

SOCIAL FEMINIST ETHICS

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Feminist are of the view that traditional ethics depreciates and devalues women's moral experience, so that there should be every attempt to revise, reformulate and rethink the traditional ethics. In particular, the feminist Alison Jaggar has found five ways in which the traditional ethics has devalued women and let them down. And before going into them in detail, the ways, it should be asserted that this was the particular reason that the need for feminist ethics arose and feminist philosophy took shape in demand of the feminists or feminist philosophers. The feminists felt as well that the traditional ethics and some particular notions of them should be reconceptualized evading the previous based ones altogether. All such notions which are tilted in favour of masculine gender or even written from their point of view should be absolutely quashed giving place to new conceptions unbiased and unprejudiced.

Now, coming to Alison Jaggar's views, her ways she found to fault traditional ethics are important, more so because they also give a clue so as to how the newer unbiased ethical conceptions should be formulated in feminist ethics. The traditional ethics is faulty in the five following ways:-

First, it shows less concern for women's as opposed to men's issues and interests. Second, traditional ethics views as trivial the moral issues that arise in the so – called private world, the realism in which women do housework and take care of children, the infirm and the elderly. Third, it implies that, in general, women are not as morally mature or deep as men.

Fourth, traditional ethics overrates culturally masculine traits like “independence, autonomy, intellect, will, wariness, hierarchy, domination, culture, transcendence, product, asceticism, war, and death”, while it underrates culturally feminine traits like interdependence, community, connection, sharing, emotion, body, trust absence of hierarchy, nature, immanence, process, joy, peace and life.” Fifth, and finally, it favors “male” ways of moral reasoning that emphasize rules, rights, universality, and impartiality over “female” ways of moral reasoning that emphasize relationships, responsibilities, particularity and partiality (Jaggar, “Feminist Ethics”, 1992).

Based on these five ways traditional ethics has failed or neglected women, feminists have developed a wide variety of gender – centered approaches to ethics. Some feminist ethicists emphasize issues related to women’s traits and behaviours, particularly their care giving ones. In contrast, other feminist ethicists emphasize the political, legal, economic, and / or ideological causes and effects of women’s second – sex status. But be these emphases as they may, all feminists ethicists share the same goal; the creation of a gendered ethics that aims to eliminate or at least ameliorate the oppression of any group of people, but most particularly women.

Feminist Ethics: Historical Background

Feminist approaches to ethics, as well as debates about the gendered nature of morality are not recent developments. A wide variety of thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Catherine Beecher, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton raised topics related to “women’s morality.” These thinkers raised questions such as : Are women’s “feminine” traits the product of nature / biology or are they instead the outcome of social conditioning? Are moral virtues as well as gender traits connected with one’s affective as well as cognitive capacities,

indeed with one's physiology and psychology? If so, should we simply accept the fact that men and women have different moral virtues as well as different gender traits and proceed accordingly? If not, should we strive to get men and women to adhere to the same morality: a one – size – fits – all human morality?

In answer to the questions raised above, Mary Wollstonecraft concluded that morality is the same for one and all, for men and women alike. In other words moral virtue is unitary. Though Wollstonecraft did not use terms like “socially constructed gender roles” and no less found women less virtuous than men but she agreed they were of weak moral characters pre – eminently due to deprived of sufficient opportunities to develop their rational powers. She said that due to societal reasons, women wind up being over – emotional, hypersensitive, narcissistic, self – indulgent individuals. Wollstonecraft said further that there was nothing wrong about women, including their supposedly weak moral characters, that could be cured by a rigorous education that is the kind of education that aims to develop students' rational powers. Men receive a proper education and so, they have concern, causes and commitments over and beyond petty, self – interested ones. Give women men's education, said Wollstonecraft, and women, no less than men, will become morally mature human beings. (Wollstonecraft, 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women P.105).

Wollstonecraft said that it was reason rather than sentiment the characteristic trait which distinguishes humans from non – human animals. Similarly manners are different from morals. Manners are mindless automation which one might master, but morals are such which require critical thinking. Whereas parents teach boys morals, they teach girls manners. More generally, society as a whole encourages women to cultivate negative psychological traits like “cunning”, “vanity” and

“immaturity”, all of which impede women’s moral development. What is worse, society twists what could be woman’s virtues into vices. For instance, women’s positive psychological traits of gentleness is quickly transformed into the negative psychological trait of obsequiousness “when it is the submissive demeanor of dependence, the support of weakness that loves, because it wants protection’ and is forbearing because it must silently endure injuries; smiling under the lash at which it dare not snar.”

Wollstonecraft reasoned that the best way for women to become full – fledged moral agents was to start thinking and behaving like men. Only then they could evade negative psychological traits which Wollstonecraft found much prevalent especially in upper – middle class women. However, she does not question whether men’s morality was in fact human morality. Only she says that on the face of it men’s morality seemed better than women’s morality and so was a superior candidate for the title “true human morality.”

Wollstonecraft emphasized that the women of her times needed a better education, but she fails to provide a definite rationale for providing women with men’s education. Her opinion differs and gives mainly two reasons for that. First she opines that the purpose of educating women is simply to supply men with “rational fellowship”. that is with more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers”. Secondly she suggests that women needed to be educated like men so that they can become rational, responsible, independent adults, she noted that if women were to be “really virtuous and useful”, they needed to be economically independent of men.

‘What made a human being good?’ was such a topic which did not end with Wollstonecraft. Rather, the discussion continued into the next century. What would be more ironical, was that by the nineteenth century, women were now considered as more moral (though less intellectual) than

men. However, John Stuart Mill, the Utilitarian philosopher was much disturbed by this view, As he viewed society was mistaken to et up an ethical double standard according to which women's morality was to be assessed differently than man's morality. Reflecting on women's alleged moral superiority. Mill concluded women's morality was simply the result of systematic social conditioning. He said that to laud women on account of their "complex abnegation of themselves",² is merely to compliment society for inculcating in women those psychological traits that serve to maintain it. Women are taught to live for others; to always give and never take; to submit, yield and obey; to be long – suffering. They are also taught to demur to men because they are not as smart and strong as men. This being the case, women's virtue is not the product of autonomous choice. Rather, it is the consequence of social programming. At the root, there is but one virtue – human virtue – and women as well as men should be pushed to adhere to its standards. Then, and only then, will society be as just as possible.

J.S. Mill and Mary Wollstonecraft thus hold one and the same standard of morality for both sexes. However, other nineteen century thinkers object to this. They think that male and female virtues are simply different. They give expression to a separate and unequal theory of virtue according to which female virtue is fundamentally better than male virtue. Importantly, this diverse group of thinkers disagree among themselves about how to assess the characteristics (nurturance, empathy, compassion, self – sacrifice, kindness) typically associated with women. They asked whether these "female" or "feminine" characteristics are : (1) genuine moral virtues to be developed by men as well as by women; (2) positive psychological traits to be developed by women alone; or (3) negative psychological traits not to be developed by anyone?

Catherine Beecher belongs to this group of thinkers. Unlike some of her contemporaries, she thought that women's place was in the home. Women's work such as creation and maintenance of strong families in which moral virtue thrives, was essential for society's well being. In order to esteem women's housework, Beecher developed the discipline of "domestic science". She stressed that women's housework required as much intelligence and organizational and occupational skills and it may be as demanding as to manage a small business properly.

Beecher also emphasized that women's most important work was to make the member of her family noble and gentle like Christ, who did a painful death so that humankind could be redeemed from its fallen, sinful state. Insulated in the private realm, where they are supposedly deaf to the siren calls of worldly wealth, power and prestige, women are supposedly better situated than men to cultivate the Christ like virtue of "self denying benevolence" and to serve as role models for their families. The more pure and perfect women are, the better society will be. Beecher is convinced that women are responsible for morally perfecting men and children. However, Beecher never asks herself that why God had burdened women rather than men with this responsibility, imposing on women the task of specializing in the virtue of self – denying benevolence. After all, given that Christ was a man, should not God have selected men as the keepers of society's virtue?

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a contemporary of Beecher also saw differences between women's and men's morality. However, her view is far different from Beecher. Stanton is not certain whether men's and women's virtues and vices are the result of social manipulation or biological imperative, but she has a low opinion of men's morals though it has set the standard for behavior in the public world. The solution to this regrettable situation, says Stanton, is a relatively simple one: push women and their

superior morals into the public world. Humankind cannot afford to leave women, as Beecher would, in the private world, exerting their good influence there and only there.⁴

Stanton is also reared up in Christian faith like Beecher and so she values women's self – denying benevolence. But Stanton believes that there is an even higher virtue for women to develop; namely self – development. In the course of interpreting a biblical passage in which a poor widow is praised for her charitable actions, Stanton agreed that the woman's generous gesture of giving was, on the face of it, indeed praiseworthy. Nonetheless, Stanton cautioned women that women's generosity – their willingness to do more in the way of caring and giving than men – may be contributing to women's second – class status. Although acts of self – sacrifice are morally required in the abstract, ought implies can in the concrete. Women cannot be always afford to be totally other – directed, says Stanton, sometimes they have to be self – centered, so that they can care for themselves and make progress towards securing the same political, social and economic rewards and power men have.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman another contemporary feminist of Stanton, takes a different line of thought. She imagines an all – female society, Herland in which women and their daughters (produced through parthenogenesis) are able to practice a superior morality. Herland is women – centered society of mothers in which the lines between the private realm and the public realm have been radically redrawn. The women of Herland would be just as visible in courts of law and centres of trade as they are in the nurseries and schools. Competitive, individualistic approaches to life would disappear in Herland, where women would be able to relate cooperatively because they feel no need to dominate on each other.

No wonder, then, that three male explorers – Terry, Jeff and Van – who reach Herland do not know what to make of it. Before they arrive, they make light of the mythical land, assuming there must be men in it, since women could not possibly be competent enough to run a nation without men’s help. When they see how successfully Herland is run, however, only one of them, Van is honest enough to recognize that its all – female population is a group of extraordinarily accomplished human beings. As he sees it, the women of Herland cultivate both the best feminine virtues and the best masculine virtues – the virtues that joined together are co – extensive with human virtue. Thus if a society in the real world wants to be virtuous, it should embrace Herland as its ideal⁵.

To be sure, Herland is a fictional utopia in which imaginary social, economic, political and cultural conditions permit women to develop in morally good as well as psychologically healthy ways. But Gilman admitted, that conditions are quite different for women in the non – fictional, real world. In ‘Women and Economics’ (1966), she wrote that so long as women are dependent on men for economics support, women will be known for their servility and men for their arrogance Women need to be men’s economic equals before they can develop truly human moral virtue, a perfect blend of pride and humility: namely, self – respect.

Reference

1. Mary Wollstonecraft : ‘A Vindication of the Rights of Women’ P. 117.
2. J.S. Mill: “the Subjection of Women” P. 32.
3. Beecher and Stowe: “The American Woman’s Home 1971
4. Buhle and Buhle, eds “The Concise History of Women’s Suffrage”
5. Gilman: “Herland” 1979.