

FEMINIST ETHICAL THEORY: TOWARDS A WHOLISTIC UNDERSTANDING

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Abstract

Feminism is one of the several movements, theories, ideologies and initiatives that have been developed in response to gender-based discrimination. Its main concern is to campaign for the rights of women for social, political and economic equality with men. Feminist ethics seem to be single-minded, focusing only on women's own culture, which has a great risk of ignoring the larger social and historical development of which it was part. This approach to ethics leads to cultural exclusion; looking at women as different from, and usually superior to men. This study observes that there is weakness in global approach to feminist ethics. It submits that despite the shortcomings of feminist ethics, it (feminist ethics) has contributed a lot especially towards the empowerment of women. In this study, analytic and hermeneutical methods were employed.

Keywords: Feminism, Ethics, Exclusion, Culture, Gender

Introduction

Since the 1970s, two interrelated but distinct points of view have gained wide adherence and acceptance: One is that in the past, philosophical and scientific inquiry have tended to leave women out of account; the other is that the ideals of objectivity which have underlain prevalent modes of inquiry have a masculinity bias which distorts inquiry, and in practice harms women.

Feminism is “a belief in equal rights and opportunities for women.”¹ The person who embraces feminism is called a feminist. The feminists main concern is to campaign for the rights of women for social, political and economic equality with men. They fight for women's right to own properties, to have access to higher education, and to vote. Feminism is “another contemporary movement that is seeking to rethink philosophy.”² Since feminism is a movement and not a doctrine-laden school of thought, there are many conceptions among its adherents as to what constitutes feminist philosophy.

Ethics is “the area of philosophy concerned with human values, and which studies the meanings of moral terms and theories of conduct and goodness.”³ For Kipfer, ethics means “moral philosophy, values, belief, conduct, conscience, criteria, decency, goodness, honesty, honor, ideal, integrity, moral code, morality, mores, natural law, nature, practice, principles, right and wrong, rules of conduct, standard, or the golden rule.”⁴ Ethics is the “domain of virtues and vices, right and wrong action. In ethical theory, one seeks to understand the nature, justification, and structure of ethical values.”⁵ This paper will have some touch of the general approach to feminist ethics found in different philosophical dimensions. The paper will define the key terms, explain the origins and developments of feminism, define feminist ethics, show the link between feminism and care ethics, feminism and virtue ethics, feminism and morality, the critique against feminist ethics, and later end with a conclusion.

Origins and Developments of Feminism

Feminism is one of the several movements, theories, ideologies and initiatives that have been developed in response to gender-based discrimination. “It is the theory of the political, economic and social equality of the genders.” We have some movements, programs and initiatives focusing on women's rights and interests including; “The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) established in 1976, The United Nations Women established in 2010, The African Women's Development Fund founded in 2001, The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) established in 1949, The European Feminist Forum launched in April 2007, and The North American Indian Women's Association founded in 1970.”⁶

¹ M. Upshall, *The Hutchinson Concise Encyclopedia* (London: Guild Publishing, 1990), 337.

² W. F. Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, (Mississippi: Cengage Learning, 2015), 579.

³ M. Upshall, *The Hutchinson Concise Encyclopedia*. 322.

⁴ A. B. Kipfer, (Ed.), *Roget's 21st Century Thesaurus (2nd Ed.)*, (1999), 295.

⁵ C. Taliaferro and J. E. Marty, (Eds.), *A Dictionary of Philosophy of Religion*, (London: 382Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 80.

⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki-feminism>.

What is obvious is that within the feminist movements, thinkers and advocates have developed gender-centered approaches to ethics. “There are many branches of feminist ethics that focus on diverse ways in which traditional notions of ethics could better take gender-related issues into account.”⁷ Nevertheless, despite the many branches of feminist ethics, there is an underlying common goal for all branches. “This common goal is the creation of gendered ethics that aims to eliminate the oppression of any group of people, especially the women in particular.”⁸

Prior to 1970, “there was no recognized body of feminist philosophy.”⁹ Of course throughout history, philosophers have attempted to understand the roles that gender may play in moral life. Yet such philosophers presumably were more interested in males' than women's moral capacities. Rarely in the history of philosophy will one find philosophical works that notice gender in order to criticize and correct men's historical privileges. The disruption of the social orders and practices that subordinate groups of gendered dimensions were not the goal of many philosophers. In this work we shall consider some of the philosophers of the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These philosophers presented to us what they perceived to be moral wrongs resulting from oppression on the basis of sex. Apart from oppression, they also felt that there were meta-ethical errors on the part of the public intellectuals who believed ideal forms of moral reasoning to be within the capacities of men and not women. “More theories argue influentially for ending unjust discrimination on the basis of sex, be it in ethical or moral reasoning.”¹⁰

Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Feminism

During this period, we have some public intellectuals who published treatises arguing that women were as rational as men. What women needed was good education that would allow them to develop their moral characters. They argued that “since females are rational, their unequal access to learning was immoral and unjustifiable. They explored questions about the preconditions for morality; what sorts of agents can be moral and whether morality is equally possible for different sexes.”¹¹ Astell vehemently challenged those deep backgrounds – philosophical and theological assumptions - which deny women the capacity for improvement of the mind.¹² She went on criticizing “the injustice of women's lot and the background assumptions maintaining their subordinate situation.”¹³ Frankel added “explicitly feminist claims including objections to the inferior education accorded women.”¹⁴

⁷ <https://ethics.org.au-ethics-explainer:ethics-of-care>.

⁸ <https://plato.stanford.edu-entries-feminism>.

⁹ C. Card, *The Unnatural Lottery: Character and Moral Luck*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 90.

¹⁰ <https://Plato.stanford.edu-entries-feminism>.

¹¹ <https://Plato.stanford.edu-entries-feminism>.

¹² M. Astell, (Ed.), *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, (NP: Broadview Press, 2002), 21.

¹³ M. Astell, (Ed.), *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, 17.

¹⁴ L. Frankel, *Damaris Cudworth Masham: A Seventeenth Century Feminist Philosopher*, (Hypatia, 1989) .84.

Especially when such obstacles were due to “the ignorance of men.”¹⁵ The “double standard of morality imposed on women and men especially the claim that women's virtue consists primarily in chastity”¹⁶ was challenged during these centuries.

Nineteenth Century Feminism

In Europe and North America, nineteenth century moral arguments were around material issues, women's moral leadership and greater freedom as moral imperatives. The “resistance of enslaved women and political activism of their descendants, the anti-slavery organizations of women in Europe and North America, the attention to inequity in women's access to income, property, sexual freedom, full citizenship and enfranchisement, and the rise of Marxist and socialist theories contributed”¹⁷ to women's participation in arguments for the reductions of militarism, unfettered capitalism, domestic violence and the related abuse of drugs and alcohol, among other concerns.

Harriet Taylor Mill “emphasizes the benefits to society and to human species, of improving women's lives and social situations. Mill expresses skepticism about claims that women are morally superior to men, as well as claims that women have greater liability to moral bias, emotionality and poor judgement in ethical decision-making. Mill tends to overemphasize the roles of women who are wives, their benefits to family and domestic life as reasons to support the liberation of women from subjugation.”¹⁸ She argued for the benefits of women's liberation to scholarly and political spheres. “She described the differences in achievement and behaviour to be the result mainly of women's social situations and education. Women's roles were discussed in terms of family life. Emancipation would mark the end of the sexual exploitation of women and of the disruption of family life, and the creation of a society in which the black woman”¹⁹ was able to occupy her proper station as a daughter, a wife, and a mother.

Davis insisted, “All that distinguishes man as an intelligent and accountable being, is equally true of woman.”²⁰ With this point, we cannot say that “female virtue is ultimately better than male virtue”²¹ as Tong perceived it. For Davis, male and female have the same capacities and are therefore accountable to whatever they are. It is only that “feminist philosophers stress the role of gender in shaping the patterns of thought, society, and history. Furthermore, feminists focus on the ways in which our

¹⁵ L. Frankel, *Damaris Cudworth Masham: A Seventeenth Century Feminist Philosopher*, 85.

¹⁶ L. Frankel, *Damaris Cudworth Masham: A Seventeenth Century Feminist Philosopher*, 85.

¹⁷ <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism>.

¹⁸ H. T. Mill, *The Complete Works of Harriet Taylor Mill*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 518.

¹⁹ <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism>.

²⁰ A. Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011), 51.

²¹ R. Tong., *Feminine and Feminist Ethics*, (Belmont: Wardsworth Publishing Company, 1993), 37.

male-dominated historical traditions have excluded women from the intellectual and political realms. Consequently, feminists make it their goal not only to describe the world but also to change it, producing a society that recognizes women and men as both different and equal.”²²

With time, some “Philosophical thinkers of different backgrounds gained greater access to education and printing presses in the nineteenth century, resulting in a plurality of approaches to the project of understanding, criticizing, and correcting how gender operates within our moral beliefs and practices.”²³ They realized that rapes of Black Women and girls, “which began in slavery days, still continued without reproof from church, State, or Press.”²⁴ This moved them to criticize these injustices to the betterment of the women's lives.

Twentieth Century Feminism

The “beginning of the century was characterized by remarkably optimistic thinking of more radical theorists who appreciated the deep harms”²⁵ of oppressive social organizations. Most of the feminists of this time argued for the individual's self-transformation and self-understanding as keys to women's better moral characters, while maintaining that “a person's efforts were best supported by a less individualistic and more communitarian social and political framework. Like Goldman, she included greater access to both control and reproductive choice among the morally urgent routes to women's individual self-discovery. She argued for women's access to contraception in ways that reflected increasingly popular policies of eugenics in North and South America and Europe.”²⁶

This period of the twentieth century was marked by the understanding of women's capacities and desires as sexual beings with their own moral agency. Goldman argued for “broader understanding of love, sexuality, and family, because she believed that traditional social codes of morality resulted in the corruption of women's sexual self-understanding.”²⁷ Goldman's arguments were “against feminine sexual purity with attention to the sexual exploitation of, and trafficking in, women who did not enjoy the State's protection.”²⁸ Some suffragists who “emphasized on female morality repulsed Goldman. Yet, while she ridiculed the claim that women were morally superior to men, she also emphasized that women should be allowed and encouraged to express freely their true femininity.”²⁹ She, however, believed that

²² Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 579.

²³ <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/feminism>

²⁴ Sterling, D., *Black Foremothers Three Lives*, 81.

²⁵ <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries-feminism>.

²⁶ <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries-feminism>.

²⁷ Goldman, E., *Anarchism and other Essays*, 112.

²⁸ <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries-feminism>.

²⁹ Marso, L.J., *A Feminist Search for Love*, 76.

“the social environment is capable of improvement through human action and philosophic thought.”³⁰

There was an emphasis that “we are not all simply subjects and individual choosers but also objects shaped by the forces of oppression.”³¹ Here the situation and attitude as seen is focused on the embodied experiences and social situations of women. The “embodiment and social situation are not only relevant to human existence, but are stuff of human existence, so crucial that philosophy ought not ignore them.”³²

Beauvoir said, “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman; that is, one may be born a human female, but the figure that the human female takes on in society, that of a human, results from the mediation of another that can constitute an individual as an other.”³³ The embodied human female may be a subject of her own experiences and perceptions, but “being a woman would mean being an object, the other,”³⁴ that is, “the objectified recipient of the speculations and perceptions of men.”³⁵ Beauvoir described a woman who would transcend this situation “as hesitating between the role of object, of other that is proposed to her, and her claim for freedom,”³⁶ that is, “her freedom to assert her own subjectivity, to make her own choices as to who she is, especially when she is not defined in relation to men.”³⁷

A woman's position is therefore so deeply ambiguous, one of navigating “a human condition as defined in its relation with the other,”³⁸ that if one is to philosophize about women, “it is indispensable to understand the economic and social structure in which women aim to be authentic or ethical, necessitating an existential point of view, taking into account her total situation.”³⁹ In other words, “philosophers speculating about women ought to take into account the obstacles to women's opportunities for subjecthood and choice that are created”⁴⁰ by those who construct an oppressive situation for women to navigate. Beauvoir's position that women have been defined by men and in men's terms, that ethical theory must attend to women's social situation and their capacity to be “moral decision-makers, and that women's oppression impedes their knowing themselves and changing their situation reflect the concerns of many forerunners of feminist”⁴¹ ethics.

³⁰ <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism>.

³¹ B. Andrew, *Beauvoir's Place in Philosophical Thought*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 37.

³² B. Andrew, *Beauvoir's Place in Philosophical Thought*, 34.

³³ S. Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, (New York: Citadel Press, 1976), 329.

³⁴ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 83.

³⁵ <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism>.

³⁶ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 84.

³⁷ <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism>.

³⁸ <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism>.

³⁹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 196.

⁴⁰ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 84.

⁴¹ <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism>.

Mary Wollstonecraft “in 1788 renewed attention to girl's lack of access to education. She criticized the philosophical assumptions underpinning practices that denied girls adequate education. Wollstonecraft articulated an enlightenment ideal of the social and moral rights of women as the equal of men. Wollstonecraft also broadened her critique of social structures to encompass ethical theory, especially in resistance to the arguments of influential men, that women's virtues are different from men's virtues and appropriate to perceived feminine duties.”⁴² Wollstonecraft asserted, “I have thrown down my gauntlet, and deny the existence of sexual virtues, adding that women, I allow, may have different duties to fulfill; but they are human duties, and the principles that should regulate the discharge of them must be the same.”⁴³ The “revolution of the enlightenment age motivated some men as well as women to reconsider inequalities in education at a time when notions of universal human rights”⁴⁴ were gaining prominence.

Wollstonecraft accepted that there were material differences between the sexes, but advanced moral arguments against ethical double standards on the basis of universal humanism. She was advocating for the rights of women, for the admission of women to the rights of citizenship and for women's equal humanity on the grounds of reason and justice. She realized that the notion of humanism tended to prioritize virtues traditionally seen as masculine. She “argued against perceptions that women lacked men's capacities for morality, but praised rationality and masculinity as preconditions for morality.”⁴⁵

Feminist Ethics

Feminist ethics is “an approach to ethics that builds on the belief that traditionally ethical theorizing has undervalued and underappreciated women's”⁴⁶ moral experience. It believes that philosophy has been largely male-dominated. The emphasis was that this approach to ethics should face a holistic feminist approach to transform it for the benefit of all. The movement is trying to make sure that everyone lives a life worthy of joy and peace, free from any form of disruption. In discussing Feminist ethics, we shall focus on some trending concepts:

Gender Binarism, Essentialism, and Separatism

Gender binarism is “the view that there are only two genders, male and female, and that everyone is only one of them. Some of the 1970s and 1980s feminist ethicists criticized male supremacy without thereby preferring female supremacy.”⁴⁷ They argue that although the categories of men and women are physiologically distinct,

⁴² Cf. <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries-feminism>.

⁴³ M. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1988), 51.

⁴⁴ <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries-feminism>.

⁴⁵ Tong, *Feminine and Feminist Ethics*, 44.

⁴⁶ <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki-feminism>

⁴⁷ <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries-feminism>.

there is potential of feminism to liberate both men and women from oppressive gendered social arrangements. They believed that men and women do not have different moralities or separate realities, and that we do not need to articulate separate capacities for ethics. Indeed “women were traditionally defined throughout intellectual history as being subversive of rationality, impartiality and morality as traditionally conceived. But women ought to embrace, as essential to women's natures and good, some of the very qualities that men have ascribed to women as essential to women's natures.”⁴⁸ The women's capacities for childbearing and birth, their emotionality is to be valued.

Some “radical feminists and lesbian feminists argue that separatism allows a setting in which to create alternative ethics, rather than merely responding to the male dominated ethical theories traditionally discussed in the academy. They also argue that separatism better fosters women's increased connection to each other and denies the access to women than men might expect.”⁴⁹ In deep disagreement, philosophers such as Alison Jaggar argue against separatism as being in any way productive of a different and morally better world. Jaggar maintains that “what we must do instead is to create a new androgynous culture which incorporates the best elements of both, which values both personal relationships and efficiency, both emotion and rationality. This result cannot be achieved through sexual separatism.”⁵⁰ Jaggar argues against separatism or separate gendered realities, noting that there is no reason “to believe in a sexual plurality which transcends the physiological distinction.”⁵¹

Gilligan suggested that for boys and men, “separation and individuation are critically tied to gender identity.”⁵² Further, the development of masculinity typically involves valuing autonomy, rights, disconnection from others, and independence, while seeing other persons and intimate relationships as dangers or obstacles to pursuing those values. Women, in Gilligan studies, “were as likely to express the perspective of justice as they were to express a perspective that valued intimacy, responsibility, relationships, and caring for others, while seeing autonomy as “the illusory and dangerous quest.”⁵³

⁴⁸ <https://Plato.stanford.edu-entries-feminism>.

⁴⁹ <https://Plato.stanford.edu-entries-feminism>.

⁵⁰ A. M. Jaggar, *Feminist Ethics: Project, Problems, Prospect*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 288.

⁵¹ Jaggar, A.M., *Feminist Ethics: Project, Problems, Prospect*, 283.

⁵² C. Gilligan, C., *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 8.

⁵³ Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, 48.

Importance of Feminist Ethics

A feminist ethics, “which paid attention to these different identities and perspectives, became centrally important to taking women's lives and experiences seriously, and centrally to eliminate oppression of women, sexual minorities, and other oppressed groups.”⁵⁴ Feminist ethics wants “to understand, criticize and correct”⁵⁵ “how gender operates within our moral beliefs and practices, and our methodological approaches to ethical theory. More specifically, feminist ethicists aim to understand, criticize and correct: 1) the binary view of gender, 2) the privilege historically available to men, and 3) the ways or views about gender that maintain oppressive social orders or practices that harm others, especially girls and women who historically have been subordinated”⁵⁶ along gendered dimensions including sexuality and gender identity. Since “oppression often involves ignoring the perspectives of the marginalized, different approaches to feminist ethics have in common a commitment to better understand the experiences of persons oppressed in gendered ways. That commitment results in a tendency, in feminist ethics, to take into account empirical information and material actualities. Some feminist ethicists criticize and aim to correct the privilege of men as the more morally worthy half of the binary, or argue against the maintenance of a social order that oppresses others in gendered ways. More recently, feminist ethicists have criticized the gender binary itself, arguing that upholding a fixed conception of the world as constituted only by biological”⁵⁷ men and women contributes to the maintenance of oppressive and gendered social orders, especially when doing so marginalizes those who do not conform to gender binary.

Feminist ethicists who are attentive to the intersections of multiple aspects of identity including race, class, and disability, in addition to gender, make effort to criticize and correct assumptions that men are historically privileged, as if privilege is distributed equally among all men regardless of how they are socially situated. Their arguments are focused more on criticizing and correcting oppressive practices that harm and marginalize others who live at this intersection in order to account for the distinctive experiences of women whose experiences are not those of members of culturally dominant groups.⁵⁸ Whatever the focus of feminist ethicists, “a widely shared characteristic of their works is at least some overt attention to power, privilege, or limited access to social goods. In a broad sense, then, feminist ethics is fundamentally political.”⁵⁹ This is “not necessarily a feature of feminist ethics that distinguishes it from mainstream ethics, since feminist analysis of ethical theory as

⁵⁴ <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/feminism>

⁵⁵ 32H. Lindemann, (Ed.), *An Invitation to Feminist Ethics*, 11.

⁵⁶ <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism>.

⁵⁷ Cf. <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism>.

⁵⁸ <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism>.

⁵⁹ Tong, *Feminine and Feminist Ethics*, 160.

arising from material and non-ideal context suggests that all ethics is political whether its being so is recognized by the theorists or not.”⁶⁰

Since feminist ethics is not merely a branch of ethics, but instead, “a way of doing ethics”⁴³⁸, philosophers engaged in the above tasks can be concerned with any branch of ethics including meta-ethics, normative theory and practical or applied ethics. The “point of feminist ethics is, ideally, to change ethics for the better by improving ethical theorizing and offering better approaches to issues including those involving gender. Feminist ethics is not limited to gendered issues because the insights of feminist ethics are often applicable to analysis of moral experiences that share features”⁶¹ with gendered issues or that reflect the intersection of gender with other bases of oppression. Feminist philosophical endeavors include bringing investigations motivated by feminist ethics to bear on ethical issues.

Feminism and Care Ethics

Ethics of care, “also known as care ethics, has developed historically from the feminist tradition of recognizing and requiring, that we can and should respond to marginalized members of the community with care and empathy. The ethics of care calls on all individuals to take conscious and empathetic steps and actions towards the advancement and protection of vulnerable members of society.”⁶² Ethics of care has been selected from various ethical theories that can be used to address gender discrimination because of its historical links to feminism. It is an influential theory that provides us with rich resources for thinking about gender and sexuality. Robin Dillon observes that, “care ethics was for some time the dominant approach in feminist ethics and so feminist discussion of virtue.”⁶³

Carol Gilligan is credited as being the founder of the ethics of care. Gilligan's “ground-breaking work, *In a Different Voice*, promoted the view that women tended to emphasize empathy and compassion over the notions of justice-based morality. Subsequent feminist research suggests that these preferences are more likely to be a result of socialized gender roles, which in turn is reflected in the devaluation of a care approach and caring work place and home roles. In response, ethicist Nel Noddings has promoted the view that women's capacity for care is a human strength, which can and should be taught to and expected of men as well as women. Rather than the approach adopted by Gilligan who regarded care-based morality as an alternative to justice-based morality, Noddings considers that values such as justice, equality, and individual rights should operate together with values such as care, trust, mutual consideration, and solidarity.”⁶⁴ At the same time, Noddings “prioritizes caring as the

⁶⁰ <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries-feminism>.

⁶¹ Lindemann, H., (Ed.), *An Invitation to Feminist Ethics*, 4.

⁶² <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries-feminism>.

⁶³ <https://ethics.org.au/ethics-explainer:ethics-of-care>.

⁶⁴ R. Dillon, *Feminist Approaches to Virtue Ethics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 578.

preferable ethical approach that is rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness.”⁶⁵ The ethics of care “identifies four ethical elements: Attentiveness, Responsibility, Competence, and Responsiveness.”⁶⁶ Ethics of care is a theory about what makes actions morally right or wrong. Ethics is concerned with philosophical inquiry about morality, moral problems and moral judgements. The primary concern of normative-ethics is to make moral judgements about particular actions or kinds of actions.⁶⁷ The “ethics of care moral imperative goes beyond our legal responsibilities and urges us to act even where it may be uncomfortable to do so. According to ethics of care, acting morally means more than the passive idea of 'do no harm'.”⁶⁸ Doing the right thing means acting to make the world a better place for those who have been made vulnerable or otherwise excluded and marginalized. The “moral theory known as the ethics of care implies that there is moral significance in the fundamental elements of relationships and dependencies in human life. Normatively, care ethics seeks to maintain relationships by contextualizing and promoting the well-being of care-givers and care-receivers in a network of social”⁶⁹ relations. Most often defined as a virtue rather than a theory as such, care, involves maintaining the world of, and meeting the needs of, ourselves and others.

It “builds on the motivation to care for those who are dependent and vulnerable, and is inspired by both memories of being cared for and the idealizations of self.”⁷⁰ A century before Care Ethics would become a strain of academic feminist ethics, Cooper urged that both masculine reason and feminine sympathy “are needed to be worked into the training of children, in order that our boys may supplement their virility by tenderness and sensibility, and our girls may round out their gentleness by strength and self-reliance.”⁷¹ Her timeless concern was that a nation or a people “will degenerate into mere emotionalism on one hand, or bullyism on the other, if dominated by either exclusively.”⁷² “Her's is a normative argument for appreciating the contributions that both traditionally feminine and masculine values could offer to a well-balanced ethics. Explicitly arguing that standpoints matter to knowledge claims and moral theorizing, Cooper insisted that historical knowledge necessary to a nation's self-understanding”⁷³ depends on the representation of Black Americans' voices, and especially the “open-eyed but hitherto voiceless Black Woman of America.”⁷⁴

⁶⁵ <https://ethics.org.au-ethics-explainer:ethics-of-care>.

⁶⁶ N. Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 2.

⁶⁷ <https://ethics.org.au-ethics-explainer:ethics-of-care>.

⁶⁸ A. Fadahunsi, *Philosophy and Society: An Introduction for Beginners*, (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2015), 49.

⁶⁹ <https://ethics.org.au-ethics-explainer:ethics-of-care>.

⁷⁰ <https://ethics.org.au-ethics-explainer:ethics-of-care>.

⁷¹ <https://ethics.org.au-ethics-explainer:ethics-of-care>.

⁷² A. J. Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, (Xenia: The Aldine Printing House, 2000), 60.

⁷³ Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 61.

⁷⁴ <https://Plato.stanford.edu-entries-feminism>. Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 2.

Feminism and Virtue Ethics

Some feminist ethicists are contented that virtue ethics, which focuses on living a good life or flourishing, “offers the best approach to ensuring that ethical theory correctly represents the conditions permitting vulnerable bodies to flourish in oppressive contexts.”⁷⁵ Feminists have engaged “critically for several centuries with questions about which virtues and qualities of character would promote a good life in the context of”⁷⁶ what we now describe as women subordination. Robin Dillon observes that feminist virtue ethics “identifies problems for character in context of domination and subordination and proposes ways of addressing those problems, and it identifies problems of unreflective theory and proposes power-conscious alternatives.”⁷⁷ Dillon proposes what she calls “feminist critical character ethics as an alternative to feminist virtue ethics”⁷⁸

Like the ethics of care, virtue ethics is often described as offering a theory that is not beholden to abstract and universal principles, but instead acknowledge “that moral reasoning might be an extraordinarily complex phenomenon, a view on which what the ethical life requires of us cannot be codified or reduced to a single principle or set of principles.”⁷⁹ A “further commonality between care and virtue that is of interest to feminists is that virtue theory, like care ethics, rejects a simplistic dichotomy between reason and emotion,”⁸⁰ and does not begin from the assumption that all human beings are essentially equal. “Ethical theories of virtue or character tend to appreciate the importance of emotions and interpersonal relationships to a person's moral development.”⁸¹ Some virtue ethics also focus on what opportunities for virtue are available to agents in particular social contexts, which is useful in feminist ethics when it comes to delineating our responsibilities as relational beings and as characters who may exhibit vices resulting from oppression.

Virtue ethics “provides wider opportunities for feminist ethics to attend to virtues such as integrity and courage in oppressive context that the ethic of care tends not to prioritize.”⁸² Tessman argues that when agents live under conditions of systematic injustice, their opportunities to flourish are blocked and their pursuits may even be hopeless. She suggests that “the burdened virtues include all those traits that make a

⁷⁵ S.A. Berges, *Feminist Perspective on Virtue Ethics*, (London: Palgrave-Macmillan 2015), 3.

⁷⁶ [https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries-feminism](https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism).

⁷⁷ R. Dillon, *Feminist Approaches to Virtue Ethics*, 381.

⁷⁸ R. Dillon, *Feminist Approaches to Virtue Ethics*, 380.

⁷⁹ Moody-Adams, *Gender and the Complexity of Moral Voices*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1991), 209.

⁸⁰ [https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries-feminism](https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism).

⁸¹ [https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries-feminism](https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism).

⁸² [https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries-feminism](https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism).

contribution to human flourishing, if they succeed in doing so at all, only because they enable survival of or resistance to oppression, while in other ways they detract from their bearers' well-being, in some cases so deeply that their bearer may be said to lead a wretched life.”⁸³

For Jean Hampton, “you are under no obligation to make yourself prey to others.”⁸⁴ Hampton believes that all persons have intrinsic values and thus must have their interests respected. Virtue ethics is “an ethical theory that focuses on those character traits that make someone a good or admirable person, rather than simply the actions the person performs. This ethical theory can trace its roots back to Socrates, Plato, the Stoics, and Confucius. However, Aristotle had the most influence on the development of this perspective.”⁸⁵

Feminism and Morality

The work of psychologist Carol Gilligan has a great influence on philosophers interested in just such evidence for substantial sex differences in moral reasoning. Gilligan disputes accounts of moral development that do not take into account girls' moral experiences,⁸⁶ or that describe women as stuck at an interpersonal stage short of full moral development as in the theories of Lawrence Kohlberg.⁸⁷ Gilligan argues that Kohlberg wrongly prioritizes a “morality of rights and independence from others as better, rather than merely different from a morality of responsibility and intimate relationships with others.”⁸⁸

Gilligan offered a view on ethical reasoning. “While investigating the moral thinking of women, she found that mature, adult, intelligent women, do not think about moral problems in an abstract and impersonal”⁸⁹ way or in terms of justice, but rather in terms of personal moral responsibility. “Responsibility for and protection of the other, Gilligan suggested, is at the core of women's moral thinking.”⁹⁰ Men, on the other hand, see a moral problem as one that can be resolved in terms of right and wrong. Gilligan argued that “although the reasoning of women when making moral choices is different, it is no less logical or mature than that of Kohlberg and Kant.”⁹¹ Men, on the other hand, see a moral problem as one that can be resolved in terms of

⁸³ L. Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 95.

⁸⁴ J. Hampton, *Feminist Contractarianism*, (Boulder: Westview, 1993), 236.

⁸⁵ Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 587.

⁸⁶ Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, 18.

⁸⁷ Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, 30.

⁸⁸ Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, 19.

⁸⁹ <https://ethics.org.au-ethics-explainer:ethics-of-care>.

⁹⁰ <https://ethics.org.au-ethics-explainer:ethics-of-care>.

⁹¹ <https://ethics.org.au-ethics-explainer:ethics-of-care>.

right and wrong. Gilligan argued that “although the reasoning of women when making moral choices is different, it is no less logical or mature than that of Kohlberg and Kant.” The argument, therefore, is not only a question of the existence or nature of the gender differences regarding patterns of moral thinking. Rather, it is a debate about what form of moral thinking is more developed, mature, or advanced, in this case the logical versus the compassionate. Gilligan argues that men and women claim different moral imperatives, women feel “a responsibility to discern and alleviate the real and recognizable trouble of this world,” whereas men's moral imperative “appears rather as an injunction to respect the rights of others.”⁹² From this we can see that moral judgement is a product of the different patterns that characterize men and women.

The ethics of care “advocates a moral obligation to provide care for marginalized segments of society. Where the carer is the beneficiary of a system established upon and perpetuating historical and or current inequality, the ethics of care perspective would call for a heightened duty to care for others. But even utilitarian ethicists, such as the controversial philosopher Peter Singer, argue that individuals in a position of influence or power, whether it be financial, educational or positional, have a higher moral duty to care for those they can care for and who need their help, and to make changes to the systems and institutions”⁹³ that perpetuate sexism and inequality.

Some “feminist ethicists endorsed deontological moral theories on the grounds that granting women, who have been subordinated in private and public spheres, the same rights routinely granted to men in positions of power would enable women's freedom and flourishing, especially in context of political liberalism.”⁹⁴ Ethical deontologism argues that, “the moral worth of any action is to be determined independently of any actual or possible consequence. Rather, the appeal is to be made to the very nature or motive behind an action or the rule guiding the action.”⁹⁵ Feminist ethicists have long argued that we “should acknowledge women's equal capacities for moral agency and extend human rights to them. While building on existing frameworks of liberalism, rights theory, and deontology, feminist ethicists have argued for granting rights where they have been previously”⁹⁶ neglected. They have argued for rights on the issues of enfranchisement, reproduction, abortion, bodily integrity, women's and non-heterosexual people's sexuality, sexual harassment, pornography, violence against women, rape and more. Feminist philosophers have argued for global human rights as a remedy for gendered oppression and dehumanization.

⁹² Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, 100.

⁹³ <https://ethics.org.au-ethics-explainer:ethics-of-care>.

⁹⁴ <https://Plato.stanford.edu-entries-feminism>.

⁹⁵ Fadahuni, *Philosophy and Society: An Introduction for Beginners*, 52.

⁹⁶ <https://Plato.stanford.edu-entries-feminism>.

Mill argues that “the desirable outcome of human moral progress is generally hindered by women's legal and social subordination.”⁹⁷ He adds that not only each woman, but each man's personal moral character is directly harmed by the injustice of unequal social arrangements. Mill expresses special concern that “the object of being attractive to men had become the polar star of feminine education and formation of character an immoral influence over the minds of women”⁹⁸ “as well as an immoral influence on the understanding of the boys and girls that such women raise. Consistent with the utilitarian principle that everyone counts equally and no single person's preferences count more than another's, Mill argues that men and women are fundamentally equal in the capacities for higher and lower pleasures and arguably in their responsibilities and interests.”⁹⁹ Harriet Taylor likewise argues for moral improvement of humankind generally and “the elevation of character and intellect that would permit each woman and man to be both morally better and happier, which are overlapping and important considerations.”¹⁰⁰

Feminist Ethics: A Critique

Feminist ethics seem to be single-minded, focusing only on women's own culture, which has a great risk of ignoring the larger social and historical development of which it was part. This approach to ethics leads to cultural exclusion; looking at women as different from, and usually superior to men. There is weakness in global approach to feminist ethics. We think we have to think locally and act locally first in order to have a hope of being effective globally. It is our strong position that when we get the real sense of what we can do is when we get involved at the local level. At the community level, we can really see the consequences of what we do and the collective impact of communities around the world. Take for instance, to deal with the problem of gender discrimination, we can start acting locally by implementing an ethics of care approach in our own lives in everyday situations involving gender inequality. We can support victims of sexual harassment or assault. We can speak up and support those who have been interrupted or talked over during meetings. In doing so, we are demonstrating behaviours of a carer for others outside our immediate family circles, of course after having done so in our own individual families first.

Another way in which we can take responsibility is by addressing our own implicit gender-based biases. For example, when we witness an act of discrimination against women, we should ask ourselves whether our own common practices could encourage such discriminatory actions. This is how we can deconstruct and question

⁹⁷ <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism>.

⁹⁸ J. S. Mill, *Three Essays: On Liberty, Representative Government, The Subjection of Women*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 28.

⁹⁹ <https://Plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism>.

¹⁰⁰ H. T. Mill, *The Complete Works of Harriet Taylor Mill*, 65.

our own privileges and biases, how we can alter our own life to become more inclusive and empathetic.

Most of the feminist ethicists seem to define femininity in relation to masculinity, it is somehow controversial whether femininity can necessarily be defined in relationship to masculinity. The power relationships and political relationships manifest in moral encounters, the vulnerabilities of embodied actors that yield a plurality of approaches to ethical situations, and the degrees of agency or capacity that are shaped by experiences with oppression and misogyny.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we could say that in most cases the approach of feminist ethics was biased or judgmental. They perceived male life as a norm and so female's life was to be fashioned out of a masculine cloth. They were convinced that voices of women had either been excluded from the research on ethics or had been considered inferior. They embarked on giving expression to the voice that had not been heard and to promote traditional women's values in a quest for new virtues. It is as if the motivation was to challenge the philosophers before them on their approach to ethics and their sensitivity to gender issues. All in all, feminist ethics has contributed a lot especially towards the empowerment of women.

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