

# The Feminist Concept of Self and Modernity

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The relationship between community and individual is the key issue in contemporary political philosophy and ethics. The concept of self seems very important for individualism, communitarianism and feminism when they respond to relationships, particularly when we have to situate selfhood in the conditions of modernity. So my article can be divided into seven parts. First I will introduce the debate about the concept of the self between individualism and communitarianism. Secondly, I will discuss the feminist critique of this issue and analyze the feminist concept of self, and then I will discuss modernity as the condition of women. Next I shall attempt to talk about how women situate themselves in the conditions of modernity. Then I will discuss how Chinese women are reshaping their selfhood under the conditions of modernity. And finally I will draw some brief conclusions.

## **I. The concept of self: individualism and communitarianism**

Both individualist and communitarian theories begin with the image of the individual or self. How is the self constituted? How do individuals get their identity? In this part, I want first to discuss the individualist concept of self. Obviously, classical and modern liberalism have talked about the self in the sphere of individualism. It seems to me that individualism defines the self in various ways, as follows:

1. The notion of self or subject is a rational being prior to and independent of experience. 'From the Kantian viewpoint the priority of right is both moral and foundational. It is grounded in the concept of a subject given prior to its ends, a concept thought to be indispensable to our understanding of ourselves as freely choosing and autonomous beings' (Sandel, 1998: 9). Because different people have different desires and ends, so any principles from them may be contingent. But the moral principle must have a basis prior to all empirical ends. For Kant, how does the self go beyond experience? The self must be a rational being who has an autonomous

will which enables them to participate in an ideal, unconditional realm wholly independent of our social and psychological inclinations.

2. The self is prior to the ends which are affirmed by it. For individualists, the self is not merely a passive receptacle of the accumulated aims, attributes and purposes thrown up by experiences, not simply a product of the vagaries of circumstance, but always, irreducibly, an active, willing agent, distinguishable from its surroundings and capable of choice (Sandel, 1998: 19).

3. Since the self is prior to the ends which are affirmed by it, the self is concerned with the concept of a politics of rights rather than the common good. Michael J. Sandel, a critic of modern liberalism, asserts that liberalism is a politics of rights. He tries to analyze liberalism as individualism, and states that individualism cares about the concept of rights rather than social welfare or ideas of the good. For instance, John Rawls addresses the fact that rights secured by justice are not subject to the calculation of social interests. The essence of liberalism is this: 'a just society seeks not to promote any particular ends, but enables its citizens to pursue their own ends, consistent with a similar liberty for all; it therefore must govern by principles that do not presuppose any particular conception of the good. What justifies these regulative principles above all is not that they maximize the general good, but rather that they conform to the concept of right' (Sandel, 1992: 13). Robert Nozick, another libertarian, claims that rights should not be pushed aside for the sake of any idea of a general good.

4. Since individualists are preoccupied with individual rights, and regard right as a moral category, so automatically they state that the right is prior to the good and independent of it. Probably the idea has two meanings: individual rights cannot be sacrificed for the general good; the right cannot be premised on any particular vision of the good life.

5. Because the individual self must be prior to the ends which it affirms, and because of the significance of the right, the self, as bearer of an end and right, has a kind of dignity beyond the roles that it inhabits and the ends it may pursue (Sandel, 1992: 20).

6. The role of government is to ensure basic rights; it is not the business of government to promote or sustain any idea of the good life. Dworkin suggests that community is not a need in general, but it is a need in the sense that people need a society in order to identify with it and recognize that the value of their own lives is only a reflection of and is derivative from the value of the life of the community as a whole.

Communitarianism claims that social attachment determines the self, which is constituted by the community of which it is a part. What communitarianism believes is that:

1. From the ontological standpoint we have special obligations to the community and others. And those obligations are part of what constitutes the self. The relation to others constitutes the self, so those obligations are natural for communitarians.

2. For communitarians, people cannot be independent of society, because they get their identity in communication with others rather than outside communal life. For individualists, people's dignity comes from them escaping from social roles, but communitarians believe that social roles and obligations make our self-identity.

3. Individualism pursues a politics of rights, but communitarians like Charles Taylor attack atomistic liberals who try to defend the priority of individuals and their rights over society. Communitarians aim at the common good. For them, in society individuals should regard the common goal as their own.

4. While individualists think in terms of the priority of the self over its aims, communitarians regard this priority as artificial and impossible.

5. Communitarians regard society as a need and a good. Taylor states that, by virtue of our being members of communities, we can find a deep meaning and substance to our moral beliefs. Walzer sees society as a contract, and if people's needs are met, the contract is valid. Gauthier explains society as a process of cooperation in which people seek to find mutual advantage.

6. For individualists, the self depends on distance from others. The further individuals are from others the more self they have. Liberalism deals with how to limit the sphere of politics, while communitarianism is about how to extend it (Avineri and De-shalit, 1992: 7).

## **II. The feminist critique of individualist and communitarian concepts of self**

Although some feminists share some ideas with communitarians, an important theme for recent feminist thought is the critique of abstract individualism and communitarians around the issue of the concept of self. I will discuss these critiques in turn.

First, feminists criticize the individualist and communitarian conception of the self in several ways, as follows:

1. The self in individualism is an abstract self, which considers human beings as social atoms, abstracted from their social context, and disregards the roles of social relationships and human community in constituting the very identity and nature of individual human beings (Friedman, 1992: 101).

2. The self of traditional philosophy is constituted by the image of the person who is conceived as a rational and contractual human being. The image fails to see the value of social relation, and the connection, care, nurturance and experience. This is a common mistake on the part of individualists and communitarians.

3. Feminists share some ideas with communitarians, for example, 'the broad metaphysical conception of the individual, self, or subject as constituted by its social relationships and communal ties, or the assumption that traditional communities have some value' (Friedman, 1992: 104).

However, for feminists, communitarians make some mistakes when they are talking about the concept of the self.

1. Communitarians fail to recognize the social roles and structures which have been oppressive for women in communities. Their theories have a gender-blind point.

2. The communitarian concept of the self does not provide a basis for regarding nurturing, relational selves as morally superior to those who are highly individualistic.

3. Communitarians regard communities as a moral starting-point. For instance, MacIntyre refers to the debts, inheritance, rightful expectations and obligations we

inherit from family, nation and so forth. But for feminists, this point fails on two counts: on the one, hand society is changeable; on the other, many societies exclude people who are non-group members, especially outsiders as defined by ethnicity or sexual orientation.

### **III. The feminist concept of self**

For feminist theory, the main aim is to eliminate the gender discrimination and oppression in all traditional philosophical theories and practices. It defines the self as a relational, embodied and autonomous self, a caring and cared-for self, as well as a self with integrity. I will discuss these in detail.

#### *1. Relational self*

Feminists address the fact that most accounts of the self, from Descartes to contemporary theorists, have been individualistic, and the point is based on the assumption that one can individuate the self and determine the criteria for its identity independent of social context. In contrast, feminist accounts of the self have focused on the ways in which the self is formed in relation to others and sustained in a social context (Tietjens Meyers, 1997: 14). The self is related and constructed by others in an ongoing way, not only because others continue to shape and define us throughout our lifetimes but also because our own sense of self is couched in a description whose meanings are social phenomena.

#### *2. Embodied self*

Feminist philosopher Susan J. Brison talks about traumatic experiences from a gender perspective. She finds that our self-identity has an intimate relation with our body. Even 'the study of trauma does not lead to the conclusion that self can be identified with the body, but it does show how the body and one's perception of it are nonetheless essential components of the self' (Tietjens Meyers, 1997: 18). In traditional philosophy there was a tendency to deny experience; moreover, this rejection of the body has been most apparent in the denial of the female body. Thus the feminist embodied self is closer to nature, more bodily and more experiential.

#### *3. Autonomous self*

For feminists, the self is the locus of autonomous agency, which freely makes choices and wills actions. But autonomy is different from the self in traditional philosophy because it has a relational nature. 'Not only is autonomy compatible with socialization and with caring and being cared for by others, but the right sort of interaction with others can be seen as essential to autonomy' (Tietjens Meyers, 1997: 28). Based

on experiences, especially traumatic experiences, feminists believe that the autonomous and the relational self are shown to be interdependent, even constitutive of one another. Taking the old Hegelian notion of *Anerkennung*, mutual recognition, feminists emphasize that one autonomous self must be recognized by another autonomous self. Selves can become – and be – autonomous selves, genuine moral *agents*, only to the degree that their autonomy is recognized by their own others. As one postmodern feminist writer remarks: ‘The self is a relational self: a self capable of autonomy has an autonomous self-concept, and this self-concept can come into being only as it has been fostered and encouraged by the object relation in which the self has been engaged’ (Madison and Fairbairn, 1999: 10).

#### 4. *Caring and cared-for self*

In the early 1980s, care ethics became an important trend in feminist ethics in Western society, following particularly from the work of Carol Gilligan. Based on empirical studies, Gilligan reported a significant connection between gender and moral perspectives. According to her book *Different Voice*, males are characteristically concerned with moral matters of justice, rights, autonomy and the individual. In their moral reasoning, they tend to rely on abstract principles and to seek universality. By contrast, women are more concerned with caring and pay more attention to personal relationships and to avoiding hurting others. They focus on emotion, concrete context rather than abstract principles. From her work, care ethics begins to develop as a new approach to feminist ethics.

Four distinctive features structure the ethics of care: (1) a relational ontology; (2) a relational ideal; (3) a methodology of caring attentiveness; and (4) an insistence upon knowledge of the particular. Creating, maintaining and enhancing caring relationships among us constitutes the central moral task. In order to do so we practise what Nel Noddings terms ‘engrossment’, the giving of caring attentiveness to particular persons in particular situations (Diller, 1992).

#### 5. *Self-integrity*

For feminism, the self should express the character of integrity. In its general sense moral integrity means sound reliability, wholeness and integration of moral character. In a more restricted sense moral integrity means fidelity in adherence to moral norms. Accordingly, the virtue of integrity represents two aspects of a person’s character. The first is a coherent integration of the self – emotion, aspirations, knowledge, and so on – so that each complements and does not frustrate the others. The second is the characteristic of being faithful to moral values and standing up in their defence when necessary (Beauchamp and Childress, 2001: 35–6). However, the virtue of integrity, for feminist scholars, means not only for one’s own self, but for others. Respecting one’s own integrity means respecting that of others. ‘No one who does not respect his or her own integrity . . . will ever respect the integrity and well-being of others’ (Madison and Marty Fairbairn, 1999: 10).

#### **IV. Modernity as the condition of women's life**

There have been many attempts to understand what modernity is. In the field of sociology, modernity may be considered as marked and defined by an obsession with evidence, visibility and visibility (Leppert, 2004: 19). There are a lot of words used by people to describe modernity as social transition, such as industrial society, mass society, decontextualization, secularization, commodification, mechanization, democratization and linear progression generally. However, in terms of philosophy, modernity means rather concern with hierarchical organization, individualism, subjectivism, universalism, reductionism, totalitarianism and diversification. According to some Chinese scholars, the nature of modernity is the modern fundamental principle of Western society from the Enlightenment movement. That means the contemporary cultural ideas which address individualism and rationalism. Therefore, modernity points to Enlightenment modernity.

However, in terms of interdisciplinary notions, first, the keyword of modernity is social transition, which can be seen in the following: (1) every culture has to be forced from being a small isolated local community into a more integrated large-scale society; (2) the economic element dominates the whole society, and the new order is regulated by economic standards, which also become a force for control over the society; (3) instrumental rationality – people pursue short-term and short-sighted interests under the control of the moral principle of utilitarianism; (4) people travel too much with the flow of labor and capital; (5) people lose their traditional identity and selfhood, and have to resort to an individualist self rather than a communitarian self under the conditions of the market economy.

Modernity has shaped a new world to live in and also changed the way women think and behave. It impacts on women in two ways, positive and negative. The former can be described as having five aspects: (1) modern democratic politics brings a consciousness of rights and liberation to women, for instance, the worldwide feminist movement; (2) the modern market trains women in all kinds of competences so that they can live with competition; (3) cultural diversity leads women to go beyond their limited world and have a broader vision; (4) with the increase in travel women have more opportunities to benefit from social transition; (5) instrumental rationality acts as a guide to achieving greater economic efficiency, as well as developing productive forces.

However, as far as the negative impact of modernity is concerned, women have been undergoing unprecedented effects of modernity. We can see these in the following aspects. (1) Modern democratic politics still puts women on the margins just as traditional society did. Michel Foucault thinks of modern power as a Panopticon which fixes prisoners (people) in their places and also leads to rivalry between a master of power and his oppressed people. Modernity addresses rationality, the public sphere and capital profits, political power and hierarchical organization, which are all traditionally held by men. 'Woman's place in man's life cycle has been that of nurturer, caretaker, and helpmate, the weaver of those networks of relationships on which she in turn relies' (Gilligan, 1993: 17). (2) In modern society, every class has to have a general framework for living. Women have to struggle harder for their living under the competitive market economy. In developing countries women

have become objects that are exploited by the capital from capitalist countries. (3) Local culture is invaded and lost because of the increased mobility of cultural elements. With the process of cultural merging, women who have lost the roots of local culture are making every effort to find a place for themselves in the new diversified cultures. (4) Modernity causes women to lose their stable, peaceful life. Traditionally, compared with men, women were more attached to agriculture, family and local traditional culture. (5) Women also lose their identity and selfhood with modernity's fragmentation of thought and practices. In modern society, gender difference creates more spaces and areas than it usually did in the past – difference makes new difference. 6. Individuation still limits women's living space. Individuation becomes a necessity rather than an option.

In addition, modernity has brought up a key issue in regard to the redistribution and relocation of people. As individuals, women need to use their new freedom to find a proper place for themselves and adapt to the new order in modern society. As reflexive beings, women have been freed from religions and have recovered their freedom in modernity; however, another task has come their way with liberation. It means they have to improve themselves endlessly. Becoming modern means developing continually; it would rather imply delayed gratification than the enduring impossibility of gratification. Becoming modern means having to remain in the position of transgression, and always having many future plans.

## **V. Women: situating the self under the conditions of modernity**

At the crucial time of transition in an increasingly globalized society, women need to situate themselves in the condition of modernity. Facing the negative impacts of modernity on women, and relying on the vision of the communitarian and feminist self, women have to situate themselves under the conditions of modernity from various perspectives, for example:

1. Rebuilding relational identity and selfhood. Women have lost their identity and selfhood with modernity's fragmentation of thought and practices. They have to rebuild the self based on the self concept of feminism. As opposed to an individualist abstract self which considers human beings as social atoms, abstracted from their social context, women should pursue a relational self, and find their identity in relationship with others. Although the relational self has autonomy, it is different from the autonomy in traditional philosophy because of its relational nature.

2. Based on gender perspectives, building a caring and cared-for self. The feminist self stresses caring and pays more attention to personal relationship and avoiding hurting others. It focuses on emotion, concrete context rather than abstract principles. Modern democratic politics still puts women on the margins as traditional society did. In the background, feminist scholars suggest we should respect women and others, and particularly care for those who are the least advantaged members of society. This is also the main task of care ethics. At the present time care ethics seems to pursue an alternative to utilitarianism and Kantian ethics in western ethical history. Compared to other ethical theories, care ethics highlights relationship through caring practices. This is a feature lacking in traditional ethics. 'Even Aristotelian ethics pays

little attention to caring and to efforts required to maintain relationships' (Friedman, 2000: 208).

3. Situating self-integrity. Self-integrity mainly means a coherent integration of the self – emotion, aspirations, knowledge, and so on – so that each complements and does not frustrate the others. In modern times women have lost their stable, peaceful life. They have to struggle harder for their living under the competitive market economy. Local culture is invaded and lost through the increased mobility of cultural elements. This situation makes it harder for women to live peacefully. So they have to make an effort to situate self-integrity in order to acquire more competitive capabilities in modern society.

4. Situating the emotional and experiential self. As was said above, modernity is the modern fundamental principle of Western society from the Enlightenment, the contemporary cultural ideas which address individualism and rationalism. There is a dichotomy in modern Western philosophy: culture/nature, man/woman, reason/emotion, and so on. In this tradition, the first of the pair is superior to the second, which is a typical patriarchal value system. Traditional mainstream philosophy tries to regard emotion and experience as less important elements, and this phenomenon leads to a denial of women's role in morality, because women have been seen as being more inclined to emotion and experience. However, according to feminist thinking, emotion and experience are vital parts of philosophical thinking; women must set up an emotional and experiential self for the modern world.

## VI. Chinese women: reshaping the self under the conditions of modernity

Generally speaking there are two core factors which influence the shaping of Chinese women's selfhood under the conditions of modernity. One is ethical value, and the other is the socialist market economy. As is well known, Confucian thought is still to a large extent influencing people in their thinking and behavior in today's China.

Here we may ask a question: does Confucian ethics care for women? This is probably not an easy question because it is so complex that you cannot just reply with 'yes' or 'no'. I do not agree with some claims that Confucian ethics totally disregards women. When it asks younger people for filialness (*xiao*), this means being filial to both parents: mother as well as father. But when Confucian ethics talks of morality from a gender perspective, it appears to be clearly discriminatory. In the following passage, I would like to share some Confucian moral notions about females, according to which women are destined to be stuck in a miserable situation without a chance of escape. This reflects the long history of the Chinese feudal system. Some relevant fundamental thoughts from Confucianism include: (1) Men are the masters of external affairs, women the mistresses of domestic affairs; women are inherently meek, weak, sweet, dependent and distant from worldly success. They are expected to maintain feminine virtues, for example, laughing without exposing the teeth, and staying at home without taking an interest in any social activities beyond the family. (2) A woman without knowledge is virtuous: women should not be allowed any opportunity to have an education or develop their intelligence, because knowledge means having foresight, broad vision and the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood.

(3) There are three sorts of unfilial pieties, and the worst one is not having offspring: women are thought of as a means for bearing children. If a woman does not bear children, this is one of the accepted reasons for a man to abandon his wife. (4) A good horse does not have two saddles, and a virtuous woman cannot have two husbands. (5) Until the 20th century it was not possible for a Chinese woman to initiate a divorce. Her husband, on the other hand, could leave his wife by invoking any of the seven conditions including: barrenness or wanton conduct, neglect of parents-in-law, garrulousness, theft, jealousy and ill-will, and incurable disease. If the husband felt a little dissatisfied with his wife, he could send her away by giving her notice.

Moreover, in the *Analecets* 17.23, there is a sentence which is frequently cited by different people for different purposes. It goes, 'The master said, Women and small-minded people are hard to deal with.' There are at least four different English translations of the Chinese original: (1) 'The master said, Women and people of low birth are very hard to deal with. If you are friendly with them, they get out of hand, and if you keep your distance, they resent it' (Waley, 1938: 216–17). (2) 'In one's household, it is the women and the small men that are difficult to deal with. If you let them closer, they become insolent. If you keep them at a distance, they complain' (Lau, 1979: 148). (3) 'Women and servants are most hard to deal with. If you are familiar with them, they cease to be humble. If you keep a distance from them, they resent it' (Chan, 1963: 47). (4) 'It is only women and morally retarded men that are difficult to raise and provide for. Drawing them close, they are immodest, and keeping them at distance, they complain' (Ames and Hall, 1998: 88).

Obviously, in Chinese feudal society, women could not control their own lives and make their own decisions. They did not have enough power or position to shape their autonomy and selfhood. After liberation in 1949, Chinese women obtained a powerful status like men, protected by the new constitution in society. The selfhood of Chinese women was established in both public and private worlds. Although there was a great gap, as regards gender equality, between constitution and reality, women were empowered to do important work such as men did because the Chinese government formulated many policies to protect women's interests under the conditions of the planned economy.

The onset of China's great transformation stemmed from Deng Xiaoping's decree in the late 1970s aimed at turning China into a modern nation. However, Chinese women are experiencing the impacts of modernity – in both positive and negative ways – like their sisters in other countries. So they have to reshape their own selfhood under the conditions of the socialist market economy. There are two kinds of resource to help them build their own selfhood today – the concept of the feminist self and the positive part of Confucian ethics. From the feminist concept of self, Chinese women should rebuild relational identity and selfhood, build a caring and cared-for self, and situate self-integrity, as well as an emotional and experiential self. However, unlike their sisters in other countries, they have to carry on Chinese ethical tradition, especially the positive part of Confucian ethics. Caring is an essential concept in Confucian ethics. This is embodied by the principle of *Ren*. The essence of Confucian ethics is a kind of humanism based on the principle of benevolence (*Ren*). The character of *Ren* is expressive of the relations that should pertain among human beings. Hence it has been translated as humanity, benevolence and love. It is the

supreme virtue that encompasses all others and so it is rendered as goodness, or perfect virtue.

It seems as though, in Confucian ethics, we can identify all the meaning of the feminist self – the relational self; the caring and cared-for self; self-integrity; and the emotional and experiential self – because Confucian ethics has characteristics such as addressing human relations, personal experiences and emotions, caring about others based on the ethical principle of *Ren*. However, as was said earlier, there is a strong inclination to gender discrimination in Confucian ethics, so Chinese women should establish their own selfhood by reusing Confucian ethics positively from a feminist concept of self in modern society.

## VII. Brief conclusions

Generally speaking, how one defines the self depends on what explanatory work one wants the concept of self to do. Neither the communitarian nor the individualist self can work very well in real society because of some fatal defects. Feminists are trying to correct these defects but their efforts are still not perfect.

1. Individualism regards the self as an abstract being who can escape from society. Individualists deny obligations because they fear that affirming any obligations will offer a pretext for restriction of freedom. For individualists freedom is the primary principle and nothing else can be above it. Individualists address the idea that society should not seek to promote any particular ends, but enable its citizens to pursue their own ends, consistent with a similar liberty for all. This means that what makes the just society is not the *telos* but individual rights and freedom. Here we can formulate two questions to challenge that idea: (1) How does the individualist manage the conflicts between individual rights and freedom? (2) If a society does not have a common goal, can individuals belonging to it get equal liberty and rights? So in this case the individualist concept of the self cannot work well in society. It must lead to anarchy and social disorder.

2. Communitarians overlook the autonomy of the self, as individualist critics have said: if the communitarian is right in saying we are not free to choose, but rather our values are determined by our community, then there is no reason to criticize the values of one's society. Moreover, feminists state that communitarians fail to recognize gender oppression in traditional society. Thus they do not go beyond the patriarchal system.

3. Compared with communitarians and individualists, feminists address the relational self, the embodied self, the autonomous self, and so on. However, some feminists make society's final goal very naïve. For instance, Marilyn Friedman (1992: 114) suggests that 'friendship is more likely than many other relations, such as those of family and neighborhood, to be grounded in and sustained by shared interests and values, mutual affection, and possibilities for generating mutual respect and esteem'. But how can we manage conflicts of multiple interests with friendship? If terrorists attack your country and you, can you claim intimate friendship with them? So I do not think the feminist strategy always works very well, especially in the case of conflicts of interest.

4. In modern society, the concept of self is not only a philosophical notion, but a political practice. Modernity has shaped a new world to live in and also changed the way women think and behave. It impacts on women in positive and negative ways, as we mentioned earlier. It is a great mission for both contemporary philosophy and the women's movement to situate women's identities and selfhood in the conditions of modernity. These visions of a feminist concept of self can provide a theoretical ground for feminists to carry the mission through. Indeed the eventual goal of the mission will mean more than women's well-being and freedom.

5. In a world of diversity and multiculturalism women should build selfhood based on their own cultures. Although Chinese women, like their sisters in other countries, are facing multiple challenges, such as poverty, unemployment, limited access to land, legal and social discrimination in many forms, sexual abuse and other forms of violence in the modern world, they still are expected to reshape their own selfhood based on the positive side of Confucian ethics and a feminist concept of self.

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