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Weekly Paper #5: Feminist Ethics

For most of history, the discussion of philosophy has often been done by the male elites, as they often had the most privileges and freedoms to philosophize, along with patriarchal values that suppressed the educational freedoms of women. In modern times, educated women have come to resist much of the historical ethical theories, on the grounds that it doesn’t take into account values that many women think are necessary, specifically the relationships with others and caring nature. The branch of ethics formed from this petition to contemporary theory is known as feminist or care ethics. Two works describing some of the theories for the tenants of care ethics, *Rethinking Feminist Ethics* written by Daryl Koehn and *Feminist Transformations of Moral Theory* by Virginia Held. Koehn emphasizes a dialogical feminist ethic through six common features, while Virginia Held gives justification for the importance of feminist ethics through three features. Koehn and Held agree on much in their arguments, but there are some notable differences between the two pieces. It is important that the two works are overviewed, and then explore Koehn’s three arguments against traditional care ethics, and what Held’s response would likely be.

In *Rethinking Feminist Ethics,* Koehn gives six features that are common amongst many philosophers on what should be the tenants of feminist ethics. The six features are as follows. First is the relational self, which means people are not individualistic because humans are interdependent. Second is a benevolent concern for the vulnerable. The third is the publicness of private, which means familial and household relationships are more than just private affairs, they carry over into the public space. Fourth is the importance and value of difference, that a Kantian categorical imperative is dismissive and against ethical maturity. The fifth is the emphasis on imaginative discourse, that all real situations have different contexts that can change the discourse. the final feature is making a difference by changing the world, which means that an important part of ethics is reform and action.

In *Feminist Transformations of Moral Theory,* Held’s first point is reason and emotion, that abstract and general principles do not account for natural human emotion that conflicts with the rational will. The second is the public and private, which echoes Koehn’s third feature. The third is the concept of self, which is like Koehn’s first point about the concept of self as a relational and not an individualistic being.

Now with the proper context, we can dive into Koehn’s issues with traditional feminist ethics and Held’s responses. The first of Koehn’s issues with traditional feminist ethics is “ It is highly questionable whether we can save the individuality of the self by adopting female ethics’ idea of the self as completely relational.”(Koehn, 12). Koehn believes that identifying with relationships entirely creates a lack of individuality and that people’s definitions of caring are debatable, sidestepping the issue that should be brought up of the differing perspectives of caring-ness. Held would respond to that the relational self is inevitable. “Even if we would be freed from the debilitating aspects of dominating male power to ‘be ourselves’ and to pursue our own interests, we would, as persons, still have ties to other persons, and we would at least in part be constituted by such ties. Such ties would be part of what we inherently are.” (Held, 338) Held believed firmly that people’s relationships build individuality, not the other way around.

The second point that Koehn makes is a criticism of feminist ethics dealing with the problem of public vs. private by satiating needs as a public function. Koehn argues that desires and needs cannot be separated easily, that people can be manipulated into having needs not aligned with health and happiness, the examples she gives is the need to be very thin for “fashion”. Held would say that integrating the public and private space is good in many aspects of life like protection from domestic violence, but she does not hit on this topic specifically. To conjecture, Held would likely say something along the lines of a strong caring household should instill positive values in others, that a mother would raise a daughter to understand what public needs are good.

The third criticism is that we “must recognize the peculiar and important power of principles to set liberating limits. Principles enunciating absolute prohibitions can open up, as well as close, possibilities.” (Koehn, 14). What Koehn means by this is that in some cases the absolute principles can be very effective in protecting and caring for others. The primary example she gives is of inalienable rights given to citizens to protect them from governments discriminating or oppressing groups. In Held’s work, she acknowledges Jennifer Nedelsky, another feminist ethicist, as describing very well the role of feminist ethics and government: "maintaining a sphere into which the state cannot penetrate, but fostering autonomy when people are already within the sphere of state control or responsibility”(Nedelsky). Held goes on to agree with this, that a correctly operating feminist care society could not suppress others by the very nature of feminists’ primary concern with freedom and autonomy.

Works Cited

1. Koehn, Daryl. *Rethinking Feminist Ethics: Care, Trust and Empathy*. Routledge, 1998.
2. Held, Virginia. “Feminist Transformations of Moral Theory.” Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, vol. 50, 1990, pp. 321–344.
3. Jennifer Nedelsky, "Law, Boundaries, and the Bounded Self," Representations 30 (Spring, 1990): 162-89, at 167.