

Support for “Disruptive” Men from Feminist Ethics

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Abstract

For straight white men the major cost of masculinity is isolation, so men who wish to “disrupt” masculine isolation must seek social action around relationships. But relationships are not considered to be a public political issue - rather, they are part of “private” life. For men to organise collectively around “disruptive” interests then, they must find ways to make relationships a political and moral issue. Feminist ethics potentially provides intellectual and moral support for this project. In this essay I discuss two topics from feminist ethics: a) reworking moral agency following Gilligan’s “ethic of care”, focusing on critiques of the ideal “normal” moral agent; and b) Claudia Card’s discussion about ‘moving on’ from acknowledging one’s perpetration of abuse or violence - an especially pertinent issue for many men. Both topics address the extent of the moral domain itself, as well as the process of moral deliberation. I argue in order to participate effectively in social change in men’s own interests, disruptive men must not only clearly identify and articulate what their new claims are, but they must perforce change the limits of the moral domain in order to have their new claims recognised as valid material for society-wide moral deliberation.

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Introduction

I am a straight white middle class man (referred to as “swhim” in this essay), well educated and rational, the exemplary “person” of modern society. I represent the ideal political subject, the archetypal moral subject, the norm against which “others” are judged. My access to power is good, I have many choices open to me, I am easily accorded respect. In short I am privileged. Yet I have a strong motivation to disrupt this personhood, to disrupt the assumed equivalence between me and the modern “person”. I have experienced the power associated with this position to come along with a huge cost - a sense of deep isolation from others that I experience in my daily life. The ideology of masculinity portrays such isolation as necessary in the competition with other men for the gaining and maintaining of power, and at the same time provides a structured moderator of isolation in the form of heterosexual marriage to a woman.

This arrangement supported by masculinity looks like an OK deal: I get power and I get nurtured by a woman. Why would I want to change that? Partly, the deal has already been changed through feminism empowering women to reject their role in the “deal”. So, to an extent, I must respond to this changed situation. Many men come to men’s work after the ending of their marriage and the resulting exposure of their isolation. But no matter what life events prompt us to identify and name our isolation, for me the more deeply felt motivation for change is the desire to somehow resolve or ameliorate a profound and unrelieved vulnerability I feel both in competing with other men and in heterosexual marriage with a woman. This vulnerability is structurally linked to the isolation I mention above: there is no place of safety in the world of “masculinity”, no place where one is not isolated, no place where one is simply appreciated for how one is right now, or unreservedly accepted as a member of the group.

My interest in change to the gender structure, my interest in being a “disruptive swhim”, is thus deeply felt and personal. But what avenues are open for me and other disruptive swhim to articulate this interest in a way that empowers us individually, draws us into community with others with disruptive intent, and promotes social

change? In other words, how can we articulate a personal and collective interest in change because we are swhim? The motivations for social change I am describing are conventionally described as “private”: they apparently have no links with traditional rallying-points for social change such as calls for liberty, equality or justice. Experiences of isolation and feelings of vulnerability can not readily be called political or moral issues.

Clearly, more access to power is not an issue for swhim. Well-established liberatory discourses and strategies are thus not really relevant. I am suggesting that a strong motivating force for disruptive swhim is the experience of isolation. To put it another way, the issue for swhim is relationship, since isolation arises through of lack of deep relationship. I use “relationship” in this sense to refer to what Claudia Card defines as “personal relationships” , in the sense that “it matters to the parties who the other parties are and ... this mattering is important to the nature of the relationship” (Card 1990; 210).

Relationship in this sense is not currently considered a political or moral issue. Indeed, the distinction that Card makes between “impersonal and formal” relationships and “personal and informal” relationships reflects the split between the public (moral) world, and private experience which Gilligan (1982) shows has conventionally be considered outside the moral domain. So to articulate a collective interest in social change by raising the issue of relationship, swhim must not only identify what it is we want, we must at the same time change the limits of “the political” and “the moral” in order to be able to construct any new basis for a claim to interest at all. If relationship is so important a concern for swhim, it is vital that we find ways to make relationship both a political and a moral issue, to make relationship an issue in the public sphere, and to make visible the links between power, social structure, and men’s personal experiences of isolation.

In this project, I suggest that some areas of feminist ethics can be seen as a major support. In this essay I will focus primarily on two issues arising in feminist ethics: first, the critique of the traditional moral agent, and second, the moral consideration of the position of perpetrator. With each issue I attempt to show how its articulation may be turned to good account in the interests of disruptive swhim.

The Moral Agent

In keeping with feminist work generally, and perhaps also with the Western ideology of “femininity”, feminist ethicists see themselves as people-in-relation. Gilligan’s apocryphal work (1982) sought to elevate “care reasoning” to the status of proper moral development. Care reasoning is moral deliberation based upon placing people in narratives of relationship, rather than “justice reasoning”, that seeks to apply general rules to individuals as though their relationships are unimportant.

Gilligan’s work to validate women’s daily experiences as morally worthy has stimulated a radical critique of the paradigmatic Western moral agent. Feminist ethicists are in a sense outsiders to the conventional picture of moral agency and, as outsiders, they can more easily ask: how and why has relationship and considerations of care been excised from the moral world? Who is the ideal “person” who exists apparently outside of relationship or personal moral ties?

Seyla Benhabib proposes that the possibility of moral agency itself becomes “incoherent” (1987; 91) without a view of people as individuals with both personal history and significant moral ties with others. She proposes that the Western moral agent is in fact “disembedded and disembodied”, an anxious “mushroom” (ibid; 90) - one who has just appeared in the world “not bound by prior moral ties to another” (ibid; 89). This self is defined against an other whose interests are antithetical to the first, but who in all other respects is similar. A crucial step in this creation is the

excision of personal history and relational experience to the realm of the private, and thus outside of moral consideration.

But a being who simply appears, lacking relationships and personal history, is not a real person at all but is a kind of “definitional identity” - an idea of identity disembodied from actual persons. This means that one of the traditional concepts upon which moral judgement is based, the test of universalisability, cannot be carried out since, in the absence of detailed information about people’s actual lives, we cannot tell if we are comparing similar situations or not. So, unless moral agents are seen as actual people in a context of relations and history, the possibility of moral judgement doesn’t make sense - it becomes incoherent. Her argument thus strongly supports a view of moral agents as people-in-relation.

Of especial interest to swhim here is the connection between the ideal moral agent and the subjective experience of isolation. Benhabib points to the subjective experience of the disembodied disembedded moral agent as one of anxiety and engrossing self-absorption:

The law teaches how to repress anxiety and to sober narcissism, but the constitution of the self is not altered. The establishment of private rights and duties does not overcome the inner wounds of the self; it only forces them to become less destructive. (ibid; 85)

Benhabib’s work points to a likelihood that isolation is actually a central feature of being considered to be a conventional moral agent: ideally, moral agents relate to each other as if they exist outside of relationships and apart from their bodies.

For swhim there is huge significance in this re-describing of the ideal moral agent as disembodied and disembedded. It points to links between common - indeed expected - emotional states in swhim and social conventions of morality. Rather than isolation being simply something that individual swhim experience as private experiences, this work in feminist ethics suggests that swhim’s isolation may in fact be central to Western ideas of the “person”, and thus central to the operations of power in our society. If this is so, then the emotional states in the lives of swhim that lead to isolation can not simply be “resolved” through therapy, or ameliorated through self-help groups or courses. Any attempts by swhim to disrupt our isolation inevitably will have profound political and moral implications, since that isolation is structural in the sense that it is a part of the structure of society.

In calling the isolation “structural” I mean to imply that its existence is supported by large and powerful social structures that cannot be simply dismissed, ignored or unilaterally modified by individuals. But this does not mean that we are simply victims to isolation and that there is nothing we can do about it. There is not a simple direct equivalence between being swhim and being a conventional moral subject: we take up that position to a greater or lesser extent, depending on what Claudia Card calls “moral luck” (1990; 199), and on choice. And to the extent that swhim perceive that we have a choice in the matter, we may choose to disrupt that isolation by building or re-building relationships that accommodate and recognise our vulnerabilities in such a way as to foster experiences of closeness, connection and community. Such, I suggest, is a key task for disruptive swhim.

On Being A Perpetrator

Although, as I show above, isolation is structural, it is also manifested in the concrete actions of individuals in relation with concrete others. In other words, it is highly likely that I now or in the past have taken actions that may have generated or perpetuated my isolation. An important step in building or re-building relationship, then, is to take responsibility for those actions - to say that I have done them so as to allow the possibility that I need not continue to do them, as well as resolve the pain

they have generated in relating with others. Some of those actions may have involved the perpetration of evils of various sorts upon other people. These may range from merely hurtful evils such as not listening to another or displaying disinterest in other ways, through to serious evils that may have had catastrophic impact on others, such as neglect leading to fatal accidents, or sexual or physical abuse, or even murder.

Statistically, men far more than women are likely to have to live with being perpetrators of the latter three types of evils. And the perpetrators of especially sexual abuse, and to a lesser extent, the other evils, are generally considered to fall into a basket labeled “immoral” and left there. But as the existence of abuse becomes more widely acknowledged, more and more people, at present mostly men, are being faced with the prospect of living the rest of their lives alongside a public recognition of their wrong-doing. What sorts of moral issues do such people face, and what may be considered to be a moral life “after the event”?

Claudia Card, in a different essay, (Card 1998) makes a foray into this area and, in doing so, implies that perpetrators should not simply be considered beyond the moral pale. Indeed, Card suggests that we may have at least two motivations for caring about the experiences and position of perpetrators: the pragmatic stance that perpetrators may want to be different in future and need support to be so; and a stance of humility that comes from recognising that we may as easily be perpetrators as victims (ibid; 133). Card’s focus is around finding ways in which perpetrators and victims can “move on” past the evil events. She suggests that the conventional treatment of wrong-doing via punishment, typically imprisonment, may often fail to allow or support this moving on (ibid; 130). Instead, she suggests that focusing on the relationship between victim and perpetrator yields some useful ways forward, and suggests that perpetrators as well as victims have needs.

There are many significant implications here for perpetrators of any description, and especially for swhim. The implication of deepest significance I think, and one that Card more takes for granted than discusses, is her recognition that perpetrators can have a genuine and deeply felt desire to “move on”. I will explore an implication of this in relation to a highly charged current issue: pedophilia and men as carers of children.

There is currently considerable doubt abroad generally in society about whether men can be trusted as carers of children. In this atmosphere, every man child carer is viewed as a potential perpetrator, and every man child carer lives with the knowledge that other men just like himself have perpetrated child sexual abuse. Because pedophilia has been so hidden up until recently, there is a sense in which I may potentially find that men I believe I know well may be, or may have been, pedophiles.

One consequence of this situation is that I do not know how many men just like myself are pedophiles; perhaps pedophilia is just inevitable and if I play with children I will inevitably abuse them, perhaps I am one of a minority who are not pedophiles. At this moment it is impossible to know, which is a situation of profoundly disconcerting doubt. In addition, I would suggest that the social and psychological structures that support men in the isolation that allows them to encompass rape or pedophilia as possibilities in their lives are extremely widespread. My argument in the first section of this essay suggests that in fact these structures are key aspects of power. As such, swhim, to the extent that we identify with the position of conventional moral agent, must face the potential in ourselves for pedophilic behaviour. Thus, the issue of pedophilia is one that every man who cares for children must deal with in some way, whether or not he ever abuses a child.

Of crucial significance for disruptive swhim who seek to foster relationship with children is the question of to what extent, and even whether, we have “moved on” past a desire to commence or to continue the practice of pedophilia. Not only is this a question individual swhim carers must face in themselves, but it is inevitably necessary

that such a question is faced with the other carer(s) of the children in one's care, as well as possibly with other family members and friends. In addition, it is an issue that must be faced by society more broadly if one of the major claims of second wave feminism is to be met: that men should be involved equally in childcare.

Card's work suggests some possible starting points in making an assessment of whether a man carer really desires to "move on", or whether he seeks opportunity for access to potential victims. For example, she suggests that an appropriate attitude seeks neither to justify or diminish past wrong-doings, nor does it focus excessively on the plight of the victim(s) (ibid; 133-134). Another important suggestion is viewing the relationship of victim and perpetrator in terms of how both may be supported to move on. She even suggests that "Perhaps there are ways of being "good" enemies" (ibid; 134).

Although Card's discussion is very preliminary as to how to morally consider the issue of perpetration, the two points I have picked up - that perpetrators should not be automatically assigned to the moral scrapheap, and that perpetrators may legitimately want to move on - open up a space in which being a perpetrator can be considered as valid material for society-wide moral deliberation.

Conclusion

Finally, Benhabib (1987) proposes that moral deliberation should be seen as a "communicative ethic of need interpretations", in which "the object domain of moral theory is so enlarged" (93) as to include not only general ideas but two other aspects as well: firstly the particularities of people's lives and how they construct their needs, and secondly the process of the moral domain itself. The two examples I give above, Benhabib's critique of the ideal moral agent, and Card's exploration of the moral dimensions of being a perpetrator, clearly do all three. I have suggested that, in order to participate effectively in social change in our own interests, disruptive swhim must not only clearly identify and articulate what our claims are, but we must perforce change the limits of the moral domain in order to have our claims recognised as moral claims rather than simply details of personal biography. I hope in this essay I have demonstrated that feminist ethics, in its avowed intentions and in its practice, can be a major support for swhim's disruptive projects.

Nor should this essay give the impression that such support may only be found among only these few feminist philosophers. Many other workers in this field illuminate different areas of vital moral concern for disruptive swhim: Calhoun's (1999) ideas on the inevitability of moral failure when one is engaged in disruptive projects; Spelman's (1997) exploration of shame and privilege; Card's (1996) work on responsibility as the preparedness to stand behind the meanings of one's actions; Hoagland's (1988) work on moral agency and social control, to name a few. In addition, the work of many others, not mentioned here, that focus upon the elicitation and critique of the ethic of care, and upon the moral choices and motivations engaged when one is party to relations of care, gives valuable insight for swhim engaged in what I suggest is a key disruptive project: building and re-building relationship.

There is thus, I believe, considerable conjunction between the aims of feminist ethics and the aims of disruptive swhim. To suggest that this conjunction may become an alliance, it remains to identify what special insights and perspectives swhim, by virtue of our unique position of assumed alignment with the ideal moral agent and being putative recipients of women's care, may have to add to the discourse of feminist ethics. But this must remain the subject of other essays.

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