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ARTICLE

Feminist counterpoints in the ethical debate and its possibilities for social work

Contrapuntos feministas en el debate ético y sus posibilidades para el Trabajo Social

Javiera Cubillos Almendra¹

Catholic University of Maule, Chile.

Carlo Zarallo Valdés

Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFCS), Brazil.

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Abstract

Since Lena Dominelli and Eileen McLeod published the book *Feminist Social Work* (1999), the question of the confinement of feminism - as a critical perspective - to the professional practice of social work has opened the door for professional reflection. This discussion is still in the process of exploration and develo-

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¹Corresponding author Javiera Cubillos Almendra  jcubillos@ucm.cl
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ment. The intention of this article is to explore the theoretical reflections of the so-called feminist ethics and some of the contributions for the practice of social work. Specifically, we propose to address three critiques from feminist theory to deontological ethical theories, which derive from three proposals that underpin a "situated ethics". Based on the aspects addressed, we propose some reflections on how we could approach social workers' interventions to conceive emancipating professional and disciplinary practices, which allow us to question the dichotomies that have characterized modern thought, including the dichotomy "who intervenes"/"who is intervened".

Resumen

Desde que Lena Dominelli y Eileen McLeod publicaron el libro *Trabajo social feminista* (1999), se abre una puerta de reflexión disciplinar que cuestiona el confinamiento del feminismo - como perspectiva crítica - de la práctica profesional del trabajo social. Dicha discusión aún se encuentra en proceso de exploración y desarrollo. En este contexto, la intención del artículo es explorar en las reflexiones teóricas de la llamada ética feminista y algunas de sus contribuciones al ejercicio de la profesión. Específicamente, nos proponemos abordar tres críticas desde la teoría feminista a las teorías éticas deontológicas, las que derivan en tres propuestas para avanzar en una ética situada. A partir de los aspectos abordados proponemos algunas reflexiones sobre cómo podríamos tensionar la práctica de trabajadoras/es sociales, en miras a concebir prácticas profesionales y disciplinares emancipadoras, que nos permitan cuestionar las dicotomías que han caracterizado el pensamiento moderno, incluida la dicotomía "interventor/a-intervenida/o".

Palabras clave:
 ética feminista;
 ética situada;
 ética deontológica;
 justicia social;
 intervención social



Introduction

“A feminist ethic is, obviously, something different from an ethic for women. Much less does it occur to us the nonsense of thinking that a feminist ethic is one whose statements would be an expression of feminine values. While one can speak of feminine values in a sociological sense, it would be completely meaningless to speak of feminine values in an ethical sense”

(C. Amorós)

The disciplinary discussion on the confinement of feminism - as a critical perspective - in different areas of social life, and particularly in the professional practice of social work, is still ongoing and is still in the process of exploration and development. Feminist interpellations within the discipline are diverse, and there is interest in situating the conceptual apparatus developed by feminist theory² in the debate around professional practice, with the intention of nurturing the praxis of social work (Agrela and Morales, 2018; Dominelli, 2002; Dominelli and McLeod, 1999; Fernández-Montaña, 2015; Oliveira and de Almeida, 2015).

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In this line, we particularly intend to reflect on the contributions from feminist ethics, with the purpose of questioning the applied ethics with which we proceed in our professional and research work. Specifically, we address three critiques from feminist theory to deontological ethical theories³ - considered hegemonic ethical referents in the “West” -, which will derive from the commitment to a situated ethics, which we hope to link with some reflections on how we could approach the practice of social workers, in order to conceive emancipatory professional and disciplinary practices (Muñoz-Arce and Larraín-Salas, 2019).

More than presenting a conceptual device that allows us to nurture the understanding of the contexts and social subjects with whom we work, we would like to venture into outlining reflections of an ethical nature that allow us to approach the doing, to make decisions that are directed towards fair actions and the promotion of social justice, given the centrality of the latter in the Codes of Ethics of the profession.

²We talk in the singular, of feminist theory, only to facilitate the reading. In doing so, we do not wish to ignore the diversity of theoretical currents and political actions within feminism.

³We will mainly present criticisms from feminist theorists of three great referents of deontological ethics: Immanuel Kant (1994), John Rawls (1971) and Jürgen Habermas (1994).



We understand that social intervention - as a complex, constructed and situated process (Muñoz-Arce, 2018) -, demands from us an attentive and critical look in order to make the best possible decisions in light of social justice, where many times universalist/standardized prescriptions and patterns of action are insufficient. In view of this, feminist ethics can provide us with interesting clues to advance in this direction. Although professional actions are circumscribed in certain institutions and/or social programs, often operating under centralized and homogenized designs, we are called to flexibilize, dialogue and assume a critical role in the contexts in which we are inserted.

With these purposes in mind, the article is structured in three sections. The first presents the main criticisms from feminist theory of deontological theories. The second section presents some of the proposals that allow us to outline a feminist ethics, understood as a situated ethics. Finally, we conclude with some reflections on the usefulness of the contributions of feminist ethics to social work.

Feminist critiques of deontological ethics

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Feminist criticisms of deontological ethics are triggered by the postulates of psychologist Carol Gilligan (1985) on the ethics of care, who questions Lawrence Kohlberg's (1981) proposal regarding the model based on stages of development of moral conscience. Gilligan discusses formalism, cognitivism and the pretensions of the universality of Kantian theories, questioning the separation between form and content in the evaluation of moral judgment⁴, given the difficulties women have in accounting for their judgments and their own sense of "I" (Benhabib, 1992, p. 39).

Based on Kohlberg's assertions that women reach a lower stage of development than men, Gilligan compares the experience of women with the Kohlbergian model, in order to show that the exclusion of women and their experiences in the main evolutionary theories of psychology, generated models and hypotheses that were neither universal nor neutral. The author questioned the ideals of an "autonomous self" (presupposed in Kohlberg's model), in light of the experiences of women and children, who tended toward another type of moral reasoning: more contextual and based on relations of

⁴We talk in the singular, of feminist theory, only to facilitate the reading. In doing so, we do not wish to ignore the diversity of theoretical currents and political actions within feminism.



solidarity, what Gilligan calls the ethics of care. With this, the author also proposes to listen to the voice of different subjects who are excluded from studies such as those of Kohlberg.

What Kohlberg ignored is that subjects are not detached (“autonomous self”), but rather - as Gilligan argues - embedded in networks of interdependence, have ties that bind them together, that shape their moral needs, their identity and their conceptions of the good life (“embodied self”). This poses a challenge to universalist philosophies in terms of how to sustain the centrality of justice and care in people’s lives; and how to broaden the scope of morality to include considerations derived from “care”, without ignoring moral universalism (Benhabib, 1992; 2006).

The ethics of care has raised a gender subtext, although Gilligan does not integrate this perspective of analysis into her study (Benhabib, 1992). As Seyla Benhabib (1992) argues, Gilligan - drawing on the postulates of Nancy Chodorow (1999) - proposes that the psychosocial development of girls and boys results in certain personality patterns among adults of the species. Boys - given their socialization - would have a more rigid sense of the limits of the “I”; girls, on the other hand, would be more predisposed to show feelings of empathy and sympathy in relation to others, since the boundaries between their “I” and the others would be more fluid. Thus, the author concludes that the results of Kohlberg’s study - in which women did not reach post-conventional stages - are due to the limitations of the instrument used and not, as the author believed, to a kind of “moral inferiority (or immaturity)” of women. This happens to the extent that any ethical consideration of the values on which women would configure their “moral self” is excluded.

Despite the criticisms of Gilligan’s postulates⁵, her contributions have opened ways to destabilize the postulates that aspire to universality and have inspired different authors to continue the debate on feminist ethics (Benhabib, 1992; 2006). Given the importance of this discussion, in the following sections we will develop in greater detail the main criticisms and some proposals emanating from feminist reflections on the ethics of justice⁶. Among the main criticisms are: i) Criticism of the *normative universality*

⁵ Criticism of Gilligan’s work has come from both feminist theorists and justice theorists. Feminist critics point out that her study seems to infer that behavior according to gender is biologically determined, falling into essentialist postulates. Likewise, it is believed that the author has forgotten the consideration of historicity in the results of her work and the historical determinants of the differences between women (Benhabib, 1992).

⁶ The ethics of justice are recognized as deontological ethics insofar as they are integrally linked to a Kantian universal “duty”. Rawls himself in his theory of justice points out: “the principles of justice are, moreover, categorical imperatives in the Kantian sense ... a principle of conduct that applies to a person by virtue of his nature as a free, equal, and rational being. The validity of the principle does not presuppose that one has a particular desire or end” (Rawls, 1971, p. 253). Under the Kantian influence, Rawls designs a theory of justice whose maximum claim is to be impartial.

and impartiality defended by such ethical theories; ii) Criticism of the dichotomies that such theories presuppose and reinforce, among them *the divorce between the public and private spheres*, and the *supposed confrontation between principles of good life and principles of justice*; and iii) Questioning of *the presupposition of an autonomous moral subject*.

Problematic: normative universality and impartiality

For feminism, normative universalism with deontological roots, inherited from Enlightenment thought, is problematic. From this perspective, normative universality - profiled as the north of the moral project of modernity - constitutes one of the most important critiques of contemporary ethical and political theories. The conceptions of *universality and impartiality* recognize concrete relations of domination that remain hidden, including those of gender. The latter privilege the figure of the autonomous adult male (stripped of his interpersonal relationships), which necessarily excludes women and other subjects for not complying with the parameter: a masculine subject, assumed as endowed with reason; a subject defined in partial terms that is understood as representative of the human (Benhabib, 1987; 2006; Fraser, 1997).

For Esperanza Guisán (1988), Kantian ethics - which drives and gives rise to the debate on the ethics of justice - is presumably masculine in comparison with the proposals of other philosophers. Kant assumes the roles socioculturally attributed to women and men in an uncritical way, understanding the masculine as necessarily linked to the idea of abstract rationality ("the universal") and the feminine to the realm of feelings and the concrete world ("the particular")⁷. The unilateral and partial formulation of deontological ethics is rightly noted and criticized.

The bet on a universal-abstract individual defines the human being necessarily as male, and not only as male, but more often than not as Western (or Westernized), white-mestizo, heterosexual and ascribed to a certain social class, excluding anyone who escapes this canon (Brah, 2011; Fraser, 2006; Young, 1987). Universalism (or claims of universality), then, would implicitly establish the male norm under the veil of impartiality⁸.

⁷ Regarding the universal-particular duality, Kant does not consider that women are capable of universality, attributing to them a "beautiful intelligence" (whose object is feeling) as opposed to the "deep intelligence" of men (whose object is abstract speculation). "That is why the education of women will not consist of reasoning but of the cultivation of sensitivity and moral sentiments" (Kant, 1997, p. 148). Thus, having denied them the possibility of access to principles, nature has endowed women "with a tender heart" (Guisán, 1988, p. 149).

⁸ This can be linked to the so-called veil of ignorance, a concept used by John Rawls to arrive at the two principles of justice. This perspective requires that all participants in the agreement abstract from their actual situation in society and adopt an original position, where there is no prior knowledge of particular persons or interests.

Such abstraction evades the recognition of the concrete moral subject, in all its particularity, context and history, exerting a negative and destructive effect on a highly differentiated world.

Faced with this, feminism has taken on the task of showing that, in a patriarchal society such as ours, the male subject assumed as universal is the constituent subject of ethical reflection and practice, which must be destabilized because it does not represent human diversity and excludes the plurality of women from this imaginary. The ideals of universality rather than integrating have marginalized, since abstracting the subjects from their particularities has implied leaving “in parenthesis” the social inequalities that shape their experiences and moral decisions, offering “advantages for the dominant groups in society and disadvantages for the subordinates” (Fraser, 1997, p. 110). Thus:

establishing a set of norms that [are assumed] to be beyond power or force is itself a practice of power and force that sublimates, disguises, and extends its own power play through recourse to rhetorical figures of normative universality.

(Butler, 2001, p.15)

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In this line, Seyla Benhabib (1987) argues that universalist moral theories - such as that of John Rawls - ignore the starting point of the concrete (situated) “other”, which would lead to epistemic incoherence. In the “original position” proposed by Rawls, the other (as different from the self) disappears, which evades the moral obligation to confront otherness (Benhabib, 1987; 2006), since differences are irrelevant. The idea of “an abstract other” points to an empty mask that would correspond, at the same time, to everyone and no one (Benhabib, 1987). The “original position” would hide central aspects of inequality that Rawls himself intends to overcome. The problem would not be in the fictional character of the “original position”, but in the affirmation that it is desirable that this fiction normatively orients the theories of justice. Thus, we see how Rawlsian normative presuppositions would impose serious limits to the understanding of power relations and the various forms of oppression.

By questioning both normative universality and impartiality, feminist theorists invite us to distrust all those discourses, conceptions and practices that claim to be universal -including the conceptions of Democracy, Citizenship and Equality-, since they would conceal, reproduce and reinforce relations of domination and oppression, which have resulted in the marginalisation of certain subjects and social groups on the basis of



their “difference” or “distance” from the “normative subject” assumed as universal (male-Western-white-heterosexual-bourgeois) (Alexander and Mohanty, 2004; Fraser, 1997; Young, 2000).

Such an approach to justice would be imperfect, among other things, because it takes shape in laws that standardize, so it does not reach everyone and does not take into account differences (Camps, 1990). Notions that are blind to differences and the resulting power relations - which could include the professional practice of social workers themselves - even if they recognize the equal moral value of all people, would reproduce and reinforce specific power relations, making it difficult to achieve justice. In this context, it is worth questioning the ideals of assimilation (Young, 2000) that conceal universalist and standardized practices, which - by promoting equal treatment as a fundamental principle - have devalued and seek to standardize difference (gender, race/ethnicity, etc.), constructing these differences as obstacles.

Criticism of the reinforcement of (seemingly) irreconcilable dichotomies

This second criticism follows from the previous one, because under the veil of impartiality, not only are specific power relations concealed (e.g., between men and women; between young people and adults), but also a dichotomous discourse, derived from the apparently opposing differentiation of masculine and feminine, is uncritically reproduced (culture/nature; reason/emotionality; public/private). This discourse has divided “human beings into heads and bodies, reasons and passions, rational and efficient communication, and intimate communication” (López, 2004, p.31).

Feminism has posed the challenge of destabilizing the reason/affection and public/private dichotomies in ethical reflection, since an ethics based only on ideals such as reason and the public - in opposition to and devaluation of affectivity and private space - would, on the one hand, relegate solidarity and the values of respect for “the other” in the public sphere to a second plane; and, on the other, would neglect the discussion on what is fair in the sphere recognized as private (family relations, marriage, sexuality, care practices) as it is represented as particular (non-universal) by bourgeois masculinist ideology (Benhabib, 1992; Fraser, 1997; López, 2004; Pisano, 2004). This dichotomous ethical discourse, among other things and as we will review below, validates a sharp division between the public and private spheres, and the incompatibility of principles of justice and good life.

The divorce between public and private

One of the dichotomies most criticized by feminist theory corresponds to the divorce between the public and private spheres that deontological theories presuppose, where “the public sphere and the principles that govern it are considered separate or independent from relations in the private sphere” (Pateman, 1995, p. 2-3).

Among the criticisms that Habermas received⁹, starting with his book *Critical History of Public Opinion* (1962)¹⁰, feminist theory pointed to the arguments that traditionally justified the difference between the public and private spheres. This difference was historically based on institutions of civil society and sexist public culture in which the ideas of participation and citizenship were attributed exclusively to men (Fraser, 1997). The male figure is attributed rationality, property and citizenship, as if men “naturally” carried virtues linked to universality and justice.

Assemblies, parliaments and civil associations would be, then, exclusive spaces for men, while women - based on their sexual difference - are placed in the private/domestic sphere, assuming mainly the roles of mother and wife (Hierro, 2014a; Pateman, 2013). Thus, the “natural/civil” binomial is reproduced, where the private world is circumscribed to “the family based on the ties [assumed to be] natural of feeling and blood”, while the public sphere “is governed by universal criteria, interests, rights, equality and property, criteria applicable only to men” (Pateman, 2013, p. 59).

Civil society - its origin, sustenance and subjects of interest - is understood separately from the private/domestic sphere. Theories of justice -and the liberal political theory that these insume- have striven to strengthen the barriers that separate the public -which presume relations of equality- from spaces and processes assumed as pre-political (or non-political), such as the family, everyday life and the economy, founded on systemic relations of inequality (Fraser, 1997). The terms “public” and “private” are not only designations of social spheres, they can be powerful cultural classifications and rhetorical labels, “often used to delegitimize certain interests, ideas and topics, and to valorize others” (Fraser, 1997, p. 126).

⁹ The criticisms point mainly to insufficient historical presuppositions, since Habermas would have reduced the concept of the reality of bourgeois civil society to a very limited period of time. Thus, many would be excluded from the reconstruction of the bourgeois public sphere (Habermas, 1994). This would not be, for example, the history of the proletariat in the same period (Kluge and Negt, 1993).

¹⁰ Book about the historical trends of the public sphere as a bourgeois category from the 17th to the mid-20th century in England, France and Germany.

The dissociation of the private sphere from the public sphere, therefore, has collateral and harmful effects for society. On the one hand, women are circumscribed to certain private activities (caring for children, looking after the house, satisfying their husbands, etc.); and, on the other hand, the fact that these activities are part of the private sphere makes it impossible for this social space to be rationally questioned on the basis of criteria of equality and justice.

Thus, widespread practices such as assuming that the domestic sphere (care of dependents and/or children) is mainly the responsibility of women can lead us to over-demand them and make invisible the responsibilities that correspond to men or other actors and institutions. This, in addition to being counterproductive in the light of feminist criticisms of justice, can violate the fundamental rights of women themselves and the exercise of their moral autonomy.

Counterposition of the principles of justice and good living

On the basis of the feminine/masculine opposition, deontological ethics have reproduced the public/private dichotomy - as we have just seen - and, with it, the opposition between justice and the good life. Thus, for example, Kant will argue:

The virtue of women is a beautiful virtue (...) They will avoid evil not because it is unjust, but because it is ugly, and virtuous acts are for them the morally beautiful ones. No duty, no necessity, no obligation. Women find unbearable any order and any morose construction (...). It seems difficult to me the fair sex to be capable of principles. (1997, p. 155)

For Kant, not only are women incapable of acting according to principles¹¹ (or post-conventional morality in Kolbergian language) since they lack moral autonomy, but also virtue (the beautiful, inclination, interest) would be incompatible with “the just” (duty). These Kantian demands of universality and autonomy - where the authentic moral conduct is to follow what is just and not the interest - found continuation during the 20th century through authors such as Rawls, Apel and Habermas. Impartiality, defined from the idea of universal reason (understood as masculine), is the result of the opposition between “reason” and “desires”, situated from an ideal perspective that could hardly be applied to empirical reality, since it appeals to a situation of reasoning that removes people from the context in which they make decisions.

¹¹ Starting from the universal maxim, i.e., “work in such a way that you use humanity, both in your person and in the person of any other, always as an end at the same time and never only as a means” (Kant, 1994, p. 84).

Reinforcing the above, we see how the moral sphere, in which the criteria of justice operate, would be delimited by the public space; while the values belonging to the domestic space -understood as part of the particular options of a good life- are considered to be outside the strictly moral sphere. Based on this evidence, the emancipatory telos of feminism proposes to dismantle the dichotomies (“false antitheses” or “false oppositions”) that are presented as irreconcilable and oppressive, both in deontological ethical theories and in liberal political theory (Benhabib, 2006; Carosio, 2007; Fraser, 1997). We will return to this purpose in the third section.

The presumption of autonomy of the moral subject

Finally, the third criticism that we will address alludes to the presumption of autonomy of the moral subject on the part of the theories of justice. By questioning the impartiality approach, the impossibility of a “neutral point of view” - capable of deciding what is pertinent a priori - where the subject is capable of totally abstracting from his conditions of existence, including the ties that bind him to other people (affective relationships, care, loyalty, etc.), is positioned.

For authors such as Benhabib (2006), the assumption of a rootless autonomous male ego responds to a fiction, which makes theories of justice indifferent and insensitive to the context and contextual reasoning of subjects. The abstraction of the subject extracts it from the social and affective relations that constitute it, obviating the fact that subjects are not detached, but that we are inserted in networks of interdependence that shape our moral needs, identities and conceptions of both justice and the good life (Benhabib, 1992; 2006; Gilligan, 1985). In doing so, the recognition of a concrete subject is evaded. At the same time, it ignores the place we occupy in the social fabric: the relations of reciprocity and power that shape our particular situations. In this context, it is reasonable to think of an embodied, situated, interdependent subject, who is determined in historical terms and who has a specific location in the social fabric.

Having commented on the main feminist criticisms of deontological ethics, in the following section we will present some elements that allow us to outline a feminist ethics, characterized by the proposal of a situated ethics.



A situated ethics

On the basis of the criticisms discussed, feminist theory has put forward different approaches that allow us to outline a situated and dynamic ethics centered on subjects and their networks of interdependence, which points to a different relational order. In this context, we will present some elements that shape a feminist ethics¹². First, it is understood that the moral subject does not respond to an abstraction, but is embodied and that, at the moment of making ethical decisions, she cannot totally abstract from her context and the social relations that shape her behavior. Secondly, feminist ethics seeks to destabilize the dichotomies naturalized by deontological ethics, proposing to integrate the ideals of justice and the good life into ethical thinking, as well as to bring the principles of justice to spaces recognized as private. Finally, the promotion of the principles of solidarity and co-responsibility in moral decisions, which are often relegated to being assumed as “feminine” values, is highlighted. Each of these aspects will be discussed below.

The embodied moral subject

As an alternative to the subject proposed by the ethics of duty - abstract, autonomous and rational -, feminist ethics proposes thinking of the subject as positionality: incarnated, contextual and socially and affectively interdependent. The moral subject is understood, on the one hand, as a diverse/plural subject in terms of identity; and, on the other hand, as a relational subject that becomes from its location (its positions and functions) in the social framework, being especially relevant the power relations in which people are inserted (Benhabib, 1992; Carosio, 2007). It alludes, then, to an experience that is neither essential nor innate, but rather historically and contextually signified.

The proposal of a situated subject - among other things - is fundamental for the approach of intersectionality by feminist theory, a perspective that allows us to understand the mutual constitution of social structures and the effects - in terms of inequalities and privileges- that this matrix of power has on the lives of individuals and groups (Collins, 2000; Cubillos, 2015; Muñoz-Arce and Larraín-Salas, 2019). Intersectionality invites us to understand the complex interactions between different structures of inequality (e.g. gender, race/ethnicity, social class), to make them explicit and discuss them open-

¹²We do not wish to homogenize the proposals of various feminist authors in the field of ethics. There are different proposals and different emphases; however, some common elements can be distinguished, such as those presented in this section.

ly. This is to understand how they influence the life circumstances of individuals and groups and their conditions of speech. In the line of a communicative ethics, the intention is to prevent inequalities from contaminating discursive interaction and to reach fair agreements for all people involved (Benhabib, 2006; Fraser, 1997).

From this point of view, social interventions that uncritically assume standardized repertoires should be reviewed, aiming at an informed examination of the situations to be worked on: recognizing the power relations that cross it and any other relevant background that may eventually limit horizontal dialogues (both among the parties involved and between professionals and intervention subjects). This aims at recognizing the hierarchical social relations in the situation addressed and the moral autonomy - capacity of speech and action - of all participants, avoiding silencing, re-victimization, reproduction of stereotypes and impositions in the intervention process.

Thinking of the subject as positionality does not imply renouncing universality, but rather rethinking it in a non-totalizing way: a metaphorized universality in a field of permanent dispute, constantly questioning its foundations, recognizing what it authorizes and what it excludes (Butler, 2007). There is a transition from a rational universalism -recognized as oppressive, for trying to position itself as a unique, representative and normative concept- towards a dialogic universalism, in constant construction based on the experiences of diverse subjects (Guirao, 2010). In particular, Benhabib proposes an interactive (non-legislative) universalism, which reformulates the principle of universalization in the model of moral dialogue proposed by authors such as Apel and Habermas. A universalism “aware of the differences between genders, not blind to them, sensitive to the context and not indifferent to the situations” (Benhabib, 2006, p. 16), where “the willingness to reason from the point of view of the other, and the sensitivity to listen to their voices” (Benhabib, 2006, p. 21) are essential.

Benhabib bets on visualizing the moral subject, at the same time, as a generalized other and a concrete other. On the one hand, to recognize him/her as a moral person with the same rights as ourselves; respecting him/her, recognizing his/her agency, voice and capacity for a sense of justice. And, on the other hand, to understand him/her “as a unique individual with a vital history, disposition and determined capacities, as well as with needs and limitations” (Benhabib, 2006, p. 22). The author bets on the cultivation of the qualities of friendship and civic solidarity, capable of mediating between the points of view of the generalized others and the concrete others. For Benhabib, civic solidarity -which implies a willingness to understand and a willingness to reach agreements in an



open dialogue- would teach us to reason and understand. It can also help to bridge the gaps between relations of justice (principles of moral right) and those of virtue (which defines our relations with ourselves and others); and “force the boundaries between private needs and public claims, individual misfortunes and collectively representable grievances” (Benhabib, 2006, p. 22). This approach points to two issues that will be fundamental to feminist ethics: i) The promotion of cooperation and solidarity; ii) the recognition of the interdependencies between public and private interests, and the principles of justice and good life.

Solidarity and co-responsibility

A claim from feminist theory to the ethics of justice is to give too much centrality to reason (assumed as an eminently masculine attribute and proper to the public space), to the detriment of values such as solidarity and care (assumed as feminine and proper to the private space). Thus, feminism has posed the challenge of destabilizing the reason/affect dichotomy in ethical reflection, demanding the universalization of values constructed as feminine in order to integrate them into the ethical debate and discussion in the public sphere. An ethics based only on ideals such as reason - in contrast to and devaluation of affectivity - would lack solidarity and values of respect for “the other” relevant to humanize society (Benhabib, 1992; Camps, 1990; López, 2004; Pisano, 2004). Care -for oneself, for others and for nature- is positioned as a fundamental human activity to sustain society and the public, recognizing the vulnerability of the human condition (Butler, 2006; Carosio, 2007; Puleo, 2011).

Victòria Camps (1990) states that justice is not perfect in itself (it does not reach everyone) nor does it constitute the totality of ethical demands; therefore, it needs to be compensated with feelings of help, friendship and recognition of the other. Thus:

it is necessary to take care of and attend to another neighboring value of justice, the value that consists in showing oneself united to other persons or groups, sharing their interests and their needs, in feeling solidarity with the pain and suffering of others. Solidarity is, therefore, a virtue, which must be understood as a condition of justice, and as that measure which, in turn, comes to compensate for the inadequacies of this fundamental virtue (...). Solidarity is a practice that is beyond but also goes beyond justice. (1990, p. 36)

The relevance of articulating justice with solidarity has been evidenced in the context of the current socio-health crisis caused by COVID-19 at the national level, since, where

justice provided by the State has not arrived (in health, education, subsistence), various manifestations associated with care have been developed by civil society (common pots, support campaigns to cover basic needs, etc.). All of which leads to questioning the ethics of justice from the ethics of care, not positioning them as separate ethics, but seeking their integration and recognition.

Destabilizing and integrating dichotomies: public/private and justice/good life

As mentioned above, the emancipatory telos of feminism proposes to dismantle dichotomies that become oppressive and irreconcilable (Carosio, 2007). In this scenario, it is assumed that there are no static or aprioristic boundaries between the public and the private, as proposed by deontological ethics. That is, what should be considered of common interest will be decided through discursive confrontation (Benhabib, 2006; Fraser, 1997).

An appeal is made to a redefinition of the public and the private that recognizes their interrelationships, since the domestic sphere is also political and of public interest, while the public space cannot ignore the particularities and relations of interdependence between subjects (Benhabib, 2006; Pateman, 1995). Feminist ethics has expanded the sphere of ethics by claiming that the private is also political and by not leaving out of its reasoning any element of the human (Gargallo, 2004). The sharp division between public/private and reason/emotion has allowed the exclusion of relations of solidarity from the public sphere. A coexistence based on reciprocity implies observing the private sphere from the prism of justice: family norms and those that sustain the social and sexual division of labor, allowing issues and values inherent to daily interactions to circulate between the public and private domains.

In this line, and with the purpose of tensioning, destabilizing and integrating “false antitheses” (Fraser, 1997), feminist theory proposes that thinking of a horizon of social justice does not necessarily imply forgetting that there are conceptions of “good life”, making visible the power relations that cross moral precepts and that have limited free and self-determined female existence, by defining a duty to be for women (“being-for-others”) that promotes their inferiorization, use and control within the family and society (Hierro, 2014a; 2014b; López, 2004; Pisano, 2004). Feminism has sought to vindicate the “feminine subjectivity” that has been denied, in particular, tracing the imperative of recognizing the “human capacity to respect ourselves and design our own lives and the society we want” (Pisano, 2004, p. 6). This reintegrates the debates on the good life into the ethical sphere without counterposing them to the ideals of justice.

In this regard, Graciela Hierro (2014b) proposes the so-called ethics of pleasure, defined as a feminist ethic committed to everyday life, where neither the pursuit of pleasure nor personal or collective satisfactions, mainly of women, are sacrificed. The right thing for women would be to become “beings-for-itself”, which implies self-determination and self-interest, assuming pleasure as the meaning of existence and determinant of a good life. From (self-)interest it would be possible to reposition women -and other subjects- in society and with themselves, becoming aware of the responsibility of overcoming their oppressive situation, by opening themselves to the possibility of pleasure and happiness. As Margarita Pisano states, “feminism, by claiming the right to enjoyment, pleasure and the body as legitimate, not guilty, is counterposing to the morality of suffering a desire for the good life” (2004, p. 9). An ethics “that reflects both the dignity of justice and the promise of happiness” (Benhabib, 2006, p. 16) that is not only concerned with rules (duty, justice), but with anything that is valued as moral (Carosio, 2007).

Such ethics (“for-itself”) does not aim at a self-referential and selfish ethics, it recognizes

the free action of a person in solidarity with others and the whole, both against the injustice of the domination of a person, sex, class, culture or race in the name of its supposed universality, both against the subjugation of the nature of which we are part based on a supposed human superiority over all living things. (Gargallo, 2004, p. 24).

This ethical commitment goes beyond particularistic intentions, promoting responsibility not only with oneself, but also with the human and non-human environment.

In this sense, it would be necessary to assume, as social workers, reciprocal relationships with people, where we not only act recognizing the generalized other - worthy of respect, with rights and capacity for speech and action - but also integrating the concrete other, in his/her particularity, history, limitations and possibilities (Benhabib, 2006). Likewise, responsibility and solidarity among the participants of a given intervention should be recognized and strengthened, where, on the one hand, space is provided for self-determination and the responsibility of each person or group with their own processes; and, on the other hand, obligations of collective well-being are assumed by the different people involved, based on reciprocal relationships.

Conclusions

On the basis of this article, we have been able to review the main criticisms from feminist theory to deontological ethical theories -to the normative universality, the dichotomies linked to the public and private spheres, to the principles of justice and good life, and the figure of an autonomous moral subject-, which derive from the proposal of a feminist ethics. This proposal, nourished by various postulates, aims at a situated ethics that conceives a different relational order: one that contemplates the impacts of an intertwined power matrix and visualizes an autonomous but interdependent moral subject, endowed with reason but also sensitivity. A subject capable of becoming aware of its conditions of existence and the place it occupies in society, capable of taking responsibility for its processes and establishing reciprocal relationships to build better projections of its future, in terms of justice and self-determination.

These debates allow us to reposition reflections, perhaps not so new, but which we face on a daily basis. This discussion draws attention to knots and disjunctions that are important to attend to. We know that reflections and proposals emerge from professional practices that eventually dialogue with the arguments presented. We also understand that these concerns are not exclusive to feminism; we have only tried to make them available as a conceptual apparatus that dialogues with the practices, with the purpose of continuing to mobilize critical views in the praxis of social work, from feminist ethical reflections that aspire to the transformation of structures that become unjust, both in objective and subjective terms.

We consider that feminist counterpoints to the ethical debate would allow us to advance in the development of emancipatory practices that allow us to complexly understand the contexts of intervention, moving away from standardized discourses and their uncritical applications; moving away from fixed and prescriptive discourses (Muñoz-Arce and Larraín-Salas, 2019). We hope that these reflections will be channeled towards critical views, which will, above all, stress those “false opposites” (public/private; justice/good life; reason/emotion) in the framework of social intervention, including the dichotomy “who intervenes/who is intervened”.



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About the authors

Javiera Cubillos Almendra is a social worker from the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Master in Gender Equality in the Social Sciences and PhD in Political Science from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Academic at the School of Sociology and Associate Researcher at the Center for Urban Territorial Studies (CEUT), Universidad Católica del Maule (UCM).

E-mail address: jcubillos@ucm.cl

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8080-4049>

Carlo Zarallo Valdés is Professor of Philosophy, Master in Philosophy at the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), Brazil. PhD candidate in Philosophy at UFSC, Brazil. Becado CAPES.

E-mail address: carlo.zarallo@hotmail.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6655-045X>