

An Introduction to Feminist Ethics

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Abstract

Gender discrimination in social, economic and political life is one of the problems of ethical problems. This paper attempts to prove that the importance of feminist ethics in different situations in life biologically, socially and culturally. To develop our society, it cannot be neglected the role of the status of women. The moral values of women must be considered to get the perfect way of life. So, it can be said that feminist ethics plays an important role in our society.

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Introduction

The main goal of Feminist Ethics is to show that the traditional ethics had neglected or undervalued women's moral experience. Theoretical ethics which consists of normative and meta-ethics deals with values, norms and issues that are general and no need gender discriminations. But when it comes to be applied ethics, the situation is different. For this reason, the male and female perspectives must be considered. The cultural and social traditions have produced a gender gap concerning ethical issues. Feminist ethics tries to solve the moral arguments against system based on class, race, physical or moral ability, sexuality and gender between men and women.

The Characteristics of Feminist Ethics

Until the late 19th century, women's voices have been neglected. The moral concern of men has occupied traditional western ethics. The moral perspectives of men have shaped the methods and concepts of traditional ethics. Feminist ethics deals with the substantive effect of this imbalance on moral philosophy and seeks to rectify it. It also provides strategies for human beings to deal with the dilemma arising in private as well as public spheres and to eliminate views, customs and practices of women and other forms of life. It is claimed that such approaches to ethics have the goal of creating gender-equal rather than gender-neutral ethics which is an ethical theory that generates non-sexist ethical principles, policies and practices for both females and males.

Feminist ethics can be approached by distinctive ways. The first one is broadly critical to expose and to challenge male-oriented biases in traditional ethics to justify the subordination of women. Second distinctive approach of feminist ethics is to emphasize the interconnections between the political and the personal or the public and the private or to reject these distinctions entirely.

Third distinctive approach is to develop moral concepts, theories and methodologies that incorporate the moral perspectives and understandings of women. In general, feminists tend to seek relational reconstructions of major moral ideals and concepts. The last approach of feminist ethics is to incorporate the moral understandings such as sexual orientation, race, class religion, ethnicity, nationality, age among women. So, it can be said that the concept of feminist ethics had grown in complexity.

Some feminist ethicists emphasize the problems related to women's traits and behaviors, particularly their care for another one. Other feminist ethicists emphasized the political, legal, economics and ideological causes and effects of women's second-sex status. Although their approaches are different, all feminist ethicists tends to the same goal which is

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the creation of gender ethics that aims to eliminate the oppression of any group of people particularly women.

The Historical Background of Feminist Ethics

Human being and ethics plays a vital role in feminist thought. In the late 1960s, a general resurgence of feminist activism and as unprecedented explosion of feminist ethical debate was occurred among the general public and academic discourse. Moral criteria and political norms were applied to specific social issues of special social issues that concerns to women, such as abortion, sex discrimination in the workplace, gender roles, sexual harassment and violence against women. Later feminist ethics became prominent as an ethical issue of character, values, responsibility and perspectives. So, the proponent of feminist ethics consists of the highlighting of women's morality and maintains that women's moral experiences have been ignored. And it also asserts that traditional ethics is male-biased.¹

Feminist philosophers also challenged basic principles of traditional Western philosophy, and say that philosophical inquiry would take a different path of women's experiences as well as their viewpoints. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was a famous 18th century feminist. She advocated for the full humanity of women and men for the moral of women. In her book, "A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792)", Wollstonecraft showed that social norms keep women from gaining experience, and advancing knowledge and developing the powers of reason. The general view was that women lacked the capacity to be full citizens and women, slaves and children were thus lumped together in the same category.² So, it can be said that feminist ethics developed from Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of women. From these new ideas, individual feminists are able to travel more than ever before, generating more opportunities for the exchange of ideas and advancement of women's rights.

The Meanings of Feminist Ethics

Nowadays, feminist ethics has become one of the most important issues in ethics. Although, there are many different versions of feminist ethics, it finds a naturally in virtue ethics. Feminist ethics has largely agreed women's invisibility in ethical theories. It not only morally objectionable in but also profoundly distorts many of the arguments and conclusions about the women. In the Encyclopedia of philosophy, feminist ethics is defined as follows, "Feminist ethics is a diverse and growing body of philosophy work, initially based in the recognition that most canonical accounts of morality neglected, distorted and trivialized women's moral perspectives while either ignoring or defining unjust power imbalances between women and men."¹

Feminist ethic suspects traditional ethics which is male-bias by its explicit commitment. It is a specific experience of highly privileged men and women of lower economic class to enable them to pursue higher inquiry. The relationship of unjust privilege and group are based on the oppressions of the traditional disciplines. So, it may be said that these oppressive conditions shape people's moral beliefs, values and characters at deep levels. In the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, feminist ethics is also defined as follows,

"Feminist ethics is sensitive to the gender bias that may be implicit in philosophical theories (for instance, philosopher's lists of virtues may be typically manly or culturally masculine), and social structures, legal and political procedures and the general culture. One controversial claim is that women approach practical reasoning from a different perspective from that of men. The difference includes emphasis on community caring and bounding with particular individuals in place of abstract impartiality."²

For feminist ethicists, one should live in a social world by understanding and evaluating one's moral beliefs and responsibilities. But it can face more complex issues

¹ Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2005, Volume-3, p.573

² The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, 2008, p.170

because gender is one of many bases for the oppression and privilege. Many feminist ethicists have devoted attention to the intersections among different forms of oppressions.

Furthermore, ethics will not be completed without the consideration of the moral experiences of women. It must be constructed by the different moral sensibility of women and men. In addition, it seems plausible to suppose women's distinctive social experience as the implications of domination and especially gender domination.

From a variety of philosophical differences, their divergence means that feminist ethics can never be identified in terms of a specific range of topics and methods. It will respect women's moral experience and avoid rationalizing women's subordination. It will also attempt to define precisely or substantively and prematurely foreclose feminist moral debates.

The Development of Feminist Ethics

In the long history of feminist ethical debates, the term "feminist ethics" did not come into general use until the late 1970s or 1980s. At this time, a number of feminists began expressing doubts about the possibility of women's issues by traditional ethical theory. Other feminists charged that certain assumptions widely accepted by traditional ethical theory were incompatible. It was now beginning to be claimed as distinctively feminine moral experience or sensibility. Some feminists began to speculate that traditional ethics more deeply male-biased. And then, it needed more fundamental rethinking than they had realized hitherto. Such reflection was fueled by much-publicized work of developmental psychologist Carol Gilligan. She demonstrated that the moral development of women was significantly different from that of men. Gilligan reported that girls and women often construe moral dilemmas as conflicts of responsibilities rather than rights.

Furthermore Gilligan described females as less likely than males to justify moral decisions by the application of abstract moral rules. She also claimed that girls and women were more likely to act on their feelings of love and compassion for particular individuals. Gilligan also said that men typically adhere to a morality of justice do not provide standard for measuring female moral development. And it may be said to be male-biased. In "In a Different Voice" which is the work of Gilligan, she said that

"Morality is prescription, a kind of prescription, a thing to follow, and the idea of having a concept of morality is to try to figure out what it is that people can do in order to make life with each other livable, make for a kind of balance, a kind of equilibrium, a harmony in which everybody feels he has a place and an equal share in thing."³

Morality is essential for the interaction between people. It is prerequisite to fulfill the individual goal. So, it can be said that Gilligan's work as offering evidence for existence of feminizes approach to provide the basis for a distinctively feminist ethics.

Feminist ethics can be approached into two aspects. One is an ethics of care and the other is an ethics of justice. Since feminism is essentially a normative and its meaning is continually contested by feminist themselves, all feminists are constantly engaged in ethical reflection. Feminist ethics can be seen not only in educated field but also uneducated field. Popular feminist books and journals frequently engage in ethical consideration of moral or public and issues. It also offers more general discussions of supposedly "masculine" and "feminine" value system.

Most women discuss about feminist ethics along the history. The development of feminist ethics is continuously changing. But this is slowly changing. Concerning feminist ethics, not only women but also some men philosophers are doing significant work in feminist ethics. And the gender discrimination is the main causes of occurring feminist movements.

³ In A Different Voice , 2003, p.98

Feminist philosophers criticize traditional ethics as pre-eminently focusing on men's perspective with little issues regard for women's viewpoints. The moral issues of private life and family responsibilities were traditionally regarded as trivial matters in traditional ethics.

Generally, women are portrayed as ethically immature and shallow in comparison to men. Traditional ethics prizes masculine cultural traits like "independence, autonomy, intellect, will, wariness, hierarchy, domination, culture, transcendence, product, asceticism, war, and death" and gives less weight to culturally feminine traits like "interdependence, community, connection, sharing, emotion, body, and trust, peace and life." But such traits can be found in both men and women. Traditional ethics has a 'male' orientated convention in which moral reasoning is viewed through a framework of rules, right, universality and impartiality. The female approaches to moral reasoning emphasize relationships, responsibilities, particularity, and partiality.

Feminist ethicists believe that there is an obligation for women's differing points of view to be heard and then to build up a more inclusive and comprehensive view. The goal is to achieve gender equality and to bring about a transformation of societies and situations where women are protected from harm by acts of violence, subordinations and exclusion. When such injustices have been brought into clear view, feminist activists maintain they will continue their work of protest and action after careful appraisal and reflection to work for women's empowerment.

Traditional ethical theories include ethical norms which are applicable to all human beings. But the fault lies not in the ethical theories and their norms but in the failure to put them into practice. Thus, there is a need to understand not only how to theorize but how the norms and moral values may be applied in everyday life. To understand this it would also be necessary to know the ethical issues that are special to women.

Conclusion

Women and men share the same characteristics of good and bad and that moral conduct is determined by the same criteria. But each also has special ethical problem which is described by different approaches and methods. Feminist ethics criticized the exclusion on women and the discrimination on women. It also tried to convert male bias existing ethical frameworks. It proposes more ethically adequate norms and standards. In order to get the better society, women should have the same equality as men in some parts of the society. And then men must give them the opportunities to play in the building of the perfect society. As women have the equality, they have the ability to promote their lives as men.

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Notes

1. Khin Myo Chit. (2014). Colourful Myanmar.pp.186-187
2. Sally J.Scholz. (2010). Feminism.p.39

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