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Contemporary Social and Political Philosophy

Feminism: Western Meddling or Honorable Crusade?

The question of whether we (from a Western cultural perspective) should make moral judgements on other cultures is one of great philosophical debate. However, looking at this issue through a feminist lens, I pose a more focused quandary: Should we interfere in cultures that violate essential human rights based on the principles of feminism? This is not to ask ‘In what conditions are we allowed or even obligated to interfere?’ but instead to look at whether it makes sense and is right to interfere at all. I respond to this based on the points that: bringing feminist ideas into the human rights debate is beneficial, helping those that are struggling is within our ethical duty, and all of this must be done with an understanding of local culture and not simply an imposition based on external judgement.

First off, bringing in feminist ideas is a method of diversifying the human rights discourse in different contexts. This additional perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of what people have the right to defend in different contexts. This gives voice to the individual, especially to individual women, empowering them to participate in the discussion with more personal understandings. Introducing feminist frameworks can change how people perceive their own experiences. As an example, Eva van Roekel (Lecture 5, Moral Universalism and Cultural Diversity) recounted a narrative in which a Hawaiian woman was told that her described experience of having her husband force her to engage in sexual relations against her will would be constituted as “rape”. Understanding this as an act of violence against herself allowed the woman to stop internalizing her shame, thinking she was a difficult partner, but instead modify her own narrative with the help of feminist ideas to see it as an act committed against her will.

Additionally, it is within our ethical duty to help people that are in positions of weakness. I employ the theories of deontological ethics to suggest that feminists can be supported in their approach through the ideas of existing obligations and duties to act a certain way in defense of others. Deontology has various branches of agent-centered, patient-centered, and contractualist ethics, but these all generally emphasize a conformity with a moral norm. In this way the cultural differences are not ignored but broadened to say that we must help people in certain situations no matter what. This connects to the underlying theme of human rights and the necessity to help others even in contexts different from our own. Now as the condition of cultural values varies, it is important to allow room for moral reasoning. This would present itself as a “threshold deontology” practice that counters Kantian absolutism to allow for actions to be “morally wrong” but “morally just” [Alexander & Moore 2016]. This distinction is necessary for the cases of differing cultural values in which actions to save individuals in positions of danger can sometimes go against moral assessments of interference. One example would be the issue of

divorce in foreign countries that either make the process very difficult for women or do not allow it at all. If a women's rights organization were to shelter a Filipina woman from her physically abusive husband this would be an assertion of different beliefs into the local culture* yet would be morally justified in the act of protecting her from physical violence.

Some may argue that deontological reasoning for interference by Westerners assumes a universal ethics code and thus imposes a Western moral superiority. Further, strict cultural relativists would assert that we do not have the right to interfere in other cultures in such ways because we lack the understanding of the local and historical context. A defense of this counterclaim could be seen through the article detailing an anthropologist's account of local flogging and torture practices used by the Dinka Akaar in South Sudan [Deal 2010]. In this context, torture is not used simply for the sake of physical violence and punishment to an individual, but instead as a form of group-culpability in connection to the individual's identity as part of the larger group. This is to say that such practices have a deep-rooted historical and political context, and putting an immediate stop to them would disrupt the socio-political structure in place. This issue is one of feminist concern because of its relation to notions of personal violence and autonomy over one's own body. However, I would assert that this counterpoint in fact shows the underlying connection between cultural relativism and feminism. Both ideologies have a mutual acknowledgment that some groups have been ignored by the majority and current human rights discourse doesn't account for such differences. The approaches to resolve this issue are different, but the base understanding is the same: existing ideas of human rights notions are insufficient. I argue then that this understanding along with the idea of ethical duties presented before, asserts that something must be done in such situations of injustice. Therefore, it is justified that action be taken to protect people from such violence, but in such a way that is sensitive to local issues.

Finally, is imperative, from a feminist perspective, that we are conscientious of the unique local contexts in which intervention is taken. Feminists have a long history of calling out institutional establishment of systems that give greater voice to the majority (historically this is usually focused on the issue of men and men's power). Therefore, they would be aware of the importance of making sure their actions do not create a similar structure that pushes out the opinions of those with whom they are working in order to resolve issues of injustice. Returning to the Dinka practice of flogging, I argue that the

*The Philippines do not allow for legal divorce to take place and social separation is highly stigmatized.

necessary action would be one that works by first gaining a deeper understanding of the cultural practice by working with locals, and then gradually working alongside these people to develop strategies for shifting practices away from physical violence. As Deal himself concluded in his paper on the Dinka flogging practices, “A quest to understand the meaning of violence in context is a first step to effective activism, provided that the end of the quest is the beginning in healing -- a healing that must include both social networks and individual bodies. Where those interests conflict, I would plea for the[Deal 2010]. As Deal so clearly asserted, the first step is understanding such practices in context. Feminists can be quick to identify cases of injustice and violence, but this practice of humble learning and solution co-design is what can distinguish justified assistance from aggressive imposition.

It is clear that feminists cannot nor should not simply shut down all situations of injustice as they are often based in deeply cemented cultural practices. To do so would be not only demonstrate an assumed moral superiority, but would also upset the existing social/political climate in such a way that would do more harm than good. However, with a deeper understanding of such cultures we can use notions of personal liberty and the right to safety, security, and opportunity in order to work alongside existing systems to find new methods of integration. Therefore, it is justified to interfere within situations of injustice in the name of feminism given these methods of engagement. Doing so is not only necessary but beneficial to the well-being of the local culture. With a mindset of understanding and a genuine drive to engage in local culture, it is possible to make effective change over time by working alongside local community members instead of simply asserting moral superiority from a Western perspective.

Works Cited

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