

Self-Sacrifice: A Philosophical Analysis from the Perspective of Gender

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Abstract

The understanding of the concept of 'self' cannot be complete without examining it's being embodied, which we understand as an 'embodied self'. The self is always situated in a historical, social, political, geographical, familial context. Some of these situations can be what we are born with. My main contention is to discuss what do men and women understand by self-sacrifice and how do they exercise it. The way gender determines our identities and ways of living, could also be located with reference to the notion of self-sacrifice. I would like to argue that the sacrifices should not be evaluated in a gendered way. Women who are making such sacrifices and men who are mostly at the other end, should recognize the value of these sacrificial acts. Just because most of the actions of women are of traditional set up and hardly questioned by them, it should not be taken for granted. The moral worth of women's action is as significant as that of men's. Human existence consists of rationality as well as emotions, and hence the involvement of these aspects of human personality should be valued equally.

Keywords: self, self-sacrifice, gender, private-sphere, public-sphere, traditional ethical theories, ethics of care

Introduction

The understanding of the concept of 'self' cannot be complete without examining it's being embodied, which we understand as an 'embodied self'. The self is always situated in a historical, social, political, geographical, familial context. Some of these situations can be what we are born with. For instance, a person is born into a particular family, maybe from a rich background or a poor background. The world we live in is so diverse and there is no doubt about it. The world is filled with different societies and living in a society, we are guided by different social structures namely our caste, race, economic background and gender¹. Discriminating someone or putting someone down because of from where they come is never justified. Every person is an individual and has the freedom to think for themselves until it is not hurting or harming themselves or someone else. For instance, a job that someone chooses to do is something that the person should

be able to choose as per her or his capacity.

In this article, I will discuss how does our gender influence the sacrifices we make. Human beings are social beings and in order to live in a society, we do something for others which requires the sacrifice of our interests. We can say that we all tend to sacrifice something in order to fit in the society we belong, so that the ‘society’ does not judge us for the choices we make. However, the question remains how are these sacrifices done and judged when it is done by people of different gender. However, since we live in a patriarchal society where our identities are gendered in way that we are expected to perform different roles and responsibilities, the evaluation of our being good or bad largely depends on those gender-specific duties.

Simone de Beauvoir, a feminist thinker, has asserted: “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”² and “He is the Subject, He is the Absolute. She is the Other.”³ By these two statements, she has made an attempt to establish that gender is a socially constructed identity in which men have been given privilege over women. The ‘self’ refers differently to men and women, and this is because of the patriarchal setup of the society. Since gender is a social construct, the identities of men and women are also embedded with social, political and historical contingencies. Men and women have very different ways of living, thinking and working and this is not only because they are fundamentally different from each other biologically, but also due to the norms and meanings attached with their genders. One of the most common example is the case where, in a patriarchal set up, women are expected to take care of the private realm, whereas men are supposed to go out and be the part of the public sphere.

The way gender determines our identities and ways of living, could also be located with reference to the notion of self-sacrifice. In this article, I would like to find out how does the distinction between private and public realms affect and form the understanding and significance of sacrifices for women and men? Can we say that their sacrifices carry equal worth irrespective of the realms they sacrifice in? How is the notion of sacrifice associated with one’s morality and how do various ethical theories deal with this relation? Do ethical theories make any distinction between masculinity and femininity of the self? If the self is gendered in these ethical theories? If no, then why women have not been referred to various ethical theories as moral agents? and if yes, then what is the basis of this distinction?

Generally, self-sacrifice is understood as giving away one’s life or interest for the others

or for a cause. However, it can also be understood as letting go of something, like our money, time or emotions for someone or for a cause; this self-sacrifice in the article will be discussed according to the gender, i.e., man and woman. In post-industrial world, the sexual division of labour has largely become the distinction of public and private. Due to industrial growth, men started working in industries and hence established their hegemony in the public realm to secure the lives and well-being of family members in the private realm. On the other hand, women were supposed to work within their homes, remaining within the private realm, and taking care of the well-being of family members and in this way, they were carrying and protecting the norms and stability of the society. This shows that although the distinction between private and public was maintained and was apparent, the contribution in one realm had a certain impact on the other realm. However, this arrangement of the distribution of responsibilities and roles in public and private spheres created a hierarchy between these two genders. Before I examine, how the contribution in one sphere (the public sphere), which also contributed in the other sphere (the private sphere) with less direct association, became superior to the contribution in the other field (the private sphere), it is imperative to discuss and deliberate on the question, ‘what is sacrifice?’ The sacrifice will be discussed from the point of view of the public-sphere and the private-sphere.

I

One significant point is to be remembered that if the thing or position sacrificed is not affecting the lives of others, it would hardly be considered a sacrificial act. In order to be recognized as a sacrifice, it has to be beneficial for the others or at least should be intended for that. Hence, it could be argued that a sacrifice which affects more lives becomes more significant and valuable. The way ethical theories have defined the difference between selfish and moral acts, leads us to this understanding where we refrain from doing selfish acts and want to stick to the moral principles adhered to by the traditional dominant ethical theories.

A moral action is such that it involves an awareness of one’s choices and the freedom of will to choose to perform a particular act. In doing this, the use of the faculty of reason plays a vital role. Any action performed out of mere emotion, passion or feeling is not considered to be a moral action. Such kind of actions make us equivalent to animals as they are the ones who are controlled and guided by their emotions and senses. Immanuel Kant, Aristotle, J.S. Mill, believe faculty of reason to be the foundation of

morality. Although they differ from each other in the formulation of moral principles and Aristotle even argues against the possibility of developing any universal moral principle, all of them agree that morality could not and should not be based on our emotions.

This overemphasis on the use of the faculty of reason, raises one important question, why it has been the case that emotions have not been accepted as a source of morality. It has been argued by Aristotle and Kant that men are rational and women are emotional beings. Does it mean that women cannot be moral or that their actions could not be judged from a moral perspective? If this is the case, what would it mean for a woman to be good?

Before starting to analyse the posed question, it is important to discuss a few things that will make us understand it properly. Edward O. Wilson in *Human Decency is Animal* says that:

In hunter-gatherer societies, men hunt and women stay at home. This strong bias persists in most agricultural and industrial societies and, on that ground alone, appears to have a genetic origin... My own guess is that the genetic bias is intense enough to cause a substantial division of labor even in the most free and most egalitarian societies. . . . Even with identical education and equal access to all professions, men are likely to continue to play a disproportionate role in political life, business, and science.⁴

As they are brought-up with such a mind-set, men usually become dominant in a patriarchal set-up. It is without a doubt that the window of education, work and opportunities for men are limitless, the reason for this is because it is understood that men are capable of doing everything (or at least are encouraged to do so) and for that reason boys are exposed to better education. Marie de Gournay says that women “achieve levels of excellence” less often than men because of their “lack of good education.”⁵ Having been given such opportunities since their childhood, a boy, undoubtedly get a better chance of excelling in career. All of this is done because it is true that men are expected to be the breadwinners of their families. Education, primarily, becomes a means to this end where they are prepared for becoming financially independent, who has the responsibility of looking after the financial needs of family. In a patriarchal society, men are compelled (implicitly and explicitly) to follow this path and this becomes the source of their privileged position in society. This also gives them a status higher to that of women, who is supposed to be financially dependent on their men.

In today’s time, the trend is changing, where we see both men and women work. Women are also fighting for their rights and it has been realized by parents that in order to

lessen the social evil and crimes against women, it is imperative to educate girls and make them financially independent. However, this progressive step gets challenged once again by the set gendered roles of women in their families, in particular, and society, in general. After marriage, if given an option and a situation arises as to who should leave their job, it is usually the woman who has to leave her job in such a situation; for instance, if the work timing and the amount of work is too much for a woman to manage the responsibilities in the private sphere as well as in the public sphere, then it is her responsibility to put her private sphere over and above the public sphere. The reason why I am saying 'has to' is because as mentioned earlier, it is a woman who is expected to stay at home and look after the house while a man is expected to provide for the family; to take care of the needs and responsibilities of the house is primarily her domain and she is not allowed to transgress that in any case. Compromising with career for the sake of welfare of family is one of the examples where women struggle with maintaining both the worlds, public as well as private, and hardly succeed in any of them completely.

It could be argued that in the modern world, women's household burden is shared by maids and other domestic servants and hence they are not saddled with the responsibility of the private sphere. In this reference, whereas, on the one hand, it could be argued that still the job of dealing with the servants remains intact with women largely, on the other hand, it is worth mentioning that these house hold activities are generally shifted from one woman to another woman. Hence, it should be noted that this reallocates the gender-specific work.

Sometimes, such traditions are hard on women who are poor and who want to help out financially because most women (especially women from a weak economic background) are not allowed to venture out of their homes in search of work and this is not that they are not capable of working outside their homes, but because 'tradition' shows and teaches us that women belong to the private sphere while men belong to the public sphere and hence, sacrifices made are restricted to their gender specific sphere. Traditionally men, across most traditions, have been understood as being assertive, independent, intellectual, transcendent⁶ etc. and this has been one of the contentions of feminist ethics that traditional dominant ethical theories have overrated the culturally masculine traits of human-beings such as assertiveness, independence, intellectuality, rationality, capability to be transcendent etc.

Since patriarchy privileges men over other genders, men's sacrifices are also

privileged over women's sacrifices. In the traditional ethical understanding, selfishness is put in opposition to altruism. Hence, it becomes morally valuable to sacrifice one's ends for the sake of others. When we talk about sacrifices done by men or supposed to be done by men that is socially recognized and is intended for the achievement of the good of the society. The concept of sacrifice has been discussed by so many thinkers. Men are supposed to sacrifice their lives or interests for the sake of their nation, religion, etc. Hence, their sacrifices are considered to be something which make them acclaimed. There sacrifices too are the part of the public world. This does not mean that men never sacrifice in their homes, but the point is that their sacrifices are usually intended for higher social and political aims and are more recognized in comparison to that of women.

Men are conditioned and susceptible to making sacrifices for the sake of their professional life. Most of the sacrifices done by men are for the sake of their own welfare and are primarily related to their work-place. For instance, if work is important to a man, then he will sacrifice for work and in his work-place. A boy when he is brought-up is usually brought up to 'think like a man' and to 'think like a man' is to mentally prepare him to study hard and earn well. For instance, a boy, since in school, is taught that he should concentrate on his studies and perform well academically so that he gets into a good college and then his path to getting a 'hefty pay-cheque' is to some extent guaranteed. A boy on his way to becoming a man is taught that getting a good job is priority because earning well and being able to provide at home is what makes a man, 'a man'. In such a case, he maybe more sacrificial when it comes to work but maybe not when it comes to family. They sacrifice their comfort and work hard for sustaining in the public world. When they sacrifice, in the public realm for their jobs and financial independence, they get promoted and are paid more for that. The point is their sacrifices make them progress. Whereas, when women sacrifice their career for the sake of their children and family, it is considered to be their duty as mothers and does not lead to any recognized progress in their lives.

Many philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, have described men as being independent or autonomous. Aristotle in his book *Politics* says "The slave is wholly lacking the deliberative element; the female has it but it lacks authority; the child has it but it is incomplete."⁷ It is believed that men experience the world differently than the way it is experienced by women. Men are more independent than women in making decisions when it comes to their social-life and work-life. Whereas, for a man, the decision taken

by him for his career is primarily taken by him based on his capabilities and interests and it is hardly compromised after marriage due to the responsibility of family or by the views of his wife; on the other hand, a woman's career is mostly constrained by the limits of the issues of her security and safety and the suitability of her job for family's welfare. Since women are supposed to take care of their families, they tend to go for those jobs which require lesser working hours and work responsibility. After marriage, the decision about their career and other activities are guided and controlled by their husband. Hence, it can be said that men exercise more independence in comparison to women, be it the issue of their physical safety (they can choose any career option without being afraid of sexual exploitation), or financial security (they can choose to leave their houses even after marriage for the sake of better career opportunity). She cannot decide independently, like the way a man can decide for himself, independently. It is often the case that in a family, women move where their man's work take them, so even when that means a working woman should leave her job.

This could be reflected in the case of self-sacrifice too. We see that, women mostly sacrifice without any deliberation over the sacrifices done. They do it as their duty which has to be done and which has hardly been questioned. Hence the sacrifices done by them for the sake of their families are less recognized, as men sacrifice things not just out of their gender specific duties, which can never be questioned, but out of choice and deliberation.

The possibility of validity of moral rules is based on their being based on rationality. The masculine understanding of morality is universalistic and abstract meant for the individuals. This leads to the binaries of reason and emotion, public and private and men and women. It is argued by various traditional ethical theorists that the faculty of reason is the source of morality in human beings and this gives us scope of being impartial and independent in the exercise of moral actions. Hence, since men are considered to be independent, and rational, they are the ones who can maintain the impartiality in moral behaviour and hence are capable of being moral beings. Women, on the other hand, being culturally defined as emotional beings, are hardly capable of being moral in a true sense.

Dominance of men on women has been the ongoing problem. This dominance is not just limited to physical strength but is manifested in various fields, such as, academically, at work-places, and at home, etc. Men are dominant in the public sphere due to their

independence, privileged position in society, they also dominate women in the private world because women are dependent on them. The way women are conditioned, they consider themselves to be dependent on men and hence are dominated by them.

Considering the traits ascribed to men according to the traditional dominant ethical theories, such as independence and autonomy, intellect and rationality, dominance and transcendence, it can be said that men consider the success in the public-sphere as a state of freedom, because public-sphere is considered as an area where people would come together and speak freely and act independently and rationally so that they can make a difference in the society. While this is not possible in the case of private-sphere. The reason being that, the private-sphere is a sphere where only the family and the household chores exist and that is considered as a mundane life, where no personal growth is possible, and this sphere is given to women mainly because of the reproductive system and so, she is excluded from the public-sphere.

There is no doubt that men have sacrificed for their family, in terms of time, emotion and money. Such as, one, a father sacrificing his time, emotion and money for his children by putting their needs before his own. Two, a brother sacrificing his time to accompany his sister. Three, a husband sacrificing his money for his wife. Four, a son sacrificing his time, emotion and money for his parents' needs. In all these cases too, men are seen as the care-takers while women are the ones who need to be taken care of; the reason for this can be that women are seen as someone who can be harmed, sexually and physically, and hence the sense to protect a woman, in terms of a sister, daughter, wife or mother, is instilled in a man, in terms of a brother, father, husband or son. However, the difference is that if men decide to sacrifice in the private sphere then it is recognised and the man is held praiseworthy for it, while this is not so when it comes to women sacrificing in the private sphere.

The sacrifice of a self is closely related to the understanding of how do we define the self. Whereas the masculine traits of a self-include independence, autonomy, transcendence, rationality, feminine traits are dependence, being emotional, remain immanent. If we look at the primary distinction between the traits of these two selves, we find that it is very difficult to account women's sacrifices. Since they are already dependent, immanent, emotional, the sacrifices they make are not taking anything away from them. The self, which is already does not have anything to give away, cannot have

the scope for sacrifice. This is one of the primary reasons that sacrifices done by women are not noticed or praised.

Women generally perform their gender-specific duties in the private sphere and the dilemma of sacrificing their own interests for the sake of others hardly arises as it is assumed on the basis of the culturally defined traits of a feminine self that they should work for the wellbeing of their family members and that would make them ‘good mothers’, ‘good wives’, etc. However, the dilemma of choosing one over the other becomes significant in the case of clash between the roles required for public and private sphere. This dilemma of choosing one over the other is primarily related to the lives of working women as in a patriarchal setup, as culturally public-sphere is not considered to be of their gender.

Since in a patriarchal and heterosexual structure of society the public-sphere is primarily the realm of men and women are associated with the realm of private, their achievements could be accounted for when it is related to their duties within their houses. Due to this, she is taught to sacrifice in the public-sphere for the sake of private-sphere and is expected to do so every time she has to choose between ‘herself and work’, ‘herself and family’, ‘herself and other people’.

There have been different ways how feminists have seen the problem of the patriarchal setup. Some have said that both women and men have the same values and so there is no need to discriminate, instead women should be given the same opportunities as that of men. While some say that, because women are the only gender that can reproduce therefore their virtues and outlook is different from that of men and instead of discriminating women on the grounds of moral immaturity or lack of rationality, they should be given equal respect and appreciation for what they do. This becomes more prominent with the discussion of Ethics of Care and how different feminists have presented different formulation to Ethics of Care.

II

Care Ethics, which is a feminist perspective to morality and decision-making, concentrates more on emotions, especially care, and says that this trait is most culturally most common in women than in men. Women and men are different from each other and that is why we see their inclination to different things. Since biologically women are capable of giving birth to a child, motherhood is associated with them. It is believed that by virtue of being

someone who gives birth and nurtures babies, they are prone to be caring, nurturing and are emotional beings. Care ethics highlights this aspect of women's existence by maintaining that ethics should be based on care which is a feminine virtue. Hence instead of focusing on rationality, which is primarily considered to be the virtue of men and because of which women have been denied the status of a moral being, we should highlight and attach more importance to the feminine virtues. Instead of berating what is associated with women and struggle to make them equivalent to men, one should focus on feminine values as they are of great importance. Care ethics challenges the liberal justice traditions (deontological and utilitarian theories of ethics) and produces an alternative, but equally legitimate, form of morality which has put more emphasis on care, interdependency and interpersonal relationships. Whereas the significance and contribution of the works associated with the private sphere is hardly recognized as worthy of making anyone a moral being in the liberal justice traditions, as it is primarily seen as associated with and limited to women's lives and existence; care ethics has underlined how the feminine virtues such as caring, nurturing, and attachment and concern for others as well as to oneself are constitutive of moral behaviour. Carol Gilligan states:

In order to go beyond the question, "How much like men do women think, how capable are they of engaging in the abstract and hypothetical construction of reality?" it is necessary to identify and define in formal terms developmental criteria that encompass the categories of women's thinking.⁸

However, Ethics of Care is not opposed to the main traditional ethical theories, instead it tries to include 'care' along with the other moral virtues, such as justice, virtue, rationality etc., as has been argued by Virginia Held:

The ethics of care, it should be noted, has potential comparable to that of rationalistic moral theories. It appeals to the universal experience of caring. Every conscious human being has been cared for as a child and can see the value in the care that shaped him or her; every thinking person can recognize the moral worth of the caring relations that gave him or her a future. The ethics of care builds on experience that all persons share, though they have often been unaware of its embedded values and implications.⁹

Care Ethics, unlike the traditional dominant ethical theories, takes care of people and the different situations that people encounter. It attempts to draw attention to the importance of care which is associated with the virtues of women. They are interested more in incorporating emotional aspect of human experience in the concept of morality itself.

III

After reaching this far, this might sound clichéd but, what I've noticed is that men have been at an advantage, both in the public-sphere and the private-sphere. I am not supportive of the compartmentalisation concerning work opportunities of men and women just because of their gender and also having distinct ethical theories based on rationality and emotion. I fully support gender equality where men and women should get the same opportunity and this is only possible when both, men and women, are equipped equally educationally since childhood. However, this should start at home, where a mother, who **chooses** to stay at home to look after the house and the family, should get the same respect and value as a man who works in the public-sphere. The reason I stress on 'chooses' is because it must be realised and accepted that some women would not mind staying in and looking after the family and the house; however, it must be recognised that women should be free to choose what they want to do. It could be argued that what would happen if a woman chooses not to take care of the children, then who will be responsible for them. The point is not that we should argue for women leaving all the roles and responsibilities, but, that this responsibility should be shared equally between both genders and should be as respectable as other paid works are.

It must be understood that gender is a social construction and not a biological construction, because understanding gender as a social construct will make it more promising for a change in the society where, since history this biased confinement of women in the private-sphere and men in the public-sphere has been practiced and was justified on the basis of biological differences. As far as the moral worth of women's sacrifices are concerned, I would like to argue that women and men both are rational and emotional beings. It is hard to think of a human existence which is devoid of either of these aspects.

Through my article, I hope I was able to raise other questions too such as, first, do social constructions become moral rules overtime? Second, even if women agree to follow the rules pertaining to the patriarchal system, does this have to be taken for granted or unrecognised? I have made an attempt to deal with these questions throughout the article and I believe whatever work is done by either of the sexes, they must be recognized and valued equally.

Endnotes

¹In this article, I will only talk about the gender hierarchy in the social structure.

²Beauvoir, Simone de. 2011. *The Second Sex*. Great Britain: Vintage: 293.

³Ibid, p.6.

⁴Wilson, Edward O. "Human Decency is Animal", *New York Times Magazine*, 12 October, 1975. <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/10/12/archives/human-decency-is-animal-hawks-and-baboons-are-not-usually-heroic.html>

⁵Anderson, Nick. "Philosophy's gender bias: For too long, scholars say, women have been ignored", *The Washington Post*, 28 April 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2015/04/28/philosophys-gender-bias-for-too-long-scholars-say-women-have-been-ignored/?utm_term=.6804f636ad65

⁶Tong, Rosemarie and Williams, Nancy, "Feminist Ethics", *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/feminism-ethics/>

⁷Borghini, Andrea. "Plato and Aristotle on Women: Selected Quotes." ThoughtCo. <https://www.thoughtco.com/plato-aristotle-on-women-selected-quotes-2670553>

⁸Gilligan, Carol. 1985. *In a Different Voice: Women's Conception of Self and of Morality* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 490.

⁹Held, Virginia. 2006. *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. New York: Oxford University Press: 21.

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