. At thirteen, she divides her mind which she locates in her gut from her brain which is in her head. The mind, Judy says, is connected to “your heart and your soul and your real thoughts and your real feelings.” The brain, in contrast, contains “your intelligence, your smartness, your education.” Aware of this rift in herself, Judy feels she is losing her mind.

“Children,” she observes, “have the most mind, but they are starting to lose it actually.” It is a loss that typically occurs earlier in boys’ development, around the age of five rather than at adolescence. Consequently, girls are more likely to put into words what boys have experienced but have not spoken about: a shattering break in the sense of connectedness, both within oneself and with others; a loss that is akin to betrayal.<sup>10</sup>

If this is true, then it is a psychology that has a long cultural history. But if there is an inherent tension between human development and the culture of patriarchy, between the cultivation of relationship and the structures of hierarchy, then there also would be a long history of resistance on the part of the psyche. In *The Birth of Pleasure*, I pick up a resistance story that dates back to second century North Africa. It is a love story, the myth of Cupid and Psyche. I took the title of my book from the ending of this tale, the birth of a daughter named Pleasure, to signal the contribution of girls to my understanding and also the significance of the myth itself in providing a map of resistance and transformation, a metamorphosis—the title of Apuleius’ novel. Eva Cantarella has made a singular contribution to our understanding of this myth in tying it to a tradition of women’s resistance to patriarchal restrictions on love and marriage, a resistance that began in the time of Augustus. But she also explained something that I had registered intuitively in connecting this myth with my research on girls. Psyche, she discovered, was a common name for girls in the Romanized world of second century North Africa. Thus, a myth whose origins had been considered a mystery instead reflects what has been a buried or unwritten history: a history of women’s resistance to patriarchy and the psychology of girls. As Psyche, upon becoming an adolescent, refuses to lose her voice and become an object, so too will she break a taboo on seeing and saying what she knows about love. Told she is living with a monster, she discovers she is living with a lover—what is monstrous is that he feels compelled to hide his love. The metamorphosis lies in the transformation from patriarchal to democratic forms of relationship, and it is this transformation that sets the stage for the birth not of tragedy, but of pleasure.

### III. THE PARADIGM SHIFT

I have come to the paradigm shift and with it the end of the journey that began with *In a Different Voice* and led to *The Birth of Pleasure*. It was a journey contingent on a method of listening that in part, I brought

---

10. For a more extended discussion of Judy, see L.M. Brown and C. Gilligan, op. cit.; see also C. Gilligan, *When the Mind Leaves the Body... and Returns*, in *THE BODY IN MIND* (A. Damasio ed., Daedalus, forthcoming Summer 2006).

with me into psychology, drawing on my background in literature and in music. As I had learned to listen for point of view and analyze narrative structures, listening for different voices, their harmonies and dissonances, their patterns of counterpoint and fugue, and working from the text itself (of interview transcripts or personal narratives) was an approach that at first I did not even reflect on because this way of listening felt so much part of myself. I was interested in stream of consciousness, I had developed an eye and an ear for breaks in a narrative.<sup>11</sup> Like the girls I would study, I had learned to read the human emotional world. And it was more my resistance to relinquishing these human capacities in favor of what were considered to be scientific methods of psychological investigation (theory-driven and bound to the either/or categories of diagnostic labeling or statistical analysis), that led me to discover the huge methodological error within the field of psychology: the omission of half the sample.

After *In a Different Voice*, my students and I worked to render the way of listening I had intuitively followed both explicit and systematic in the form of *A Listening Guide*.<sup>12</sup> The method is akin in key respects to the clinical methods that Freud describes in *Studies on Hysteria*<sup>13</sup> and Piaget in *The Child's Construction of the World*,<sup>14</sup> early works where they record a similar process of psychological discovery. The Listening Guide specifies three successive listenings: first for the plot or the psychological landscape—the stories told, thematic patterns, key images and metaphors, the relational dynamics of the research encounter and also its cultural constraints; second for the “I”—the first-person voice, the way a person speaks his or herself; third for contrapuntal voice—the different voices within the text that speak to the researcher’s question, including their association with or dissociation from the voice of the self.

I have come to the end of my journey. When I began, I had no idea that listening to women and then to girls would give me an insight into a critical intersection between the human psyche and the culture of patriarchy, a turning point in development where relational capacities that are

11. Eva Cantarella, *L'ultima Gilligan: lo studio del mito*. In Beccalli e Martucci op. cit.

12. C. Gilligan et al., *On the Listening Guide: A Voice-Centered, Relational Method*, in P. CAMIC ET AL., *QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN PSYCHOLOGY* (Am. Psychological Ass'n Press 2000).

13. JOSEPH BREUER & SIGMUND FREUD, *STUDIES IN HYSTERIA* (Beacon Press 1950).

14. See, e.g., Judy S. Deloache & Ann L. Brown, *The Early Emergence of Planning Skills In Children*, in *MAKING SENSE: THE CHILD'S CONSTRUCTION OF THE WORLD* 108, 108-09 (Jerome Bruner & Helen Haste eds., 1987) (stating that Jean Piaget was “the most influential theorist of cognitive development” and discussing his theories’ application to early childhood development); Paul Light, *Taking Roles*, in *MAKING SENSE: THE CHILD'S CONSTRUCTION OF THE WORLD* 41, 41-44 (Jerome Bruner & Helen Haste eds., 1987) (discussing Piaget’s concepts of “egocentrism to draw together individual and social aspects of thinking.”).

our birthright are at risk. I would discover the extent to which developmental theories, whether of Freud and Piaget or Erikson and Kohlberg and all of their many derivatives, are for the most part rewritten histories, histories written after the fact of a tragic loss that creates a rift in the psyche. The initiation of boys into cultural scripts of manhood, the internalization of these social codes into the core of the self, is what Freud referred to as the Oedipus complex. The difficulty in fitting girls into theories of development framed from a male standpoint or based on studies of boys and men arises from the fact that girls' initiation and the psychic splits it entails occur not in early childhood but at adolescence. The voices of girls thus became critical to deconstructing a psychology that had read culture as nature and also highlight a potential within human psychology or nature for resistance and transformation. As the paradigm shift that began with *In a Different Voice* reaches its full extension in *The Birth of Pleasure*, I draw a map of development that is also a map of love, showing how a path that is headed for tragedy can turn into a road leading to freedom. The connection between inner and outer worlds, between the psychological and the political, that was present at the outset of my journey returns as my research with girls, my study of young boys, and my work with man/woman couples in therapy join with an exploration of cultural history to reveal the affinity between the conditions for love (having a voice, living in relationship) and the conditions for democracy.

\*\*\*