

KANT ON WOMEN AND MORALITY

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Abstract: Kant has often been criticized for holding a very negative vision of women, according to which they are less rational and less morally valuable than men. I shall argue quite the opposite. I will show that, in spite of some minor pejorative comments, Kant held that women fit better the ideal of a moral person than men. This is due to some qualities of the female sex, mainly women's capacity for self-control and the capacity for having moral emotions such as sympathy and compassion. Moreover, women show their master of emotions and passions when they are able to use their emotional sensitivity and self-control to master the feelings and passions of men.

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1 Women and the beautiful morality

As morality presupposes the capacity of mastering inclinations in order to follow the moral law, women seem to fit better the role of a moral agent than men. Kant implicitly acknowledges this in the first statement of the section "The character of sex" of the *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*:

"All machines designed to accomplish with little power as much as those with great power, must be designed with art. Consequently, one can assume beforehand that Nature's foresight has put more art into the design of female than the male" (Ant, 7:303)¹.

Indisputably Kant thinks men are superior to women in physical power, which is the reason why he claims that "under uncivilized conditions, superiority in on the man's side only". Yet in civilization the (so called) weakness of the feminine sex calls for a deeper inquiry. She has a power to control man's inclinations and she brings man to moral behavior.

¹ I will use the following abbreviations: Ant for *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*; *Observations for Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schöne und Erhabenen*. The numbers refer to volume and page of the Akademie Edition (Kants gesammelte Schriften. Ed. Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902-).

Kant shows indeed his old fashioned sexism when he claims that one of the ends of nature regarding women is the preservation of species. However, he also attributes another end to women: the improvement of society and its refinement. She is endowed with finer sensations, since nature “made this sex the ruler of men through modesty and eloquence in speech and expression” (Ant, 7: 306). She demands gentle and polite treatment from men, by doing so, they are brought to moral behavior, which is not morality itself, but is a preparation and introduction to morality.

My aim is to explore these relations Kant establishes between women, emotions and morality, in order to show that the female sex is useful to moral education and fits better the ideal of a rational agent. By doing this, I want to challenge the common feminist view according to which the liberal thought, from Kant to John Rawls, are not capable to deal with emotions as an important part of our lives.

2 The beautiful morality

Much has been said about Kant’s prejudice against woman. One of the most striking examples is in *The Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, when, after stating that women could be successful in science, Kant advise them against it, because they will lose the power over men:

Laborious learning or painful pondering, even if a woman should greatly succeed in it, destroy the merits that are proper to her sex, and because of their rarity they can make of her an object of cold admiration, but at the same time they will weaken the charms with which she exercises her great power over the other sex (Observations, 2:51).

Men are sublime, woman are beautiful. Surprising as it is for our contemporary feminism moral sense, I will show that the attribution of the beautiful to women has some interesting consequences.

According to Kant, the refinement in social life is very important for morality. In a passage which seems to be extracted from a polished British philosopher, Kant writes:

The cynic’s purism and the hermit’s mortification of the flesh, without social good-living, are distorted interpretations of virtue and do not make virtue attractive; rather, being forsaken by the graces, they can make no claim to humanity (Ant, 7: 282).

In this effort to develop morality through sociability, the good living which still

seems to harmonize best with virtue is a good meal in good company. A good dinner has to obey some rules, among them not to allow deadly silence to fall, but permit only momentary pauses in the conversation. But if a sudden silence threatens the conversation, a woman, usually the lady of the house can often all by herself avoid such stagnation:

A single person, particularly the lady of the house, can often all by herself avoid such a stagnation and keep the conversation flowing, so that, as at a concert, the conversation can conclude with general and complete joyfulness, which makes it all so much more wholesome (Ant, 7: 278).

The mere presence of women is already a constraint to impoliteness. Kant claims that “there are occasions at a festive table, where the presence of ladies automatically limits the freedom of the conversation to what is polite.” (Ant, 7:279). Besides that, women have a strong aesthetical sense; even her morality is primarily aesthetical. Her judgment of a good or wrong action is related to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure:

The virtue of a woman is a beautiful virtue. That of a male sex should be a noble virtue. Women will avoid the wicked, not because it is unjust, but because it is repulsive; and to them virtuous actions mean morally beautiful ones (Observations, 2: 56).

Although this morality does not have the moral worth that Kant attributes to actions done from duty, it can indeed help morality, as it can identify situations in which respect and politeness are being neglected:

They have many sympathetic sensations, good heartedness, and compassion ... They have very delicate feelings in regard to the least offense, and are exceedingly precise to notice the most trifling lack of attention and respect toward them (Observations, 2:50).

This aesthetical moral sense which belongs to women can be developed in order to approach what Barbara Hermann has called moral salience²: emotions can also have a perceptive role of what is morally relevant in a situation.

3 The indirect art of domination

In spite of some awful comments about women, Kant accepts that they have many virtues. Although some of these virtues attest that Kant is an old fashioned man, and the virtues are symbol of submission, they are worthwhile analyzing

One of these virtues is patience, although one could object that this is a very old

² Herman, Barbara, *The practice of moral judgment* (Cambridge, MT: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 79-83.

fashioned and submissive virtue, it is still a proof of self- control.

Feminine virtue or vice is very different from masculine virtue or vice, not only in kind but also in motive. She is expected to be patient; he must be tolerant. She is sensitive; he is perceptive. The man's business is to earn, the woman's is to save (Ant, 7: 307).

Through patience, women can control men, even for her own purposes. She does not use strength, but charm. While explaining in what consists one of the social passion, lust of authority, Kant explains that, while men use the direct art of domination, women uses the indirect art:

This is not to say that the feminine part of our species is free from wanting to rule over the masculine element (just the opposite is true), but it does not use the same means to this end as the masculine. The feminine sex does not use the quality of strength (which refers in this context to domination), but rather the quality of charm which directs itself toward the inclination of the other sex to submit (Ant, 7: 273).

Women are more cunning than men; they have more capacity of obtaining their ends using the appropriate means. As they are not assaulted by strong emotions and passions, they are more capable of controlling themselves and getting what they are looking for. Their weakness is only a disguise of an artful power to dominate without using force:

Feminine traits are called weakness. People joke about them; but reasonable persons see very well that those traits are just the tools for management of men, and for the use of men for female designs (Ant, 7: 303).

Because men like domestic peace, he prefers to submit to her in the domestic sphere, as he does not want to be hindered in his own affairs. "The woman wants to dominate, the man wants to be dominated" (Ant, 7: 306): Although Kant sometimes attributes the capacity to dominate to some submissive and traditional capacities as the ability to please (Ant, 7: 306), he acknowledges that the woman can better master some abilities required in society.

By controlling the rude manners of men, women can win over him. For this she uses politeness and the art of pleasing. She can also use some expressions of emotions, such as crying, which the rules of society allow her to have.

Women are aloud in society to show her emotions through tears, contrarily to men, who can only be excused to cry, if he does not make any noise. Women can use her tears to control men, disarming him with her "tears of exasperation" (Ant, 7: 304). In one of the few passages where Kant says good word about emotions, he claims that there are some emotions "by which nature mechanically strengthens health" (Ant, 7: 261): among them are laughing

and weeping. One can understand that in the sense that when one are taken by strong emotions of sadness, it is better to express that and come back to a normal state of excitement. Laughter can help digestion, because it is “always an exercise of the muscles which are used for digestion”.

Another expression of feeling which is good for health is weeping:

A widow, who, as the saying explains, will not allow herself to be comforted, that is, who does not want to know how to dry up the flow of tears, unknowingly or unintentionally takes care of her health. (Ant, 7: 262).

However, this eloquent expression of sadness is only allowed by the feminine sex. If man is moved until the point of crying, his expression should be more discrete:

This expression of tenderness, as a weakness of the sex, however, must not permit the male involved to be moved to shedding tears, but only to have tears in his eyes (Ant, 7: 263).

4 The art of deceiving

Kant is a moralist who condemns all lies and false promises. It is a sign of character neither to break one’s promise nor to speak an untruth intentionally (Ant, 7: 294). However, this does not imply that we should always be completely sincere to the point of being rude. In social life man should abstain to always tell the truth, when he is not asked to do it. Politeness is partly an art of dissimulation and Kant attributes the total sincerity to uncivilized people. To know how to be an actor is a sign of education and refinement:

Collectively, the more civilized men are, the more they are actors. They assume the appearance of attachment, of esteem for others, of modesty, and of disinterestedness, without ever deceiving since nothing sincere is meant. Persons are familiar with this and it is even a good thing that this is so in this world, for when man plays this roles, virtues are gradually established, whose appearance had until now only been affected (Ant, 7: 151).

In this civilized art of deceiving, women are better than man. They are trained from early in life to smile and to please and they do not reveal their inner secrets, whilst men are easy to fathom (Ant, 7: 304). This aptitude is not immoral, but helps to develop politeness and a good social life. Woman put a veil around her secrets, as well as the secrets of nature. Her modesty and sensitivity to shame attest that capacity to veil the coarsest secrets of sexuality:

Sensitivity to shame is secrecy of nature addressed to setting bounds to a very intractable inclination, and since it has the voice of nature on its side, seems always to agree with good moral qualities even if it yields to excess But at the same time it serves to draw a curtain of mystery before even the most appropriate and necessary purposes of nature, so that a too

familiar acquaintance with them might not occasion disgust, or indifference at least, in respect to the final purpose of an impulse onto which the finest and liveliest inclinations of human nature are grafted. This quality is especially peculiar to the fair sex and very becoming to it (Observations, 2: 61).

5 Women are better fitted for morality than men

One of the main criticisms against Kant has come from feminist philosophy, according to which, some ingredients that are important to female identity, such as emotion, love, empathy and cooperation, are not in consideration in Kantian Ethics. Sally Sedwick expresses this criticism when she says that “because of moral agency on Kantian view is a function of acting from reason rather than from feeling, it is said to reflect features more of male than of female identity.”³ She, however, supports Kant against the critique of a misunderstanding of human psychology. What Kant is saying is not that we are-or should be-cold people without any feeling, or that in our meaningful relations, feelings should not play an important part. What he is claiming is that empirical motives do not have moral weight. Barbara Hermann offers a clear picture of Kantian model when proposing that we should understand emotions as possible primary motives. Emotions can be an initial motive to go and visit a friend in a hospital; however, they are themselves morally indifferent in Kantian account.

The Kantian and anti-Kantian feminists agree on one point: they all think that women are more emotional than men. However, Kantian texts show that women have less harmful emotions than men. Female passions are weaker and their affects are not an obstacle to pure practical reason.

Women are less likely to have passions in the Kantian sense. One of the natural passions is the passion for sex and women seem to have a natural self control that lacks in the masculine gender. They are endowed with modesty and with a natural capacity to refrain from men’s bold advances.

If all vanity should be considered bad for morality, at least women’s vanity is not as dangerous as men’s vanity: “Vanity, for which one reproaches the fair sex so frequently, so far as it is a fault in that sex, yet it is only a beautiful fault”. (Observations, 2: 57). Men’s vanity

³ Schott, May Robin. *Feminist Interpretations of Immanuel Kant*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1997, p.78.

takes the form of the three main passions: lust of honor, lust of authority and lust of money. A woman's vanity, on the contrary, manifests itself in the enjoyment of adornments and dressing, which is not meant to attract the attention of man. Kant considers that women dresses for her own sex, while men dresses for women, "if this can be called dressing, it goes so far as not to shame his wife by his clothes" (Ant, 7: 307). Women are more inclined to some affects than men, but these are harmless affects, which are even good for health (Ant, 7: 262).

The Kantian picture of women is not what commentators usually believe. The Kantian portrait of the fair sex is not depicted with the bold colors of passion and affects. Women are rather represented as endowed with a subtle morality, which can distinguish fine differences that men cannot see. This is not for sure a morality of principles, but indubitably a beautiful morality.

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