
ORIENTATIONS ON TRADITIONAL AND FEMINIST ETHICS

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Abstract: This paper tries to focus upon the importance and the need of feminist ethics as well as it will try to show how this ethics is different from that of traditional ethics. The paper will also discuss in brief the emergence of care ethics out of feminist ethics. Keeping this in mind the paper will also endeavor to discuss the emergence of justice based ethics vis-à-vis care ethics.

Keywords: care ethics, feminist ethics, reason, and traditional ethics.

Introduction: In everyday life we need ethics. Ethics plays a significant role in our lives as it shows us the right path. It facilitates to set standard in one's life by which to measure 'good' or 'bad'; to determine what is to be valued in this life and hereafter. Not only helping in achieving a good life, ethics also assists us to become the kind of person we want to be in our lives. As a branch of philosophy, ethics is involved in providing us a systematized normative concept of right and wrong. Without a proper moral guidance which ethics promises to deliver, the whole of humanity can suffer from utter confusion, directionlessness and degeneration. Hence ethics plays a fundamental role by providing such guidance.

Role of Reason in Ethics: Ethics derived from an Ancient Greek word *êthikos*, means "relating to one's character." Ethics necessarily deals with our choice of values, ideals, behavior and actions – all of which together aids in building up a 'good' character. This good character is achieved with the help of the utilization of our rational faculty. Traditional ethicists think that the fundamental principles of ethics can be seen to be true in the light of reason only. Reason uncontaminated by passions or emotions (pure reason) helps in the building the right world view. According to the traditional ethicists, while taking any decisions or deliberating upon something to do or not to do, we take the help of reason which acts as a guiding force. As a unique human virtue or quality, reason plays a significant role in one's life. The use of one's rational faculty not only makes him more desirable within a society which in turn becomes the source or ground of having a superior kind of morality. To such ethicists, every passion or emotion needs to be controlled or regulated by reason. It is believed that emotions or lived experiences of an individual distort the 'pure' form of reason. A moral action is believed to take always the course of reason. Hardly considered as a virtue by the traditional thinkers, emotion appears to belong to the lower order. In order to have a consistent and just life in the present world, the rational path is preferred. Since to be rational becomes the norm for any significant human endeavor, the struggle to be more rational necessarily rules out emotions from one's life. As a consequence, there arises a binary or opposition

between the two virtues of reason and emotion. This opposition between the two human capacities leads to a situation where reason completely negates the significance of the other virtue (emotion). As a result, virtues like abstraction, impartiality, universality or uniformity arising out of the application of reason are held in high esteem by the mainstream thinkers/ethicists where emotion has no role to play. To them reason alone has the power to control or regulate the emotional instincts and psychological drives of human beings. Features like objectivity, universality and context-neutrality make reason more powerful in nature and at the same time desirable. Reason turns out to be the fundamental one in one's life and makes emotion as if null and void. Very effortlessly the society links reason with men and emotion with women. Moral understanding and moral decisions are delivered with the help of reason and one who has the inclination to use his rational faculty is regarded as a matured individual. Those showing signs of weak development of reason are generally looked upon as the one who have a weak morality having the bleak chance to evolve as a matured person. A matured rational self can never be associated with any kind of emotions as this will lead to the development of a weak and confused self. One must strive to develop one's self in a rational way which appears to be autonomous, independent and separate in nature. The rational autonomous detached self prefers to maintain an arm's length distance with others and follows a type of ethics which is termed as 'justice based ethics' or 'rights based ethics'. In justice based ethics ethical decisions are based as well as taken on universal principles and rules. This kind of ethics ensures an impartial and a verifiable system whereby one can achieve a fair and equitable treatment of all people. Such an ethics usually represents the voice of men. Having reason at its base, justice based ethics believes in the universal application of rules in any conflicting situation so that virtues like impartiality, neutrality and objectivity can be retained. In this ethics, things like context, plurality, situatedness, embodiedness, heterogeneity, particularities, lived experiences and so on are over and over again ignored.

Where all these above mentioned factors like situatedness, heterogeneity are overlooked, care ethics tries to encompass those factors in its theory. Care ethics evolves out of feminist ethics. One of the proponents of this theory Carol Gilligan points out that it is wrong to infer that there are no sex differences in moral development on both empirical and theoretical grounds which is often overlooked by the justice based theorists. Nor can we say on the basis of observation or experience in our day to day life that moral development takes place in identical ways in a girl and a boy. Nor the theories can give us such conclusions of having no point of divergences in moral development. But the fact remains such instances of overlooking of 'differences' are common as a male child in the experiments is always used to define the other, which is here a girl child. Justice based ethics has a tendency to homogenize the differences prevalent in the moral development.

Gilligan opiniates that both inequality and attachment are present in the moral development but the 'attachment' factor is overlooked in the theories. In her studies Gilligan has successfully shown that there is no single way of moral reasoning; it is quite different for men and women and the traditionalists are negligent towards such differences. Mainstream moral reasoning epitomizes detachment, abstraction, uniformity and independence from each other. Gilligan is trying to trace the presence of the 'care' framework within the developmental model vis-à-vis the justice paradigm. While engaging with care, she endeavors to give a moral theory which includes more women within the theoretical discourse. Gilligan advocates care ethics and she stresses on interdependence between individuals, talks about values and importance of emotions like empathy, trust, and care in a relationship. To her opinion emotions like care should be given moral consideration which has a part to play in our moral understanding.

In the context of justice based ethics feminist like Alison Jaggar will say that this kind of ethics has a propensity to "disregard or bracket individual subjectivity through ingenious theoretical devices designed to approximate an impersonal "view from nowhere"" (Jaggar, 1995). This is not the case with feminist ethics/care ethics whose "appropriate motivations, attitudes, sensibilities, and qualities of character are thought indispensable to morally acute perception"(Jaggar, 1995).

Feminists or care ethicists will always talk about 'view from somewhere', where one is situated. To them 'view from nowhere' is untenable. Justice ethics takes the stand of aperspectivity which most feminists would like to discard. At the practical level, such an abstract, impersonal, neutral stance is impossible to

happen when we know that as individuals we are always embodied selves.

The reason-emotion binary is seen to be prevalent among the traditional thinkers. It is imperative to know whether this dichotomization between reason and emotion is achievable or whether it is practically possible or not. Or can the two be regarded equally as virtues; do they influence each other? Is it possible for human beings to practically combine both reason and emotion?

At this juncture it becomes important to know the features of feminist ethics so that one can delve into it. It is unique in its own way where it proposes the importance of both emotion and reason. Both of them are regarded equally as a virtue and one can combine both of them while delivering any moral judgments.

Now let us see how feminist ethicists formulate their ethics where the principles are different from the traditional ones.

Feminist Ethics: Feminists go on proposing various principles in order to enrich as well as create their own ethics different from that of mainstream ethics. This ethics seems to be free from loopholes as experienced in the traditionalists' account of ethics. It is the duty of the feminists to focus on the 'differences' rather than solely stressing on the 'commonalities' which buttresses the process of homogenization. As Alison Jaggar points out "feminists do not deny that moral subjects are alike on some level of abstraction, but their consciousness of the many false humanisms that have purveyed generalizations about specific populations as universal truths of human nature motivates them to highlight human differences over human commonalities. Nor do feminists dispute the equal worth of each individual but, when individuals are so differently situated, they insist that a genuine commitment to moral equality requires sensitivity to actual inequalities" (Jaggar, 2000). Thus, in feminist ethics the factor of heterogeneity is been taken care of.

According to many feminists, within the traditional reason-centric theories there is any hardly any room for those qualities/traits associated with women. The overtly masculine traits like abstraction or detachment, which are part and parcel of the mainstream theories, are not acceptable to the feminists. The latter attempts to bring some changes within the existing traditional standards and theories either by taking a liberal approach or a radical one. In the former case they call for the inclusion of feminine virtues and feminine issues/problems within the existing theories. In the latter case they demand total rejection of the existing theories which devalue women. Feminists are seen to intervene into these mainstream theories thereby giving us the scope to

rethink, recompose or revise those standards from where the stories of women are missing. Having no regard for women's experiences, needs and problems as such, feminists are of the view that the justice model seems to be in need of remodeling for inclusion of women's issues; to make it more gender sensitive in nature.

The faith in the binary of reason and emotion leads justice based ethicists to think that reason belongs to the realm of public and emotion to the domain of private. For them the public and the private realms are separate and distinct domains where the public triumphs over the private. Public is the one for men and private is reserved for the women who have no business in the public. But is this division at all tenable? Daryl Koehn, a feminist philosopher will find this division to be morally suspect in nature. According to her, this division is contestable in nature. To quote Koehn "private" choices have a way of leaking into "public" ones" (Koehn,1998). But many believe in this distinction and continue to see men to be the representative of the public sphere.

Men have a propensity to exercise rationality through moral virtues like universality, abstraction, and impartiality. On the contrary, women exercise moral understanding in terms of particularity, context, need, and concrete relationships. The mainstream approach standardizes masculine way of moral reasoning thereby marginalizing or ignoring women's way of moral deliberation. Women's uniqueness is made invisible and insignificant due to its particularity and perspectival bias. The main agenda of the feminist ethics is not only to remodel and restructure existing theories or make up new theories but to include women as 'subjects'. The aim of the feminist ethics is to extend the theoretical domain and to make it more gender sensitive in nature. It aims to incorporate into our moral understandings the presence of diversities in terms of race, sex, class, ethnicity, religion and gender. Feminist ethics addresses various kinds of oppression on women. It also shows the possibility of having different ways of moral reasoning instead of taking one paradigmatic case (male). The possibility of heterogeneous thinking or heterogeneity is introduced by feminists which indeed a fact to be acknowledged. Feminist ethics is against any kind of notion which does not incorporate 'differences' and thus wage their war against the dominant traditional mainstream model which talks about a uniform model within the theories. By refuting homogeneity and supporting heterogeneity feminists show us the possibility of doing moral reasoning which is different from the traditionally accepted norm.

Feminists also stress upon the process of socialization which is neglected by the mainstream philosophers. According to Marilyn Friedman, the process of

socialization "incorporates cultural resources such as language, modes of thinking and practical habits into the very identity and consciousness of persons..."(Friedman, 2000).

The narrative of relationships is also vital which the feminists try to highlight in their ethics. The narratives provide an opportunity to get intertwined with other selves which in a way enhances the relational aspect of self. This narration helps us to know what is at stake, what is to be done when others are involved. It is thought to be a different way of understanding which feminists are aware of, in order to unravel the problem.

Again, feminist ethics stress the power of 'imagination' in women's lives which remains unacknowledged by the traditionalist thinkers. This is helpful in situations where no pre-determined rules can help to address the problem. Each problem which one faces in life is unique. There can be no one universal solution to tackle all the problems unlike the traditional accounts.

Feminist psychologist like Carol Gilligan and many others have talked about the 'lived experiences' of women. Virginia Held emphasizes on experience as "it is from experience that we adopt our critical stance toward what has been claimed as 'knowledge' in male dominated society. It is experience with which we confront and protest existing institutions and distributions of power. It is experience on which we trace suggested patterns for the future" . What Held points out is that we need the "moral inquirer interpret the experience, either before, during, or after its occurrence, as such a test and interpret the perspective in question, whichever it is, as the most valid" (Held, 1993).

Feminist ethics also suggests that women must be listened appropriately in order to arrive at a theory on moral judgments. Moral understanding has its passage in the actual embodied relationships and should not be based on abstract rule-based prescriptions. Such ethics is also of the opinion that in the traditionalists' account of moral theory women's voices are missing.

Thus, we see that feminists have challenged the traditional way of doing moral reasoning as well as the obligation to develop into an autonomous self which is a pre-condition of becoming a matured person. Many feminists including Gilligan are of the view that self does not develop in isolation; it develops relationally. Feminists acknowledge the fact of being inter related to one another. We are social animals and unlike the traditionalists view we do not evolve out of abstraction.

Conclusion: Men are apprehensive about the problems that may arise due to connections and women tend to focus more on the dangers of isolation. Men have an individualistic self and tend to

do take moral decisions by following certain universal fixed moral principles leading to abstraction and context blindness. This kind of self development and morality give rise to threat in relationship in case of men. Whereas women are more relational in nature. They find the distancing with the others quite

disturbing. By practicing feminist ethics it becomes possible for women to live with their own differences as well as to acknowledge the differences of others. Physically, mentally and psychologically feminist ethics provides women the base where they find themselves strongly anchored with the reality.

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