

Gender in Ethics: A Construction of Care-based Moral Agency

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Abstract

The discipline of ethics has constantly been invoked to tide over human beings from silence, exclusion and invisibility, from disempowerment and alienation into that domain of freedom and goodness where life may prosper. That modern ethics as a subject may not be able to shoulder the weight of this emancipatory project for women, guiding her into public and private life as a significant human being in her own right, is the challenge that feminists came to make against man-made ethics.

Key Words: Care, Feminism, Freedom, Gender, Morality.

Introduction:

Thinking with gender is the practice of a hermeneutic of suspicion that calls for reinterpretations and revaluations such that humanity may be set on its way again. The question of gender unfolds the fundamental issues of philosophy allowing nothing to be assumed without reflection. Locating the problematic, critical gender theory strives at restoring philosophical thinking to the matter of truth.

The question of gender; what it is to be a woman or a man, is a troubled dimension of contemporary life and those not broaching these questions are challenged for their presumptions and complacency. Personal values and behaviour together with institutions commanding everyday existence fall within the scanner of gender interrogation, creating a deep turmoil on account of its demands for an astute reflection on who we are.

Gender has come to be an essential and a regular way of representing ourselves. It is the passage through which human self is expressed, human relationships explored and dilemmas of human living revealed. Passing through this, one becomes aware of oneself as persons shaped by culture. What it is to be a woman and to be a man features largely in this enculturation. When this cultural

phenomenon of gender representation is critically attended to, a confused, multilayered and dense complex of issues emerges. It is this complexity that makes gender studies such a richly variegated area for academic enquiry. By means of its investigative tools it becomes possible to step back from involvement in culture, create a distance and raise critical questions about the structures and forces that determine and design. It becomes apparent that gender is thought in cultured ways, that cultural gender ideals are embodied and above all cultural political and social expectations of gender behaviour are restored.

Unearthing the very rudiments of ideas and practices, critical and cultural theories excavate the groundwork of culture examining the very roots of our thinking and thus archeologically exposing those concealed structures that shape and support gender formations. Gender demands to be known as a significant dimension of humanity become mandatory for issues cannot be fully addressed until the matter of gender has been raised and resolved in some way. Susan Frank Parsons writes:

“There is something of an expectation that something fundamental, essential even, about our humanity will come to be revealed in gender. By means of questioning gender, we seem to expect a breakthrough to a true understanding of our humanness, a full revelation of ourselves to ourselves and to the world. Excavations follow the traces of these hopes that through the trouble of thinking with gender, we will come to know our humanity more fully”. (Parsons, 2002, p.3)

With knowledge come revaluations that pry open ideas and practices by mining the past to provide the resources for changing the present. An examination of how ideas and practices of gender have been configured opens possibilities of new formations and an investigation into the structures of gender thinking assists in rethinking how to discover a supply of political and ethical resources to overcome the past.

Gender urges us to deliberate about the ways we are fabricated as cultural products and reaching into the foundations of our ideas figure out how they have acquired importance for us. It encourages us to treat the space of gender as a location of a promise for a better culture and a better human life. Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* points out that in considerations of gender, there are subversions of our thinking at work.

This paper would be chiefly concerned with the subversions of ethical thinking by investigating the interface of gender with ethics. As a prefatory definition it may be suggested that ethics is a discipline concentrating on what may be called good, forging avenues passing through which lives can be shaped in accordance with what is deemed to be good. Gender questions challenge nearly

every dimension of ethical thinking, questioning the content of ethical vision and recommendations for practice by interrogating the ways in which the notions of good are already shaped by assumptions about what women and men are. Thinking with gender challenges modes of ethical reasoning through the suggestion that women's way of thinking may be at variance from men's way of thinking, and so the need to consider for whom ethical deliberation is intended. Thinking with gender calls into question assumptions about what ethics is and its purposes might be and thus about the role of ethics in our formation as men and women.

Gender has emerged as a category of thinking in which our humanity is reflected, revealing what we understand ourselves to be and allowing us to represent our humanity in particular ways. Simultaneously it calls into question this self-understanding and engages in a critique of these very representations. This dual character of gender thinking which allows both a revealing in and withdrawal from representation is perhaps the most striking feature that makes the ethics of gender a rich and complex discourse.

In the most general sense to think with gender suggests to think with what it is to be woman and to be man in the midst of our human situation, immersed in everyday experiences, filled with ordinary dilemmas formed in thinking by culture and language. Gender becomes one of the ways in which we think differences, so that it stands as a marker of what is unique to woman and to man. Thinking with gender is thus a form of human self-reflection, especially within the human sciences that focus on self in the world as does feminist ethics that calls in question the forms of thinking, assumptions and methods.

Feminist ethics uncovers gender bias in established traditions of morality and moral philosophy and constructs alternatives which draw on women's gendered experiences, feminist activism and practices of solidarity among women and with men who suffer oppression.

Feminist ethics discovers gender bias in commanding theories of Anglo-American ethics. Certain modern moral theories, such as Kantian, Utilitarian, Contractarian command most attention, setting problems for discussion and influencing standards of evaluation. These academically institutionalized views reflect and reinforce publicly authoritative discourses of rights, obligations and welfare. In these theories and discourses feminists unearth assumptions and points of view that mirror spheres of activity, social roles and character ideals associated with socially advantaged men, holding up norms of masculinity that apply in the least to men so privileged, if not to all men in general. The moral agent or the normative subject thus envisioned is not a woman or a person of

disadvantaged or despised economic, educational, racial, sexual or religious identity. This image of normal moral agents and their contexts of choice ignores what women across class and racial groups have historically been expected and required to do. More typically, women are assigned discretionary responsibilities to care for others, either as paid or unpaid labour in physically and often emotionally intimate ways. Women are expected to perform insubordinate and dependent economic, social and political roles with obedience and loyalty. Women are forced into accepting domestic, reproductive and sexual arrangements enforced by male authorities; arrangements that offer limited possibilities for individual expression or negotiation of terms. Dominant moral theories thus envision a moral world from familiar situations and positions of some men and very few women even now.

The canonical form of moral judgement in major theories pursue gendered social positions and prerogatives as well. Moral judgement or justification is rendered as the uniform application of law-like, impersonally action-guiding principles to cases relevantly similar from an impartial point of view. In this situation the moral agent in action is more like a judge, manager or bureaucrat enacting patterns of judgement appropriate to legal, institutional or administrative contexts. Since positions and operations like this characterize roles, positions and activities that are conservatively reserved for men it appears that theory makers know what only some men know.

In academic moral theory the image of a fraternity of peers invoking the authority of laws to deliver verdicts is so pervasive that some philosophers hold the project of western ethics itself as hopelessly discredited. Frye points out that ethics is not only gendered but “race, class and history specific” (Frye, 1990, p. 133). The question naturally arises whether we are in need of better ethics for that would mean one that is normatively equipped to support social and political critique with conceptions of morality adequate to diverse social positions. Feminists have supported that adequate moral theories must articulate the moral knowledge resident in women’s characteristic gendered locations and roles. However, these are parts of a social order that is unjust or oppressive to women and many men, and they are coercively assigned and maintained manipulatively within gender and other hierarchies.

Feminist critiques of ethics do not hold that moral philosophy is mistaken in its representation of moral life. Rather, they show how moral philosophers have in fact, represented in abstract and idealized theoretical forms, aspects of the actual positions of only some people in a certain kind of social order. This social order is one where the typicality of these positions depends on gender, age, economic status and other factors that distribute powers and forms of recognition differentially and

hierarchically. It is the moral agency of people placed in a society in certain specific ways that is dignified and 'normalized' by its portrayal in culturally authoritative philosophical accounts. The rest are either left unrepresented or represented as different and lacking from a moral point of view.

If these theories derive authority from their supposed representation of a moral life common to all it would be flawed for they depict part aspects of the lives of few ignoring the lives, labors and responsibilities of others. The credibility of claims to represent loses its authority Feminist criticism places the authority of representative claims about moral life under a harsh light.

Differently situated people tend to have different moral problems or experience similar ones differently for in a segmented and stratified society these are bound to be significant differences in views about the nature of moral problems among people very differently placed. If such a segmented or stratified social order is able to produce different and potentially competing styles of moral understanding along with different conceptions of agency and responsibility as well, there will be a problem in representation. These variations may compete not only for relative status but to be considered moral ones at all.

Projects of amplifying and augmenting stifled voices of many men and women become vital for the objects of comparison they yield which help in tracing dominant and recessed voices to real social locations.

For feminists isolating obstacles to women's agency is a vital project that elucidates complex relations between culture, social structures, developmental experience, individual identity and interpersonal relationships. Some feminist theorists appropriate the notion of false or colonized consciousness from the Marxist and anticolonialist traditions. Cultural ideals of feminine beauty and demeanor, together with norms of feminine duty and conduct function to subordinate women, yet women so often espouse those very ideals and norms. Moreover, when women fail to measure up to the ideals and conform to the norms they blame themselves for their inadequacy instead of challenging such conceptions of femininity and resisting the subordination that they reinforce. Once oppressive standards have been internalized, women's discontentment and outrage turns inwards and transforms into self-defeating shame and self-hatred and their potential for critiquing those standards and exacting change is effectively neutralized.

The primary task of a feminist theory of moral agency becomes explaining how women are to overcome colonized consciousness and exact the value of care without colluding in their own subordination and how they can breach the double binds of femininity that distorts their self-

perception and hence their life-choices. Two engagingly divergent strategies have been put to use by feminist scholars to persist with their aims. One is to treat the expertise associated with women's traditional role of mother and caregiver as a repository socially scorned but genuine values and thus creating the means to an opportunity to reconfigure the conception of what it is to think insightfully about moral questions and what it is to act morally. This strategy delves into what can be learnt from reinterpreting and revaluing so-called feminine experience. The second strategy directs its attention more on women's economic and political marginalization and forms of abuse they are vulnerable to. Both strategies work towards establishing an alternative discursive community; either one in which traditional feminine activities are revalued and their feminist potential tapped, or one in which the subordination and victimization of women is decried and subversive initiatives are undertaken. One yields a care-based account of moral agency and the other an oppositional account. For the purpose of this paper we will largely be confining to the care-based account.

Feminist accounts of care observe a significant variance in several respects however, they share a relational conception of the self. Feminist proponents of care treat the moral subject as a self-in-relation; an individual who treasures and revels in intimacy and whose identity is significantly determined through interpersonal bonds with concerns that are interdependent with those of others. Folded within a web of relationships that may be voluntary or non-voluntary, between equals or with dependents a self-in-relation construes moral choice in a way that refrains from harm and preserves relationships.

Care-based moral agency is particularistic in nature where a care giver must pay attention to and meet the needs of a distinctive individual. Further, it cannot mechanically derive decisions from general theories and must proceed improvisationally. A caregiver is required to be vigilant to fluid and peculiar situations that may call for special assistance or necessitate a reordering of priorities. Care-based moral agency is interactive for in order to comprehend the needs of the other, listening attentively with lines of communication constantly charged is required. Most importantly care-based moral agency does not exclude emotion for affective bonding enhances moral sensitivity and emotional receptivity can heighten moral perception. It is programmed in such a way as to remedy the exclusion and distortion of women's lives in moral theory and to represent sympathetically and comprehensively women's moral perceptions, senses of values and understandings of agency and responsibility. The purpose is to give expression to moral understandings enclosed in practices that have been and remain to be women's work. The result has been rich creative work on ethics of care,

maternal and friendship paradigms of moral relations and moral responsibilities in situations of interdependency, vulnerability and trust.

On the obverse, all the capacities mentioned above are other-directed which bring to mind the objections to self-sacrificial altruism that has prompted some feminists to doubt that care furnishes a tenable feminist ethics. A number of feminist scholars contend that the ethic of care translates into being a self-defeating feminine norm and that women's acceptance of this ethic only assists in perpetuating male dominance. The attention directed towards the other and the altruistic responsibilities that are integrated into the ethic of care can stifle the needs and aspirations of the caregiver. Moreover, submitting to the widely accepted social presumption that women ought to extend care unstintingly with men and children receiving it, binds women in a syndrome of unreciprocated care that ensures their continued subordination. The perils of self-effacement and servility, so interpreted, cannot be denied.

In a related view some theorists have analyzed the moral double binds that snare women. Womanly virtues are despised as vices, but acquiring manly virtues only stigmatize women as unfeminine. Women are powerless and so to protect themselves overweening care can be used to manipulate and coerce beneficiaries. Thus it becomes obligatory for feminists who would wish to reclaim women's experience in intimate social contexts to show that a care ethic can be extricated from its historic role in women's subordination.

Feminist scholars repudiate the stereotype of feminine care that attributes to women an unflagging disposition to serve in the interest of others. Because caregivers are equally deserving of care, they must include themselves in the orbit of care. Since caring for oneself presupposes knowledge of one's own needs, desires, values etc. introspective skills together with the imaginative, calculative and volitional skills that enable one to realize one's plans are indispensable to care. Care-based agency requires balancing skills that enable individuals to measure the moral concerns at issue and devise a course of action that holds these concerns in equilibrium. It also requires expressive skills that would enable individuals to communicate their needs and represent their choices without rupturing relationships. Thus care mobilizes a repository of skills and a moral competency that enables an individual to define her own moral identity and to improvise enactments of her moral identity that take into account both the empathic understanding of others and introspective understanding of herself. Care delegates responsiveness both to others and to oneself.

Although the feminist account of care-based moral agency initiates with a determination of reclaiming and revaluing activities and experiences that are culturally coded as feminine, it has far wider application than their derivation from what maternal practices and other intimate relationships might suggest. Moreover, feminist care does not submerge women's identity in the identities of others or block women's self-fulfillment and opposition to harmful social practices may be mounted in the name of care. Thus, there is a growing consensus that an ethic of care is an indispensable component of a feminist ethic.

The feminist debate about an ethic of care that initiated during the early 1980s acquired an extensiveness that would overcome any effort at overlooking it. From its very beginning it generated a series of independent models suggesting ways to expand critically or to provide alternative readings of traditional conceptions of morality. The reception of psychologist Carol Gilligan's book *In a Different Voice* (1982) sparked the entire discussion in which she outlines her theory of the different moral developments of women and men. Gilligan argued that her moral development research revealed two distinct but comparably integrated and mature moral orientations, 'justice' and 'care'. According to Gilligan the 'male' conception of morality may be understood as an ethic of justice while the female conception can be seen primarily as an ethic of care. Gilligan held that her point was not to generalize about either sex, but to highlight a distinction between two modes of thought and to focus on a problem of interpretation. The problem is "a problem in the representation, a limitation in the conception of human condition, an omission of certain truths about life" (Gilligan, 1982, p.2).

How an ethic of care can be applied as a potential critical supplement to traditional morality or as a way of rereading classical conceptions of morality and the usefulness of an ethic of care as an independent ethical alternative is worth discussing. However, since all of these attempts depend to a large degree on Gilligan's thesis, an overview of her formulation of an ethic of care would be in place.

Carol Gilligan's uneasiness with Lawrence Kohlberg's stages model of moral development became her point of departure. Within this model women were always assigned a lower moral stage (Kohlberg, 1981, p.409). Through a series of interviews with men and women she confirmed that the moral development of women is not deficient in relation to men, but that it follows a different logic.

From the perspective of the male self, whose development is tied to the experience of separation and individuation, people are individuals who are independent of one another and are equipped with subjective rights. He views the other primarily as a curtailment of his own circle of will and as a potential infringement of his personal rights. Coexistence only meant a coming together of different individuals at the margins of each one's respective domain. Thus from the male perspective, society materializes only subsequent to the assembling of originally independent individuals and is maintained through common rules applicable to everyone. This would imply that there can be only one morally correct solution and that moral decisions are above all applications of abstract principles to concrete situations. This, according to Gilligan is what characterizes the male conception of morality as an ethic of justice.

In contrast, the female conception of morality is centered around the terms of care and sympathy. From within the perspective of the female self whose development occurs alongside the experience of solidarity, the individual exists only within and on the basis of a web of social relationships where others are looked upon as conditions of one's own existence rather than restrictions. This for Gilligan means that society consists not of isolated individuals, but of relationships and that it holds together through human connections and not a system of rules (Gilligan 1982, p.42). The conception of morality that accompanies this female perspective is thus grounded in the experience of the sociality of people. The awareness of these bonds between people leads to the recognition of the mutual responsibility for one another.

In contrast to an ethic of justice, according to which morality is based on the abstract autonomous individual, the morality of an ethic of care foregrounds the concrete individual, and the social determinedness of human relations. Because of its reliance on context, a moral decision made for a specific situation is not simply the only possible rationally grounded option, and its morality does not lie in its possible generalizability or applicability to other situations.

Moral judgements within an ethic of justice are made through the deductive application of rules or universal principles to a particular situation while with an ethic of care they are formed by searching inductively for a solution that best affects all involved. However, according to Gilligan, the different conceptions of morality are in no way reserved exclusively to the one sex or to the other and neither one is limited to either the public or the private sphere. She believes it necessary to be able to switch between moral perspectives and to be able to access a problem from the point of view of each. She concludes that in order to endure the tension that such lack of clarity means each person requires a high degree of "tolerance for ambiguity" (Gilligan, 1982, p.25).

Seyla Benhabib was one of the first to undertake a consideration of traditional morality in the light of Gilligan's arguments towards a female conception of morality. Her critical approach in her essay "The generalized and concrete other: the Kohlberg – Gilligan controversy and feminist theory" (Benhabib 1986) has been ground breaking. For Benhabib, the normative potential of an ethic of care lies in its specifically context-bound character. Women tend to take the 'standpoint of the particular other' in their moral considerations unlike traditional conceptions where morality is based on the 'standpoint of the generalized other'.

Further Sara Ruddick's concept of maternal thinking and Joan C. Tronto's concept of an 'ethic of care' not only represent two of the most significant variations of independent ethics of care but also demonstrate the range covered by the term 'care'. In her elaboration of 'maternal thinking' Ruddick proceeds from the assumption that moral and theoretical norms, forms of knowledge and criteria of truth all arise from specific social practices and maternal thinking is a way of spelling out what is currently lived as "maternal praxis".

'Maternal praxis', tied to the existence of a child can be performed by both men and women as it is a social and not a biological praxis. However, due to gendered division of labour, it is carried out more often by women. Despite its individual differences it still retains its characteristic moments, or 'demands' as Ruddick calls them; preservation, growth and acceptability which, for her, are not simply of an emotional nature but also require reflection, knowledge and the capacity for reason.

Joan Tronto, as she puts it, wants to enable with her book a glimpse of another world, "where the daily caring of people for each other is a valued premise of human existence" (Tronto, 1993 p.x). She seeks to construct an ethic of care from everyday praxis of care for others thus going beyond 'care' to a 'caring for others'.

In all these models the primary goal is a further development of morality and rarely do indications that morality has anything to do with power, domination and oppression appear. However, morality is to be understood as a hegemonic discourse. Conceptions of morality are not merely certain sets of norms or social expectations that may or may not be followed but complex blends of a multiplicity of ways of thinking, feeling and acting which are normativized, censored as well as constituted.

An abstinence from normative discourses would be neither politically sensible nor practicable and hence a critical analysis and transformation of essential structural elements of dominant morality would be relevant. In contrast to the monistic conception of universalism and its belief that there can be only one morality or none at all, the insistence of the coexistence of several equally valid

conceptions of morality must be foregrounded. Above all the development of normative rules and political praxes is required so that they are able to guarantee a mutual, nonhierarchical recognition of socio-cultural differences, a goal toward which the idea of plural universalism could be a first step.

The correction to the gender blindedness of man-made ethics is the readmittance of women, not as different moral subjects to be set alongside men, but as ones whose spheres of activity comes to define what the moral subject is in itself. This would mean acknowledging the centrality of care to human life, as the mode of activity that nurtures and sustains good communication between human beings. For not only do we become the individuals we are through dialogue with other selves with whom we share our lives, we also learn the enlargement of consciousness associated with moral thinking when we hear and respect, attend to and honour the needs, desires and intentions of others.

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