

## KANT'S APPROACH TO ALTERITY AND WOMEN

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Feminists and Kantian feminists criticize Kant for being a 'sexist' and I want to argue that this term and norm is anachronistic. In fact, it seems clearly that the norm against sexism today is not something that was part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century culture in which Kant grew up and worked. Applying the norm to him then is not appropriate and conceals what is distinctive about Kant's comments about women. As I think through Kant's relationships to women and the remarks he makes that have pegged him as a 'sexist,' a phenomenon emerged in my mind that is common within our own century and that is 'gender policing,' which I don't think is the same as 'sexism' or at least should not be considered the same thing. Gender policing is a way in which people can be "othered" when they don't conform to the gender norms. Kant did engage in "othering," and he engaged in gender stereotyping, but my position is that he was not a sexist in the way we use that term in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, because he did not know what that was, and what he was doing in promoting gender norms is not the same thing as 'sexism.'

Kant engages in gender policing activities and his comments on women and his relationship to women exhibit this pressure on women to conform to gender norms, but this pressure is not the same as sexism. The reason I believe this is so, is because gender conformity is not illegal nor is it totally undesirable. Many people want to identify with a gender role and conform often to gender norms willingly. Sexism is unwanted pressure to conform, and also is something that happens in a context in which gender conformity should not be a factor, such as, the workplace. So, we need to make a clear distinction between when someone is enforcing a gender norm as part of normal and acceptable socialization, and when it is an unwanted and inappropriate pressure (sexism) in a context that should be free from gender policing and norms.

This distinction between gender norm pressuring and sexism makes sense because there are many people in the world who want to conform to gender stereotypes. There are marriages like the ones that Kant describes in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* where the woman reigns in the household while the husband governs (Anth 7:309). These marital aspirations are not intrinsically bad or evil, but rather are organizations that work for

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many couples. However, we should be clear that they may not work for many couples either. Concluding that all gender stereotyping and policing are wrong would leave parents who are raising their children with little guidance. People seeking relationships would also be at sea.

As I think through Kant's comments on women and his relationship to Maria von Herbert, I have to conclude that what he was engaging in was this kind of gender policing and exerting pressure to make women conform to a gender norm in his society. This is something we do in our society too and it cannot be dismissed simply by identifying it as 'sexism.' Rather, we can see it as pressuring people to conform to a norm for the sake of establishing an organization in sexual relations. People are still getting married and want to have relationships to each other and these norms establish the expectations and organization in those relationships.

Kant probably could have advocated for women's opportunities and rights, however, he did not appear to question the social gender norms of his society. We know that one of his students, Theodore von Hippel, wrote an essay "*Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber*" (*On Improving the Status of Women*) advocating for the education of women and their equality with men, but we have to remember that this essay was published anonymously (Dyck, 157-58). Von Hippel most likely did not want to lose his position as Mayor of Königsberg by challenging the gender norms in his society. There is a good deal of pressure even in our society to conform to gender norms and challenging these norms can expose one to punitive consequences even in our century. Was Kant afraid to oppose these norms or did he simply believe that it was in the best interest of women to conform to gender norms? Was he personally attracted to women who conformed to those norms? Why would he oppose gender norms if he finds women more attractive who conform to the norms? Do we have to judge Kant as 'sexist' just because he had a preference for women who conformed to gender norms of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany? Finally, does his moral philosophy eliminate the desirability of gender norms?

To respond to these questions, we need to start with the fact that most of Kant's specific and "offensive" comments (to our ears) occur in popular works and not in his standard philosophical works. He is thus not writing as an expert philosopher when he makes comments about women, but is branching out and attempting to be a popular philosopher. He is also attempting to define new fields called empirical psychology (which morphed into anthropology) and physical geography which are empirical sciences and not philosophy. The two works in which most of Kant's gender comments occur are the "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime" (1764), and the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, along with the student lecture notes from his course on anthropology. The "Observations" was an early essay that was meant to be popular. It is not Kant representing himself as an epistemologist or metaphysical philosopher or even as a moral philosopher. He is trying to reach out to the public and make philosophical concepts appealing to those who are not skilled in philosophy. He is speaking to people who understand gender norms and are trying to orient themselves in terms of gender norms. In the "Observations," Kant is not denigrating women but elevating them and cherishing them in terms of something that is acceptable to everyone and that is the "beautiful." Kant writes: "The virtue of the woman is a beautiful virtue. That of the male sex ought to be a noble virtue. Women will avoid evil not because it is unjust but because it is ugly,

and for them virtuous actions mean those that are morally beautiful...I hardly believe that the fair sex is capable of principles, and I hope not to give offense by this, for these are also extremely rare among the male sex” (KGS, *Observations* 2:231-232). There is nothing denigrating about the beautiful. Many women want to be cherished the way we cherish beautiful things. That is not denigration. Some men may also want to be valued the way we value sublime things. That too is not denigration. However, it does classify women and men differently. And one may wonder whether there are women who would prefer to be classified with the sublime like in Matthew Arnold's poem “Urania,” and whether there are men who would rather be classified with the beautiful. Kant, then, makes the observation that women's gender normative behavior is organized around affirming what is beautiful and avoiding what is ugly. He opined that these principles are not moral principles strictly speaking and that even men do not always conform their behavior to moral principles. This does not mean women are not capable of moral principles, but that the gender norm is not built on conforming to moral principles. Women, Kant is saying, are capable of social success by conforming their behavior to norms of beauty and avoiding that which is ugly. Whether this normative behavior can successfully cohere with his understanding of morality is another question.

If Kant is right about his description of the social norms of women in his society and how they normativize beauty rather than morality, we could ask ourselves what the difference is between the beautiful and the good, the ugly and the evil. I'm not going to explore that question here. I am sure we could easily come up with an example of an action that was beautiful but not moral. Still, Kant is not speaking from his expertise as a philosopher. We elevate Kant to the status of one of the greatest philosophers ever by the amount of writing dedicated to his works every year, by the number of philosophical articles and books appearing on his works, by the number of positions at universities for Kant scholars, by the number of journals dedicated to his works, by the conferences and sessions dedicated to him, and by the translations available of his writings. However, we must distinguish between the status we award him as a philosopher and the status we award him when he is engaged in empirical science. His strictly philosophical works and his empirical works may both be worth studying but for different reasons, and there is a different level of expertise evidenced in the two kinds of works.

Kant should be given credit for being a pioneer in the empirical human sciences, but we should also recognize that he was an amateur. He was unaware of how his own biases were influencing his descriptions of human beings. Today, social scientists are much more aware of their own biases and have principles of investigation to minimize social and cultural biases. We should distinguish between Kant's philosophical works and his empirical and popular works in terms of the norm he sets for us. The authority we accord him or the deference we accord him for his philosophical works should not be automatically applied to his popular works. We should see his popular philosophy for what it is – it is establishing the beginnings of the social sciences, it is not normative for social sciences today. Kant is not describing women in his culture, but is upholding gender stereotypes and norms. Kant writes in the *Anthropology*: “What the world says is true, and what the world does is good’ is a feminine principle which is difficult to unite with character in the narrow sense of the term” (KGS, *Anth* 7:308). This statement is based not on an empirical study of all women but based on his experience of

some women and his generalization of that experience to all women by calling it a “feminine principle.” This kind of overhasty generalization creates a kind of bias that the empirical sciences today are keen to avoid. Kant does not have some kind of privileged access to the “principles of femininity.” Perhaps some women conform to this stereotype, but it cannot be decisive for understanding all women empirically.

We must also recognize that his description of the ideal marriage in the *Anthropology* was not based on studies of many people, cross-cultural studies, surveys, or experiments, but rather was based on his limited experience with women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century German city, Königsberg. How many women did he really know? Women were not generally among his students. He did have dinner parties at his house where women were invited and where perhaps men described their relationships with their wives. But today all of this would be considered anecdotal in the social sciences. It cannot be normative or descriptive of “women’s nature,” and we cannot hold it to be the results of expert empirical studies about women and gender norms.

Nonetheless, we can learn something from Kant about how women are “othered” when they don’t conform to the gender norm. He “othered” women who were attempting to be scholars. When Kant distinguishes between men and women, he says that “in addition to his private interests man also has an interest in public matters, but woman has an interest only for her home.” (KGS, *Mrongovius*, 25:1 394-95). This is not just descriptive of the women in his experience, but it is also a way of enforcing the norm that women should be in the home and care about the home. For Kant, women have a moralizing effect on men in society where he means marriage and socializing, but they do not have a moralizing effect in the workplace or in government (KGS, Refl 1 317, 15:579). So, when women attempted to be scholars, he reacted sarcastically, describing them: “As for scholarly women, they use their books somewhat like their watch; that is, they wear it so that people can see that they have one, though it is usually not running or not set by the sun.” (KGS, *Anth* 7:307). When these scholarly women were attempting to break out of the gender norm and their place in the home, Kant jokes about them and “others” them. This is gender policing. This kind of gender policing occurred early on in his career as a writer in his *Observations* as well: “A woman who has a head full of Greek, like Mme. Dacier, or carries on fundamental controversies about mechanics, like the Marquise de Chatelet, might as well even have a beard, for perhaps that would express more obviously the mien of profundity for which she strives” (KGS *Observations* 2:229-30; 230-32). Kant is trying to demean scholarly women, so that they will conform their behavior to gender stereotypes and remain in their place in the home. This kind of othering happens in our century too. When a woman does not conform to gender stereotypes some men make jokes about the woman in order to ostracize her or put pressure on her to conform to gender stereotypes. Some women gossip about other women to enforce gender norms. This behavior does not have to be considered “sexism” if it is done in a social context and not in a context defined by equal opportunities. Women and men engage in this kind of behavior when they are trying to negotiate gender norms that will help them secure a mate. What is problematic is when this behavior occurs in the workplace or is used to deny women or men opportunities. As Ruth Bader Ginsburg argued before the U.S. Supreme Court: “All I ask of our brethren is that they take their feet off our necks.” Trying to recognize when gender norm pressure is appropriate

and when it is not, is not an easy thing to know. When this happens on the workplace it often does not rise to the level of being “sexism” and is hard to prove in a discrimination lawsuit so knowing that this kind of behavior is gender policing, and the way social norms are enforced, is crucial to knowing how to deal with it. You can't always deal with it from a legal point of view. Kant does not tell us how the women reacted to his sarcasm. But maybe they never heard it, and it was rather a way in which men bonded and affirmed their identity as males since he is implying that it should only be males that have the right to establish their identities as scholars. Not wanting to share this opportunity with women is perhaps part of their way of securing their unique identity and dignity as men. Men work outside the home; women are supposed to be in the home for Kant. For some people this gender norm is still very effective in our century. Some people want it, and some people don't want it. When women acquired the right to get an education, vote, and work outside the home in this country and in Western Europe, this gender norm did not disappear. It is still being used to help people negotiate marriages, identify a potential partner, and distribute the labor in marriage. Some religions raise this norm to a high status and call it “complementarianism.” It does not appear that this gender norm will disappear anytime soon just because we now have a moral norm against ‘sexism.’

However, it may be helpful for those who want to engage in this gender normativity to reflect on the difference in worth that comes from fitting into gender norms as opposed to being a human being under moral laws. There are downsides to just fitting into gender norms. Kant explains in his lectures: “[W]omen's entire worth is determined through the opinion of men...Men can give their worth to themselves” (KGS, *Collins* 25:238; cf. *Parow* 25:462, *Starke* II, 72). The women he describes in his century who are only allowed to marry and not work outside the home, are much more dependent upon the opinions of others (especially men). Kant holds that women thus should be educated differently than men and their education should be to ‘honor’ rather than to ‘duty’ (KGS, *Refl.* 1331, 15:582; *Friedländer* 25:722; *Menschenkunde* 25:1190, 1193; *Mongrovius* 25:1392). Philosophers like Kant and Aristotle were well aware of the weakness in tying our worth to other people's opinions of us.

This weakness is actually illustrated nicely by the case of Maria von Herbert. Maria studied Kant's philosophy within the context of a community of friends and family (Herbert Circle) (Ritter, 138). She aspired to be a scholar of Kant's works, and also to live according to his moral philosophy. She held herself to high moral standards, and also tried to negotiate a romantic relationship with a man. When her first attempt failed and the man misused her, her honor was also compromised. In her next attempt to secure a lasting romantic relationship, she was more cautious and reticent, withholding information regarding her first attempt. When this information was finally revealed as it should be in a genuine friendship, the second man rejected her romantically and was only willing to maintain a friendship with her. Her status in society and her honor were compromised, because she was not successful in the first relationship, and she was then vulnerable to being rejected by the second relationship. It is at this point that she writes to Kant (August, 1791) and asks for “solace or for counsel to prepare me for death” since she is now contemplating suicide (Ritter, 144). She knows that the moral law forbids suicide, but she no longer has the will to live. Only Kant's moral theory restrains her (Ritter, 145).

Kant is flattered by her request for advice and decides to lecture her on her immorality in being reticent in the second relationship, rather than address the point of her request and comment on whether she could commit suicide. His letter to her thus does not address the issue she is facing. As a woman who is fundamentally dependent upon the opinions of others, she has no way of giving herself worth since she is not able to gain worth through marriage and a romantic relationship. Suicide is her only alternative, she believes. Kant is strongly against suicide asserting that it treats the person as a means and a thing while destroying the person (KGS, *Groundwork* 4, 429). Yet, Kant does not assert this to Maria. When Maria writes back to him and asks to visit him and inquires of him how he manages to be a single person and scholar he does not write back to her. Part of the reason for this is that a male friend, J. B. Erhard, stigmatizes her to him as a “Schwarmerei” (KGS, 11:407). This word has lately been translated as ‘fanatical’ and sometimes as “enthusiasm,” but in this context, I believe it should be translated as ‘crazy.’ The purpose of Erhard’s comment was to stigmatize her and dissuade Kant from further correspondence with her, because it would have threatened his status in the moral gender universe. The word ‘Schwarmerei’ like the word ‘crazy’ is meant to ‘other’ a person and exclude them from the world of moral concern. Not only is Maria not able to establish her worth in a relationship with a man but she is now excluded from all moral consideration as a human being. In fact, Kant bundles her letters along with his draft and Erhard’s letter and sends them to another woman (Elisabeth Motherby in 1793) to function as a warning against departure from gender norms. This action is completely inconsistent with the humanity formulation of the categorical imperative and shows that Kant will violate his own moral theory in order to illustrate the danger for women of departing from gender norms in his culture. He is not trying to help Maria but rather is using her as a warning to other women so that they don’t depart from gender norms. He abandons her. Sadly, she later commits suicide.

Does this mean that Kant is a hypocrite? Yes, but he is not alone. We all depart from moral norms, because we are also within a moral universe in which we are pressured by gender norms to conform in order to secure a relationship with another person or to stay within the norms of society. None of us wants to be ostracized. It is always a balancing act to be like Theodore von Hippel progressing our society beyond socially accepted gender norms without being ostracized and losing our jobs. We sometimes must do it anonymously. Or sometimes we must stand because we can do no other. Our worth and dignity could depend upon it.

One might wonder whether Kant also ‘othered’ men on the basis of gender norms. Although many authors accuse Kant of being a ‘racist,’ in his characterizations of other ‘races,’ I would suggest that what he finds so problematic in men in other ‘races’ is that they do not conform to the gender norms in his society (Kleingeld, 9). The main objection Kant has to Native Americans is that they have “half extinguished vital energy” (KGS, DHR 2: 438). The main objection against blacks is that they have no talents (KGS, *Physical Geography*, IX 316). Native Americans “are too weak for hard labor...” (KGS, *Teleological Principles* VIII, pp, 175-76). He does not make explicit gender distinctions in his characterizations about other races, but he is objecting to the males because they are not working and developing their talents. When he talks about Hindus, for instance, they are superior to blacks because they can be educated in the arts, but not the sciences (KGS, 15:878). No women in Kant’s society can be

educated in the arts and sciences, so Kant is talking about men. When Kant talks about not taking advantage of the ignorant in contracts, he is not talking about women since they cannot sign contracts (KGS, MM 6:353). One of the main problems Kant seems to find with males in other races is that they don't work or develop their talents. The gender norm of the male as the worker and provider for the family is evident in these judgments and 'othering' comments.

Kant thinks, however, that males in his society "can give their worth to themselves" (KGS, *Collins* 25:238; cf. *Parow* 25:462; Starke II, 72). Men "govern." (KGS, *Anth* 7:309; *Parow* 25:459; Starke II, 74). He asserts: "The principle of male ethics is virtue." (Starke II, 67, 72). If a man can give worth to himself then his worth is not based on what other people think or whether he fulfills his appropriate gender role. Having to fulfill a gender role for a woman however does mean she is subject to other people's opinions and must pursue honor. Why is there a difference when both men and women are subject to gender norms? Males are subject to women in the marriage and must conform to her reign in the household, but his submission to her rule does not threaten his dignity and worth. The husband submits to her regime so that he can pursue his outside interests (KGS *Anth* 304). This is our hint that men work outside the home. Kant does not seem to think that men need pressure to conform to the gender norm of working outside the home, but men do need pressure from women to conform to norms inside the marriage. The woman does not shrink "from domestic warfare" (KGS *Anth* 304). Kant says that women improve men and lead to their becoming more civilized. Women bring this about in marriage. Nonetheless, Kant also believes that men give worth to themselves, so in order for them to have worth, they do not need women. Their civilized qualities come in relationship with women, but their virtue and worth come from themselves. Women's worth comes from other people and not just from her relationship with her husband. So, women's gender identity leaves her without a sense of security and without a clear sense of dignity and worth. A man's gender identity does not threaten his worth and dignity. Why is there this difference? Why does a woman's gender identity not include her dignity and worth?

It would seem that a woman's gender identity for Kant is determined by her relationship with her husband or under gallantry with any man who supports her. Men govern in the relationship. Thus, she cannot govern herself. Is being able to govern oneself necessary in order to develop virtue and dignity? What is necessary in order to govern oneself? It would appear that the necessary opportunity for self-governance is not just the moral law, but actually the ability to work outside the home. Kant does hold that women are human beings. He does believe they are rational beings. Women could conceivably act according to the moral law. But they cannot have dignity and worth in themselves like men because they do not work outside the home and do not govern themselves. Men can govern women and themselves because they work outside the home.

Work outside the home appears to be what gives dignity to people, not obeying the moral law. Women, like men, are capable of bringing their maxims to the moral law, but this is not what gives dignity to them as gendered beings. Being able to govern oneself and being able to work is a huge issue for Kant in the international sphere. He complains that some "races" are not capable of governing themselves. Women are not "governing" themselves, but are being

governed by men. What is the key to governing oneself? It is apparently having work outside the home or being able to work. This is not what Kant argues but it is implied in the way he treats gender differences.

We see that Maria von Herbert also surmised that scholarly work gave Kant a reason for living. He was not married so governing a woman was not giving him meaning or dignity. What was giving him meaning was his identity as a philosopher, teacher, and scholar. When Maria no longer had the opportunity to have a meaningful romantic relationship with a man because of her ruined reputation, she had nothing else to give her worth and dignity. Her own sense of worth and dignity was exhausted in the personal relationship with a man. She did have a sense that there was more to life since she reached out to Kant. His moral philosophy hinted at that meaning and dignity but without the possibility of identity outside of a personal relationship, she was lost. She felt she could be moral according to his categorical imperative, but it was not giving her meaning and a reason to live. The only thing that was missing was her opportunity to work and develop an identity outside of relationships. She was not a “Schwarmerei,” because her need for something besides the moral law makes perfect sense. If Kant really wanted to take Maria seriously it would mean he would have to question the gender norms in his society and question whether women should be given the same opportunities as men to work outside the home, govern themselves, and develop an identity apart from gender normed relationships.

Perhaps one of the reasons that one is able to govern oneself when one has work outside the home is because that work is generally not tied to gender norms. One does have to submit to authority and also to outcomes that are determined by the organization and institution, but one can develop an identity within those organizations that is not created by gender norms. In Kant’s language, one develops one’s talents and skills and betters oneself. Institutions outside marriage and gender relationships can allow one to develop an identity. Kant developed an identity as a scholar and teacher. This gave him dignity and worth. If he only got his worth through conforming his actions to the moral law, we would have to conclude that he lost that dignity and worth when he treated Maria so poorly and used her as a means to his own ends. Clearly, he did not lose his dignity just because he does not conform his own actions to the moral law. Some philosophers may consider him a hypocrite, but then anyone who has engaged in some kind of failure to respect other human beings as ends is also a hypocrite. There is not going to be anyone who is not a hypocrite. So, if our dignity comes only through being perfectly moral, we are all going to lose our dignity.

Maria von Herbert lost her dignity and self-worth, because she was “othered” by her friend, she was “othered” by Kant, and her society offered her no other opportunity to establish a meaningful identity. Can one’s dignity be so fragile that it can be taken from one? How can the human being secure their sense of self-worth and dignity in the face of the gender policing and pressure? Conforming to gender norms appears to relieve the pressure, but does not give dignity and self-worth to the woman. Only a man does not lose his worth and dignity in conforming to gender norms, according to Kant. It would be nice if conforming one’s actions to the moral law filled in the gap but Maria reports that it does not. She is one anecdotal witness. Kant thinks that conforming one’s actions to the moral law does afford dignity and



intrinsic worth to the person. But without the possibility of self-governing, this is impossible. Being pressured to conform to gender norms and then submitting to gender norms derails the possibility of submitting to the moral law. There are three reasons for this for women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century who were conforming to gender norms: 1) they were pursuing the beautiful which is not the same as the moral, 2) they were concerned about what other people thought about them, and most likely conformed their behavior to what pleased others rather than submitting it to the moral law, and 3) they were governed by men in the home and had no options outside the home.

In conclusion, there appears to be evidence of gender norm policing in Kant's time. The threat of being "othered" was real and exhibited in Kant's comments on women scholars, and also in his treatment of Maria von Herbert. Erhard's stigmatization of Maria von Herbert is further evidence of 'othering' and gender policing. Theodore von Hippel was willing to support women's liberation from her gender role in the home, but he too was most likely afraid of the social consequences of advocating for women's opportunities outside this gender role limitation. A woman's dignity and self-worth seem to be tied to her opportunities to establish an identity outside the gender norms as they were defined by Kant's characterization of them. And finally, one's dignity and worth seems anecdotally to be connected more with one's ability to establish an identity outside gender roles than conforming one's actions to the moral law.

**ABSTRACT:** Accusing Kant of 'sexism' conceals what the real issues are: Kant was primarily making comments about women in his attempt to do popular philosophy and empirical science. Being an amateur at the empirical sciences, he actually was engaged in promoting gender norms for women especially. He was also concerned about international males conforming to the gender norms of working and self-governance. In addition, Kant engaged in the activity of gender policing and stereotyping women. His comments on women scholars and his treatment of Maria von Herbert illustrate these behaviors. When one assesses Kant's distinctions between males and females it illustrates that he wants women to conform to gender roles, but this does not mean women cannot as rational human beings conform their actions to the moral law. What it does mean is that they probably will not conform their actions to the moral law, since conforming to the gender role of a woman in 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany was not conducive to self-governance. We can conclude anecdotally from Kant's experience with Maria von Herbert that one's dignity does not reside in gender norm conformity, nor in being under moral laws, but rather in working outside the home and acquiring a meaningful identity.

**KEYWORDS:** gender norms, women, Kant, stereotyping, gender policing

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## NOTES

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