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Feminist Awareness as Virtue: A Path of Moderation

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“Doesn’t it make you crazy to be so consistently disappointed?” asked my new partner. We had been watching yet another predictable Hollywood movie and he was showing sympathetic exhaustion at my relentless feminist critiques. And, of course it *does* make me crazy. I wouldn’t be venting my views about the failings of an entire industry so inevitably if it didn’t. But the exchange that followed got me thinking, as exchanges with this man often do. It is a reflex action for me, a habit if you will, to critique my culture from a feminist perspective. I believe this to be a positive and important aspect of my personality. I believe this to be a particularly moral component of my psyche. In this paper, I wish to analyze this character trait, and in so doing make a case for feminist awareness as virtue.

While Aristotle’s ethics opens itself to criticism from several directions, including its blindness to color, class and gender issues, his focus on moral virtues and their development provide a grounding for my view that feminist awareness can and should be an engrained character trait—one which benefits oneself and others, that is, a moral virtue. I suggest that Aristotle’s view of the mean, in particular, can also aid us in understanding this feminist character trait. To think of feminist awareness as producing responses that occupy some middle ground between two extremes helps to determine how best to operate in a world distinctly different from the moral ideal we envision.

Feminist Awareness as Virtue¹

Even though Aristotle would never have seen the capacity for recognizing and responding to inequalities between the genders as being of sufficient interest or usefulness to society to merit its own character trait, much less a virtuous one, his understanding of moral development could hardly be more astute. My interest here is in Aristotle’s explication of *moral* virtue. In general terms, virtues are character traits that benefit oneself and others. To qualify as a moral virtue, (a) an action must be a product of moral deliberation that concludes that (b) the right response to a given circumstance falls within some middle ground between excessive and deficient action. Once the proper action is verified through experience, (c) we must repeat that action regularly enough for it to become a habit. Once it becomes a habit, we have acquired the virtue. A virtuous person will act in virtuous ways, not because they *have* to or because they know they should, but because they *want* to. Their action, then, emanates from a clear understanding of how best to act, and an emotional investment in who one is and wishes to be. I will discuss (a), (b) and (c) above, in turn, as regards feminist awareness, while keeping in mind that being a virtuous person, according to Aristotle, requires a good deal more than the nurturing of a single virtue.²

Practically any activity done repeatedly can find its way into our psyches. For instance, how we tie our shoes, our lovemaking and our responses to injustice, all contain more or less automatic elements, developed over time through repetition. Feminist awareness as virtue specifically involves

the acquisition of the habit of recognizing that males and females tend to be treated differently in this society for morally unjustifiable reasons and that this has a particularly negative effect on women.

Mere recognition of right and wrong will not suffice, however. Virtue will not develop without virtuous action. Becoming aware of gender stereotyping, gaining a consciousness about the barriers created by that stereotyping, and reaching the conclusion that such limitations are morally wrong, will likely, I argue, compel one to work for change, thus engaging one in the performance of virtuous action. If such action does not become habit, no virtue will be forthcoming. Making the awareness of gender inequalities a habit, however, will create the virtue by repeatedly compelling the action.

Moral Deliberation

If one possesses practical wisdom, according to Aristotle, and the proper guidance, a person can learn to desire to act in ways that benefit themselves and their community. I will assume, rather than use space to argue, that the recognition of gender injustice and the accompanying need to act based on that recognition is just such an advantageous virtue. It requires an accumulation of observations, insights, and, likely, some instruction or encouragement. Such experiences must be processed or studied, in order to reach morally valid conclusions about the gender inequities in the world. With practice, such individuals will have the capacity to make decisions based on their best judgment, and will thus create habits which make the best moral virtues.

In my view, education, observation and deliberation together can lead one to develop habits beneficial to living in community with others. This coincides with Aristotle’s view of virtue. I discuss this combination of elements below.

Education: Education may come in many forms: growing up in a feminist household, taking a women’s studies course, picking up a book with a feminist bent, or developing a relationship with a seasoned feminist. These are a few examples of how our community serves to influence us. A Letter to the Editor of *Ms.* magazine illustrates this influence:

I don’t know where I’ve been. It was only when I was looking for a copy of “something new for my clients to read” that I discovered *Ms.* As a 36-year-old hairdresser, I am so tired of looking at fashion magazines filled with emaciated women! Your magazine had stories I loved reading, stories about women who were worth reading about (Brogan 2001, 4).

I suggest that the author of this letter has gained some insight from her recent reading. She is discovering that men’s domination and women’s subordination do not define the necessary state of the world. Her recent reading has taught her that cosmetics and sex tips do not constitute the sum total of worthwhile topics for and about women.

Observation: The letter suggests that this hairdresser has been closely observing the world she lives in prior to finding the magazine. She has been comparing it to the world presented to her in the fashion magazines that fill salons around the country. I suggest that she has noticed a striking incongruity. She describes the women she sees in fashion magazines as “emaciated.” She believes fashion models are

too thin. She wishes to give her clients a different, perhaps more realistic, version of their world. A magazine that talks about all kinds of women making positive, powerful, differences in the world would answer that wish.

Deliberation: She possesses practical wisdom. She has reached the conclusion through her observations that women are being sent a destructive message. Perhaps she has seen such messages played out in the lives of her clients who may suffer from eating disorders or are convinced they will not be loved unless they meet some unattainable physical standard. She has judged the bulk of the writing in “women’s” magazines to be useless, not worth reading. Moral deliberation has delivered her to respond by subscribing to *Ms.* Such responses embody the first steps toward developing the virtue of feminist awareness.

Virtue as Character Trait

As Aristotelian ethics maintains, virtues are not virtues unless they accord with feelings. If I am to be virtuous as regards feminist awareness, I must develop my sense of gender injustice so that it becomes a part of my character; so that my emotions correspond with my rational ability to make decisions and generate action (Aristotle 1963, 308-09). To be virtuous regarding feminist awareness, deliberation must have previously assured me of the moral unacceptability of sexism and oppression. Initial attempts to react well to situations of injustice will have produced satisfaction and knowledge. Convinced that sexism harms, I will learn over time how to temper my response to gender inequities based on my audience, my own needs and the desired effect. In the course of time, this aspect of my character will take on a more and more seasoned and permanent place in my personality. If I practice it consistently, I will be honing my abilities by developing habits I truly value.

Whether I am a stay-at-home mom or an accountant or an astronaut, developing feminist awareness as virtue will require education, observation and deliberation. Such a process can come through many kinds of activities. For example, reading groups, trips to the library, and open discussions with partner and friends, encompass a few of the ways to encourage a consciousness of injustice. Keeping a close eye on my actions and their consequences, examining sources of injustice, and discovering alternative ways of acting, will help to encourage the development of feminist virtue. If repeated year in and year out, such a conscious, active examining will evolve into habit, and, thus, a virtue. I will begin habitually to see the inequities, and I will come to automatically respond in what experience has taught me is the right way. But, like the commitment to quitting smoking or eating healthier, if one is not constantly vigilant, one’s habits will not be formed as one’s deliberation dictates. We must choose to consistently repeat those activities that would create the habits we want.

Aristotle believed the right response to any given situation would be the mean between two extremes. In the next section, I suggest that feminist awareness qualifies in this regard as well.

Virtue as the Middle Ground

The emphasis on virtue as inhabiting the middle ground between excess and deficiency deserves consideration. Almost every time my partner and I sit down to watch a video

or go out to a major Hollywood film, I can expect to have my feminist sensibilities battered a bit. Most films treat women as minor characters, as incidental to the real action of the story, as love interests, as passive plot points, or as mere adornments. In general, I am more likely than not to experience a degree of disappointment with the film industry’s slow progress towards the equitable treatment of women. Films may still be worthy in other ways—as art, as cultural commentary, or as entertainment—and I should have the capacity for appreciating them as such (perhaps a virtue of a related sort). But if I am virtuous as regards feminist awareness, being conscious of gender injustice will translate into some appropriate action, and I argue that that response should demonstrate moderation. If I react excessively to every male dominated film I see, I will wear myself out. I will be burdensome to others. I will be directing my anger at the world in a most ineffectual way. I might alienate my friends, exasperate my partner, and internalize an unproductive bitterness for which I do not have the time or the temperament. Conversely, if I react with a less than moderate response as regards awareness of gender injustice, I will be on the road to passive acceptance of the current state of things, and will be headed toward the loss of the capacity for this sort of moral deliberation. Since virtuous acts need to be repeated until they are habits, if I am not repeating virtuous action, I am not developing virtue. I may even be unlearning that virtue. Further, I will be perpetuating the current environment by not drawing attention to gender injustice, by seemingly demonstrating silent agreement with the status quo.

I believe that Aristotle makes a strong case for the moderate response as the most ethical response, but as he reminds us, the moderate response depends on the person. “The mean [is] relative to us...” (Aristotle 1963, 308). How useful this ultimately makes the concept has been a matter of debate for centuries, but through a few examples I hope to lend some support to the effectiveness of this line of thinking. First of all, according to Aristotle, people who have less restrained temperaments must work hard at controlling their less moderate desires while temperate people find such a task to be quite easy. He suggests, further, that knowledge of one’s strengths and weaknesses will help one gauge the moderate response for a given situation.

For example, if I am a confident, informed, gregarious person with a ready wit, I may have the capacity for dealing with a potentially volatile but isolated case of sexual harassment in a different way than would a more reserved and serious type of person. I might use my charm to diffuse a potentially explosive situation and make a delightfully persuasive point without attacking anyone. A more reserved, serious person trying the same approach would likely come off sounding wooden or false. The less extroverted but equally confident person might, instead, produce a clear and convincing set of arguments that explain why particular actions create problems in the workplace, again without being directly accusative. However, someone new to the world of feminist awareness, someone without many survival skills, someone more vulnerable than the people in my first two examples, may need very responsibly to obtain the support of her institution’s complaint process or choose the legal route. In our pursuit of virtue, we need to develop the ability to assess situations with a clear understanding of our own

talents and limitations. Invoking the right response depends on knowing our strengths and weaknesses, as well as being attuned to the nature of each situation.

Some will argue (bell hooks, for instance) that a moderate response may not send the message home, that anger at injustice should not be squelched (hooks 1989, 129).³ Some will argue that diplomacy will look too much like acquiescence, that if a good deal of forcefulness does not accompany the message that the message will be dismissed. I believe my view is not at odds with this perspective. In Aristotle, and throughout the history of moral philosophy, it has been acknowledged that morality cannot be known with certainty. Deliberation about our actions is required, but only experience will confirm or deny that our responses were adequate. Part of the deliberation required for the development of feminist awareness as virtue involves perceptiveness regarding one's audience. If I am downing a couple of ales and playing pool in a working-class bar with folks I know to be unaware of feminist issues in any reflective way, I will respond differently than I would if surrounded by academic colleagues dismissive of issues of gender injustice who should know better. If I have been playing pool in a neighborhood bar with someone who tells me I play "pretty good pool for a girl," I am likely to control any cutting remark itching to come off my lips. I might rather, in the course of the evening, look for some gentle, good-humored feminist suggestion with which my comrade would be hard pressed to disagree. Maybe we will compare years of pool experience or "training" grounds to see what differences suggest themselves along unjustifiably gendered lines. Perhaps there will be a chance for me to point out some gender inequities of other kinds without being preachy. Or, perhaps, this time, I will just let it go, playing a few more games in relative silence to emphasize my abilities. It will depend on my pool opponent and how I read the moment.

If I am interacting with colleagues with as much or more academic experience as I, I will not be looking for subtle approaches. If a colleague told me, for instance, that I have an amazingly good understanding of Kant for a female, I would be much quicker to respond.⁴ Someone who has been to graduate school within the last 20 years or has been in academia long enough to have been exposed to important changes regarding gender relations has at least been notified of the guidelines necessary to avoid sex discrimination suits. Academics in this sense *should* know better. Therefore, the more exquisitely patient and tactful approach demonstrated in my pool hall example would not be appropriate. Such a response would be deficient because it would be masking the indignation I would experience at not being respectfully treated by a colleague. The comment regarding my understanding of Kant appears to be intentionally sexist—at the very least, careless—and such comment deserves a response that directly addresses that negligence.

If I am in the midst of people accustomed to communicating at a level of emotional intensity foreign to the mass of white middle-class America (of which I am one), I would want to raise or lower my own intensity to match theirs, in order to best communicate. This suggests that I would need to be sensitive enough to the people with whom I am interacting to intuit how best they communicate.

Many versions of care ethics emphasize the need for such perceptiveness. Attending to that conversation can help to

nurture the development of feminist awareness as virtue. Nel Noddings, for instance, discusses the caring relationship in terms of "relatedness" and "engrossment." She argues that we have to hone our capacity for perceptiveness in order to care for others ethically (Noddings 1984, 30-37).⁵ For María C. Lugones: "To know one's self and one's situation is to know one's company" (Lugones 1991, 35-36). Lugones argues that our relationships contribute to who we are. As a white person, coming to understand specific experiences of other ethnic groups will give me better tools for communicating, for finding the right response. The better I know myself and my circumstances, the better I know those in my community.

If I am a woman just coming to an understanding of grave injustices she has suffered, who has been trained to suffer in silence since before she could speak, my mode of communication may well be outside some norm of moderation. Feminist awareness would ensure my anger would be palpable and my "mean" would very likely be extreme, compared to others. But that anger would still have to be controlled for me to be virtuous. I would be angry for the right reasons, at the right people, and in an amount that I had assessed as the right amount. My response should still be within the mean, relative to me. It could not be deficient, some stony sullen silence which could be misinterpreted or written off. And it could not be the other extreme. Excess in such a case would border on the out-of-control, on the unreasonable, and thus the incommunicable. If my rage reached beyond a sensible decibel level, if it became incoherent, if it were too often veiled in tears that silenced the words, its source would not be communicable. My moderate response should make clear to a thinking adult that harm has been done. To be virtuous as regards feminist awareness, I must have the capacity to articulate how I have been harmed.

The notion of moderation that I am suggesting can be imagined as operating on a kind of sliding scale depending on the individual and the circumstance. The development of feminist virtue entails evolution — Aristotle says a lifetime of training. The subtleties of assessing one's audience and one's own needs and developing the corresponding habits will come with time if one stays alert to the inequalities of the world and the duties to one's self and those to whom one is relating.

Feminist Awareness as Process

I have argued that feminist awareness can be viewed as a virtue. What I have said so far implies that we can know the right response for every situation, given enough deliberation and experience. Sandra Bartky speaks to this point with her notion of "double ontological shock" (Bartky 1990, 18). For Bartky, upon reaching feminist awareness, we experience the shock that comes with understanding that the world is not the way we thought it was. But, in addition, we have the shock of ambiguity, of realizing we are not guaranteed to be right regarding our new interpretation. Bartky speaks of the potential for paranoia, suspicion and self-doubt (Bartky 1990, 18). My own experience supports Bartky's view. When I have to double-check the name tag on the man in front of me to assure myself that he is the nurse sent to summon me to my cousin's bedside; when I do not call the male student on his inappropriate eye contact; when the 11-year-old girl from next door comes to help me move and at her mother's

encouragement I relegate her to sweeping while boys carry boxes; in these and many other circumstances I am not exerting the same feminist virtue I have been extolling in this essay.

Yet, I believe that feminist awareness involves a process. That it may never be a completed process fits closely with what the development of virtue requires. Bartky writes that, as feminists, we have no “fully formed moral paradigms” (Bartky 1990, 20-21). Much of what we do as feminists gets made up as we go along. Still, the more experience we have making “it” up and observing its effects, the wiser and more confident we will become. The more practice we get deliberating about our world and acting in it, the closer we will be to shaping habits worthy of moral virtue. Despite the ambiguity that Bartky insists comes with feminist consciousness, we have the capacity to cultivate our practical wisdom. We have the capacity to develop feminist awareness as virtue.

Notes

1. While I discuss the virtue of being aware of *gender* inequities in this paper, the ideas put forth here could as easily apply to awareness of racial and other injustice.
2. A virtuous person is one who has trained and nurtured a number of virtues into a well-balanced, harmonious character, over a lifetime. Feminist awareness is by no means the only virtue that should be cultivated.
3. In *Talking Back*, for instance, hooks speaks of confrontation as being the necessary mode of communication for many (see especially pp.129-133).
4. This specific scenario has in fact never occurred in my academic career.
5. While I do not agree with this particular approach to care ethics as a whole, I find Noddings’s understanding of the need to discover the viewpoint of the other as particularly important in the development of moral character.

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Feminist Ethics and Anger: A Feminist Buddhist Reflection¹

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Feminist care ethics began with the thesis that there is a distinctive feminist moral experience (Jaggar 1991, 81). According to Elizabeth Spelman, the ethics of care involves the claim that emotions play a central role in human life and in moral sensibility (Spelman 1991, 216). It aims to overcome dualisms and to bring balance to the relation of reason/emotion, heart/mind and to reduce the control of reason over emotion in moral experience and agency. The feminist ethic of care has been a powerful challenge to and antidote to many traditional masculinist theories that, it is argued, place too much emphasis upon universal justice principles, rights claims and the role of reason. Since feminist care ethics aims to revalorize the role of the emotions in moral experience, there have been notable defenses of the role of anger in fighting oppression and promoting healing and self-recovery.² This raises the issue of anger’s potential as natural, creative energy. Some feminist accounts of anger do not, then, see anger as always being a vice and sometimes view it as a necessary evil, that is, as morally justified under certain conditions. Some see it as a virtue in some contexts.³

Recently, feminist Buddhist writers have also sought to revision anger’s place in feminist thought and in Buddhist philosophy and meditation practice. An examination of the contribution of this perspective promises to enrich and deepen understanding of feminist care ethics and of feminist virtue theory, in particular. In the context of feminist virtue theory, Buddhist feminists advance arguments that maintain that in some circumstances anger has the potential to do good, by promoting spiritual and emotional healing and awareness, as well as by challenging patriarchy. Thus anger can be virtuous if rooted in compassion and wisdom.

Rita Gross, in *Buddhism After Patriarchy* (1993), has led the way in the feminist reconstruction of Buddhism in its movement into the West. The foundational teaching and philosophy of Buddhism and its basic meditative techniques begin with the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths explore the nature and causes of human suffering or dissatisfaction (*‘dukkha’* in Pali or Sanskrit), as well as the end of and liberation from suffering. The cause of *dukkha* or dissatisfaction is attachment, craving, or holding on to the objects and experiences we desire. The end of suffering or liberation from suffering is nirvana. Lama Surya Das explains that “nirvana is inconceivable inner peace, the cessation of craving and clinging” (Das 1997, 84). It is nonattachment, release, openness, and emptiness. Nirvana can be experienced in a moment simply by letting go of craving, clinging, attachment and delusion (Das 1997, 85). The positive program provides methods for self-development. Basic Buddhist meditation techniques emphasize that

to dismantle ego and undercut its pain-producing tendencies, ongoing disciplines of meditation and contemplation are essential. In the simple and basic practices of mindfulness and awareness, one is taught how to experience thoughts without repressing them, judging them, or acting them out. One is taught to observe and notice, to increase