

METAPHORS & MORALITY

NANDITA BAGCHI

In "Feminism, Objectivity and Economics", Julie A Nelson points out that metaphors are not merely decorative appendages to language. They perform the functions of organizing cognition and ensuring successful communication quite efficiently. They also clarify the meanings of abstract concepts by reference to basic physical experiences. In association with perceptions of up/down, for example, metaphors organize our cognition in terms of following kinds of classification: "good is up", "bad is down", "reason is up", emotion is down. In the palce of "up", it is easy to substitute 'in, "center", "control", "rational". All of these physical experiences of "up", center etc. are characterized by metaphorical associations "superior" and "masculine", she states (depending heavily on the work of Jack Lack off & Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we live By* 1980:5). Similarly, metaphorical associations of terms like "down" "out", periphery" etc. are "inferior" and "Feminine". An analysis into the functioning of metaphors reflects the way in which the concept of gender is applied-viz. to organize cognition on the basis of the physical experiences of the biological difference between men and women in the form of a dualism which is hierarchical and value-loaded in nature. In this cognitive organization, "soft", weak", "emotional", "inferior" are associated with feminine, "hard", "tough", "rational", "superior" with masculine. It is the opposition between rational and emotional that is relevant in the moral context. Reason and its corollary, universalization, have been recognized traditionally as the key concepts in ethics (popularly referred to as the "justice perspective" in ethics). Recent feminist scholars, on the contrary are much more impressed by the "care" perspective, which chooses the situation one is in and the fact of

connectedness among the concerned persons to be the determining consideration in deciding moral questions. Feminists consider the care perspective to be exhaustive enough to explain ethical experience at large. It might be interesting to explore in some detail the salient features of both these perspectives and attempt to decide whether any one of them is capable, single handedly, of dealing with the moral context exhaustively.

The example in ethical thinking chosen by William Frankena in the beginning of his treatise "Ethics"- may well be considered as a fair representation of what has traditionally been taken as making a moral judgment. Frankena chooses his example from Plato's "Crito". In this dialogue Plato expresses his ethical thought-which has been recognized as the paradigm of ethical thinking through the ages, with the help of the character Socrates. Frankena understands Socrates' basic rules in making moral judgments to be the following: "We must not let our decision be determined by our emotions, but must examine the question and follow the best reasoning". The entire traditional philosophical community endorses that this procedure should be followed without fail. Such a scrupulous, vigilant guidance by reason leads one to arrive at universal principles in the form of blanket generalizations. These principles, when applied to concrete situations, lead to more or less foolproof moral judgments or decisions. The situation, for example that Socrates is in Plato's "Crito" is having to take a decision between whether to accept the death sentence pronounced to him unfairly by the state, or to make use of the opportunity to escape, master-minded by his well-wishers Socrates, following the path of reason, deliberates with the help of three universal principles, namely, that we ought never to harm anyone, that we ought to keep our promises and that we ought to obey the state as we obey our parents and teachers. Applying these principles to the case in hand, Socrates decides he ought not to escape, as that would harm the state. It may be noted that the thinking process traced above is corrupted at no stage by emotional components. The incorporation of emotional elements is alleged to render the system defective. Hare also considers that what distinguishes prescriptions ethical in nature, from other sorts of prescriptions is the willingness to universalize in the case of ethical ones. This willingness to universalize is in fact constitutive of the meaning of an ethical judgment. This belief is seen to be the strongest

in Kant, whose preoccupation with reason and universalization in ethics is so obsessive as to treat emotions like love and sympathy as pathological. Kohlberg too restricts ethical efficiency to the conscious internalization of universal rules.

The above line of ethical thinking happens to be in sharp contrast to the demands of feminist scholars who are very serious about taking into account emotional needs and considerations of the agent's needs, contexts etc. so far as the question is moral in nature. They are pretty skeptical about the justifiability and practical fruitfulness of such rational universalizations or rules in ethics. Feminists feel that this procedure encourages sexism and perpetuates the patriarchal structures of society. It is phallogocentric in the sense that it recommends the universalization of moral codes for the class "man" which pretends to be gender-neutral, while in effect, it is highly gender specific. It highlights, the interests of masculinity, silencing the voices of women and others.

It seems fair, at this juncture, however to pay attention to the justification proclaimed by the so-called phallogocentric system in favour of itself. Their ethics is determined by the foundationalistic epistemology, so characteristic of Descartes, to which pure objectivity and value neutrality are of utmost significance as norms. The knower or agent is taken to be an individual- completely detached from particularity, situation, context or any kind of contingency. Reason is visualized as potent to function absolutely independently of any subjectivity, locatedness etc.-thereby securing a "view from nowhere" (Ref.- Thomas Nagel's book bearing this title). The individual is seen to form the corner stone of epistemology. Ethics however, cannot afford to accord such unrestricted emphasis on the individual without giving rise to an intolerable egoism or selfishness in society. Reason guides the individual in a way that harmonizes his self - interests with those of "all", and hence the importance of universalization.

But feminist and others point out that such a blanket universalization is insensitive to the needs of particular others, i.e., person and relations situated between the individual and the world at large, like family-relationships, friendships, and most devalues and condemns morally vital phenomena like sympathy, concern for others, fellow feeling and the like.

The absurd consequences, which a purely rational ethics lead to, may be understood from Karen Green's reference to the counter-example to Hare's presentation of prescriptions as universal. Here the fanatic, popularly considered as unethical or non-ethical, poses as a counter example. His fondness for a particular ideal, for example - anti-Judaism, and obsession with universalization may lead him to universalize 'All Jews should be terminated'. Readiness to universalize being the only requirement of morality, his rule may be taken to be moral. The impossibility of this dictum being considered to be moral follows from the fact that the emotion of fellow feeling or sensitiveness to others pain is an equally important requirement of morality to which the fanatic's rule does not conform. Reason, therefore is not the entire story in morality. Frankena also points out that if universalization were the whole constituent of morality, as understood by Kant, then morally neutral maxims like "When alone in the dark, whistle", "Tie your left shoestring first", would have to be seen as possessing moral value, by virtue of being universal. The point of view from which the rules are willed to be universal needs to be taken into consideration to make the universalization morally meaningful. Rash universalization often turns into a vehicle of oppression. In the traditional moral context, devotion to mothers by sons is taken to be an epitome of moral perfection on the part of the sons. The moral code that "all sons should respect their mothers" has conventionally acquired the demand that the wives of these sons be given a position secondary to that of the mothers in the family structure. I choose to call this so-called virtue a moral one and not merely a social or conventional one, because it is accorded the requisite proportion of seriousness and normativeness, as accorded to amoral value. Brought up in the influence of such a moral stricture, a person as responsive to women's needs as Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, has been seen to comply with his mother Bhagavati Devi's dictate to let his wife Dinamoyee Debi play a second fiddle to his mother in domestic affairs. She has also been deprived of the opportunity to education, again because Bhagavati Debi willed so. The poet Satyendranath Datta agreed not to consummate his marriage as his mother condemned his wife as an unworthy sexual partner. Loneliness and depression damaged his wife Kanaklata Debi's health. On the strength of ethical rules emphasizing universalizability only, a section of women

aided by the men folk are empowered to silence another category of women. We have so far associated universalization with reason-but it is doubtful whether this kind of universalization is founded on reason alone. Such rules though apparently rational, seem more to be based on the emotional need of one section to dominate the other. This further highlights the role of emotion in morality.

The above discussion is intended to persuade one that purposeless universalization is useless, at least in morality. More relevant to the ethical context is the fact that far from being bad or undesirable, compassion or emotion in the sense of being sensitive to another person's feeling is a major requisite condition in ethics. Frankena quotes Josiah Royce and William James in his book *'Ethics'* to the effect that unless ethics is reduced to the mechanical performance of routine chores', we must somehow attain and develop an ability to be aware of others as persons, as important to themselves as we are to ourselves, and to have a lively and sympathetic representation in imagination of their interests and the effects of our actions on their lives". Another important service discharged by an ethic of care, which recognized the importance of emotions in judging morally, is that emotions provide an effective motivation to do the good, as pointed out by Karen Green in her article "Reason and Feeling: Resisting the Dichotomy". The desire, particularly strong in childhood, to be cared by others motivates one to perform good acts so as to be continued to be loved by others. At this stage, rational self-interest is the guiding emotion. Before long, it gives place to care for others. A sensitive individual, on analogy of his pain on losing love and esteem of others, easily realized the kind of pain others would be subject to on losing love from him. This motivates him to act responsibly, so as not to hurt others.

The points mentioned above are expected to take care of the position that, an ethic of care is inferior and undesirable because emotion oriented; it would, however be quite suitable here to examine in brief the contrary claim associated with the works of Gilligan and Chodrow, that reason, justice and fairness are irrelevant in morality, that an ethic of care is exhaustive enough to deal with the ethical scene single-handedly. I feel skeptical about the tenability of the assumption that reason and independence are typical, exclusive of men and connectedness and interdependence are

typical and exclusive of women, that it is neither possible nor desirable for the two to overlap. Such a stance has widened the distance between egalitarian feminists like Wollstonecraft, who champion women's right and independence and those who speak for connection among women. Sometimes, the commitment of the former group to the feminist cause has been called to question on this ground. My feeling is that the gap between reason and connectedness is not so unbridgeable that the two cannot be conceived to constitute an individual single self. Feminists should beware of constituting so rigid a polarization as not to permit any overlap between reason & emotion. Normally men are accused of effecting such strict dualisms, but unless women are careful, they are liable to commit the same error. It is common sense knowledge that in spite of emotion and connectedness being key concepts in morality, reason, too, has its role to play in the moral context. Unless some amount of reason and generalization is accepted in the ethical scenario, an intolerable amount of time and energy would have to be invested in making moral judgments separately in each context and situation. Secondly much of what is conventionally taken to be morally bad, like stealing from rich to nourish the poor, to break promises, to lie and so on would have to be accepted as ethically good under the pretext of their suitability to the context. It is bad reason, that is, reason, whose model is formal logic and its laws, as characterized by completeness, adequacy and independence that looks down upon emotions, because emotions are beyond the control of rational will. Julie A Nelson feels that such bad reason has been culturally and metaphorically associated with masculinity, and over connectedness a definitely bad trait, with femininity. In the traditional Western philosophical and scientific parlance, reason has been associated with objectivity, completeness, adequacy, separation. The paradigmatic Western rational being is totally separated, self individuated. Over-connectedness has been presented as the model for woman, especially in the Western middle-class culture. Women have been encouraged to let their individuality be engulfed by marriage and family. A maturer interpretation of reason and connectedness construes the two to be equally necessary conditions for defining human relations. Julie A Nelson points out that the opposite of rational is irrational, not emotional. Opposition has been defined as complementarity also in Webster's Dictionary (New

collegiate, 1974), so there is not logical harm in viewing the two as complementary and equally constitutive of the human personality-masculine or feminine. Old metaphors, like the proverbs, thus, need to be made new, so as to accommodate the insight that the marginalized are not inferior. They deserve the same kind of attention in the moral and other questions as demanded by those constituting the core or center.

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