ALTRUISM AND THE PROBLEM OF GENDERED VIRTUE

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Introduction

I start with a story. During the Vietnam war, an orphanage was hit by mortar rounds. One of the critically injured was an eight-year old boy. When the U.S. medical team arrived, they decided the boy needed blood transfusion or he would die from too much loss of blood. Asking those around if anyone would be willing to give blood, the doctor was only met with silence. After some long moments, a small hand of a girl slowly went up. Trying not to waste time, they immediately laid her on a pallet, swabbed her arm with alcohol, and inserted the needle in her vein. The little girl went through all this with courage. But after a while, she let out a sob. The doctor asked her whether the needle was hurting her. The medical team was worried because the needle could not be hurting her. Then a Vietnamese nurse arrived. After talking with the little girl, the team learnt of a small misunderstanding -- she thought she was dying because she had to give all her blood to the boy. Asked why she volunteered to do it, she answered, "Because she's my friend." [1]

This is altruism, one of the most fundamental and familiar of all the virtues. It is also one of the most mysterious. Indeed, why does one help? Some psychologists answer that an emphatic emotional response triggers motivation to help. But this usual understanding of empathy as an emotional response to the emotion of another fails to explain many aspects of helping behaviour. Empathy must be re-defined as "an emotional response elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone else."[2] "Perceived" is here emphasized because the other's welfare is not always reflected in his emotional state, as an unconscious victim of an accident. (This compassion for a perceived distress was what the good samaritan was presumed to have done.) Empathy is different from sympathy in that, while sympathy only involves reactions to another's pain, empathy includes reactions both to another's pleasure and pain.

A Historical Survey of the Concept

The Greeks may have come up with the word "philanthropy," the regard for man as man, but the idea refers to attachment to another person mainly as a means of strength for oneself, and not the idea of whole-hearted giving without personal gain.[3] The Hebrews speak of "justice and truth," i.e., exact return for what has been done, and pair those off with "mercy and grace," which points to something over and above the field of equal play, a surplus of generosity.[4] This second pair is understood to reflect altruism.

The term "altruism" is a fairly recent coinage. It was introduced by the French sociologist August Comte (1798-1857) to signify devotion to the welfare of others as a principle of action.[5] Although the terms "altruism" and "prosocial" are new terms, the study of behavioral phenomena to which these refer has started since time immemorial, expressed in such questions as "What is human nature?" or "How should people live their lives?" Thinkers may have been divided as to how humans were like, but they are less so when they consider how humans ought to be like. Virtually, regard-for-others is a universal value in all human communities. In many cultures, altruism as a virtue is emphasized from pulpits to schools, from home to TV hero. To show how society takes to it, there are civic awards for altruistic behaviour. One of these is the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission. Established in 1904, it awards medals for outstanding acts of selfless heroism performed in the United States and Canada. It is true however that the study of altruism as a major focus of attention only began in the last 20 years.

Altruism

As one of the modalities of unselfishness, altruism is taken as a counsel of perfection since it is a character trait whose motivation is to give priority to the welfare of others so that their interests can, in principle, take precedence over one's own within the framework of his own moral calculations. Running parallel to it, and always regarded as its contrary, is a more powerful tendency--egoism, the tendency to give priority to the self.[6] While altruism is thought "superior" or "higher," egoism has nothing in it to merit admiration.

In the area of ethics, there were attempts to harmonize these two springs of action. Thomas Hobbes teaches that we can be successfully egoistic only by taking others into account.[7] Each one endures social rules because it pays, i.e., it is beneficial to the self. The English moralists--Cumberland, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Butler--argued otherwise. They say that benevolent feelings are as original as the self-seeking. But they cannot show how the relationship of these two forces within us might be treated. There were attempts to fuse these two passions, just to explain how we cross from our egoistic to altruistic desires. Hartley (1705 - 1757), for example, holds that the two become one through association.[8] His example is the man who amasses money to supply his wants but, by degrees, forgets those wants and fixes his attention to the money itself. A means has become an end. In the same way are our egoistic desires transformed. At first, their satisfaction depends on other people, but slowly we become interested in people for their own sake, finally, helping them rather than having them help us. Martin Hoffman thinks that proper stimuli trigger in us a powerful action tendency or motive, the basis of which is

empathy.[9] Yet, having the property of making another's misfortune into one's own distress, empathy turns out to have both egoistic and altruistic elements. It is true that we feel good after helping someone, but this does not necessarily mean that we act in order to feel good. The consequence of an act must be differentiated from its aim. Besides, it is a fact that all motives cause actions that are satisfying to the agent. If so, good feeling cannot be used as the defining criterion for egoistic motives.

It can be argued that all these theories begin with the wrong premise. They look at man as basically a self-centered being, a distinct ego so that his discovery of, and relations with, other persons are only subsequent and supplemental. In himself, he is understood to be separate and detached.

But no person is solitary. One person is no person, for the smallest known unit of personality is three--father, mother, child. Our coming into the world, and remaining here, is not characterized by separateness. Since birth, relations have permeated our beings. Through these relations, we become the social beings that we are--members of a group. No one ever stands alone.

This is not saying that it is a mistake to say "I". It is properly the most common word and most common thought and it is the reference point for anything to have any value. In all kinds of relations, there are unique centers of consciousness that evaluate reality and even modify it. This unique spot is called a person, a self, an ego. It is so important that we have to stand above relations in order to focus on it. This is legitimate abstraction, and the self that emerges is the separate or the abstract self. This kind of self is different from the real person, the conjunct or the social self.[10] It is the real person that is made up of centers of consciousness and all its attendant relations. Aristotle asserts that the good man is always a lover of himself. But which self does Aristotle mean here, the conjunct or the separate self? It must be noted that in some undeveloped forms of social life, it is the separate self that is emphasized. The mark of moral maturity is when a man or nation gives attention to the conjunct self.

The Problem of Gendered Virtue

Central to the ethical teaching of many Western analytical moral philosophers is the claim to universalizability, advanced as an ideological assumption in most ethical theories in the Western tradition. It is supposed that the moral task is to abstract certain details from a given situation and check it against a rule or a principle. And for a principle to be considered moral, it must be univeralizable, i.e., reducible to the form "Whenever X, then Y." Nel Noddings contends that a morality based on rules or principles

is inadequate, and universalizability misrepresents the nature of moral decision-making.[11] She says that posing moral issues in a "desert-island dilemma" form fails to reveal the kinds of questions only situational and contextual knowledge can bring out, questions which are essential to moral judgments in specific contexts.

By so saying, we have raised what may perhaps be described as one of the most vigorous critique of ethics in the Western tradition. I am referring to the feminist moral theory, which characterizes ethical theories in the Western tradition as attempts to generalize from the experience and self-conception of a group with a dominant social status (not only men, but of a certain social class, and so forth) to the whole humanity. It is seen as a break with the ideals of Liberalism, criticized to be steeped in masculine biases about the nature of society and what it means to be human.[12]

These criticisms, or claims, are not without valid foundations. The problem of identity is truly of special importance for any moral theory. Charles Taylor, for example, maintains that there exists an "essential link" between a person's identity and his or her moral orientation--identity provides the horizons from which a person decides on moral issues.[13] For Taylor, the moral judgments of subjects, or agents, are circumscribed by a "moral space" that is not neutral but is defined by the way questions are framed about what the subject perceives is right.

Among the various sources for the definition of personal identity, gender seems to occupy a privileged place because it defines the moral space of an agent, i.e., the limits of what is legitimate for him or her to do. The beginnings of the idea that the standards and criteria of morality are different for women and men, that virtue is in some way gendered, can be traced to the 18th century, specially in Jean Jacques Rousseau's book, *Emile*.[14] Emile as a man is expected to develop such virtues as self-sufficiency, hardiness, independence of mind. In his judgments, he is beholden to no one else. On the other hand, his woman-companion, Sophie, possessing a different nature from man, is supposedly bound to different principles of virtue: she must learn to be obedient, dutiful, modest, submissive to her man's will, and above all, her reputation must be above reproach. If she so much as attempt to emulate the virtues appropriate to man, she becomes a woman of less stature and loses the very qualities that make her meritorious and desirable.

What makes this view of the difference, or complementarity, if you will, of male and female virtues unacceptable to feminists, is the assumption that the virtues of women--presumably the results of their lack for reason, judgment, and acting on--are inferior to those ascribed to men. Women are viewed as incapable of objective or "universal" judgment (their judgments being infected by particularity), they are too personal, and they are more

swayed than men by their emotions. This specific notion of "gendered virtue" was attacked, and quite viciously, by such feminists as Mary Wollstonecraft.[15] But many women in the 19th century remained fascinated with the idea not merely that there are specifically female virtues, but that sometimes women are morally superior to men.[16] The traditional concepts of morality are here seen to espouse distorted notions of the self (since based on a deeply masculine orientation) and of key moral notions, such as the notion of rational autonomy, suggesting a radical separation of the realm of the affective from the realm of the rational, or even the idea of a subject so disengaged it is capable of setting the rules for dominion and control, is blamed for wreaking havoc on human life and the planet. The feminine psyche however is believed to be naturally less aggressive, more cooperative, more gentle and maturing, and closer to Nature than men. It follows from this that it is to women that we should look, for a new vision of a more harmonious and nondestructive way of life.

The problem of difference, or the "right to difference" as it is sometimes referred to, must be translated into the idea of respect for difference. Carol Gilligan holds that those who suggested that women typically reason differently from men concerning moral issues are, in fact, right.[17] What is wrong, she says, is the assumption of the inferiority of or deficiency in female moral reasoning. Indeed, to understand morality in terms of fast rules and cold principles is bound to misrepresent women's moral reasoning. It must be recognized that the typical differences in structure between male and female personalities are largely borne out of the significant fact that it is woman who undertakes the primary care of children. In a social system as this, an infant's initial sense of self develops in relation to the mother, and it is out of this sense of oneness with her that the processes of separation and individuation of the self must take place. Boys establish their masculine identity by escaping from the female-dominated world of the household. This entails the need for boys to deny the power of women and to repress the early infantile experience of close relatedness to a woman. On the other hand, becoming female is a different process. The girl continues to nurture her closeness with the mother, so she does not need to repress her relational capacities. It is in relation to others that she defines herself. The basic feminine sense of self therefore is characterized to be more relational, more "connected" to others, while the basic masculine sense of self is understood to be "separate". Gilligan writes:

> Since masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment, male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender identity is threatened by separation. Thus males tend to have difficulty with relationships, while females tend to have problems with individuation.[18]

As a consequence, women, more closely entrenched in relationships than men, are more likely to form an ethics prioritizing care for others and maintaining relationships with them, and in which moral judgements tend to be contextual. Men, more distanced from these personal networks, tend to develop an ethic that gives priority to rights, or rules and principles. It is Gilligan's opinion that if the ethic of individualism were indeed truly universal, people by now would have been isolated and alienated from each other[19]. But this is not the case because it has always been complemented by the ethic of care, which anchors itself on altruism and responsibility-for-others as its main moral imperatives. Yet, there are other authors who see this evaluation to be inadequate. J. Toronto, for one, contends that the ethic of care is inherent in both men and women, with a difference in orientation.[20] Women are oriented towards care "for somebody" while men are oriented toward care "about something" like career, money, sports, politics, etc. A universal ethic of care in the future therefore must be able to transcend this aspect of the dichotomy.

Conclusion

If we understand the actually existing differences between male and female, if we understand how we got to where we are now, we begin to realize that there is a need for a socio-historical reconstruction of modern identities. This re-construction must be carried out in the light of the acceptance of a plurality of identities that define different spaces of moral concerns. We must begin to look at gender difference in a different historical perspective: not as a divisive factor, but as an organizing principle of our cultural systems. Charles Taylor urges us to have an image of internal tensions, of conflicting images of the self and a plurality of goods so that, even if they are often in conflict, they never cancel each other out.[21] This kind of recovery of what Habermas would call the "normative contents" of modernity, making women true moral subjects, is argued to be possible in Discourse Ethics.[22]

Discourse Ethics rejects the model of the "isolated subject" of the philosophy of consciousness;[23] instead, it adopts an intersubjective paradigm, regarding moral knowledge as mediated by language so that it becomes a result of a unified effort of subjects sharing a background of beliefs and practices. Rationality is now understood as a "communicative rationality" where norms are justified in a discursive process, and universal validity is tested in a collective process of argumentation. What is decided to be the best must be acceptable to all the participants engaged in moral debate. Since the rightness of a moral norm is established only in a context of discourse requiring the participation of several subjects, the "other" is always implied in the question "What ought I to do?"[24] In other words, the acceptability of a moral norm must not only pass the test of universaliza-

tion, it must also pass the test of reciprocity, i.e., respecting the dignity of others as persons in their individuality and particularity.

In review, we have presented the male psyche to be basically rationalistic, the female psyche basically affective. And I refrained from asking my question until now: "Is the virtue of altruism a gendered virtue?" Or more directly, "Is altruism a feminine virtue?" It is Thomas Nagel who answers this question for us. He talks of "rational altruism".[25] A seeming contradiction but by this he means that altruism can be intuitively represented by the common argument "How would you like it if someone did that to you?' But what next? For if no one is doing it to me, how can my conduct be influenced by the hypothetical admission that if someone were, I would not like it? Nagel's argument has something more to it--its conclusion is a judgment since it actually involves a general principle involving my attitudes to certain commitments. The hypothetical situation can be changed. By considering the different aspects, there is some objective interest in it, like recognizing others as persons like myself--having feelings, needs, and desires. Thus "interests" stop being "my interests" and become "someone's," or for that matter, "anyone's interests."[26] This makes altruism a rational requirement on action, but only insofar as it is derived from a formal principle that does not restrict the influence to one person alone, thereby fulfilling the condition of objectivity. In practice, it is an attitude towards intersubjectivity.

I end with the observation that, since masculinity and femininity are socially and historically constructed, neither is monolithic nor unchanging. The re-construction should be recognized as one of our present struggles. There is reason to suppose that this process involves conflicts, but there is also reason to believe that if women were given value and status, moral and social priorities will be different from those we find in the world in which we live now.

NOTES

1. The *Reader's Digest*, Sept. 1987, 107.

2. C. Daniel Batson and Jay S. Coke, "Empathy: A Source of Altruistic Motivation for Helping," in *Altruism and Helping Behaviour*, ed. J.P. Rushton and R. Sorrentino (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, Inc., 1981), 169.

3. George H. Palmer, *Altruism: Its Nature and Varieties* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1970), 169.

4. Ibid., 2-3.

5. Comte, having written much about the development of altruism and the so-called "sympathetic instincts," is even regarded by some as the father of behavioural psychology. See Nicholas Rescher, *Unselfishness: The Role of the Vicarious Affects in Moral Psychology and Social Theory* (Pittsburgh: University Press, 1975).

6. Thomas Nagel denies genuine egoism. See his work *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).

7. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Dalton Press, 1914).

8. Palmer, 5.

9. Martin L. Hoffman, "The Development of Empathy," in *Altruism and Helping Behaviour*, 41-56.

10. Palmer, 5.

11. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

12. Iris Marion Young, "Impartiality and the Civic Public: Some Implications of Feminist Critique of Moral and Political Theory," in *Feminism as Critique: Essays on the Politics of Gender in Late-Capitalist Societies*, ed. Benhabib and Cornell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 58.

13. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989).

14. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: Or Education* (New Jersey: Everyman's Library, 1972).

15. Jean Grimshaw, "Mary Wollstonecraft and the Tensions in Feminist Philosophy," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 52, Summer, 1989.

16. Olive Banks discusses 19th century feminism in her *Faces of Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1981.).

17. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982).

18. Ibid., 8.

19. Ibid., 22ff.

20. J. Toronto, "Woman and Caring: What Can a Feminist Learn About Morality from Caring?" *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, ed. Allison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 184.

21. Taylor, 502.

22. Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1987). Cf. also Habermas' *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

23. See Habermas' *The Philosophical Discourse*.

24. Ibid.

25. Thomas Nagel, 82 ff. For comparison, see Lawrence A. Blum, *Friendship, Altruism, and Morality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).

26. Ibid., 83-84.

THE SILENT PLAY

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Introduction

Let me begin this paper with a description of two women. They are best friends, Woman A and Woman B. Woman A is a person who loves to live a quiet life. Habituality trying to avoid risks the things that she does are those that are tried and have passed the test of time. After graduation she settles down in a job that involves the minimum of risks and tensions. Her life becomes a routine of ordinary daily chores. Woman B is the dynamic type of person who is in constant search for new ground, as it were, unafraid of the unknown. She is one who ventures into new ways of doing things, as a daughter, as a student and as a career person, and later as wife and mother.

Woman B's dynamic life brought her not only failures but also successes, not only scorns but also praises. From every frustrating experience, she emerged a new woman, with new strength and new self-confidence. Woman B's life is a play, while woman A's is one which, consciously or unconsciously, avoids it. Indeed, in a great woman's life, play is discernible.

What is play? To expound on play, first, I would like to involve a "radical philosophy" which specializes in making sense out of non-sense, believes in man's capacity to survive swimming with or against a destructively strong current; and , secondly, I shall show how B's life is a play and why it is a silent play.

Play in Radical Hermeneutics

The radical philosophy I am referring to is "radical hermeneutics" as understood by John Caputo.[1] Through it I hope to show the significance of play in the life of women.

Hermeneutics is interpretation. It is traceable to Gadamer.[2] The word "Hermeneutics" has its roots in Hermes who, in Greek mythology, is a bearer of messages from the gods.[3] Thus, by extension, the hermeneut hears the message, and interprets for us, so we could understand its meaning. When interpretation is stretched to its farthest which implies not a distancing from the phenomenon but remaining within the flow of experience, staying amidst chaos and, making some sense of it, and in the process discovers one's self, then, that is radical hermeneutics. Caputo asserts that *Radical Hermeneutics* is a philosophy of *kinesis*,[4] and the "hermeneutics" in Radical Hermeneutics is to be traced back to the project