

Interpreting Feminist Ethics as a Way of Doing Management Ethics: A Few Philosophical Reflections

Kumar Neeraj Sachdev
Associate Professor
Birla Institute of Technology and
Sciences (BITS) Pilani Campus
Pilani, Rajasthan, India.

Ashwini Ramesh Sharma
Research Scholar
Birla Institute of Technology and
Sciences (BITS) Pilani Campus
Pilani, Rajasthan, India.

Abstract

In everyday life, individuals encounter ethical challenges often shaped by traditional ideas about gender roles. These ideas also influence the field of management, affecting how managers make decisions, interact with others, and structure organizations. Management ethics is primarily shaped by a framework that reflects patriarchal values, emphasizing competition, rational control, and authority. Despite the increasing presence of women in management and leadership roles, many organizations' ethical norms and managerial structures continue to reflect male-centric perspectives. This often results in the under representation of values such as collaboration, emotional intelligence, holistic decision-making, care, and empathy, which are integral to a more inclusive approach to leadership. As a result, ethical management practices continue to carry gender biases.

In this paper, we argue that feminist ethics, centered on care, empathy, interdependence, and attention to lived experiences, offers a crucial framework for reimagining management ethics. We apply a feminist lens to examine ethics in management, challenging the traditional reliance on ethical theories predominantly shaped by male perspectives, such as Kantian and Utilitarian ethics. Feminist ethics promotes a more inclusive, relational, and equitable approach to ethical decision-making, one that better reflects the diverse experiences and needs of all members of an organization.

Keywords

Management ethics, Feminist ethics, Care, Lived experiences, Inclusive, and Individuality.

1. Introduction

Ethics is a system of moral principles that guide decision-making and behaviour, focusing on determining what is suitable for individuals and society. Often referred to as moral philosophy, the term "ethics" is derived from the Greek word *ethos*, which encompasses meanings such as custom, habit, character, or disposition. Ethical inquiries address fundamental questions, such as how to live a virtuous life, the rights and responsibilities of individuals, the distinction between right and wrong, and the nature of moral actions. Ethics as a philosophical subdiscipline encompasses various branches, such as metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. However, feminist ethics is not traditionally considered a branch of ethics in the same way. Instead, it offers a distinct way of doing ethics, challenging the assumptions and practices within these established branches. Similarly, Care Ethics¹ is also not an alternative moral theory, but a different way of framing or thinking about ethics (Hamington, M. (2013). Furthermore, care ethics arose out of women's experience and feminist theory, but it is not a "woman's morality." (Ibid.pp.1129) Both feminist ethics and Care Ethics engage with all these areas, questioning and reshaping them from a perspective that highlights the experiences and concerns of marginalized groups, particularly women.

Management ethics is a subfield of business ethics, which falls under applied ethics. It focuses on the practical application of ethical theories to the roles and responsibilities of managers within organizations. Feminist ethics critiques traditional management practices by highlighting that, while management ethics may present itself as rational and holistic, it often fails to account for the experiences and needs of women within the workplace. Despite the increasing presence of women in managerial and leadership roles, many organizations continue to treat women employees as mere participants in the workforce, overlooking their lived experiences as women. Feminist ethics argues that this oversight prevents a truly inclusive and equitable approach to management, where the perspectives and needs of all employees, regardless of gender, are fully understood and addressed.

This paper aims to emphasize the importance of the intersectionality of feminist ethics within business ethics, providing a more expansive understanding of ethics in practice. It argues that management ethics predominantly follows ethical frameworks shaped by a male-dominated, patriarchal context and needs to be redefined and reshaped from a feminist lens.

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1. Here, the term "Care ethics" is used interchangeably with feminist ethics, as both care ethics and feminist ethics demand an inclusive and alternative approach within the ethical framework.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section will discuss management ethics and ethical theories in depth, exploring their key principles and intersections with feminist ethics. In the second section, we will argue that adopting a feminist lens in management ethics can lead to a more holistic and inclusive ethical framework, fostering harmony and addressing the gendered biases that often shape traditional ethical approaches. Finally, in the third section, we will emphasize that feminist ethics represents a distinct and valuable approach to doing ethics that enriches the broader ethical discourse by prioritizing relational values, care, and inclusivity in organizational settings.

2. Management Ethics and Ethical Theories

Simply put, management is what managers do, and it involves understanding their current actions and evaluating what they should ideally be doing. At its core, management coordinates work activities to ensure that tasks are completed efficiently and effectively, with and through others. This process encompasses key functions such as planning, organizing, leading, and controlling. However, when considering management ethics, it is essential to highlight that these actions must align with moral principles. These Moral Principles or Moral theories are structured, systematic frameworks designed to guide our understanding of how we should live and what actions we should take. These theories aim to explain why certain ways of living or behaving are preferable to others while prescribing specific courses of action. Furthermore, they offer justifications for actions, grounded in different interpretations of what is morally valuable. Since the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, two prominent moral theories, utilitarianism and Kantian ethics, have been particularly influential in shaping the discourse on ethics, especially in English-speaking countries. These theories have dominated academic discussions and have been widely applied in the managerial world, guiding decision-making and organizational practices. Let us first understand these moral theories in detail.

3. Utilitarianism

David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill were key figures in developing utilitarian ethics, a moral framework based on maximizing happiness and minimizing pain. Bentham introduced the Principle of Utility and the hedonic calculus to assess the moral worth of actions by their consequences. Mill, in *Utilitarianism* (1861), refined the theory by distinguishing between higher (intellectual and moral) and lower (physical) pleasures, arguing that the former possess greater intrinsic value.

Utilitarian principles are highly relevant to management ethics. Like utilitarian thinkers, managers aim to create conditions that promote overall well-being for employees, customers, and stakeholders. Applying Bentham's principle, managers assess decisions, such as hiring, layoffs, or policy changes, based on their impact on collective happiness. Bentham's hedonic calculus guides managers in evaluating the potential benefits and harms of various actions. Incorporating Mill's idea of higher pleasures, ethical management also prioritizes employees' intellectual and moral development through opportunities for learning, meaningful work, and ethical leadership. Thus, utilitarian ethics helps managers balance short-term satisfaction with long-term growth and well-being.

4. Kantian Ethics

Kantian ethics, developed by Immanuel Kant, is grounded in the idea that morality is based on duty and the application of universal moral principles, rather than the outcomes of actions. Kant most systematically presented his ideas on morality in his major work, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). The central concept in Kant's ethics is the Categorical Imperative, which requires individuals to act only on principles (maxims) that could be made into universal laws for everyone. Kant emphasized that human beings have intrinsic value and must never be treated merely as means to an end, but always as ends in themselves. His Universal Law Formulation suggests that one should act only according to principles that all rational beings can accept. At the same time, the Humanity Formulation stresses respect for the dignity and autonomy of every individual. The Kingdom of Ends formulation presents a vision of a moral community where all individuals act as self-governing legislators of universal laws, respecting the freedom and rationality of others. Managers can apply Kantian ethics to their practices by making decisions based on consistent and universal principles. In hiring, promotions, and performance evaluation, managers should act reasonably, transparently, and impartially, ensuring that every employee is treated equally. Following the Humanity Formulation, managers must respect employees as individuals with their own goals and dignity, and not use them merely to achieve organizational objectives. Kantian ethics also highlights the importance of integrity in management; managers should avoid unethical practices such as manipulating information or applying double standards. Managers can build a "Kingdom of Ends" within the workplace by promoting an environment where all employees are treated as rational agents worthy of respect. In doing so, Kant's ethical framework guides

managers to make decisions rooted in duty and moral principles, fostering fairness, trust, and a strong ethical culture in the organization.

5. Feminist Ethics

Feminist ethics is not about women but about ethics. (Walker, M. U. (2002). However, Feminist ethicists generally agree that a proper starting point for ethical reflection is to engage directly with the concrete realities and lived experiences that shape women's lives. (Robb, C.S. 1981) Feminist ethics encapsulates a wide variety of writings but has at its core a concern about including perspectives, experiences, and reasoning of women into theories of ethics (Derry, 2002). Feminist ethics developed into a distinct area of academic philosophy during the 1980s. It begins with the assertion that traditional ethics have a masculine bias and aims to address this imbalance by rethinking ethical frameworks. Feminist ethics often emerges in response to the marginalization of women within traditional ethical theories. (Borgerson, J. L., 2007) Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (1984) have pointed out that women's experience of morality centers on concrete particulars rather than abstractions, on close, caring relationships, not on abstract rules and impartial norms. (Driver, J., 2005).

Feminist ethics is sensitive to the gender bias implicit in philosophical theories (for instance, philosophers' lists of virtues may be typically manly or culturally masculine), social structures, legal and political procedures, and the general culture. One controversial claim is that women approach practical reasoning from a different perspective from that of men. The difference includes emphasis on community caring and bonding with particular individuals instead of abstract impartiality."² Feminist ethics' primary objective is to demonstrate how traditional ethics have ignored or undervalued women's moral experience. Theoretical ethics, which includes normative and meta-ethics, addresses values, norms, and universal problems that do not require gender discrimination. However, the situation is different when it comes to applied ethics. The opinions of both men and women must be taken into account. It emphasizes the need to dismantle ethical models that inadvertently sustain biases based on gender, sexual orientation, class, race, ability, or moral character. It calls for a more holistic and inclusive approach to managerial ethics.

The management process, particularly the establishment of organizational priorities, significantly influences the achievement of ethical performance by highlighting the values deemed important by management. However, ethical

2. The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, 2008, p.170

standards are often overlooked or even compromised due to management's primary focus on other elements of the firm's strategy. By emphasizing ethical frameworks that are predominantly male-driven and partial toward gendered practices, managerial planning often creates an environment where considerations related to gender, particularly women's experiences, decision making, opinions are neglected. This gender bias in ethical decision-making disregards women's diverse lived experiences. It perpetuates an organizational culture that fails to recognize the importance of inclusivity, care, and relational values in achieving ethical outcomes.

6. Feminist Ethics Framework for Management Ethics

By incorporating feminist principles into managerial ethics, businesses can foster environments that respect diverse perspectives and prioritize equitable treatment, creating ethical frameworks that consider the complexities of power dynamics, gender, and intersectionality, and not just think from the perspective of universalization. From a feminist ethics perspective, Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy presents significant challenges, particularly his concept of the categorical imperative and the principle of universalizability. While Kant's framework advocates for a universal moral law based on individual autonomy and the application of impartial principles, feminist ethics critiques this emphasis on abstraction, autonomy, and impartiality, arguing that these principles fail to adequately account for relational and contextual aspects of human life, particularly for women and marginalized groups. Feminist ethics fundamentally opposes Kant's focus on the autonomous, individual self, as it prioritizes impartiality and universality over personal relationships and care. Kant's categorical imperative is predicated on treating others as ends in themselves, but in a highly abstract and detached way. For feminist ethicists, such an approach overlooks individuals' nuanced, lived experiences within relationships. Feminist scholars such as Carol Gilligan (1982) argue that moral reasoning for women tends to focus more on concrete situations and relationships, emphasizing care, empathy, and interdependence, rather than universal laws that are disconnected from real-world contexts. Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, maintained that moral philosophy should be rooted in the principle of autonomy, with individuals obligated to follow a universal moral law they impose upon themselves. He articulated this principle through the "categorical imperative," which posits that each action must be guided by personal principles or rules, referred to as "maxims." Maxims constitute the underlying rationale for one's actions, even when individuals may not be fully

conscious of them. To assess the moral validity of a maxim, Kant proposed the test of universalizability, whereby one must consider whether the maxim could be willed as a universal law applicable to all rational beings. (Marques J (2015) Since Kant's categorical imperative does not take into account any particular characteristics of the individuals involved in a moral action, it is intended to maintain consistency and, to a significant extent, parallels the Golden Rule, which advises that one should treat others as one would wish to be treated. However, the concept of universalizability within Kant's categorical imperatives is precisely the opposite of feminist ethics. While Kant's framework is grounded in notions of justice and abstract principles, feminist ethics emphasizes the importance of relational contexts and interpersonal connections. According to Machold et al. (2008), feminist ethics extends moral considerations beyond Kant's categorical imperative by incorporating an imperative of care for oneself and others within the framework of relationships. In traditional managerial ethics, decision-making is often guided by impersonal, utilitarian frameworks prioritizing efficiency, profit maximization, and shareholder interests. These frameworks tend to neglect the voices of those who may not hold positions of power within the organization, often leading to decisions that perpetuate inequality or disregard the well-being of marginalized employees. Feminist ethics challenges this by introducing a more inclusive approach to ethics that considers abstract principles and the real-world experiences of all stakeholders, including women and other underrepresented groups.

Feminist ethics strongly emphasize care and relationships rather than individualistic notions of autonomy and justice. In a business context, this means that managers should consider the impact of their decisions on both the individuals and the communities within the organization. For example, fostering a supportive, inclusive workplace where employees are valued for their productivity and unique experiences can improve morale, increase employee satisfaction, and reduce turnover. When managers consider their employees' relational needs, they help create a more ethical organizational culture where workers feel heard, valued, and respected. Furthermore, feminist ethics advocates dismantling traditional hierarchical structures in favor of more participatory and democratic decision-making processes. By integrating feminist principles, managers can develop decision-making strategies emphasizing collaboration, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. This would allow managers to make decisions that meet business goals and promote social justice, equity, and care within the organization. For example, feminist

ethics would encourage managers to consider how their policies and actions affect women employees, particularly regarding opportunities for advancement, equal pay, and work-life balance.

7. Feminist Ethics as a Way of Doing Management Ethics

Janet Borgerson (2007) argues that feminist ethics has been consistently overlooked and misapplied within business ethics and corporate social responsibility, a highly relevant critique today. Despite advances, most managerial practices and ethical decision-making processes continue to be grounded in traditional ethical theories formulated by male philosophers, often reflecting patriarchal values. Ming Lim (2018) emphasizes that feminist ethics reorients traditional frameworks to incorporate women's moral experiences, challenging ontological and epistemological assumptions perpetuating women's marginalization and other under represented groups within organizations.

Feminist ethics critiques the essentialist assignment of social and economic roles based on gendered traits (Card, 1991), advocating instead for ethical approaches grounded in inclusivity, relational understanding, and care. Philosophically, feminist contributions have expanded the meaning of “good business” by reshaping stakeholder theories to include a wider array of affected groups beyond shareholders and executives (Carroll, 2004). Freeman and Gilbert (1992) similarly argue that business should be reconceptualized as a system of interconnected relationships founded on principles of cooperation and care, rather than competition and strict justice.

In management ethics, feminist ethics offers a practical framework by emphasizing the importance of relationships, community, empathy, and context in ethical decision-making. It encourages managers to recognize and address diverse employee identities, fostering collaborative and supportive environments (Hamington, 2013). Additionally, Oliner and Oliner (1995) describe “diversifying” as the deliberate effort to engage with groups different from one's own, reinforcing the feminist ethical call for mutual understanding and relational responsibility in organizational life. Unlike traditional ethical models based on abstract, individualistic, and often adversarial notions of rights (such as those proposed by Kantian or utilitarian frameworks), feminist ethics foregrounds care, interdependence, and social responsibility. It moves from legalistic or contractual notions of morality toward a relational approach more responsive to real-world organizational dynamics. Thus, feminist ethics provides a valuable alternative way of doing management ethics, one that

nurtures inclusive leadership, ethical imagination, and a more profound commitment to organizational justice and employee well-being.

8. Conclusion

Feminist ethics offers a critical intervention into traditional moral theories by illuminating how gender operates as a system of social power that influences and often distorts moral and institutional practices. Rather than merely articulating abstract normative ideals, feminist ethicists emphasize the importance of engaging with the concrete realities and lived experiences of women and other marginalized groups, thereby exposing the underlying structures of oppression that conventional ethical frameworks frequently obscure. As Lindemann (2005) observes, feminist ethics is not confined to description; instead, it critically analyzes how power is exercised within societies and insists that moral philosophy must be responsive to these dynamics. Within the domain of management ethics, feminist ethics provides a necessary corrective to dominant models that prioritize shareholder interests, regulatory compliance, and profitability, often at the expense of relational care, inclusivity, and social justice. Through integrating an ethics of care, feminist ethics reconceptualizes management as a relational and community-centered practice, emphasizing empathy, trust, and connection alongside autonomy and rational deliberation. It challenges essentialist and socially constructed gender norms, historically devalued traits associated with care, emotion, and interdependence in organizational leadership and ethical reasoning. Furthermore, feminist ethics privileges lived narratives, biographies, and experiential knowledge as legitimate sources for ethical reflection, offering a richer and more contextually grounded ethical framework for decision-making in organizational contexts. Recent feminist scholarship has significantly expanded stakeholder theory by advocating for the inclusion of a broader array of individuals and communities impacted by business practices, thereby fostering more imaginative, inclusive, and socially responsive leadership. Consequently, feminist ethics emerges not merely as a critique of traditional ethical theories but as a practical and dynamic approach to management ethics — one that demands the active embodiment of ethical principles in ways that address real-world inequalities and power imbalances. In doing so, feminist ethics transforms ethical practice within management from a procedural or compliance-oriented exercise into a robust, relational, and justice-centered endeavor.

9. References

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