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A Feminist Approach to Ethics¹

One of the tasks of feminist scholarship is to uncover the male bias which exists in traditional academic disciplines, offering a corrective vision in its stead. Feminist scholars have noted that most disciplines represent male views and male experience as the view and experience of "mankind", and try to persuade us that by "mankind" they really mean humankind. Unfortunately, it turns out that in most cases they really meant mankind all along, for the knowledge presented and discussed reflects exclusively male thought and experience, and hence it is limited and distorted as a substitute for human knowledge. Feminists have been working to identify in some detail what has been omitted in the traditional approaches to scholarship, and to pick out issues and analyses which reflect women's experience and foster women's understanding.

Philosophy has not been immune from male bias in its choice of subject matter and methodology. In this paper, I attempt to outline the ways in which those concerned with the subject of ethics have restricted its scope and relevance by concentrating on the work of male philosophers. By perpetuating assumptions and procedures that are alien to women, the discipline denies women a voice through which they might offer alternative perspectives. By showing the incompatibility between traditional ethical thought and feminist research, I hope to demonstrate the inadequacy of a non-feminist approach to ethics, and hint towards an alternative theory that might be more adequate as a basis for moral decision-making.

The Traditional Approaches to Ethics

The dominant ethical theories in use to-day share a common perspective which is not compatible with some fundamental feminist values; hence, a firm commitment to feminism demands a normative theory which is significantly different from the prevailing theories. In

this paper, I shall explain why the available theories are inadequate and sketch the outline of an ethical theory that would be acceptable to feminism.

Contemporary ethical theorists commonly assume that the most fundamental normative choice to be made is whether to adopt a teleological or deontological approach. Implicit in both approaches is a meta-theoretic commitment to developing a theory that specifies obligation in terms of behaviour or conduct in accordance with the most abstract principle available.

Virtually all contemporary moral theorists, despite their major areas of disagreement, assume a common meta-principle of abstraction which directs moral agents to disregard most of the special features of a particular moral situation, including, in particular, the actual identities and relationships of those concerned; morality is thought to require that agents concentrate on the **essence** of either the act in question (deontologists) or its likely consequences (teleologists). But accepting this structure requires us to sacrifice some important matters of value: specifically, we seem to be obliged to give up recognition of the significance of personal feelings and attitudes and to deny the importance of particular relations among persons.

There is something troublesome about this fundamental metaprinciple which assumes that ethics must be founded on pure and abstract principles. I shall try to make clearer my difficulties with this premise and show how feminism offers a different world view which does not rely so extensively on this meta-claim.

First, the moral theories that derive from the principle of abstraction are excessively individualistic. They rest on a model that views persons as autonomous, normally isolated atoms. Occasionally, one bumps into some other atom and moral principles are designed to govern behaviour in the essentially deviant circumstance that obtains when these independent individuals meet. Individual rights and autonomy are given priority in this model, and attention is focused on protecting each individual from excessive bumping by others. It is seen as important to preserve and entrench the fierce independence of each person. Such a view makes social interaction an anomaly to be treated with suspicion. Most moral theories in fact seem to view social interaction in just this way. Obligations do not direct one to seek out interaction with others, to strive for co-operative arrangements, but rather to refrain from interfering excessively with the independence of some other person one might happen to bump into.

At the same time, the traditional theories are depersonalizing in a serious way, since they urge us to formulate rules for relating to other persons which must be valid for any meetings with any other persons;

we are to generalize by abstracting as far as possible from the details of the particular situation. Kantianism in particular urges us to disregard any special relations between oneself and the person in question. Sentiments relating to the other person are said to be quite irrelevant from the moral point of view. Morality is to be concerned with duties towards persons *qua* persons, not to specific persons in terms of social and political facts.²

At first glance, utilitarianism seems preferable to the Kantian approach, since it does have room for the emotional component generated by the details of relationships. In so far as it increases our pleasure to benefit our friends, relations, and political comrades, this fact adds to the utility of beneficent acts when they are directed towards such persons, making a stronger case for duties to benefit those we care for. But any particular decision will still depend on accidental empirical facts, and it may often turn out that benefitting strangers or even enemies creates more utility than any alternative, despite the disutility of our possible distaste for such a situation. If we accept utilitarianism, it is our duty to concentrate on how we can produce the greatest utility with only incidental and instrumental concern for who is being benefitted or harmed.³ In the final analysis, we must be impartial in increasing utility despite our prior preferences.

Under either of the standard theories, we are not to follow our inclinations for those we care for and about; rather, we are directed to treat all persons as essentially equal and interchangeable when calculating our moral obligations. Differences among persons are to be seen as fundamentally insignificant, for each is viewed as a sort of bare abstract essence. For Kant, this essence is personhood; that is, each person is viewed as a rational free being equivalent to all other rational free beings. For utilitarians, a person is seen as a bearer of utilities, the sort of being that can be benefitted or harmed to a degree commensurate with the utilities of other sentient beings.

These features create a curious sort of attitude towards others for those who hold such a moral theory. From the agent's point of view there is an emphasis on one's individuality in the sense of being separate and independent of others. Rights become important as a means for each agent to preserve a sphere of independence where others are forbidden to intrude or make demands. Morality is an instrument for distancing oneself from others. Moral theories become necessarily individualistic in the sense that there is a great stress on the separateness and independence of each individual person/atom.

Yet, these theories also argue against an important element usually associated with concern for individualism, namely the recognition of the significance of differences among persons. By concerning them-

selves with their conception of the common feature of all persons, be it rationality or capacity for pleasure or pain, both Kantianism and utilitarianism deny the value of human differences. Our moral duties do not vary with the particular qualities of persons or our feelings for them; such features are declared to be irrelevant from the moral point of view. The value of individualism as recognition of the variety among persons and appreciation of the uniqueness of each person is specifically rejected. It is their common moral status that matters, not any particular feature unique to some individual. Again, the model of atomism seems most fitting. Persons are complete, inscrutable beings not subject to further analysis. Each is similar to every other for all moral purposes. Our moral duty would be the same whichever other person/atom we were to bump up against.⁴ (There are, of course, special duties recognized as created by special relationships as in the duties owed by parents to their young children. But here the duty derives from the abstract relationship and is quite removed from the particular feelings of the participants.)

Psychologically, I believe the effect of this emphasis is to encourage each individual to concentrate on his/her separateness and foster concern for protecting oneself against intrusion from others. This attitude leads to feelings of indifference, at best, towards other persons—more commonly, it produces a sense of competition with others; such social attitudes result in quite unfortunate social and political arrangements. Traditional approaches to ethics would find such consequences unfortunate perhaps, but basically irrelevant. It is generally assumed that a philosopher's job is to find the truth whatever its costs. Feminist theorists tend not to dismiss unfortunate human consequences of theories as irrelevant, but rather to see them as sufficient reason to seek a change in theory.

There is, of course, some positive virtue in the traditional, non-emotional approach. The denial of the relevance of personal feelings in our duties towards others is expected to provide an important protection against viciousness and the harsh consequences of unjust discriminatory attitudes. Given the prevalence of such feelings, it seems important to have our moral theories explicitly state that prejudice is not adequate justification for mistreatment.

As a feminist, however, I do not feel terribly reassured by this defense. Moral theories that deny the relevance of personal feeling in defining proper behaviour have not actually provided much protection to women in an oppressively sexist culture. The advantages of such a neutral moral theory are not evident in practice. Rather, the ontological notion of equality which denies the relevance of sex (or race or class, etc.) seems to function as a mechanism to deny the

significance of the common experiences of being female in a culture that insists gender should not matter. The result is that our feelings are officially denied and dismissed and the practices that oppress women continue, despite explicit moral disapproval at the formal level.

Feminists cannot accept this metaphor of a world composed of isolated independent person/atoms. Of course, feminists are concerned with developing *autonomy* for women, but the ideological vision of separate, isolated "rugged" individualism is not part of our utopian aspirations. It does not capture what we mean by individual autonomy. As I understand feminism, it is committed to developing a spirit of co-operation, fostering healthy human interaction, and ensuring a sense of mutual responsibility among persons. The autonomy feminism embraces is a freedom from dominance, a liberation from oppression, and not mere isolation and separation.

Feminism involves a sense of community among its adherents that is not readily accommodated in the traditional approaches to ethics which deny the significance of special human relationships; hence, I believe a whole new ethical theory must be developed to account for our fundamental world view and values. These cannot simply be mapped onto the existing moral theories because there is disagreement with the fundamental ontology of the dominant moral theories.

Political Implications

The commitment to an atomistic conception of independent and equal persons which underlies the most popular moral theories is developed further at the level of political theory. Here we can clearly see the inherent contradiction, for despite the lip service paid to the concept of equality among persons, it is obvious that differences in atoms are recognized and treated as significant in a quite unjust manner on the political level. People behave differently when encountering female person-atoms than they do when encountering male ones. The myth of universality does not operate in practice; none of the leading political theories is capable of handling that difficulty.

Just as feminists have learned that political debates are made too narrow when they exclude the "personal sphere" from their discussions, we are now learning that moral theory is too narrow when it asks us to disregard personal feelings and relationships in forming both moral and political decisions.

Political forces involve alliances and structured relationships among persons. As feminists, we are well aware of our particular concern with contributing to the strength of women.⁵ While we do not wish that anyone suffer and we do properly feel a responsibility to relieve whatever suffering we can, we do feel a special responsibility to reduce

the suffering of women in particular. Our concern for reducing the violence against women in our society, improving access to abortion and day care facilities, pursuing greater economic equality between women and men, etc., is based on our sense of concern for women qua women; it is not merely the conclusion of some utilitarian calculation which suggests that this policy happens to be our best strategy for maximizing utility in the world. Feminism involves politically based loyalties which generate differing obligations towards others depending on each person's sex, their own behaviour with regard to feminism and sexism, and the connection between agent and other. One's behaviour towards others is not dependent only on the personhood of the other or on his/her capacity to feel pleasure or pain, but it is properly influenced by political as well as personal relations between the agent and the other. In other words, our political commitments display a rejection of the underlying commitment which is central to the traditional theories. By acknowledging the relevance of differences among people as a basis for a difference in sympathy and concern, feminism denies the legitimacy of a central premise of traditional moral theories, namely that all persons should be seen as morally equivalent by us.

In this, feminism is similar to most other political group struggles. Native people concerned with the legal status of their people feel special obligations to members of their own race; other groups defined by members who share common problems, e.g. Jews, recent immigrants, gays, farmers, and union members, tend to organize themselves to improve the position of their group in our society, reflecting the same phenomenon. Group members feel a particular concern for other members of the designated group, creating loyalties and hence special duties to one's fellows and quite a different set of duties to those outside the group, especially toward those who foster attitudes and behaviour hostile to group members. These ordinary moral intuitions—that one has special duties toward those with whom one shares common political concerns and that one need not treat one's political enemies and competitors in all ways the same as one's allies—are alien to the leading moral theories. It is for this reason that many political activists have been unable to see the relevance of moral theory to their concerns.

The result of denying the relevance of such distinctions might be tolerable if it produced an increased sense of care for one's enemies, but in fact we find the opposite situation occurring. We tend to conclude that those who are naturally one's friends and allies are to be treated with no special favour; to avoid the charge of acting unjustly, the victims of discrimination commonly bend over backward to avoid

favouritism, and wind up treating their allies as competitors. Cooperation becomes very elusive on an individual-centered ethics.

Feminism's Special Perspective

Thus far we can conclude that feminism, like other group-oriented political movements, cannot be easily accommodated by the leading moral theories. But I think that feminism takes us further, going beyond the criticisms of group-based loyalties to recommend the details of a different sort of ethics. Other groups differ from feminism in their perspective, for they seem to be purely political, that is, their aims are defined in terms of power relative to some other person or group. For example, unions seek negotiating power relative to employers; minority ethnic groups seek political and economic power for their members at least comparable to that of more advantaged groups in society. Frequently, such politically oriented groups seek to be the dominant power in their society. Political power struggles, reflecting competition for dominance, are at the heart of the structures of most groups. They are not the goal of most feminist groups, however.

Feminists, after all, are very familiar with the nature of dominance. Most feminist analyses explain the complex patterns of discrimination against women in terms of patriarchy or male dominance of women. Women are oppressed physically, economically, politically, psychologically, and sexually. But women react differently to such oppression than do victims of other forms of oppression. Contrary to popular belief, most feminists do not seek to maintain the patterns of dominance and simply reverse women's place in the relation. Feminism identifies the phenomenon of dominance as the core of the problem. While we are committed to protecting ourselves and other women from the worst effects of a patriarchal culture, we do not define our goal simply as that of acquiring equal power for women. We are after a different sort of social order, one which is not organized into coalitions of power.

The concept of groups organized for the purpose of collecting and exerting power maintains the basic framework of the atomistic conception of human interactions. People cluster to protect themselves against other clusters or to take advantage of perceived weakness in other clusters. This conception retains the barrenness of abstract individualism; it allows us to recognize certain features of others but still only a limited range of features. Persons are still undistinguished units, although we can sort them into teams and acknowledge our relationship to each 'team' as that of membership, opposition, or indifference towards it. On this view, what matters about a person is

whether or not she belongs to the same group as I or the opposite side. Her role, as member of my group or not, is all that matters. Such abstractions still miss the essential features of persons and persist in a vision of social interaction as essentially competitive and non-co-operative.

A Feminist Ethical Theory

A feminist ethics would be one that rejects the predatory conception of human interaction inherent in any theory that is essentially concerned with preserving the separateness of persons. It would view concern and co-operation as normal, not an aberration; in such a theory, vicious competition would be viewed as the violation demanding special justification. This would differ significantly from the approach underlying the leading moral theories where pure self interest and competition is defined normatively as 'rational'. (Ethics is not alone in this world view: it underlies fundamental assumptions in many other disciplines, especially economics, political science, and many psychological theories.)

What is needed, then, is a moral theory that recognizes genuine sympathy and co-operation as valuable and encourages their development where appropriate. Social and political networks as well as individuals are to be treated as important. The ideal moral theory will recognize that interactions among persons are not necessarily dangerous and regrettable, requiring an elaborate system of protective mechanisms to assure an equilibrium of separation. Rather, we must recognize interaction among persons as the norm and see it as a source of positive good and not always something threatening.

I think such a social conception is inherent in feminism. Feminism teaches us how little scope there is for individual autonomy, since our choices, behaviour, and values are shaped by our culture. We are not separate individuals but part of an inter-connected social fabric. The moral theory we seek to appeal to, like the political theory feminists are evolving, must focus on the ties among people. It will not accept the view of society as composed of independent atoms floating in a vacuum.

The moral theory we seek will give primacy to bonds of affection, empathy and political alliance (so long as the last structures remain necessary). It will discuss our obligations to groups as well as to individuals. It will incorporate a political understanding as a significant factor in determining loyalties and render legitimate our sense of particular concern for those we love and for those we identify with as being like ourselves.

It is a theory that rethinks the very nature of what it is to be an individual in a social context. Our inherited ontology places primacy on the concept of the individual and treats social arrangements as artificial constructs. I think feminism is impelling us towards an ontology that recognizes social arrangements as being fundamental as well; but unlike fascism and Marxism (on some interpretations), and many versions of religious dogma, it cautions against a perspective that values groups *above* individuals. The picture we need is not of a competition of interests between the individual and society (which the leading political and moral theories seem to be offering), but rather one that views each as integral to the other.

It is a theory that genuinely respects individuals by seeing ethics as a subject concerned with persons, not with actions that are somehow free-floating. The behaviour evaluated is behaviour of persons in social contexts, not abstract, free-floating actions that are available to any agent. Character and circumstances of persons should be relevant in making moral judgements—a recognition that most modern moral theories seem to have abandoned.

Unfortunately, I do not have such a theory ready to propose. The details remain to be worked out.⁶ At this point, I am offering a programmatic scheme of what needs to be done to build a new sort of ethical theory which is modeled on significantly different assumptions than the leading alternative theories. After all, the deontological and utilitarian theories we have at hand have been defined from within a profoundly immoral culture that has rather readily tolerated great injustice in terms of sexism, racism, and militarism.⁷

The moral theories which are now available to us are theories that were developed by men in a male controlled intellectual arena. Feminism provides the political momentum for the confidence to develop our own approaches to traditional disciplines. I have attempted to demonstrate that the currently popular moral theories are inadequate to express the moral intuitions upon which feminism rests. It is time to follow through with the logic of feminism to develop a moral theory compatible with the moral experience of women and the political ideals of feminism.

NOTES

1. Earlier versions of these ideas were prepared for the 1983 CRIAW meetings and the C-SWIP session at the 1984 CPA meetings. I appreciate the contributions made by participants at those meetings as well as many colleagues in the Dalhousie Women's Faculty Organization and the Dalhousie philosophy department. Especially helpful were detailed comments made by Sheila Mullett, Richmond Campbell, and Sheldon Wein.
2. The absence of room for sentiment in a Kantian approach is spelled out very clearly in Lawrence A. Blum, *Friendship, Morality and Altruism*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.

3. This sort of concern has been raised by others, notably Bernard Williams in "A Critique of Utilitarianism", in J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, eds. *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge University Press, 1973) and "Persons, Character and Morality", in A.O. Rorty, ed. *The Identity of Persons*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976).
4. These concerns with the prevailing moral theories are not unique to feminists. Other authors have raised similar misgivings. See especially Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories", *The Journal of Philosophy* 63/14 (August 12, 1976). The motivation to seek a new ethical framework can come from other sources. My point is that feminism must seek a different sort of framework, and that it offers some clues as to what that framework should look like.
5. In fact, this is a source of great discomfort to many feminists, especially since all have grown up in a culture that expects women to be altruistic and self-denying. This well-known phenomenon has been appropriately dubbed "the guilty victim phenomenon" by Sandra Lee Bartky in "Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness", *Philosophy and Women*, ed. Sharon Bishop and Marjorie Weinzieg. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1979.
6. I find the work of the psychologist Carol Gilligan really intriguing in this enterprise. The work she documents in her book *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) suggests that the momentum for this difference from the feminist perspective reflects a female response to moral situations which differs from that documented for men. As Gilligan interprets the data which she has collected, women differ from men in the way that they approach moral dilemmas. Women seem to view moral problems as those that arise from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights. They see morality as a matter of directing care and requiring an understanding of responsibility and relationships (p.19). Her studies reveal girls identifying themselves through their connections with others while boys define themselves through separation. For girls, responsibility to others comes first, and it is an extension not a limitation of action. For boys, responsibility to themselves is first; responsibility to others involves restraint of aggression (p.38). The explanation of these gender differences awaits analysis.
7. John Stuart Mill deserves a special exemption here. He was concerned about the problems of sexism and did speak out eloquently about such injustice. Nonetheless, he stands out in an otherwise unconcerned literature as a striking exception, and the feminism he proposed, though more progressive than any other major philosopher, is still rather pale compared to the works of feminists even of his day (including his wife and inspiration Harriet Taylor Mill). I have tried to give some indication of why I think the moral theory he offered is unacceptable from a feminist perspective.