

Chapter Two

Feminists approach to Philosophy and Ethics

Feminism in philosophy

Feminism has provided a new vision to the problems of philosophy and so it has a deep connection with philosophy. Feminism pursues a perspective to the traditional problems of philosophy. ⁵⁶For example, feminist epistemologists challenged traditional ideas of how we explain things, by arguing that the traditional philosophical ideas are based on male perspectives and therefore ignore women's rights. According to some feminists, traditional philosophy had the aggressive argumentative style as being male focused and patriarchal in nature. Moreover, some other feminists think that the aggressiveness of traditional philosophy can be used to feminist ends. But some feminists have also criticized other feminists for attacking traditional philosophy as they think that aggression is a valid female trait, and that feminists should not seek to repeat traditional sex roles which state women cannot be aggressive.

Feminist philosophers engaged in a search of re-explained the philosophical cannon mainly in two significant areas of concern. The first is the problem of historical exclusion. Feminist philosophers had to face with a tradition that believed that there

⁵⁶ Moira Gatens, *Feminism as "Password": Rethinking the "Possible" with Spinoza and Deleuze*, *Hypatia* 15 (2) 2000, pp.59-75.

were no women philosophers and if there were any, they are unimportant. But women are not entirely absent from the history of philosophy, that brings us to the second challenge. Generally, it can be said that philosophical norms like reason and objectivity are defined in contrast to matter, the irrational or whatever a given philosopher associates with women and the feminine and here women have to face a problem that they are irrational by nature, because our tradition tells us that philosophical norms of reason and objectivity exclude everything that is feminine or associated with women either implicitly through images and metaphors or explicitly in so many words.⁵⁷

Feminist philosophers have criticized both the historical exclusion of women from the philosophical tradition and the negative characterization of women or the feminine in it. Feminists' historians of philosophy have claimed that the historical record is incomplete because it omits women philosophers. It is biased because it devalues any women philosophers. In addition, feminist philosophers have argued that the philosophical tradition is conceptually flawed because of the way that its fundamental norms like reasons and objectivity are gendered male. By means of this criticism feminist philosophers are enlarging the philosophical canon and re-evaluating its norms in order to include women in the philosophical "US".

Feminist philosophy of science shows the ways in which gender ought to influence human conceptions of knowledge and the practices of inquiry and justification. It

⁵⁷Jean Grimshaw, *Philosophy and Feminist Thinking*. University of Minnesota Press, 1986, PP.viii, 280.

finds ways in which conceptions and practices of knowledge systematically disadvantage women and other subordinated groups. Some feminist epistemology and philosophy of science have argued that dominant knowledge practices disadvantage women by (1) excluding women from enquiry; (2) by denying women epistemic authority; (3) by denigrating women's "feminine" cognitive styles and modes of knowledge; (4) by producing the theories of women that represent them as inferior; (5) by producing theories of social phenomena that render women's activities and interests or gendered power relations invisible and (6) by producing knowledge that is not useful for people in subordinate positions.⁵⁸Feminists' epistemologists show these problems to flawed conceptions of knowledge, knower, objectivity and scientific methodology. These philosophers offers a way to overcome these failures and they also tend to explain why the entry of women and feminist scholars into different disciplines, especially in biology and social sciences, have generated new questions, theories, methods. In this connection a new question can be raised regarding women domination and it can explain what value dualism is **and** what is the **logic of domination**?

Feminism in Ethics

Feminists approach to ethics is to re-imagine ethics as it is based on the belief that traditional ethics devalued women's' moral experience. Feminist philosophers criticized the traditional ethics because it focused on men's perspective with little

⁵⁸ Janet A Kourany, *Philosophy of Science after Feminism*, Oxford University Press, 2010, Chapter-3.

regard for women's viewpoints. Traditionally, women were treated as ethically immature and inferior to men and therefore it prizes the masculine characteristics like "independence", "autonomy", "intellect", "wariness", "domination", "culture", "asceticism" and "transcendence". On the other hand, it gives less importance to feminine characteristics like "interdependence", "trust", "immanence", "emotion" and "peace". So feminist's ethics is a way to transform the traditional ethical beliefs which undervalued women's morality.

Feminist ethics occurred during the 19th century with the new ideas and it developed from Mary Wollstonecraft's writing: "Vindication of the rights of women" in 1792.⁵⁹ Feminist ethics was further developed by some other notable people like John Stuart Mill, Cathrine Beech, Cady Stanton, etc. The aim of feminist ethics is for changing the society where women are harmed through violence, subordination and exclusion. Now the question is raised: whether women's feminine traits are the product of nature or it is the outcome of social conditioning? Mary Wollstonecraft gives the opinion that moral virtue is unitary. Women, she said, should practice the same morality that men practice i.e.; human morality. She denied that women are predestined by nature to be less virtuous than men. Wollstonecraft has said that there is nothing wrong about women including their supposedly weak moral characters that cannot be cured by a rigorous education but if women are given men's education, said Wollstonecraft, women no less than men can become morally

⁵⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of The Rights of Women: With Structures on Political and Moral Subjects*, Boston: Peter Edes, 1792, Chapter-iv & v.

mature human beings. She also said that the women of her times needed a better education and that time the purpose of educating women was simply to be the good daughters, affectionate sisters and better wives which would serve men's interest properly. Wollstonecraft said that the best way for women to come full-fledged moral agents is for them to start thinking and behaving like men.

According to **J.S. Mill** society is mistaken to set up an ethical double standard which means women's morality is to be assessed differently than men's morality. ⁶⁰In his writing "The Subjection of Women", Mill has said that women are taught to live for others who always give and never take and therefore women's virtue is the consequence of social programming. Mill considers that there is only one virtue i.e.; human virtue and men and women both equally should adhere to its standards. Only then our will society will develop and it will go toward the extreme progress.

Catherine Beecher was another leading campaigner of the same group of thinkers. She saw women to be treated like a good manager who are in the family to serve themselves for others' interest only. The most important work of women is to make member of her family like Christ who died a painful death and people remember Him from His great virtuous policy, i.e.; the virtue of 'Self-denying- benevolence' which women also should acquire for serving her family, said Beecher, because women are better situated than men to cultivate the Christ like virtue and to become a role models for their families irrespective of her own wills and wishes.

⁶⁰Henry R. West, *An Introduction to Mill's Utilitarian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, P. 22.

Beecher also saw the differences between women's and men's moralities and she stressed that women's house affairs require much more intelligence like any other organizational skills.

In short 18th and 19th century feminist thinkers approached to ethics that mainly focused on the similarities and differences between masculine and feminine ethics. They mainly questioned the presuppositions of existent traditional ethics and instead they suggested the ontological assumption that *the more connected the self is to others, the better the self is*. That time a new variety of feminism, a care focused feminists, approached to ethics in the sense that care focused feminist thinkers noticed instances of female subordination and the tendencies of patriarchal societies ignoring women's ways of thinking. Thus, care focused feminist thinkers offered to women multiple ways to understand the ways in which gender, class, race affect their moral decisions. Therefore, according to the *care focused feminists* a special attention should be given to women's moral experience like men's, because traditional ethicists focused on men's interests, issues, values to neglect women. So, finally feminist's ethics insist on highlighting women's morality by adding women's moral experiences to a male biased traditional ethics sorely in need of them.

Value dualism and the logic of domination

Eco-feminism is originated as a revolt against value dualism. A value dualism is a disjunctive pair in which the disjuncts are seen as oppositional and exclusive and in

which one from of value enjoys a higher degree than other. Many ecological feminists conceive that a reason/nature dualism underlies the conceptual framework of Western patriarchal cultures. This basic form of dualism is thought to form the basis for series of related dualism in which whatever is associated with reason is viewed as fundamentally different and superior to whatever is associated with nature. The dualistic pairs involve not only reason/nature and masculine/feminine, but also mental/manual, civilized/primitive, and human/nature. These pairs function to legitimate a number of oppressions, including sex, race, and class oppression, which can all be seen in terms of the central dualism underlying the system. According to Plumwood, the construction of dualised identities involves five features: (i) back grounding, ii) radical exclusion, iii) incorporation, iv) instrumentalism and v) Homogenization. All these lead to a typical form of argument what may be called, in brief, logic of domination.⁶¹

The Logic of domination is stated as

(A1) Human do, plants do not; have the capacity to consciously change the community in which they live.

(A2) Whatever has this capacity is normally superior to whatever doesn't have it.

(A3) Human are morally superior to plants and rocks.

⁶¹, A.K Salleh. "Deeper than deep ecology: the ecofeminist connection" in *Environmental ethics*, Vol.6.No.1. 1984, p.340

(A4) For any x and y, if x is morally superior to y, then x is morally justified in subordination plants and rocks.

Since men identify women with nature, the same logic of domination of women can be stated below:

(b1) Women are identified with nature and the realm of the physical; men are identified with the human, and the realm of the mental.

(B2) Whatever is identified with nature and the realm of the physical is inferior to (below) whatever is identified the 'human' and the realm of the mental.

(B3) Thus, women are inferior to men.

(B4) For any x and y, if x is superior to y, then x is justified in subordination y.

(B5) Men are justified is subordination women.

It has been claimed by many eco-feminists that the domination of nature by humans and the sexiest domination of women by men are based on the same general framework. Accordingly, the devaluation of women depends on the prior devaluation of nature. They are conceptually linked with each other. If think that there underlies a conceptual link between the domination of nature as well as the domination of women, then it follows that a movement that is not feminist will yield, at best, superficial understanding of the domination of nature. It has been held that in order to save the environment, one ought to be working to overthrow patriarchy;

the root of domination, and those working to bring down/overwhelm patriarchy should be fighting to save the environment. At a conceptual level, these fights are two sides of the same coin. The logic of domination, therefore, underlies not only sexism and naturism, but racism and all other isms as well.

Language: dominance or difference?

Feminist language research in the 1970s focused on the question of male dominance and the female deference in conversation (Lakoff, R. 1975; Spender 1980). It criticized both the social system, which it viewed as patriarchal and as forcing women to speak in a subservient way, and also individual males who were seen to violate the rights of their female interlocutors. Robin Lakoff's polemical analysis of what she considered female language patterns was one of the first feminist linguistic analyses that made a clear connection between the social and political oppression of women as a group and their linguistic behavior. This subordinated status was displayed in the language patterns, which she describes 'talking like a lady' (Lakoff, R. 1975; 10). She gives, as an example, two statements, which, she suggested, characterize the difference between women's subordinated language and men's dominant language:⁶²

1. Oh, dear, you have put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.

⁶² Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. New York, Routledge, 1993, pp.167-68.

2. Shit, you have put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again. (Lakoff, R 1975:10)

The first, Lakoff asserts, is women's language and the second is men's language. This distinction is made primarily on the basis of perceptions that (1) is more polite than (2) because of the 'softer' expletive which mitigates the force of the utterance and therefore is less of a challenge to the interlocutor's face. Lakoff makes a connection between seemingly stronger expletives and stronger positions in relation to power.

Lakoff and Dale Spender (1980) argued that women's language style was characterized by the use of elements, which signaled subordination. This feature consists of mitigating statements, hedges, tag questions and elements which signal indirectness, tentativeness, difference and hesitation. In contrast to this, male speech was characterized as direct, forceful and confident, using features such as interruption. As a polemic, this early feminist research was extremely important since it challenged the assumption that certain males were sanctioned to act linguistically in ways which could disadvantage women and it made those linguistic acts seem less 'natural' or 'common sense'. Many women also questioned their own deferent linguistic behavior as 'natural', as just part of being women. Thus, this consciousness-raising research, which was very widely led by people outside academic circles, made a major impact on many women, forcing them to reflect on language use as an indicator of power relations and,

indeed, encouraging them to reflect on language use as an indicator of power relations and, indeed, encouraging them to make met linguistic comments on language use. Perhaps, one of the most important aspects of this work is that women felt that they could comment on an interruption by a male interlocutor and, rather than dismissing such behavior as solely due to the particular chauvinism of that individual, they could relate it to wider societal structures which made available to men privileged positions which it did not prove for women.

However, critics have noted that this type of analysis seemed to be focused on the stereotypical language usages of a very small group of women that is middle-class; white Anglo-American. It was not based on the examination of any data but rather on personal anecdotes, which seemed to uphold a stereotype of submissive women, without any counter-examples being considered. In the 1980s and 1990s, many feminist linguists, such as Deborah Tannen and Jennifer Coates, rather than analyzing dominance, as such, made it clear that the nature of power relations between women and men were being fundamentally changed at this time turned to an analysis of the socially constructed differences between women and men's language. They saw these differences as akin to dialects spoken by different groups, rather than seeing those as indicating dominate and dominated groups (Coates and Cameron 1988, Tannen 1991; Coates

1996).⁶³This female and male linguistic difference, Tannen argued, developed because women and men are largely socialized in single-sex groups where they develop different language preferences and styles. Women and men have different aims in conversation, which lead to breakdowns in communication or misunderstanding. This is because women are concerned to establish rapport between members of a group and to ensure that conversations go smoothly (rapport talk), whilst men are concerned to establish their place in the pecking order and use the production of information as a tool to move up the hierarchy (rapport Talk). Although Tannen claims that men can also do 'rapport talk', she argues that generally such is not the case. Moreover, she believes, use of these diametrically opposed styles is what leads to misunderstanding between men and women.

⁶³ See D. Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, London: Virgo, 1991.