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FEMINISM AND THE ETHICS OF CARE

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Abstract:

Since the late 1970's an important conversation concerning The Ethics of Care started becoming more and more prominent. Ethics of care is a feminist approach to ethics. One of the most prominent and influential key figures of this ethical theory was Carol Gilligan. According to her, traditional moral theories are male centric and problematic. They underestimate values that are culturally associated with women or their roles as females. In Ethics of care, vulnerability, care and relationality are privileged concepts. Ethics of care has been influential in certain areas such as medicines, nursing, education and has changed the perception of moral development.

Keywords:

Research Questions:

1. Why ethics of care has been described as feminine morality?
2. What is peace-making justice?
3. Why Feminist Ethics has been criticised?

Research Methodology:

Research method is qualitative with a critical approach. I have tried to provide Ethics of care as an alternative to the traditional ethics of utilitarianism, deontology and virtue ethics. For my research, I have used various references. One of the most important sources of my research was Carol Gilligan's interview held on June 21st, 2011. I've also referred to various online journals. I have tried to compare how men and women think differently about an ideal life and how male-centric moral theories have been problematic throughout the decades.

Objective of research:

The objective of this research is to identify philosophy of ethics and moral function in feminist approach, the role of ethics of care in the realm of education and to understand the concept of 'carer' and 'cared for' with real-life application.

Introduction:

Previous ethical theories have put forward universal principles of morals, virtues and justice. From the 1980s, and alternative paradigm emerged that criticised the dominant perspectives. This paradigm is called Feminist Ethics or Ethics of care and it basically emphasizes connection to others. In this paradigm, women's nurturing relationships are taken as a model for care. According to the title of this paper, I've tried to review the philosophy of ethics and then investigate the ethical criterion of humans in feminist approach.

Understanding Ethics of Care:

'Caring' ethics developed from discussions in the field of moral development theory. A key writer in this field was Kohlberg who, by use of interviews in which moral dilemmas were presented, particularly to children, developed a stages theory of moral development. Kohlberg (Kohlberg, 1981) suggested there were various levels of moral development from a form of primitive egoism as an infant, to a supreme objectivity, a level which few achieved. In the words of Daniel Engster (Engster, 2007), caring is understood as everything we do directly to help others meet their basic needs, develop or sustain our basic capabilities and alleviate or avoid pain or suffering in an attentive and respectful manner. Feminist ethics call for more attention on issues that arise in the so-called private world which relate to the housework, taking care of children, differently abled and the elderly. One of the main criticisms by feminist ethicists is that current ethical theories are not actually universal as they may not apply to everyone. The ethics of care has been described as a feminine morality because women in all societies are the child bearers and consequently seem to have a greater sensitivity to issues of care. There are similarities in the ethics of care's idea that morals derive from natural human impulses of compassion.

Ignoring women and their morality:

As mentioned before, according to feminists, in terms of philosophy of ethics, it is impossible for women's traits to have a position in philosophical thoughts, because of masculine bias in western philosophy. According to Jeiger 1998, there are major reasons for ignoring women in western moral philosophy. First, common believe is that wisdom is less sophisticated in women rather than men. Second, considered concepts in philosophy of ethics have been used in very abstract level. Or it is better to say it was used neutral so that moral differences cannot be seen. If some difference between two genders is seen, they would not be considered. As mentioned before, feminists believe that sex and gender are two different concepts. Sex has a more biological concept while gender relates to social roles and norms relate to male and female role in target society. Moral differences are due to gender. That is, social conflicts between men and women create conditions under which bring out certain advantages and limitation for one gender especially for women. The third reason is that women's activities are out of moral field and related to

activities in the public and private fields, because this classification is the same as gender roles which relate women to private areas and men to public areas¹

Beginning of the movement:

The publication of *In a different voice* by Carrol Gilligan (Gilligan, 1982) can be seen as the start of this movement. This publication consisted of study by the developmental psychologist Carrol Gilligan on how women's way of analysing and resolving dilemmas differed from men. At that time, general ideas about morality were based on formal and abstract notion of rights, rules and justice. For Instance, according to Lawrence Kohlberg's study among men, humans start out as individual moral agents, who are separate from others and who then independently learn to obey moral principles. Gilligan noticed that Kohlberg's description of morality development did not always apply to women. She argued that women's moral development was much more characterized by responsibility and care.

Mrs Carol Gilligan states that during her studies which have been done in her clinic on women, she indicated that women like to talk in care tone based on concrete and real relation rather a truth and justice oriented which are abstract affairs. Gilligan do not separate female and male ethic from each other and believe they can complete ethics altogether.

Feminist theorist Nel Nodding, had a similar viewpoint and argued that ethical theories were too male centric by focusing on reason, law and justice, which were thought to be inherently male values and not enough on feminine values such as empathy, relatedness and responsiveness. This is not to say that justice was no longer important, but justice was seen as an extension of caring. Although feminist ethics or care ethics were founded in the idea that men and women differ in their ethical and moral decision-making. This perspective describes how both men and women can engage in decision-making that is characterized by putting oneself in someone else's shoes and acting of feelings of empathy. Nel Nodding has been instrumental in bringing ethics of care into the realm of education. (Nodding, 2003)

Care ethics: Application and Pragmatic:

Ordinarily, scholars of ethics of care talk about 'carer' and 'cared for'. In this example, to study the applicability of care ethics, I am going to refer the teachers and school staff as the 'carer' and the students as the 'cared for'. One of the key requirements in education is the students to have a positive association between themselves and their school staff. In other words, they should feel that they really belong to the school. Without a positive association, students will not want to come to school, and even if they are in school, they will do everything possible to escape from it. Getting in trouble, using their devices in class, daydreaming etc. In reality, there's often a disconnect between the teachers and students particularly in high schools. This is partly because in high school, teachers come in contact with far more students than in elementary schools. They usually have very little knowledge about every student. However, another reason for this disconnect is also because high school teachers may not see their job as requiring any sort of care

¹ Bagheri, Kh. 2003. Feminism philosophical base. Tehran. Office of planning and cultural studies in science, research and technology

for students. In ethics of care, the argument is that it isn't enough for teachers to know that they have a duty or a moral obligation to care for their students, instead teachers should have an empathetic care for each and every student. Now, what is the difference between these two things? It's about the nature of the relationships. Relationships are two-way and involve both people having a role in that relationship. The students play the role of the 'cared for'. Traditional ethics and scores have only ever conceived of the teacher having any role in care with students being absent from the discussion. On the other hand, Ethics of care changes all of that. Ethics of care is different in terms of outcome. If a teacher only feels the moral duty to care for his students, the students will know that. That moral duty of care is what mostly students experience in school because teachers may only like a handful of their students. Others students won't feel acknowledged and cared for. This makes them not trust you, not open up to you or listen to your advice their students.

In a lecture by Nel Nodding, she discusses the need for teachers to truly listen to the students so that teachers will be able to act on expressed needs rather than on perceived needs.

Why Feminist Ethics has been criticised?

Feminist Ethics has been criticised for being too-female biased and for doing exactly the same as the dominant perspective they criticize. That is, focusing on biological and social differences between man and woman rather than a universal human being.

Conclusion

After investigating all of contrasts, we can sum up that feminist moral philosophy with an emphasis on the centrality of responsibility are very different with justice-oriented and rights-oriented ethics is its very abstract level. Feminist moral theory has tended to mirror the differing gender experiences of women and men, particularly as those affect the development of understanding with respect to the ways the ethical life is conducted. However, it has been noted that "feminist" moral theory is not "feminine" moral theory, as feminist perspectives are not fully determined by gendered points of view. Nevertheless, the suggestion that gender matters, particularly as gender relates to one's ethical predispositions, calls into question the inherent objectivity of ethical theories, which are advanced in part because of their universal merit and application. Feminine moral theory thereby deals a blow to the exclusively rational systems of thought, which have as their grounding an inherent disregard for the inherently personal and sometimes gender-biased nature of knowledge construction.

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¹ Bagheri, Kh. 2003. Feminism philosophical base. Tehran. Office of planning and cultural studies in science, research and technology

