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Women and emotion

Kant has often been criticized for holding very negative views of women, according to which they are less rational and less morally valuable than men. In the chapter “Kant” in the *Blackwell Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, Robin May Schott asks, “Why do feminist philosophers read Kant? Because of his misogyny and disdain of the body, Barbara Hermann has described Kant as the moral philosopher whom feminists find most objectionable.”¹

In this chapter, I will show that, in spite of some undeniably sexist comments, Kant held that women have moral features, although these are understood as a beautiful morality rather than a rational one. Also, Kant points out some moral qualities of the female sex, mainly women’s capacity for self-control and their capacity to experience moral emotions such as sympathy and compassion. Moreover, women show their mastery of emotions and passions when they are able to use their emotional sensitivity and self-control to master the feelings and passions of men. Morality presupposes the capacity of mastering inclinations in order to act morally and in women this moral feature seems to be more developed than in 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)

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

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 has some moral interesting features.

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 advises them against it, because they will lose their power over men:

Laborious learning or painful grubbing, even if a woman could get very far with them, destroy the merits that are proper to her sex, and on account of their rarity may well make her into an object of cold admiration, but at the

same time they will weaken the charms by means of which she exercises her great power over the other sex. (Observations, 2: 229)

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

According to Kant, refinement in social life is very important for morality. In a passage of the *Anthropology*, Kant censures the hermit way of life and praises social good living:

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)

As Alix Cohen remarks, "These zealous individuals may appear virtuous; but for Kant, they are not." One of the reasons is that "humanity requires both good living and virtue; one without the other is not true humanity."² 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. If a sudden silence threatens the conversation, a woman, usually the lady of the house can often save the day:

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: 278n)

Women are then important in keeping alive what Alix Cohen has called "The Ultimate Kantian Experience." Not only do they contribute to the success of the conversation, but their presence is also 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 aesthetic sense; even her morality is primarily aesthetic. 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: 231)

Although this morality does not have the moral worth that Kant attributes to actions done from duty, it can indeed help morality, since it can identify situations in which respect and politeness are being neglected, and women are exceedingly precise to notice the most trifling lack of attention and respect toward them.

Women’s social virtues

In spite of some awful comments about women, Kant accepts that they have many virtues. Although some of these virtues appear to relate to a submissive character, they are well worth analyzing. One of these virtues is patience, although one could object that this is a very old-fashioned and submissive virtue, it is still 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 their own purposes. They do not use strength, but charm. While explaining what one of the social

passions, the lust for authority, comprises, Kant explains that while men use the direct art of domination, women use 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 to obtain their ends using the appropriate means. Since they are not assaulted by strong emotions and passions, they are more capable of controlling themselves and to get 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, they prefer to submit to women in the domestic sphere, since they do not want to be hindered in their 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 such as the ability to please (Ant, 7: 306), he acknowledges that women can better master some abilities required in society.

By controlling the rude manners of men, women can win them over. For this, they use politeness and the art of pleasing. They can also use some expressions of emotion, such as crying, which the rules of society allow them to have. Women can use their tears to control men, disarming them with their "tears of exasperation" (Ant, 7: 304). The end of this showing (or pretending)

of emotions is the refinement of men's rude manners, so, it is a moral purpose. Women are allowed in society to show their emotions through tears, contrary to men, who can only be excused crying if they do not make any noise. However, these feminine tears have a moral purpose, and it is not contrary to morality.

Women are also more polite in social interaction. Kant surely is a moralist who condemns all lies and false promises. However, this does not imply that we should always be completely sincere to the point of being rude. Even in the text "On a Supposed Right to Lie for Love of Humanity," he acknowledges that we should tell the truth only if we are asked for it. In the same way, we should not make false promises. It is a sign of character neither to break one's promise nor to speak an untruth intentionally (Ant, 7: 294).

However, in social life man should abstain from always telling the truth, when he is not asked to do so. Politeness is also an art of dissimulation and Kant attributes 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 men. They are trained from early in life to smile, to please, and not to reveal their inner secrets, while men are easy to fathom (Ant, 7: 304). This aptitude is not immoral, but helps to develop politeness and a good social life. A woman put a veil around her secrets, as well as the secrets of nature. Her modesty and sensitivity to shame show that capacity to veil the coarsest secrets of sexuality:

Sensitivity to shame is a 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: 234)

Women and passions

One of the main criticisms against Kant has come from feminist philosophy. According to this critique, some ingredients that are important to female identity, such as emotion, love, empathy, and cooperation, are not in consideration in Kantian ethics. Sally Sedgwick expresses this criticism when she says that “because moral agency on the 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 relationships feelings should not play an important part. What he is claiming is that empirical motives cannot be the foundation of moral worth.

Kantian and anti-Kantian feminists usually agree in one point: for Kant women are more emotional than men.⁴ Kantian feminists, such as Marcia Baron, support that the ideas of reason, autonomy, and freedom are the foundation of women liberation and should be cherished by women as important tools for their autonomy. She claims that while Kant “certainly was not thinking about women and the moral outrageousness of the roles into which they traditionally have been cajoled or forced, his ethical theory is far more able to provide the tools for challenging the roles than many other theories.”⁵ However, women were excluded from this idea of reason when they were considered mainly

emotional beings. She also accepts that Kantian virtues are mostly male virtues. Kant could be blamed for by “the tendency to equate male virtue with generic human virtue.” For Baron, then, the problem with Kant is not only that “he didn’t recognize that women are full-fledged rational beings, but also that he has too narrow—too masculine—a picture of the virtuous person.”⁶ Marcia Baron does not deny that women are mostly emotional in Kant’s assessment, but she tries to respond to the feminist critique, by denying that all affective is bad in Kant’s view.

Another way to refer to this problem is to challenge the rationality of Kantian morality as the only possible way to be moral, showing that women can have a different voice regarding morality, a voice that cherishes care and emotions. This view was first argued by Carol Gilligan and gave rise to the ethics of care.⁷ Allen Wood follows the same line of reasoning when he claims that to say women are more emotional is not to regard them as generally inferior to men considered as moral agents, because for Kant “it is one thing to have a *temperament* that makes the moral life more difficult and quite a different thing to be worse as a moral agent.”⁸ Anti-Kantian feminists also criticize his idea of autonomy as independence, because this shows the isolation of his morality, which is not appropriate for women.⁹

Pro- and anti-enlightenment feminists agree that women are mainly emotional in Kant’s view; however, I think that there is not a definite position that women are more emotional than men in the Kantian texts. I will sustain the opposite, that according to Kant women are less emotional than men, because women’s emotions are less harmful and women’s passions are weaker than men’s. Female passions are weaker and their mild affects are not an obstacle to morality.

In one of the few passages where Kant says good words 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 this sense: when one is taken by a strong emotion

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 in the feminine sex. If men are moved to the point of crying, their 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).

These minor comments about affects in women do not imply that they are more emotional than men. Kant claims that they have more moral feelings, but not more affects in general. One of the paradigmatic Kant affects is anger, and all the examples Kant mentions of a person taken by this emotion are examples of men, not women. Also, Kant considers that passions are worse than affects for the purposes of morality and women are less likely to have passions in the Kantian sense. One of the natural passions is the passion for sex, which is deficient or more subtle in women. Regarding sex, women seem to have a natural self-control that is absent in the masculine gender. Inversely, they are endowed with modesty and with a natural capacity to refrain from men's bold initiatives. Allen Wood is one of the few commentators who acknowledge that for Kant men are more emotionally vulnerable than women. In a remark about marriage, he claims that while "men take advantage of women through their greater physical, intellectual, social, and economic power," "women take advantage of men through their manipulation of the man's emotional vulnerability and lack of self-control."¹⁰ He also points to men's lack of self-control. The fact that Kant claims that women are less rational does not imply that they are more emotional than men.

Even women's vanity is less harmful than the masculine one. If all vanity should be considered bad for morality, at least women's vanity is not as dangerous as men's vanity: it is only a beautiful fault. Men's vanity, on the other hand, takes the form of the three main passions: lust for honor, lust for power, and lust for 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 men. Kant believes that women dress for their own sex, while men dress 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 the health (Ant, 7: 262).

The Kantian picture of women is not as bad as what commentators usually believe. In the text *Re-Visions of Agency in Kant's Moral Theory*, Jean Rumsey claims that Kant's concept of human agency excludes women, because "women are characterized in both the *Observations* and the *Anthropology* as creatures led by their emotions and incapable of grasping principles; as naturally sympathetic, benevolent, and complaisant, possessing feminine virtues complementary to those of men (having patience rather than tolerance, being sensitive rather than responsive, saving rather than acquiring)."¹¹ Contrary to Rumsey, I consider that it would not be fair to say women are led by their emotions, because the Kantian portrait of the fairer sex is not painted with the bold colors of passions and affects. Women are rather represented as endowed with a subtle morality, where we can observe the mild color of moral feelings, such as sympathy, or virtues such as benevolence. This is certainly not a morality of principles, but indubitably a beautiful morality.

Patrick Frierson is one of the few commentators who are sensitive to a positive aspect of a beautiful morality of women. He admits that although "Kant's account might seem to preclude virtue in women," they are capable of virtue, but a beautiful one. Since virtue is also difficult for men, "whereas few men will attain sublime virtue, women are well equipped for beautiful virtue."¹²

Frierson also admits that the apparent weakness of women helps the moral progress of human being: "The apparent weakness and timidity of women ends up becoming one of the driving forces behind cultural and even proto-moral progress in the human species."¹³ Mari Mikkola has also showed that Kant's view on women is less unsettling than the one attributed to him by feminists and has challenged the view that he claims women are morally deficient.¹⁴

However, Frierson claims that the Kantian interest in women as a driving force toward morality changed from the *Observations* to the mature critical philosophy. According to him, Kant changed from an empirical and sentimentalistic moral theory in the 1760s to a more rigorous rationalist morality in the *Groundwork* and later works.

I disagree with Frierson in two aspects. First, I think that Kant never supported a sentimentalist view about morality. In the *Observations* he only acknowledges that women may have a morality, even if they are not capable of principles. Second, a later text such as the *Anthropology* also indicates that women may play a role in the cultural education of mankind through a beautiful morality.

Kant clearly attributes a moral role to women. Even if they do not fit an ideal of a morality of principles as individuals, their role in society will certainly help to build a more civilized world, which is a condition to morality.

The liberal tradition that goes back to Kant has divided feminists between the ones who think that autonomy and rationality are essential for women, and the ones who think these are mainly male ways of reasoning and should be replaced by another way of thinking. Martha Nussbaum is a supporter of the view that the enlightenment ideas of autonomy and freedom are positive aspects of the Kantian doctrine that can be valuable for the emancipation of women. She also claims that many elements of liberalism are important for women in their struggle to become full citizens and human beings that could totally enjoy their capacities.

In the book *Sex and Social Justice*, Nussbaum clarifies what she calls liberalism: "When I speak of 'liberalism,' then, I shall have in mind, above all,

the tradition of Kantian liberalism represented today in the political thought of John Rawls.”¹⁵ According to her, this tradition brings a twofold intuition that are essential for feminism: first, that all human beings are of equal dignity and worth; second, that the primary source of this worth is a power of moral choice within them, consisting of the ability to plan a life in accordance to one’s end.