

EXISTENCE & MORALITY: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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It is an eternal propensity of human to enquire about her or his identity and role in this world that assigns meaning in life. In the history of philosophy, both western and Indian, this search continues for time immemorial and branches out in various paths, some of which are more popular, some are less, while some relates our journey of life with it and accordingly writes a narrative which talks about my problem, your problem, our problem at the end of the day. Here marginal groups find an assertive voice and re-discover their self, and we are going to choose this discourse for documentation of the philosophical significance and related argumentation following that.

We are going to start our discussion by highlighting Jagger's concept on feminist ethics, as we shall refer this notion of feminist ethics here, being a central focus in this discussion. Feminist ethicists, in general, aim at the creation of a gendered ethics that aims to eliminate or at least ameliorate the oppression of any group of people, but most particularly women.¹ Carol Gilligan, in her "Remapping the Moral Domain: New Images of Self in Relationship"² focuses on the contrasting voices of justice and care that clarifies different ways in which women and men speak about relationships and lend different meanings to connection, dependence, autonomy, responsibility, loyalty, peer pressure, and violence which are issues actually related to 'existence and morality'. By examining the moral dilemmas and self-descriptions of children, high school students, urban youth, mothers and others, the author charts a new terrain – a mapping of the moral domain that includes the voices of women. In this new terrain, the author traces far-reaching implications of including women's voices for developmental psychology, for education, for women, and for men.

According to Carol Gilligan³, renowned feminist philosopher, Freud, father of psychoanalysis, is simply one of the many traditional thinkers who have viewed women

as morally inferior to men. She also singles out educational psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg for extended criticism. I would like to observe in this paper whether the need for a different voice of women receives recognition in today's society which can make their existence as something meaningful. Along with it is also to be observed that is it at all possible? To do so, we shall observe how existence is related with the sense of morality which is considered and discussed in feminist philosophy from a particular perspective. I would like to discuss this issue from the perspective of feminist ethics or as it has received recognition in the name of care ethics.

In the very beginning, we admit the limitation of care ethics as feminist philosopher Shefali Moitra clearly mentions in her *Naitikota o Naribad*⁴ that care-based-ethics has not been yet recognized as a fully developed discipline. Despite this, my search in this paper is significant in the present scenario as we may still experience exclusion of different voice, where existence, in some way or other, is directed towards the understanding related to the reason-based male dominated paradigm. Even if certain areas can be located where female voice is recognized but in implementation it is still not receiving proper social acceptance.

In this discussion tracing back the path of history, I am reflecting upon the work of Carol Gilligan, frequently known as moral psychologist, who is an expert of education, ethics, and psychology and hence we can see the reflection of these field of studies in her work which is a combination of statistical analysis of empirical data and theoretical analysis. This approach comes under the study of developmental psychology, to be precise. In search of the principles on the moral development in women, which is later developed as 'care ethics', Gilligan started working with her colleague psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg. Carol Gilligan is a psychologist best known for her innovative views on the development of women's morality and sense of self. She detailed this in her book *In a Different Voice*⁵ where she links feminine morality with an "ethic of care". Gilligan developed her ideas in response to the theory of moral development proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg, which she criticized for ignoring women's perspectives. Gilligan

proposed that women come to prioritize an "ethics of care" as their sense of morality evolves along with their sense of self while men prioritize an "ethics of justice."

In this context we may consider the fact that Moral Psychology has an approach to use different scales for analyzing the nature of moral reasoning, which is a central part of its study. In particular, it uses these scales to measure different stages of moral reasoning that helps to measure various aspects of morality. This approach is generally viewed as a reflection of the dominance of Lawrence Kohlberg's (1969, 1971) notion of 'morality as justice', and his ensuing debate with Carol Gilligan later on (1982) about her alternative idea of 'morality as care'. To mention, both the thinkers agree that morality is about how well or poorly individuals treat other individuals. Morality ultimately is all about goodness or badness associated with our life. Now, Kohlberg and later thinkers like Turiel based their boundary of the moral domain on the enlightened thinking taken from Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, John Rawls in which 'autonomy and/or welfare of the individual' are the starting point for ethical inquiry.

In our discussion, we shall take up Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development and then compare it with Gilligan's Theory, and then concentrate on how women develop their sense of self in the world. According to Kohlberg, moral development is a six-stage process. To be precise, Kohlberg's theory of moral development comprises three levels, each made up of two stages. At the lowest, the Preconventional Level, the needs of the self are focused and prioritized. From this the Conventional Level is evolved where attention is given to an understanding of how to be a moral member of society. Finally, at the highest level, Kohlberg retorts the individual adopts a universal idea of justice, and he calls this stage as the Postconventional Level.⁶

Gilligan's research on the abortion decision study led her to develop her own stage theory of moral development, which she expressed in a 1977 article and thereafter developed into her book *In a Different Voice*. Gilligan⁷ also accepts the same basic three-level theory of moral development as Kohlberg does, along with two transitions between the levels. The levels are - Preconventional Morality, Conventional Morality and Postconventional Morality. Gilligan didn't identify specific ages when the levels of

moral development are supposed to be reached. According to the Preconventional Level, moral judgment is fully focused on the self and the need for survival. When a conflict arises between the needs of the self and the needs of others, a woman will choose to address her own needs at this level. Now Gilligan opines, during the first transition from the Preconventional to the Conventional Level, a woman realizes that she also has a responsibility to others. It is the first time that she can understand her previous moral perspective could be characterized as selfish. Next, at the Conventional Level, moral judgment starts concentrating on caring for others. The woman, in this stage, starts to see herself as a participant in society whose entitlement to the claim of being a good citizen counts on helping and protecting others. It is noteworthy that this concern for others overrides a woman's concern for herself that significantly leads to a morality dedicated to self-sacrifice. Gilligan emphasizes on the point that during the second transition from the Conventional to the Postconventional Level, a woman starts to experience a tension between the needs of others and the needs of the self. What Gilligan's research contributes at this juncture is unique, which could have been overlooked in the main-stream thinking. According to her, at the said level just mentioned a woman realizes that she better tries to strike a better balance between her needs and the needs of others. So, as an individual, we can understand following Gilligan, a woman also has a duty to herself and to deny it is a kind of ethical violation. This leads to a paradigm shift in the accepted notion regarding moral judgment that highlights the notion of 'truth' rather than 'goodness'. Here a woman starts to honestly assess her own desires, not just her responsibility to others which is very significantly related with human growth as per the observations made in philosophy of psychology. Further, at the Postconventional Level, Gilligan attempts to show that moral judgment is determined by the principle of nonviolence. A woman starts looking at herself as an individual along with the needs of others. She understands the needs of the self are just as important as the needs of others, and this causes the women to arrive at the ethic of care and concern. The focal point of the above notion is that following the obligation of

care while avoiding harm or exploitation to herself and others empower the women to accept responsibility for their choices.

After laying down Kohlberg and Gilligan's theory on moral development, we may put forward the assessment made by Gilligan on Kohlberg's view. Gilligan deems that Kohlberg's methodology is male-biased. Its tendency is to hear male, not female moral voice. Consequently, it fails to recognize the 'different voice' that Gilligan claims to have heard in her survey and analysis of twenty-nine women reflecting on their abortion decisions. This distinctive moral voice, opines Gilligan, speaks a language of care that stresses on relationships and responsibilities. It is noteworthy that this language is mostly unintelligible to Kohlbergian researchers who admit the dominant moral language of traditional ethics, namely, a language of justice that emphasizes rights and rules⁸.

In Kohlberg and Gilligan's survey the depth and maturity of a group of adolescent students (both girls and boys) have been evaluated. The evaluation established by Kohlberg on this survey made Gilligan very thoughtful. Gilligan's observation on this point is very thought-provoking and interesting. Gilligan explains that behind the apparently speaking consistent moral justification of boys which is mainly dependent on reason-based rules and principles, perhaps a male identity is playing a pivotal role, while the girls' emphasis is more on connectivity and dependency. She argues that women tend to privilege relationships, connectedness, and responsibility in the formation of moral judgement, rather than right based morality relying on abstract rules and laws⁹. Women's construction of the moral problem is a problem of care and responsibility in relationships rather than of rights and rules. Nona Plessner Lyons in her "Two Perspectives: On Self, Relationships, and Morality" mentions, "Gilligan listening to women's discussions of their own real life moral conflicts, recognized a conception of morality not presented in Kohlberg's work. To her, women's concerns centered on care and response to others. Noting too those women often felt caught between caring for them and caring for others and characterized their failures to care as failures to be "good" women, Gilligan suggested that conception of self and morality might be intricately linked..."¹⁰.

Looking at Gilligan and Lyon's analysis, we may observe that women's sense of morality is much more associated with their living experience where a kind of identity crisis may be identified. It may be asked whether such an identity crisis affects their existence. She finds in her lived experiences several conflicts, moral dilemmas existing in an overlapping manner. And these lead to confusions which influence or affect the decision-making process. Such conflicts and dilemmas, just mentioned, are unique, very different from that of men, due to commonly accepted societal norms. Women are victims of blaming and shaming game by the so-called guardian of society which the male folk rarely faces. Their existence is overshadowed, or more strictly speaking, denied in such a manner that she often feels helpless to communicate assertively in both private and public sphere. So, it is not justified to say that women thinking process itself is vague, ambiguous, and full of contradiction as it is conceived by many main-stream thinkers. It is not lack of logical reasoning power, it is their 'situation' or 'environment' or 'context' that leads to think them differently, consequently a different sense of morality emerges. Thus, their morality becomes so much connected with their existential crisis, this again seems to bring the two notions, namely, 'self' and 'morality' much closer, as Gilligan claims it to be.

At this juncture the feminist concept of self especially that which Gilligan considers in her theory needs to be presented. In fact, self, conceived as separate and bounded has got a long history in the western tradition and Gilligan puts forward two images of self, derived from two types of conceptual framework, namely, justice and care. As Gilligan puts it, these are the two moral voices of which the first one speaks of equality, reciprocity, justice and rights and the second one speaks of connection, not hurting and response. These two voices may appear in conjunction but the problem here is the tendency for one voice to predominate. In Gilligan's words, "The pattern of predominance, although not gender specific, was gender related, suggesting that the gender differences recurrently observed in moral reasoning signify differences in moral orientation, which in turn, are tied to different ways of imagining self in relationship"¹¹. It is important to note that the solutions of the moral dilemmas cannot be investigated in

abstract a priori framework, since those are mainly connected with experiential, pragmatic relationships. Precisely speaking, women's lived experience is not conducive to abstraction; it demands concrete and situation specific deliberation.

Gilligan's self-construction, however, provides an entirely different form of moral maturity. Instead of moral rights, Gilligan propounds the morality of unconditional care. We may note that the social realities faced by women help them understand that individual existence in a society is essentially conditioned by relationality and connectivity. For this reason, women's development and sustenance also occur in connectivity. It is also very significant to note that the lived-experience of women induces a sense of responsibility in them which differs from that of main-stream model. The livedexperiences of women bring a sense of responsibility in them.

According to Gilligan, the moral sensitivity that arises from women's lived experience is a wider concern of care and co-feeling than a few rigid rules. Here we may note, introduction of a new concept, namely, 'co-feeling'. Gilligan develops a feminine morality, promoting a social and other-directed view of empathy. She calls the ability to share the other's feeling 'co-feelings'. In her famous *Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow asserts women develop a different sense of the self and its relation to the world than men. For Chodorow, "Girls emerge from this period (of formation of the self) with a basis for 'empathy' built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not. Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another's needs or feelings as one's own".¹² For both Gilligan and Chodorow, the capacity to empathize is a basis for knowledge. Indeed, one learns about other people's experiences of the world by sharing their feelings. Feminist theorists think that perceiving the feelings and experiences of others is "an epistemological framework for 'knowing' the world"¹³. Women would tend to draw from this way of experiencing the world and epistemology, placing relationship, responsibility, and concern for the others at the center of knowledge. Inter-subjectivity and relationships replace objectivity and rules in the formation of a moral consciousness. The individualism of Hume's definition of sympathy is thus countered by feminists' view of empathy, co-feeling, and a connected

way of knowing the world. The feminist concept of empathy is far more cognitive than the one found in Hume's writing. While for Hume, sympathy is a natural, involuntary, mechanical emotion occurring almost by accident, for feminists it is rather a cognitive, social and interactive dynamic developing through relationships to create the social formation.

Nancy Hirschmann terms, "the sympathy that connected knowers engage in an ongoing interpersonal process that creates and constructs both the social information that individuals take part in, and the individuals that make up these social formations."¹⁴ A contemporary use of the term 'sympathy' involves the sentiments one feels for another person's difficulty with motivation to help that person. Sympathy, for this reason, is closer to 'pity' but without its negative connotations. One may feel sympathy for another person, but through empathy (which is not an emotion on itself but a way of acquiring an emotion), one may feel the other person's fear, pain, sadness, etc. Thus, a clear distinction can be found notably between these two terms. However, it may be highlighted here that Hume's (1739) use of the term 'sympathy' in the eighteenth century is much closer to the contemporary definition of 'empathy'. Hume defines sympathy as a capacity with the help of which one can undergo the experiences of others, as impressions (for instance bodily sensations) of those others are transformed into ideas (for instance "suffering"), and ultimately into one's own impressions (whereby we feel the suffering of others)¹⁵.

In Carl Roger's client-centered therapy, we also find the notion of empathy which has a very important role to play in trying to build-up therapist-client relationship and also to explore the sufferings of the client's world.

Tove Patterson¹⁶ in 2008, based on Gilligan's work, identifies three notions of care corresponding to three levels associated with an agent's moral development—selfish care, altruistic care and mature care. The selfish care, in which the caring agent focuses on self, especially to guard oneself from abuse and harm. Altruistic care is the next notion and involves the caring agent's ability to reach beyond oneself to another person in need and to meet that need, even at a cost to the agent. The final notion is mature care, the

culmination of the development process, in which the relationship between the caring agent as self and the other in need becomes the focus for ethical deliberation. Mature care is meant to conceptualize the ideal of care as relational, a central idea of feminist ethics, and not a detached and isolated activity. The key idea is not one-sidedness but reciprocity. Here, it should be mentioned that, according to feminists, ‘co-feeling’ is a significant factor which is required to get a better understanding of mature care and altruistic care. The concept of ‘co-feeling’, whether it is distinct from empathy or has a closer connection, is very slippery for which we need to pay attention on the deeper analysis of it.

Co-feeling, writes Patterson, “is the ability to participate in the feelings of others, through the act of ‘affective imagination’, without confusing self with others on the one hand, and the other, merely observing the other’s feelings from a distance”¹⁷. Although Patterson acknowledges problems with the distinction between co-feeling and empathy but following Gilligan she takes empathy as identical with another’s feeling in contrast to co-feeling which maintains the autonomy or integrity of caring agent, as well as the person cared for. Now, Michael Slote¹⁸ in 2007, among others criticizes this distinction claiming that empathy, based on current psychological research, is a multifaced concept and that co-feeling is simply one species of empathy. Other than these thinkers in the realm of psychiatric or psychotherapeutic ethics too, it remains a question whether co-feeling can be treated as something different a concept than empathy or empathy is such a concept which encompasses co-feeling within it. In this discussion, our scope is limited to give a detailed analysis of this controversy.

We would like to put an end to this discussion by focusing the point that in the above discussion an attempt has been made to show that the intertwining of construction of self and moral behavior is being established through the discussion of alternative psychology that underlies ethic of care. We are leaving a trace of a precious ethical issue where Gilligan would like to propose the concept of ‘voice-freedom’ to show that how a relational self can also be autonomous. An interesting issue is here the silence-voice dichotomy and autonomy in care ethics become not silently exiting an uncomfortable

situation but finding a voice of protest and negotiation within a relationship which can make an individual's existence meaningful. Last but not the least, introducing the terms like empathy, sympathy and co-feeling can make it clear that explicit discussion on the relation between them would be a significant contribution to the study of feminist ethics and philosophy of psychology.

We would like to put an end note by contending that though Gilligan's ideas were groundbreaking, some feminist psychologists themselves have also criticized them. The main reason is quite obvious. According to this line, Gilligan treated women's voices as a single homogenous entity while ignoring the diversity of women based on age, class, race, and other factors. Some other feminists have manifested their concern over the idea that women emphasize care and connection more than men. They would like to argue that in that case it actually reinforces traditional ideas about femininity while potentially continuing to label women into typical caregiver roles which may not be a welcoming situation for feminists. Gilligan's observations have also been criticized as the outcome of societal expectations of men and women, not innate gender differences, which implies that men's and women's moral development would follow separate paths if society's expectations were different.

But it is quite significant that despite these criticisms, Gilligan's theory continues to be studied today at various levels. It has received wide acknowledgement that there are two moral orientations, one emphasizes on justice and the other emphasizes care, as proposed by Gilligan. To mention that though there is a line of criticism, still recent research has continued to back up such assertion that follow Gilligan's trajectory. Like, all genders develop both orientations, while studies have shown that men tend to emphasize an ethics of justice and women an ethics of care. For instance, a study may be found that men and women handled ethical dilemmas in business differently, a result that was attributed to Gilligan's theory. Similarly, research scrutinizing the way men and women thought about morality found that men used a detached, intellectual approach while women used a subjective approach. The point is, although all genders understood one

another's perspective, men and women were unable to comfortably adopt the other's approach, demonstrating a gender divide consistent with Gilligan's notions.

This research reveals that the moral development of men and women tends to follow different paths that emphasize different factors. The reason may be, women and girls of different age group even, often prioritize relationships and care over rules and principles, their approaches to moral dilemmas in their professional, academic, and personal lives are likely to have a contrast with that of men and boys of different age groups. Because it is quite unfortunate, but ground reality that the world still is inclined to prize men's perspectives over women's, this may leave women and girls feeling alienated or alone. However, we may opine that for women, girls, and those raising girls, it helps to keep in mind that Gilligan's theory shows that many women and girls are likely struggling in similar ways amid societal expectations. It is knowledge that may enable them to feel less isolated and make them realize that their moral values and sense of self are legitimate even if they differ from men's.

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