

# CRITICAL DIALOGUE ON HELGA VARDEN'S BOOK 'SEX, LOVE, AND GENDER: A KANTIAN THEORY' (2020)

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## INTRODUCTION

Helga Varden's book 'Sex, Love, and Gender: A Kantian Theory' (2020) can be viewed as a pioneering work which provides a comprehensive examination of Kantian philosophy in terms of the thematic areas of love, sexuality and gender. Varden's object is "to bring out the productiveness of Kant's approach" (15). Gaining an overall view of Kantian thinking on these topics is a desideratum of Kantian research. Varden not only fills this gap but also goes beyond it, insofar as she takes Kant as the starting point for her attempt to find solutions to current philosophical problems in the above-mentioned thematic areas. She thus thinks outside of the Kantian box, making a decisive contribution to philosophical solutions for today's problems, whereby theory and political practice are viewed as being closely related.

Varden's objective is to employ Kant's works as a tool to critically appraise existentialist, postmodern and scientific approaches to theories on love, sexuality and gender theory as well as to overcome their shortcomings. Drawing on Kantian concepts she develops a theory of sexuality, love and gender which revises Kant's philosophy, focusing on his image of humanity; his postulate of freedom and his political and legal-philosophical viewpoints when doing so. She references Kant's ideas about human nature when assuming that there are three anthropological dimensions:

a predisposition to animality which enables us to be 'living beings', or animals; the predisposition to humanity, which enables us to be 'rational beings', or to use reason to set off our own and to have a social sense of self; and the predisposition to personality, which enables us to be 'responsible beings' in that we can act as our practical reason deems necessary (R 6: 26). (36)

This anthropological foundation is at odds with the constructivist assumptions of postmodern theories regarding sexuality as well as with the principle of choice expounded in existentialist theories and deterministic scientific approaches that focus on causality. The aspects of 'happiness and virtue' and 'right and politics' provide the book with a structure, exploring the existential-anthropological and political-legal dimensions of sexuality in particular.

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Varden's concern is that human feelings and needs in the physical-emotional area should be taken seriously and, furthermore, that human freedom should be honoured and protected. Furthermore, she wishes to create a space for the realisation of human predispositions and possibilities – in particular for individuals and their perspectives. Freedom ends where the freedom of the other begins. The autonomy of the individual functions as the starting point for Varden's moral and legal considerations - entirely in keeping with the Kantian spirit. Freedom as autonomy also provides the basis for her theory on sexuality, love and gender. These areas are thus also subject to individual choice regarding self-determined lifestyles, which, within the scope of a consensus-based model of social coexistence that includes conflicts, are restricted solely by the needs of others. Varden asserts that the Kantian image of humanity, which assumes the animality and humanity of the human being, is a suitable tool to adequately grasp the physicality, emotionality and relationality of human beings and thus also of aspects relating to love, sexuality and gender.

Kant's philosophical concepts, argues Varden, can function as the starting point to develop a philosophy of love, sexuality and gender, even if Kant himself and his ideas often remain rooted in traditional attitudes - for example regarding heterosexuality and homosexuality. Varden wishes to overcome misjudgements and restrictions of Kant's philosophical conceptions. She asserts that a state body which is generally recognised or can be recognised is necessary to safeguard the areas of individual freedom required to live out love, eroticism and sexuality. The shaping of the political arena in such a way that it facilitates the formation of republics which practice the division of powers and award independent competences and powers to legislature and the judiciary must therefore be viewed as imperative for the realisation of individual freedom. The guarantor for human freedom is a state with a legal system which is, at the least, minimally just and this state's legitimate exercise of governmental power. An, ideally, impartial body could resolve disputes; ensure safety and offer protection, particularly in the context of human beings' physical and emotional vulnerability within the scope of romantic relationships which are protected by contracts and situations of a quasi-contractual nature in the area of sexual contacts, which can generate violence in the social context of power hierarchies. Kant's ethics are thus not only of key importance but also his legal doctrine and political philosophy, whereby Varden offers "a liberal republican reading of Kant's legal-political philosophy" (14). To do so, she positions the areas of love, sexuality and gender in a legal-political context which takes Kant as its starting point for interpretation and is the precondition for individuals to be able to adequately live out their physical, emotional and psychological needs.

Varden's work opens up the possibility of a critical dialogue, which is given a forum in this special edition of *Estudos Kantianos*. In the following section researchers Ann Cahill, Jordan Pascoe and Alice McLaughlin engage in a critical examination of the book 'Sex, Love, and Gender: A Kantian Theory'. This second part of the special edition begins with Ann Cahill's critical commentary 'Vital Forces, Selves, and Consent: Responding to a philosophical Love Letter', followed by Jordan Pascoe's text 'On Being at Home in Ourselves and the World: Love, Sex, Gender, and Justice' and Alice MacLachlan's commentary 'Friendship, Love, and Family: Comments on Sex, Love, and Gender by Helga Varden'. It concludes with Helga Varden's response to these critical appraisals, 'Responding to Ann Cahill, Alice MacLachlan, and Jordan

Pascoe', which promises to initiate a stimulating discussion. Readers are explicitly encouraged to participate in and continue this dialogue. Our journal is ready and willing to provide the space for productive discussions, also extending beyond this special edition.

