

MORALITY IN A DIFFERENT VOICE: A STUDY OF FEMINIST ETHICS

A MORAL EM UMA VOZ DIFERENTE: UM ESTUDO DA ÉTICA FEMINISTA

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Received: 02 Jun 2024

Accepted: 16 Oct 2024

Published: 28 Dec 2024

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Abstract: This article provides a study of feminist ethics to clarify how morality is spoken differently than that of mainstream ethics. Our study aims to emphasize the specificity of feminist discourse on morality. To achieve this goal, we focus on key issues, including the feminist deconstruction of Western male-centered ethics, referred to as “androcentric ethics,” reconstructing traditional ethics from a feminist perspective; and general remarks on the contributions and prospects of feminist ethics. The research methods used are comparative, analytical, synthetic, abstraction, and generalization based on essential literature related to the issues. From this research, we clarify the differences in feminist ethical discourse from the traditional male-centered one, as well as provide an approach to feminist ethics as a trend that is widely discussed not only in Western Europe and North America but also in non-Western regions (Asia, Africa, Latin America) from the late twentieth century to the present.

Keywords: Androcentrism. Feminist ethics. Morality. Care. Relational autonomy.

Resumo: Este artigo fornece um estudo da ética feminista para esclarecer como a moral é falada de forma diferente da ética convencional. Nosso estudo tem como objetivo enfatizar a especificidade do discurso feminista sobre a moralidade. Para alcançar esse objetivo, nos concentramos em questões-chave, incluindo: a desconstrução feminista da ética ocidental centrada no homem, referida como “ética androcêntrica”; reconstruindo a ética tradicional a partir de uma perspectiva feminista; e comentários gerais sobre as contribuições e perspectivas da ética feminista. Os métodos de pesquisa utilizados são comparativos, analíticos, sintéticos, de abstração e generalização baseados na literatura essencial relacionada às questões. A partir desta pesquisa, esclarecemos as diferenças no discurso ético feminista em relação ao discurso tradicional centrado no homem, bem como fornecemos uma abordagem da ética feminista como uma tendência que é amplamente discutida não apenas na Europa Ocidental e América do Norte, mas também em regiões não ocidentais (Ásia, África, América Latina) do final do século XX até o presente.

Palavras-chave: Androcentrismo. Ética feminista. Moralidade. Cuidado. Autonomia relacional.

1. Introduction

In the long tradition of Western philosophy that began in ancient Greece, it was often assumed that the field of knowledge was male-dominated. Only ideas and contributions from men were recognized as the norm and the standard for truth. This way of thinking has made the presence of women in philosophy questionable. Women and philosophy were seen as incompatible. Where women were present, philosophy was absent, and vice versa. Philosophy was envisioned as a forbidden place for women.

In reality, it is not impossible to discover philosophical discussions about/of women in the history of Western thought. Admittedly, however, it is a single voice expressing women's aspirations to escape unequal treatment. As Western societies transitioned from industrial to post-industrial stages around the turn of the twentieth century, there was a growing need to rethink traditional values of rationality and raise awareness about the unique contributions and characteristics of women. This transformative context in society is crucial for feminist studies to become more integrated into the realm of philosophy.

Feminist philosophy aims to eliminate gender biases and discrimination against women and to reconstruct a more inclusive and equal philosophy. It is a critical reinterpretation of the enduring dominance of male-centered philosophy, and it is undoubtedly an ambitious strategy.

In the late 20th century, feminist ethics emerged as a specialized field within feminist philosophy. Although its readership is rapidly expanding" (Card, 1991, p. 16) and is widely recognized today, the term "feminist ethics" was still new in the early 1980s. At the time, feminist writings in ethics were not yet collected in volumes identified as such but were scattered in works called "feminist theory" or "feminist politics" (Card, 1991, p. 14). The widely recognized event that marked the formation of feminist ethics was the groundbreaking book *In a different voice: psychological theory and women's development* (1982) by moral psychologist Carol Gilligan. She distinguishes two moral perspectives that characterize men and women. According to Gilligan (1982, p. 82), "the moral problem arises from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights and requires for its resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract." Her empirical research "has inspired further philosophical attempts to develop

theoretical approaches to ethics grounded in a distinctively feminine experience.” (Card, 1991, p. 83)

There are so numerous definitions of so-called “feminist ethics” that it is difficult to estimate an exact and specific number. It could even be said that how many feminist thinkers have so many definitions of feminist ethics (Card, 1991), (Lindemann, 2019), (Brennan, 2021). Our study demonstrates that feminist ethics, beyond its diversity, aims to eliminate all forms of prejudice against women while establishing gender equality in ethical theory and practice in various ways. In other words, feminist ethics can be defined as a concrete project to realize the strategy of feminist philosophy as a whole. In this study, we assumed that feminist ethics is a “different voice” from male-centered mainstream ethical discourse. To clarify that assumption, we focused on analyzing two main issues: firstly, feminist critique of Western androcentric ethics; secondly, reconstructing morality from feminist discourses.

2. Western androcentric ethics and the feminist deconstructive project

At the beginning of the essay “Do feminist ethics counter feminist aims?” by Patricia W. Scaltsas (1992, p. 16), it is stated: “The project of criticizing, analyzing, and when necessary replacing the traditional categories of moral philosophy in order to eradicate the misrepresentation, distortion, and oppression resulting from the historically male perspective is, broadly speaking, the project of feminist ethics.” Feminists embark on the deconstruction of traditionally androcentric ethics by presuming that what appears to be gender-neutral in moral discourse is not. They embraced a consistent view that ethical androcentrism was “constructed” from male experiences while marginalizing women’s experiences as “Others” (the term used by feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in her magnum opus *Le Deuxième Sexe*).

This tradition is often used to justify the discrimination against women, as well as to maintain male dominance. It is, therefore, not surprising that misogynistic attitudes and gender biases are present in various forms in the theories and categories of Western ethics from classical to contemporary. Morwenna Griffiths and Margareth Whitford (1988, p. 1-2) pointed out that “the practice and content of Western philosophy are male-dominated and male-biased. This statement is not directed at any one set of philosophers. It is true in general, in spite of the fact that philosophers by no means speak with a single voice and do

not even agree among themselves about what they understand philosophy to be.” Thus, from a gendered perspective, feminist scholars have identified prejudices against women as one of the significant shortcomings of traditional ethics. They demand a thorough and severe critical reflection on that “tradition” to, on the one hand, expose the prejudices implicit in it and, on the other hand, aim to create a new philosophy that is more humane and more equal.

In their criticism, feminist scholars clearly define the limits and objects of criticism to avoid the risk of an absolute negation that could have immeasurable consequences that negatively affect the realization of the strategic goal of feminist philosophy. They argue that, after all, the object of criticism is not the entire tradition of ethics, but what has hurt them is nothing more than gender bias and misogynistic attitudes within the tradition. In *The Man of Reason: “Male” and “Female” in Western Philosophy*, Genevieve Lloyd (1984, p. ix) also noted that gender bias is not a superficial linguistic phenomenon, but “it lies deep in our philosophical tradition.” Therefore, we think that for criticism to be effective, it requires careful consideration to understand the “deep essence” hidden behind the superficial phenomena of gender biases and misogynistic attitudes within the norms of traditional ethics. With that in mind, in the next section, we have generalized and analyzed the feminist deconstruction of Western “androcentric” ethics in three following key criticisms:

2.1. Feminist critiques of the Myth of gendered Reason

Most feminist scholars believe that when reason is seen as the only basis of morality, it leads to a gender-biased attitude. One of the possible reasons feminist scholars explain this causal association is that, after all, “Reason” has never been a *gender-neutral* concept. As Genevieve Lloyd argues, the literature on the history of philosophy shows that the category of reason is not as gender-neutral as one thinks it is, as shown in the history of philosophy. Genevieve Lloyd explains that reason is not inherently masculine, but it has been defined as such and created to serve male purposes. In her preface to the second edition of *The Man of Reason*, Lloyd (1993, p. x) stated: “I would have more confidence now in presenting the male-female distinction, in its various forms of alignment with distinctions between reason and its opposites throughout the philosophical tradition, in terms of the operations of philosophical metaphor”; that, “the obstacles to female cultivation of Reason spring to a large extent from the fact that our ideals of Reason have

historically incorporated an exclusion of the feminine, and that femininity itself has been partly constituted through such processes of exclusion.”

Genevieve Lloyd points out that Western civilization is based on a male-dominated model, which explains why reason is often associated with masculine/masculinity while emotion is associated with feminine/femininity. These gendered conventions can also be seen in opposing binaries such as rationality/sentimentality, sun/moon, light/dark, and cultural/natural. In these binaries, the former is often given higher value and superiority over the latter, creating a hierarchical rather than equal order. Lloyd (1993, p. xii) emphasizes that the connections between the male-female distinction and the philosophical understanding of these binaries are “a contingent feature of Western thought, the elusive but real effects of which are still with us.”

The “hierarchical order” in Western ethics has historically favored reason and rationality as masculine attributes. This has led to the belief that only men with perfect rational capacities are morally mature, while women are seen as unable to achieve this. In its various forms, this negative view of morality has marginalized women in philosophy, placing them in a second-class status. In recent decades, feminist scholars have challenged this view, highlighting the need for change. They have found that the emphasis on male privilege and rationality as the only norm of morality is not inherent to philosophy but rather a result of patriarchal ethical reflection. Virginia Held argues that this emphasis on male experiences serves to maintain male dominance in ethical traditions. Virginia Held, for example, argues that it is the inevitable result of an exaggeration of male experiences and is used to consolidate and maintain male dominance in the tradition of Western ethics. Therefore, in any sense, the existence of misogyny in tradition is unacceptable because it is contrary to the divine equality of human beings.

2.2. Feminist critiques of justice ethics

In the view of contemporary feminist scholars (Gilligan, 1982), (Noddings, 1984), (Held, 2006), Western traditional ethics focus on creating abstract and universal principles to govern human moral life. This approach means that ethical theories within this tradition are based on rationality to establish universal principles and rules. Virginia Held (2006, p. 157) states that justice ethics “focus on issues of fairness, equality, and individual rights, seeking impartial and abstract principles that can be applied consistently to particular cases.”

Ethical universalism and its various forms, such as Kantian ethical formalism and utilitarianism, rely on abstract and imperative principles to guide individuals toward good behavior. While Kant proposed the strict “Categorical Imperative,” utilitarianism is based on the principle of maximum happiness, or the appealing “Utilitarian Principle” as the standard for determining the Good. However, feminist scholars argue that ethical universalism, which pursues universal, abstract, and impartial principles detached from the historical circumstances of each individual, fails to fully comprehend the diversity, uniqueness, and concreteness of human existence. A moral decision can be considered “right” or “good” from one person’s perspective but “wrong” or “not good” from another’s viewpoint. The view means that within the framework of that tradition, ethical theories are based on the foundation of rationality to create universal principles and rules. Virginia Held (2006, p. 157) states that justice ethics “focus on issues of fairness, equality, and individual rights, seeking impartial and abstract principles that can be applied consistently to particular cases.” Nel Noddings (1984, p. 85) argues, “A and B, struggling with a moral decision, are two different persons with different factual histories, different projects and aspirations, and different ideals. It may indeed be right, morally right, for A to do X and B to do not-X.” Thus, a careful examination can assert that any attempt to idealize impartiality in moral epistemology is impossible.

2.3. Feminist critiques of the traditional ideal of individual autonomy

Feminists have found that traditional conceptions of individual autonomy are inadequate because they are based on unrealistic psychology. Most conceptions of autonomy attempt to provide a model of reflection that determines the realization of autonomy, assuming that self-awareness is easily attainable. However, feminist scholars argue that self-awareness is an honorable achievement and not always achievable, and it is a mistake to take it for granted. Traditional notions of individual autonomy do not recognize the difficulties a cognitive subject faces, and they cannot propose any ideas to overcome those difficulties. If they do, those ideas are often inadequate and flawed.

In the criticisms of feminist ethicists, the inadequacy of the traditional ideal of individual autonomy is also reflected in the stance of extreme individualism. This ideal seems to parallel liberalism’s moral view of each individual as a closed “social atom,” reflecting on individual autonomy in absolute isolation from all connection with society and other individuals due to fear of relationships that would squeeze out the individual’s autonomy. Feminist ethicists assert that this atomist conception of individual autonomy is

unfounded and one-sided and fails to properly recognize the role of interpersonal relationships in human existence from an ethical perspective. In their critique of the traditional ideal of individual autonomy, feminist scholars have found that the conception not only rejects the social nature of moral ego but also removes the essential role of interpersonal relationships from the moral project of each person. In other words, it has “widened the distance” or even increased hostility in human relationships.

3. Morality in a feminist voice: Care and relational autonomy

Feminist theorists not only attempt to reveal and critique gender biases in the norms of Western androcentric ethics but also seek to change them by reconstructing ethical categories from feminist approaches. In her essay “What do women want in a moral theory?” Annette Baier (1985, p. 53) asks: “Should one expect them to want to produce moral theories, and if so, what sort of moral theories? How will any moral theories they produce differ from those produced by men?.” In this section, we attempt to answer Baier’s question by analyzing two significant perspectives in the framework of feminist ethics: care and relational autonomy.

3.1. Care

Through feminist discussions, care is a concept that represents women’s unique perspective on morality. There is a growing focus on care-based feminist ethics. The ethics of care has been a leading topic in discussions of feminist ethics in recent decades. R.E. Groenhout (2004, p. 13) argued that we never needed such a paradigm shift in ethics. Accordingly, instead of starting with how we can end the brutal treatment of others, perhaps we should focus on when and why people should care about each other. She (2004, p. 24) further emphasized that “care, the emotion involved in tending to the physical needs of other, dependent humans, holds a central place in ethical theory because of its indispensability for human life.”

Until the 1980s, care was rarely discussed in an ethical context. Carol Gilligan’s book (1982) was a key turning point in changing this. Although Virginia Held credits philosopher Sarah Ruddick’s essay “Maternal Thinking” (1980) as the starting point of the ethics of care, it is widely recognized that Gilligan’s research has significantly contributed to the development of the “ethics of care” and has opened the door to “writing on the so-called ethics of care has become a small industry within academia and outside the

academy.” (Card, 1991, p. 83). Gilligan first coined the term “voice of care” when studying the differences in moral reasoning between men and women, boys and girls. In criticizing her mentor Lawrence Kohlberg’s theoretical model, Gilligan discovered differences in moral reasoning between the sexes. Accordingly, men often use the “voice of justice” to seek solutions to ethical problems, while women tend to use the “voice of care.” This distinction challenged traditional theoretical models and opened up new avenues for feminist approaches to ethics. We think Gilligan’s contribution is that she evokes what we have long considered *unnecessary*. Gilligan’s early ideas about care were developed in various ways by feminists into the most characteristic category of feminist approaches in ethics.

One of the most detailed and insightful accounts of care comes from philosopher Nel Noddings. At the beginning of the influential work *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education* (1984, p. 3) Noddings identifies the starting point of her analysis as the ontological basis of relation. She anatomized and analyzed care as an ethical relationship based on the ontology of relationality. Citing Seyla Benhabib’s words, in her book review of Nel Noddings, Ann Diller (1988, p. 326) emphasized the significance of the relation to human existence, stating that “we humans do not spring up like mushrooms out of the ground; we are born in relation and we grow in relation.” From the ontology of relationality, Nel Noddings emphasizes that the relationship and reciprocity of the agent involved is a “basic reality” of human existence. Human nature manifests itself in his/her multitude of relationships, and in turn, the connection is also seen as his/her inherent attribute as an individual. Noddings (1984, p. 51) wrote: “I am not naturally alone. I am naturally in the relation from which I derive nourishment and guidance... My very individuality is defined in a set of relations. This is my basic reality.”

In the words of philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), being-with-others (Mitsein) is not only a fundamental ontological fact but also implies profound ethical significance. This means that an individual cannot become a moral agent in a state of isolation but necessarily through responsible participation in the network of caring relationships (being-in-the *caring* world). In other words, the caring relation is an essential moral achievement of human existence. We argue that Noddings has been extremely ingenious and subtle in transforming relational ontology into relational ethics.

Noddings (1992, p. 45) emphasizes that caring is essential meaning for human existence because from infancy, “we are completely dependent on the care of others (primarily, the care of our mother – *We add for further clarification*).” According to Noddings

(2002, p. 121), utter dependency is “the original condition of every human being.” She lamented (1984, p. 1) that existing “ethics has been discussed largely in the language of the father: in principles and propositions, in terms such as justification, fairness, justice. The mother’s voice has been silent. Human caring and the memory of caring and being cared for, which I shall argue form the foundation of ethical response, have not received attention except as outcomes of ethical behavior.”

In *Caring*, Noddings proposed her phenomenological anatomy of “caring” as the fundamental moral relationship of human existence through a *dyadic schema*. Accordingly, the caring relations are only completed when it comprises two interrelated participants: the one-caring and the cared-for. The one-caring must always show “engrossment” and “motivational displacement”, and the cared-for must respond to the one-caring in various ways. Noddings (1984, p.69) wrote:

Logically, we have the following situation: (W, X) is a caring relation if and only if

i) W cares for X (as described in the one-caring) and

ii) X recognizes that W cares for X

...

Caring requires the typical engrossment and motivational displacement in W and, also, the recognition of caring by X. Now, of course, the relationship can be mutually (or doubly) caring if we can interchange W and X and retain true expressions.

Engrossment expresses an open and natural feel of one-caring towards the cared-for. In essence, engrossment is a form of feeling with others. It is an essential condition for a caring relationship because one must understand the existing situation of the other person before choosing to act appropriately. Noddings emphasizes that any caring relationship involves engrossment.

Noddings further notes that engrossment is a necessary condition, but alone it cannot create a complete caring relation. It must be combined with another important factor: motivational displacement. The (motivational displacement) process occurs when the behavior of the one-caring is directed towards the needs of the cared-for. Noddings (1984, p. 33) wrote:

When I care, when I receive the other in the way we have been discussing, there is more than feeling; there is also a motivational shift. My motive energy flows toward the other and perhaps, although not necessarily, toward his ends. I do not relinquish myself; I cannot excuse myself for what I do. But I allow my motive energy to be shared; I put it at the service of the other.

In Noddings’ analysis, engrossment and motivational displacement are two indispensable conditions of caring relationship. From these two conditions, Noddings

constructs a typical caring relation that is motherhood – “a romantic couple in contemporary Western discourse” (Tronto, 1993, p. 103). Ann Diller (1988, p. 331) commented as follows: “Nel Noddings unabashedly ties her exposition of the Ethics of Care to the mother-child relation as one of the central paradigm cases for understanding what is entailed in the actions, experiences and deliberations of caring and being cared-for.”

Noddings extends the concept of the mother-child relationship as the core model of caring to other types of relationships. However, the term “other relationships” does not encompass all human relationships, but rather unique relationships “are characterized by physical proximity and some degree nurturance are also taken as of central importance—such as between teacher and student, between friends, colleagues, spouses, etc.” (Diller, 1988, p. 331). Noddings (1984, p. 5) also pays special attention to what she calls the “ethical ideal” – a “realistic picture of ourselves as one-caring, that guides us as we strive to meet the other morally.” Noddings considered an ethical ideal a helpful guide to moral action, as opposed to the authority of universal moral principles. “Universifiability” is described by Noddings (1984, p. 84) as follows: “If I have to do X under certain conditions, then under similar conditions, I am also obliged to do X.” She (1984, p. 84) also pointed out, “It has been traditional in moral philosophy to insist that moral principles must be, by their very nature as moral principles, universalizable.” She (1984, p. 85) concluded that while universal principles are helpful for addressing abstract ethical issues, they cannot provide guidance for behaving ethically in specific situations. When we try to find similarities among specific ethical situations, “we often lose the very qualities or factors that gave rise to the moral question in the situation. That condition which makes the situation different and thereby induces genuine moral puzzlement cannot be satisfied by applying principles developed in situations of sameness.” So, Noddings (1984, p. 5) stated:

I shall reject ethics of principle as ambiguous and unstable... Along with the rejection of principles and rules as the major guide to ethical behavior, I shall also reject the notion of universalizability. Many of those writing and thinking about ethics insist that any ethical judgment—by virtue of its being an ethical judgment—must be universalizable; that is, it must be the case that, if under conditions X you are required to do A, then under sufficiently similar conditions, I too am required to do A. I shall reject this emphatically.

Noddings always emphasizes the importance of specific connections and situations for human existence. In reality, every human being lives and experiences their own unique

and specific situations. Therefore, an action or opinion may be suitable for one person but not necessarily good for another.

In our opinion, Noddings' feminine interpretations of caring relations contain philosophically significant ideas that contribute to bringing caring as a natural sentiment from the periphery to the center of morality.

Since its emergence in the 1980s, the ethics of care has been developed into various versions by feminists and is constantly expanding its influence from academia to social life, from local to global. However, Gilligan and Noddings' pioneering contributions, although widely criticized by contemporary feminists, can be seen as an attempt to speak to distinctive feminine voices about morality.

3.2. Relational autonomy

In her research "Autonomy and Identity in Feminist Thinking" (Griffiths & Whitford, 1988, p. 90-108), Jean Grimshaw made a remarkable assertion that "issues about women's autonomy have been central to feminist thinking and action. Women have often been in situations of powerlessness and dependence that any system of belief or programme of action that could count as 'feminist' must in some way see this as a central concern."

Feminist ethical interpretations of autonomy began in the 1970s, then flourished in academic research in the late twentieth century. Initially, feminist scholars viewed autonomy as the ideal model of the moral agent, praising its potential to liberate women. However, they later realized that individual autonomy was not a gender-neutral concept but rather a male-dominated idea created and idealized by male philosophers as a masculine achievement to discriminate against women.

From a relational perspective, feminist scholars advocate for critical reflection and reinterpretation of individualistic conceptions of autonomy. As an alternative, they propose a new conception of the moral self characterized by relationality, known as "relational autonomy" – a conception that "treats social relationships and human community as central to the realization of autonomy" (Friedman, 2003, p. 81). Feminists believe relationality can provide a "thick" image of the moral self. Accordingly, each moral agent is considered a social entity capable of developing autonomy through dynamic interaction with numerous other individuals involved in a multitude of interpersonal relationships. This capacity would not be possible if the moral agent were separated from the matrix of human relations. It means that autonomy no longer requires the individual to become an

asocial atom, i.e., the Hobbesian conception of the self as a mushroom¹ (Benhabib & Cornell, 1966).

In feminist framework, “relational autonomy” does not refer to a single unified conception of autonomy but is instead an “umbrella term” (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000, p. 4) that encompasses a wide variety of ideas and interpretations. The core of relational autonomy lies in its openness, recognizing the importance of relationships as a crucial element in an individual’s autonomy. In other words, an individual’s autonomy cannot be achieved in isolation from relationships with others and society. Feminist scholars have interpreted this concept in diverse ways, leading to a wide range of moral agents within the framework of relational autonomy.

Sarah Hoagland proposes the concept of “self-in-community” based on women’s experiences of relationality. According to Hoagland (1988, p. 144-147), the self-in-community entails a sense of oneself as a moral agent connected to others who are also self-conscious moral agents within a communal web of relationships. This allows for the separateness of selves without undermining mutual concern and interaction. Hoagland argues that only within this framework can the self achieve full and complete autonomy.

Other feminist scholars, such as Evelyn Fox Keller, have taken a more moderate stance, not completely dismissing the concept of autonomy. According to Keller (1985, p. 97), autonomy has a variety of possible meanings, one of which “connotes a radical independence from others”. However, she (1985, p. 97) also points out: “It is essential to note at the outset how laden the word autonomy, in particular, is with the prejudices of our culture. Indeed, the tendency to confuse autonomy with separation and independence from others is itself part of what we need to explain.” Keller introduces the term “static autonomy” to describe the traditional ideal of individual autonomy and introduces the concept of “dynamic autonomy” to emphasize that human interconnectedness produces autonomy, acknowledging that the self is influenced by and relies on others, and recognizing other individuals as subjects in their own right. At this point, Keller (1985, p. 112-113) seems to feel an unresolvable tension “between autonomy and intimacy, separation and connection, aggression and love.” Keller’s perspective is significant as it highlights common contradictions among contemporary feminist ideas about autonomy. While some feminist ethicists recognize the importance of interpersonal relationships as

¹ British philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1983, p. 160) explained his conception of the self as a mushroom as follows: “Vt redeamus iterum in statum naturalem, consideremusque homines tanquam si essent iamiam subito è terrà (fungorum more) exorti & adulti, sine omni vnus ad alterum obligatione.”

fundamental and necessary for achieving individual autonomy, others argue that emphasizing the value of autonomy should not come at the expense of interpersonal relationships, as the two are not mutually exclusive.

Another interesting feminist interpretation of individual autonomy is that of Lorraine Code. According to Code, contemporary Western mainstream philosophy is immersed in “autonomy obsession” with the “autonomous man” at its core. In her *What can she know? Feminist theory and the construction of knowledge*, Code (1991, p. 77-78) wrote:

Autonomous man is—and should be—self-sufficient, independent, and self-reliant, a self-realizing individual who directs his efforts towards maximizing his personal gains. His independence is under constant threat from other (equally self-serving) individuals: hence he devises rules to protect himself from intrusion. Talk of rights, rational self-interest, expedience, and efficiency permeates his moral, social, and political discourse. In short, there has been a gradual alignment of autonomy with individualism.

Viewed through the lens of this obsession, human relationships are considered a hindrance to individual autonomy. The obsession can only be eliminated if the traditional ideal of autonomy is appropriately reinterpreted and transformed into a new conception. All moral theory, Code argues, must begin with recognizing the significance of what Annette Baier referred to as the “second-person.”² Code (1991, p. 85) stated: “Autonomy and self-sufficiency define themselves against a background of second personhood.” In other words, interdependence with others is the facticity of human existence, as well as an indispensable premise for the full development of each individual.

Inspired by this idea, modern feminist ethicists have explored the concept of intersubjectivity as a crucial element in shaping a new understanding of the moral self. Viewing individuals through the lens of intersubjectivity, individuals who enter into an intertwined network of relationships as moral agents are respectfully recognized as *persons*. In this framework, *persons* are considered to be *second persons* who only come into being as persons through their relationships with others (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000, p. 6)

The diverse interpretations of contemporary feminist ethicists highlight relational autonomy as a compelling characteristic of the moral self. While the traditional ideal of an autonomous moral self is rooted in atomism and abstract individualism, feminist conceptions of relational autonomy place the moral self in the vivid context of human

² A. Baier (1985, p. 84) wrote: “A person, perhaps, is best seen as one who was long enough dependent upon other persons to acquire the essential arts of personhood. Persons essentially are *second persons*.”

relationships. This has enriched and deepened our thinking about the nature and conditions of individual agency (Westlund, 2009, p. 26).

4. Discussions

The emergence of feminist ethics has significantly influenced Western philosophy from the latter half of the twentieth century to the present day. While it's difficult to pinpoint a specific moral shift in contemporary philosophy, feminist ethicists have made noteworthy contributions to both philosophy and feminism. Based on the preceding analysis, this section primarily centers on the assessment of feminist ethics, once again highlighting its unique perspective on morality.

Firstly, feminist critiques of “malestream” Western ethics have provided a significant theoretical foundation for the ambitious feminist project of reconstructing philosophy

Feminist scholars such as Genevieve Loyld and Charlotte P. Gilman argue that Western philosophy is androcentric, meaning it revolves around masculine perspectives and characteristics, or in other words, “the measure of all things” (borrowing the classic aphorisms of Protagoras). They believe that this male-centered way of thinking has become a lasting tradition in Western culture, influencing ethical understanding and activity. This male-Chauvinist culture provides the necessary foundation to explain why masculine/masculinity has consistently been considered the “center” of ethical understanding, while feminine/femininity has often been despised as the “periphery” throughout the history of Western ethics.

It is challenging to deny the epistemological significance of feminist critical reflections on traditional ethics. This is because they have revealed that “reason is not as thoroughly objective as one might think of it. Feminist studies show that objective reason always hides behind its rights and power structures (of men – *we further explained*).” (Lawhead, 2012, p. 537). While not all criticisms of feminist ethicists are convincing or even controversial, we believe that the value contained in feminist critical reflections on deep-rooted gender biases in traditional ethics should be recognized as necessary steps in the long-term journey of fighting for gender equality and the advancement of women.

Secondly, feminist voices have played a crucial role in promoting diversification and democratization in ethical research.

Feminist ethics is an ambitious project. It aims to expose and critique gender biases within traditional Western ethics and attempts to eliminate those biases by reinterpreting and reconstructing fundamental norms based on women's unique experiences, with the goal of achieving gender equality — a strategic goal of feminism.

Feminist scholars strive to diversify and democratize ethical approaches, providing alternatives to the tradition of rationalist ethics. Carol Gilligan critiques the Kohlbergian model of moral development and proposes the “voice of care,” which characterizes women's experience in moral reasoning by emphasizing emotional responses, responsibilities, and specific relationships. While men often utilize the “voice of justice,” women tend to prefer the “voice of care.” It is important to note that these two voices are *different in essence but similar in value*.

Nel Noddings (1984) proposed the idea of creating an ethic of care as a new paradigm in ethics research. More recently, some ethicists have suggested integrating the ethical value of care and justice (Bubeck, 1995; Held, 2006; Slote, 2007) in order to overcome the limitations of each theory and address the ethical problems that arise in modern life.³

Feminist ethicists also suggest a different approach to autonomy based on relationality as a possible alternative to the “malestream” traditional conception of individual autonomy. While it is not yet possible to claim that relational autonomy is superior to the traditional ideal of individual autonomy, feminist ethics offers new possibilities for women as moral agents to engage in society.

Feminist perspectives on morality generally promote and enhance the open dialogueness in contemporary ethical discussions. As Alison Stone argues, contemporary feminist scholars not only discourse on gender-sensitive issues but also make them acceptable to everyone. In our opinion, this is significant because a philosophy that “listens

³ The ethics of care emphasizes the importance of caring relationships, social connections, and moral values such as trust, solidarity, mutual care, and empathy. On the other hand, the ethics of justice focuses on freedom, equality, and impartiality. According to Virginia Held (2006, p. 17), “care may be the more fundamental value, it may well be that the ethics of care does not itself provide adequate theoretical resources for dealing with issues of justice. Within its appropriate sphere and for its relevant questions, the ethics of justice may be best for what we seek.” Both moral theories address issues of great moral significance, so there is a need to integrate these concerns to create a complete and relevant moral theory.

to different voices” has always had more vitality and potential for development than an authoritarian patriarchal philosophy.

Lastly, contemporary feminist ethicists are right to question the importance of reconsidering traditional ethical norms from a gender perspective.

Contemporary feminist scholars view rationalist ethics, such as Kantian deontology, utilitarianism, and the Kohlbergian model of moral development, as traditionally based on universality, impartiality, and individual autonomy. These norms are universally acknowledged as the “golden norms” of morality and are therefore assumed to be intangible.

Feminist ethicists argue that the exclusive reliance on reason as the sole basis and measure of morality should be eliminated. They believe that judging moral maturity based solely on reason and rationality is insufficient, especially for women. While they acknowledge that women are capable of using reason, feminist scholars emphasize that women often perceive the world in a more sensory way. They stress that natural emotions, rather than reason, are the source of morality. Emotions are crucial in moral life, but not all emotions are considered moral. Feminist ethics should be based on the moral emotional characteristics associated with women, such as caring, empathy, trust, compassion, and altruism.

Feminist scholars in moral epistemology reject the privilege of abstract principles that are universal and impartial. Instead, they emphasize the contextuality and partiality of ethical relationships. Noddings focuses on the importance of understanding the unique experiences of each individual. By doing so, we can better address the needs of others and reduce their suffering.

The traditional conception of “individual autonomy” as the ideal of moral self should be reconceptualized and reinterpreted from a relationality perspective. As discussed before, feminist scholars argue that the concept of individual autonomy is limited and should be substituted with a “thicker” and more comprehensive concept of “relational autonomy.”

Traditional ethics and feminist ethics can be distinguished through the following criteria:

Traditional ethics	Feminist ethics
Reason / Rationality	Emotion / Emotionality
Universality	Contextuality
Impartiality	Partiality
Individual autonomy	Relational autonomy

The proposals of feminist ethicists demonstrate the unique feminine approach or the “different voices” of morality. With the contributions of feminist ethics, as Martha Nussbaum pointed out, Western ethics is undergoing a transition from an ethic based on the Enlightenment ideal of universality to an ethic based on individuality, from an ethic based on abstract principles to an ethic based on virtue; from an isolated individual-based ethic to one based on relationality and caring; from an ahistorical ethic to one firmly rooted in historicity and contextuality.

5. Conclusion

There is no doubt that feminist ethics is an incredibly diverse field. Indeed, it is difficult to determine a unified answer to ethical questions from feminist scholars. However, this study attempted to distill possible general ideas in the myriad interpretations of contemporary feminist ethicists. These general ideas are expressed in various forms in feminist critique of male-dominated ethics and contained in key categories commonly used in feminist texts. What feminist ethicists have done in recent decades demonstrates that feminism has contributed “different voices” in formal ethical discourse.

The contributions of feminist ethics, in our view, contain evocative value both theoretically and practically. The feminist deconstruction has revealed the hidden gender biases in ethics that have been subtly perpetuated by [male] philosophers for a long time. This has led to a significant reevaluation of the traditional ethical norms. In addition to critiquing the limitations of ethical androcentrism, feminist ethicists aim to reconstruct ethical theory and categories based on the values that are characteristic of women’s experiences and to apply them to social practices (Ruddick, 1989), (Tronto, 1993),

(Noddings, 1992; 2002), (Harrington, 2000), (Bubeck, 1995), (Folbre, 2002), (Held, 2006). Although feminist ethics has been controversial from the outside and within, from a broader feminist perspective, we consider the efforts of feminist ethicists to construct a better, more egalitarian reality as honorable.

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