

FEMINIST ETHICS. A NEW MORALITY?

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WOMEN AND MEN ARE OFTEN PERCEIVED AS BEING diametrically opposed, with different characteristics, different values, and even fundamentally different ways of thinking. Men are supposedly aggressive, independent and logical, while women are altruistic and gentle. Women and men have thus been brought up to respond to moral questions differently, although society often seems to place more value on the “masculine” approach. Some claim that this is precisely what causes gender inequality. Is this truly the case? Or are the two sets of standards “separate but equal”? If this is the root of all the problems, should the “feminine” values and ways solving problems be given greater public attention, or should men acquire more of the traits valued in women? Should women adopt more “masculine” qualities? Are there really such things as “feminine” and “masculine” traits?

These questions, asked since the 18th century and throughout the women’s rights movement, are still very pertinent today. Feminist Ethics is a lesser-known yet controversial answer to these questions and to the remaining problems in gender equity. As a general term, it refers to all theories of ethics that focus on the so-called “feminine experience” and posit a women-centred view of morality, in contrast with the male-centric traditional view. Feminist Ethicists believe that this alternative ethic will lead to greater gender equity through a leveling of the moral playing field, and to the empowerment of women.

Feminist ethics’ primary claim is that the male-centred ethical system currently used and taught in the public sphere does not adequately reflect the moral experiences of women. It claims that the “masculine world” of business and politics focuses on rights and rules, contracts and obligations, reason and independence. These are the tools needed to succeed in the competitive public world, and men are better equipped with the moral values necessary to tackle it. The values sought and applied more in the private sphere such as generosity, kindness, gentleness, modesty and altruism, however, are more prominent in

women. Proponents of feminist ethics do not necessarily make any claims as to whether this is an innate difference between the genders or if the different values have been cultivated in us through societal expectations. Instead, they simply maintain that this is the social reality. Traditional western ethics places greater value on the virtues associated with men when the two conflict. Therefore, women tend to be considered less morally developed or less capable of making rational and just decisions. The exception is when women take on the “masculine” traits; however, in doing so they may be giving up or hiding part of their identity, and may suffer criticism for not being womanly enough. This, they claim, is unacceptable oppression of women and inherently unequal, regardless of whether or not the discrimination is deliberate. Women must be able to be themselves without fear of criticism or marginalisation.

In order to achieve this end, feminine morality must be shown to be equally rational and effective as traditional ethical systems, if not more so. One normative system proposed as an alternative by thinkers such as the American ethicist Carol Gilligan places its focus on care for others and relationships instead of on justice and rights. In this system, referred to as *ethics of care*, something is right because of the benefit it yields to someone we care about, whether that be on a very personal level or just because of a general concern for humanity. Such a system would encourage people to not sue for anything more than actual loss and damages, to sacrifice some personal profit to keep another’s business from going under, and to donate both time and money to charitable causes. Ethics of care also implies that it is not enough to take the proscribed course of action; one must also act with good intent.

Another system using the relationship between mother and child as the paradigm of interpersonal interaction has been suggested by Sara Ruddick, among others. Ruddick notes that mothers love their children unconditionally and will go to great length to protect their lives, personal growth and happiness. They argue that if this attitude were extrapolated into public life the world would be a

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much more peaceful place. Mothers, for example, might have an entirely different attitude toward capital punishment, viewing the individual not as a criminal deserving death, but as the unique child of another mother, gone down the wrong path.

As things stand now, those making decisions such as in the examples above would be dismissed as irrational, too emotional, or impractical. The two normative systems have been proposed as better reflecting the ethical experience of women, showing that they are both pragmatic and rational as well as being socially desirable. So desirable that its advocates claim that, not only should women be given greater appreciation for holding such values, but men would also be bettered by taking on some (or all!) of their attitudes. These changes to the traditional ethical system would address the problem of gender inequality by placing men and women on an equal moral starting point. Women will no longer be automatically considered morally inferior.

Such a controversial proposal incites great criticism. Some dispute the proposed normative claims, saying that feminine ethics and values are already a part of the traditional system and that masculine virtues are valued more because that is the way it should be. The “masculine” virtues are more important because they define the moral course of action, while the “feminine” virtues simply define the proper attitude one should take to make one a truly good person. They claim that the source of gender disparity is not in the ethical system, but in the different ways in which men and women are educated morally. Others argue that while it may be true that care and motherly love are under-appreciated and may be a better model for interpersonal relationships, no personal relationship can serve as a model for a theory of ethic that can be applied to all of society. Each relationship has different qualities and virtues that are pertinent for that relationship and different considerations must be made for strangers, as opposed to loved ones. In addition, no relationships between those in unequal positions (such as mother and child) should serve as a model for relationships between equals, or vice versa.

Some believe that Feminist Ethics is in itself a bad idea, even if we set aside the problems with the normative systems. In promoting an ethical system based on only one aspect of life, it may be making the same mistake made by traditional male-centric ethical systems. Furthermore, many believe that ethics should be universal and cannot depend on perspective, gender, or any other category. While it may be true that “feminine” virtues have been undervalued and some corrective surgery on society may be necessary (although this is also disputed), critics believe that the change should not be nearly as drastic as proposed. “Feminine” virtues should be more recognized, but women should still develop “masculine” virtues for work in the public sphere and expect to

be judged accordingly. Critics aver that allowing two moralities to exist or replacing traditional ethics with Feminist Ethics would be too great of an overthrow of our beliefs and would be more harmful than beneficial.

Feminist Ethics seems to have some very good points, but I find myself unable to agree with it. I am sympathetic to the claim that different moral expectations are made of the two genders, and that fulfilling the expectations made of women make them less likely to succeed in many realms of public life. Society seems to prefer its women gentle, kind, and charitable. Many men prefer to be more powerful than their wives. At the same time, such “feminine” qualities are valued less than “masculine” ones, and women today are also expected to be educated and have successful careers, donning an aggressive “masculine” persona while conducting business. Essentially, women are asked to juggle two personalities – one for personal life and another for business. Men, on the other hand, get away with using one for both. I can certainly see why some would be offended

at the suggestion that women are less morally developed, since more seems to be expected of them.

Nevertheless, I question whether there really are such things as “feminine” traits and “masculine” traits. Certainly, there are qualities that have historically been sought more in one gender than the other. Yet the large number of men who display “feminine” qualities and women who hold “masculine” virtues leads me to believe that perhaps the differences between the genders is socially constructed and not part of their inherent natures.

Moreover, I am convinced that an alternative ethical system for women is not the answer, nor is attempting to make men more like women. Both answers seem

like nothing more than easy ways out – ways in which people can continue to be judged mainly only by a certain number of the virtues and not be held accountable by every standard.

All of humanity has the capacity to overcome these distinctions and be virtuous in all ways. To be gentle yet firm, sympathetic yet rational. I believe we have it in us to find the right balance – the *universally* right balance. To know when to sacrifice profit for the sake of kindness and altruism and to know when we must hurt someone we care about for a greater good. The worlds of business and politics do not have to be as full of rivalry, hatred, greed and self interest as they are today, but at the same time mothers may need to accept that sometimes even children must be sacrificed for a greater cause.

Why settle for half, when we can have it all? ▣

WORKS CITED

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