

Applied Philosophy of Women Empowerment

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Notion of the feminine spirit, 'The spirit of the vally never dies. It is called the subtle and profound female. The gate of the subtle and profound female is the root of heaven and earth. It is continuous, and seems to be always existing. Use it and you will never wear it out'. It is said, "One hour reflection is equal to seventy years of pious worship." St. Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev put it prudently, 'The quality of life depends on how well you manage your body, your mind, your emotion, your situations, your home, your communities, nations, your life in general and the world'. Similarly Socrates had also said, "an examined life is not worth living." It is incredible that in the 21st century gender discrimination and inequality is still an issue. The idea of autonomy is a blindingly obvious one. It simply means that if I am to act in an ethical or moral way I must choose for myself what I am going to do. I may of course take advice from others and I may be subject to persuasion and pressure from external sources, but when the chips are down I must decide and choose for myself. Only then is what I have done imputable to me so that it is my act, and only then am I responsible for it and praiseworthy or blameworthy for it¹.

As a contemporary thinker has put it:

While we may be mistaken in our beliefs about value, it doesn't follow that some one else, who has reason to believe a mistake has been made, can come along and improve my life by leading it for me, in accordance with the correct account of value. On the contrary, no life goes better by being led from the outside according to values the person doesn't endorse. My life only goes better if I'm leading it from the inside, according to my beliefs about value. Praying to God may be a valuable activity, but you have to believe that it's a worthwhile thing to do - That it has some worthwhile point and purpose. You can coerce

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someone into going to church and making the right physical movements, but you won't make someone's life better that way. It won't work, even if the coerced person is mistaken in her belief that praying to God is a waste of time. It won't work because a valuable life has to be a life led from the inside².

The idea of moral autonomy has had a long history in Western thought. The germs of the idea are present in Aristotle's discussion of voluntary action' in the Nicomachean, Ethics: a moral act is one that is deliberated upon and freely chosen by the agent³. It received further elaboration in a discussion of 'conscience' by medieval philosophers from Peter Lombard through Philip the Chancellor and St Bonaventure to St Thomas Aquinas⁴. For these philosophers the central question was whether a judgment of conscience could be binding or obligatory on a person. Aquinas, drawing on this tradition of thought, gave the surprising answer that if one sincerely believed and decided, after serious reflection, that a given line of action was objectively right, even though in fact it was objectively wrong, then one was bound to follow that decision. Aquinas qualified this position by saying that there are some matters which every one is presumed, even bound, to know to be wrong, so that if one believed them not to be wrong one would be culpably ignorant 'since the error arises from ignorance of the Divine Law which he is bound to know'. But on other matters my conscience binds or obliges me⁵. As one commentator has explained Aquinas' position:

The ruling principle is clear; a man who acts against his conscience in always in the wrong, even if his conscience is mistaken. If he acts according to his conscience and his conscience is right, well and good; if his conscience is mistaken but through no fault of his own, then his action is not morally bad.

In the nineteenth century, cardinal Newman also drew upon this tradition of thought. In the English controversy over whether Catholics' allegiance to the pope conflicted with their allegiance to the queen, Newman affirms the right of personal conscience. Thus in the Letter to the Duke of Norfolk Newman says That as a Catholic and an Englishman he owes allegiance both to the Queen and the Pope and it may happen, though it will be a rare occurrence, that the two allegiances conflict with each other. In such an event, Newman says, 'I should decide according to the particular case which is beyond all rules, and must be decided on its merits'. I may get advice from others, but 'if,

after all, I could not take their view of the matter, then I must rule myself by my own judgment and my conscience'. Newman concludes with the flamboyant statement: 'Certainly, if I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts (which indeed does not seem quite the thing) I shall drink - to the Pope, if you please still to Conscience first and the Pope afterwards'. Behind this view of conscience lies a philosophical view of the human person which Newman expresses in a magnificent passage in Parochial and Plain sermons. 'No one;', he says, 'outside of him can really touch him, can touch his soul, his immortality; he must live with himself forever. He has a depth within him unfathomable, an infinite abyss of existence'⁶.

The idea of personal autonomy is, perhaps, most famously linked with the name of Immanuel Kant. In a sense the whole of Kant's moral philosophy revolves around the idea that the moral agent is her or his own law-giver. By my reason I discern the 'categorical imperatives' or absolute obligations or duties of the moral law and I impose them on myself. If I act because of any non-rational motive - my feelings or inclinations or the coercive force of others - then I am no longer acting ethically or morally. For Kant, the autonomous moral agent is not just the source of moral value but is intrinsically valuable in herself and must be respected as such by others. She is an end-in-itself and can never be used solely as an instrumental means for achieving the ends or purposes of another. To treat another person as a means to one's own ends in effect to treat her as a thing. With Kant we witness a development of the idea of autonomy from being a fundamental condition of ethical action to being an ethical value in its own right and as such deserving of moral respect⁷.

Of course, the freedom to choose, which is of the essence of personal autonomy, is freedom to choose some concrete line of action which we believe to be morally good. Autonomy does not mean choosing simply for choosing's sake. But that does not imply, as some have argued, that freedom to choose has no ethical value in itself but only becomes valuable in the light of the concrete actions chosen: in other words, it is because those actions are good, or believed to be good, that freedom to choose and autonomy are good. However, autonomy, the capacity for self-determination, is also valuable in itself in the sense that, even though what I choose (the content of my act) is objectively bad, my choosing it is still good in that it is a free and autonomous act as opposed to one that

is coerced. If we contrast two acts: (a) one that is freely chosen but objectively wrong, and (b) one that is coerced and not freely chosen, but which is also objectively good, the liberal will say that the first act is more morally valuable than the second.

One might also mention that freedom of expression or 'free speech' is based upon the recognition that members of a liberal society have a right to be treated as autonomous moral agents who must be allowed to decide for themselves the worth of views expressed to them. There are of course cases (defamatory statements, racial vilification and the like) where the expression of certain views may cause direct injury or harm to other people and violate their personal autonomy. In such cases the state may intervene. But if a government intervenes to curb free speech on the grounds that people may be morally depraved or corrupted by the views that are expressed, or led into politically questionable behaviour, or persuaded to believe false (religious or other) ideas, it is in effect treating its citizens as children lacking full autonomy who are not capable of considering those views for themselves and making their own judgments on them.

No doubt, as Mill was to argue, freedom of expression may also be justified on the ground that it leads to beneficial consequences overall. Thus we are more likely to discover the truth, whether in religion, politics or any other sphere, through free and untrammelled debate where a variety of views are able to be expressed. But this consequentialist justification is much weaker than that which sees freedom of expression as a corollary of the recognition of the value of personal autonomy. The best that the consequentialist justification of free speech will bring about more good social effects than bad. It is incapable of according an absolute value to freedom of expression.

Much later on, philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre attempted to construct a whole ethical theory around the idea of autonomy. Thus for Sartre the conscious subject has no predetermined 'essence' or make-up or 'nature' but is wholly self-determining. I make myself through my choices and I am totally responsible for myself. The realisation of this is the basis of the first Sartrean ethical commandment: always act as one who is self-determining and responsible for what one does. This is what Sartre calls the attitude of 'authenticity'. The negative corollary of this is that I must not try to evade my freedom of self-determination, and my responsibility for making myself through my acts, by practising 'self

deception' or 'bad faith' (*mauvaise foi*). The attempt to escape the 'burden' of freedom and self-determination or autonomy is paradoxical, since any attempt to abdicate from having to choose freely and responsibly for myself presuppose that I am free. I am in effect saying: 'I freely choose no longer to freely choose what I am going to do', or 'As a conscious self-determining subject I choose to be a predetermined thing'. Just as for Descartes I cannot doubt that I am a conscious being since I have to presuppose that I am conscious in order to doubt, so also for Sartre the attempt to abandon one's moral autonomy presupposes that I am free, self-determining and autonomous. nevertheless, as Sartre shows in his brilliant delineations of the pathological strategies of 'bad faith' and 'self-deception' in all areas of human life, we can certainly succeed in deceiving ourselves and in forsaking our autonomy and evading responsibility for ourselves. In fact, for Sartre the life of 'authenticity' based upon autonomy is arduous and only rarely successful. In a sense Sartre deromanticises the idea of autonomy in that, while emphasising that it is the central good, he also emphasises that it is a burden which most people would prefer to avoid and that it is very difficult to escape from the lures of 'bad faith' and to achieve authenticity. We all say that we want to be free and autonomous ('Give me liberty or death'!) but in fact we spend most of our time trying to escape from freedom and autonomy.

Questions about surrogacy:

Three main questions about surrogate motherhood need to be considered. First, is the practice of surrogate motherhood immoral in itself: in other words, does it offend against some moral principle so that, regardless of its possible consequences, it is intrinsically immoral? Most of us would hold that directly killing an innocent human being is morally wrong in itself because it offends against the ethical principle that human life has a special value. In the same way those who argue that the practice of surrogate motherhood is intrinsically immoral claim that it offends against the moral principle that one person can not be used as a means for the purposes of another person. In commercial or contractual surrogate (where one woman contracts for a consideration to bear a child for another), so it is argued, a woman sells herself (or her gestatory functions) to another. But even in altruistic surrogacy, it is claimed, the surrogate mother becomes an instrument or a means for the social mother's end of having a child.

Surrogacy then does not of itself necessarily involve one woman being used as a means to serve the ends of other people and this argument against the practice of surrogate motherhood fails. It might be replied, however, that while surrogacy may not of itself involve the surrogate being used or exploited, never the less in the concrete social circumstances in which we find ourselves, surrogacy is likely to be used in an exploitative way.

Feminist views on reproductive technology:

Certain feminist views have already been mentioned in the discussion on surrogacy. One might have expected that the right which has played a central over their own bodies and their reproductive processes, would have been invoked apropos of surrogacy. This right is a direct corollary of the fact that women are autonomous moral agents and is simply a version of the general principle of autonomy. If a woman is not able to use her body as she wishes, so long as no harm is done to others, and if she is not able to control her reproductive capacities as she freely chooses, she is no longer in responsible control of a vitally significant part of her life. (In a sense this is not an exclusively women's right since it applies equally to men; but it applies of course in a special way to women.)

In parenthesis, it might be remarked that the principle that a woman may use her body as she chooses has been used mainly with respect to abortions, but it is complicated in that situation since the right of the mother to control her body and her reproductive processes, and to have an abortion, is in conflict with the quasi-right of the fetus (which will, all things being equal, become or develop into a human being) to continued life. There is no way in principle in which this conflict can be resolved so that in all cases the mother's right to control her bodily and reproductive processes takes precedence over the right of the fetus, or vice versa. All that can be done is to weigh the two principles with respect to the particular circumstances. Thus, for example, if a woman's pregnancy were the result of rape or incest it would seem that her right to control her body as she chooses (and to have an abortion) should take precedence (at the cost of denying the quasi-right of the fetus to continued life); but if the pregnancy were in the last trimester it would seem that the right of the fetus should take precedence (at the cost of coercing the mother, against her will, to continue the pregnancy).

However, as we have seen, some women have taken a different view of surrogacy and of reproductive technology or assisted procreation in general and there is now a wide range of feminist views about these matters. It is worthwhile on looking at these views in a detailed way since they exhibit some of the complexities of applying the concept of autonomy in this area.

As Mara Mies has said, any woman who is prepared to have a child manufactured for her by a fame and money-greedy bio technician must know that in this way she is not only fulfilling her own individual, often egoistic wish to have a baby, but also surrendering yet another part of the autonomy of the female sex over child-bearing to the techno-patriarchs.

This stringent critique of reproductive technology was, perhaps, the dominant view in 'second wave' feminist thinking through the 1980s and still retains a good deal of influence. However, there are now signs that the absolute rejection of reproductive technology is being critically reassessed by some recent feminists. These thinkers reject the naive optimism of early feminists such as Firestone and recognize with Corea that the new technology is not value-neutral but is in fact pervaded by certain technocratic values, and that there are real dangers of its being used against women in an exploitative way. At the same time they argue that the reproductive technologies can be used to help women achieve liberation if they are able to control those technologies for their own purposes. If the 'pro choice' principle governs women's access to the new forms of contraception and to improved ways of abortion - both brought about by medical technology - why should it not govern women's access to IVF and other forms of birth technology, provided that there is a real choice for the women concerned?

A good example of this development in feminist thinking is the recently published *Tomorrow's Child: Reproductive Technology in the 1990s* by the three well known English feminists mentioned before. In the preface to their book, Birke, Himmelweit and Vines characterize the FINRRAGE position as being dominated by fear - 'fear that what we are witnessing is a takeover by scientists of women's role in reproduction, and fear that we are moving towards a dehumanized (and defeminised) technological future. The position is one of total resistance to scientific and male control of reproductive processes, by a complete rejection of the new technologies'. As against this, the authors affirm

the primacy of the feminist principle 'that women should be able to choose whether or not to bear a child': 'We feel that women, and women alone, should be the ones to make the choice'. At the same time these authors adopt an attitude of healthy scepticism towards some of the more extreme reproductive scenarios (the possibility of ectogenesis and the mechanical womb, the use of ova donation and embryo transfer to create Corea's and Dworkin's 'reproductive brothel'). They also question the version of Murphy's Law which a good deal of previous feminist thinking has invoked: if a biotechnological development is theoretically possible it is likely actually to occur and it is bound to be bad for women. This is, the authors argue, to adopt an unduly pessimistic view in that it assumes that women are unable to resist pressures from male medical technocrats and are incapable of exercising autonomy and taking control of the technology themselves (as has happened to some extent in ordinary birthing practices).

In the conclusion to their book the authors set out a number of 'feminist principles' which supplement the 'pro choice' principle and provide a social and political dimension to their discussion. Reproductive politics, they say, must find ways of changing the arrangements for reproduction in our society which are oppressive to women, and of enabling women to carry out effectively their reproductive choices. A similar view has been taken by the American feminist philosopher Mary Anne Warren, who argues that while 'the costs and risks of IVF treatments to the female patient are substantial... they are not known to be so great as to clearly outweigh the potential benefits, in every case'. 'There are physical and social dangers for women in reproductive technology but women can by various means attempt to contain these dangers rather than seeking to eliminate the new technologies all together. They must also work to gain more control of the technologies'. Warren says that 'it is too soon to conclude that this new reproductive technology will not serve women's interests... If women and other under privileged groups can gain a larger presence in the medical and research professions, and if suitable modes of regulation can be implemented, then the new reproductive technologies may provide more benefits than dangers.' Again, another feminist philosopher, Laura Purdy, argues against the position that surrogacy is necessarily opposed to women's best interests. As she puts it:

That surrogacy reduces rather than promotes women's autonomy may be true under some circumstances, but there are good grounds for thinking that it can also enhance autonomy. It also remains to be shown that the practice systematically burdens women, or one class of women. In principle, the availability of new choices can be expected to nourish rather than stunt women's lives, so long as they retain control over their bodies and their lives. The claim that contracted pregnancy destroys women's individuality and constitutes alienated labour, as Christine Overall argues, depends not only on a problematic Marxist analysis, but on the assumption that other jobs available to women are seriously less alienating.

The 'third wave' feminists just mentioned do not constitute a 'school' or a 'movement'. Nevertheless, there are certain common features in their approaches to the new reproductive technologies. First, they are critical of any absolute and unilateral rejection of the new technologies and of the techno-pessimism which sees them as beyond any kind of control by women. Control, they suggest, is what is needed, not condemnation or prohibition. At the same time, they recognize the difficulties in the way of achieving informed decision-making and control by women. This group is also sceptical of the Orwellian future scenarios imagined by Corea and others of the FINRRAGE group, and they are critical of the paternalistic attitudes of the same group which, as has been said, are 'insulting' to infertile women. As an older feminist thinker, Janet Radcliffe Richards, has put it: 'It is too dangerous to try to 'free' women who are regarded as conditioned by forcing them to do what prevailing feminist ideology presumes they must want, because with that method there is always the danger of ignoring women's real wishes. They may not be conditioned at All'.

Every one is equal in God's eyes. Ethics is the activity of person directed to secure the inner perfection of his own personality. It is noteworthy that equality of opportunity means expanding the spectrum of choices available to women, not narrowing them according to a tunnel-visioned notion of success. Technology may have done much to level the playing field. This has done much to create a meritocracy where women have attained position of excellence in diverse field. However, much is still to be achieved. In terms of spiritual attainment, the gender issue has always been irrelevant. Swami Vivekanand said if we offered education to and left women to themselves, they would work out their

own destinies, "All the mashie to women," he said, "has come because men undertook to shape the destiny of women." He reminded us that being female was not a handicap and to over emphasise differences between genders is a form of paternalism. While redressing the balance, it is important not to divide a single species into tow. As members of the human race, we need to move towards an inclusive universality, not a reverse biological bigotry. Because, truth remains even when there is no Tathagata, no "somebody who arrived there."

Reference:

1. Joseph Raz, *Morality of Freedom*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986, especially ch.14.
2. Will Kymlicka, 'Liberalism and communitarianism,' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 18, 1988, pp.183.
3. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, cg. I.
4. See Timothy Potts, *Conscience in Medical Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 1980.
5. *Summa Theologiae*.
6. J.H.Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol.. 4., 1863, pp. 82-83.
