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## **Analysis of Hilde Lindemann and Her Thoughts on Feminist Ethics**

Many ethical theories were founded by male philosophers during times where women were seen as inferior to men. Kant for example argued that women needed moral guidance from more rational men and that women weren't capable of legislation or voting. Aristotle viewed women as having no authority and being subjects to men. During the late 18<sup>th</sup> century new perspectives about ethics and views of women were brought to life through the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft who wrote that women aren't naturally weaker or emotional, but that society shape them that way. She started the first wave of feminism. The second wave came in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the writings of Simone de Beauvoir who wrote that "woman" is seen as the "other sex". The one that is always compared to ideal, the male sex thus stopping women from focusing on their own beliefs and values. Ongoing since the 1990' is the third, modern wave with prominent feminist like Martha Nussbaum and Judith Baier. Where the latter one reflects upon the problems with the notion of gender. Another author who also discusses gender in regard to ethics, is Hilde Lindemann. She is an American bioethics and philosophy professor at Michigan State University. In her paper "*What is feminist ethics*" (2005) she claims that the main issue for feminist ethics is to understand, criticize and correct gender. This she claims, is because gender is the power structure which forms our moral views, practices and our approaches to ethical matters. This essay offers a summary and analysis of Lindemann's paper. The result of this is the conclusion that the ideas Lindemann discuss in her paper are relevant and

important in order to understand and break down the power structures that creates unequal societies today.

Lindeman starts her paper by stating that many think that feminist ethics is about making women equal to men. She argues that this idea is problematic since the question “which men?” can be asked. Does race, ethnicity, economical and educational background matter on which men women should be equal to? Further she raises the question *why* women should be equal to men? Saying that feminism is about women being equal to men only enforces that being a man is the ideal and get women to focus on men, instead of creating their own value of being a woman. Therefore, Lindemann argues that feminist ethics isn’t about getting women to be equal to men. Rather, Lindeman argues that feminism is about power and the social construct of gender that distributes power asymmetrical between women and men. The social systems that are in place today were created by privileged first class men, that wanted to keep power to themselves. They let domestic duties be the responsibility of women and slaves, and as long as women saw it as their duty to raise children and take care of the home, these social systems could remain intact. However, Lindemann argues that feminist ethics is about exposing these patterns and get women (and men) to understand what system they’re in and how this system forms our moral beliefs.

How gender form our norms and perception about moral beliefs and ideas about women vs men is something Lindemann elaborates. The problem with the perception of gender is that it makes it seem like there are only two sexes, male and female. However, Lindemann states that there are numerous biological reasons as to why there are more than just the two. The biological sex of a person doesn’t mean that they identify as that sex. There are people that have genitalia of one sex but hormone levels more like the other. Or chromosome sets that can’t be defined typical male or female. Thus, gender fails to describe us humans. There is no such thing

as only female and male. There are many “in-betweens”. Gender stresses that you are either feminine or masculine, thus it discriminates and excludes people. It puts people in separate boxes where there have to be one or the other, even though that’s not what the actual biological world looks like.

There are several strengths and weaknesses with Lindemann’s claims. One argument that strengthens her reasoning is that she discusses actual biological facts about genitalia, sexes and chromosome sets. These claims, grounded in science, proves that the two forms of gender, female and male, only is a social construct. In reality there are many more versions of gender, so maybe gender shouldn’t be a thing at all? What if we stopped classifying people as male or female? What if we took the Ms and Fs off our passports? For what purpose do we describe ourselves as male or female? Why does it matter so much? We think it matters because society tells us that it matters. Why can’t we just be described by our body shape, height, weight, eye and hair color? What would the world look like if we stopped having gender specific names? What if someone born with the physical appearance and genitalia of a man would be called Elisabeth? If gender-specific names wasn’t a thing. Then job recruiters, banks, teachers or other institutions would not be able to make judgements or proceed with their stereotypical beliefs. Instead everyone would be judged based on their performances and abilities in themselves and not by what gender they have.

Yes, there is still a problem with this thought about drastically gender-neutralize our world since people could still be judged based on other things like race, ethnicity, economical standard or educational background. However, Lindemann states that since feminist ethics offers moral arguments to break down the power structure that oppresses women, then feminist ethics provide moral arguments for all systematic power inequalities that exists. The

same arguments used to criticize the asymmetrical power distribution between men and women can also be used to understand, criticize and correct the social patterns that contributes to for example race discrimination. That makes this theory so relevant, important and useful. It can be used to fight for everyone that is discriminated and everyone that is oppressed. Resulting in a better society where acceptance and respect could flourish.

Even though Lindemann's arguments are well grounded, a weakness in her claim is that she is somewhat contradicting herself. Lindemann clearly states that it's problematic to claim that feminist ethics is about equality. Rather she claims feminist ethics is about gender, and that gender is power. Thus, feminist ethics is about power. However, all throughout her paper Lindemann describes what gender is and why it's important to expose, criticize and correct it. If it weren't exposed, the power structure could, unnoticed, contribute to much damage of people's beliefs about themselves and others. If women don't realize they're subjects to a power structure that oppresses them, how will they ever get out of it? However, when Lindemann makes these claims about power she doesn't say it explicitly, but since she wants these power structures gone, she wants equality of power between men and women. Which is contradicting her previous claim that feminist ethics isn't about equality. It is in fact about even out the power distribution between the sexes and make that distribution, equal.

By shifting the focus from the concept "equality" to the concept "power", she is also refocusing the discussion from a "female" perspective to a more masculine perspective. This is because power is considered masculine due to the social power construct that gender has created. Women have through history not been considered to be able to reason objectively and discuss matters like power or legislation. When Lindemann then does this, rather aggressively in her paper, she is "acting like a man". Proving that there is no thing as women being incapable of

doing things considered “male”. Thus, there is no such thing as male or female behaviors, thus the notion of gender should be destroyed.

In conclusion, Lindemann’s arguments form a relevant claim that power inequalities should be understood, criticized and corrected in order to create a more equal society. Her argument about the biology of humans and that there are not only two sexes, but many in-betweens proves that a notion of two genders doesn’t reflect reality. Thus, it’s a social construct. This further proves that gender isn’t needed, and that masculinity and femininity isn’t polar opposites that one has to choose to fit into. Rather individuals can be mixtures, one shouldn’t have to choose one or the other. Lindemann’s argument about feminist ethics isn’t about equality is somewhat contradictory but it results in a strong argument that it’s about power equality rather than simple being equal to men. Since the main purpose of feminist ethics is to understand, criticize and correct these power inequalities, feminist ethics can also offer moral arguments on for other power inequalities too. Thus, Lindemann’s claims are relevant and by adopting the feminist ethician way of moral reasoning, the world could become a better place.