Pascoe, Jordan. "Patriarchy and Enlightenment in Immanuel Kant (1784)." *Patriarchal Moments: Reading Patriarchal Texts*. Ed. Cesare Cuttica. Ed. Gaby Mahlberg. : Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 115–122. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472589163.ch-015>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 10:40 UTC.

Copyright © Cesare Cuttica, Gaby Mahlberg and the Contributors 2016. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Patriarchy and Enlightenment in Immanuel Kant (1784)

Jordan Pascoe

Enlightenment is the human being's emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one's intellect without the direction of another. This immaturity is self-incurred when its cause does not lie in a lack of intellect, but rather in a lack of resolve and courage to make use of one's intellect without the direction of another. 'Sapere aude! Have the courage to make use of your own intellect!' is hence the motto of enlightenment.

Idleness and cowardice are reasons why such a large segment of humankind, even after nature has long since set it free from foreign direction (naturaliter maiorennes), is nonetheless content to remain immature for life; and these are also the reasons why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. It is so comfortable to be immature. If I have a book that reasons for me, a pastor who acts as my conscience, a physician who determines my diet for me, etc., then I need not make any effort myself. It is not necessary that I think if I can just pay; others will take such irksome business upon themselves for me. The guardians who have kindly assumed supervisory responsibility have ensured that the largest part of humanity (including the entirety of the fairer sex) understands progress toward maturity to be not only arduous, but also dangerous.... It is thus difficult for any individual to work himself out of the immaturity that has become almost second nature to him. He has even become fond of it, and is, for the time being, truly unable to make use of his own reason, because he has never been allowed to try it.¹

In this passage from the beginning of *What is Enlightenment?* Kant defines 'enlightenment' as the courage and capacity to think for oneself. For Kant, the central question is: why do we hold ourselves back from enlightenment?

In Kant's nod to the 'the entirety of the fairer sex', the only direct reference to women that Kant makes in this essay, he intimates that women, in particular, see enlightenment as both dangerous and difficult. Women are not alone in this: Kant critiques many men, too, for failing to claim their intellectual maturity. Nevertheless, the reference is striking: *all* women find themselves in a condition of intellectual immaturity, dependent upon others for guidance and uniformly failing to undertake the arduous task of working towards enlightenment.

There are two ways we might read this claim. Either Kant is making a rather insulting assumption that all women are by nature immature, or he is issuing a call to arms: a call for women to overthrow the guardians and institutions holding them back, and to develop their capacities for independent thought and autonomous action. My question is whether this latter reading squares with Kant's patriarchalist tendencies elsewhere in his moral and political philosophy. Kant's call for women to seek liberation rests on the premise that women are holding *themselves* back from enlightenment, and that they have the power to overthrow the 'guardians' that stand in their way.

Who are these 'guardians'? Kant seems to be using this term in two ways: on the one hand, there are persons (like the pastor and the physician) who perform this role, and on the other, there are institutions and statutes that do this work. For women, these 'guardians' are specific and unmistakable: they are husbands, of course, as well as the institution of marriage itself, which positions women as wives, and therefore as legal minors under the protection of their husbands. Kant is quite specific about the nature of this dependency: in the *Anthropology* he argues, 'woman regardless of age is declared to be immature in civil matters; her husband is her natural curator'.² If she has no husband and owns her own property, he goes on to say, 'then another person is the curator'.

This assumption about women's immaturity is borne out in the *Doctrine of Right*, where Kant argues that men ought to have dominance over their wives, based on the 'natural superiority of the husband to the wife in his capacity to promote the common interest of the household'.³ In these passages, husbands are explicitly the guardians of wives, and their right to guardianship seems to be grounded in an assumption of the 'natural inferiority' of women to their husbands.

Kant is famous for making these sorts of disparaging remarks about women, particularly in his anthropological works and popular essays. Many scholars argue that these comments should be taken with a grain of salt, and distinguished from Kant's more rigorous philosophical claims that all persons are ends in themselves, with an innate right to freedom and equality. Of course, Kant is also guilty of defending and justifying women's legal inequality in his

political philosophy. This poses a bit of a chicken-and-egg problem for Kant scholars, since it is not always clear whether Kant thinks that the legal inequality of women is justified because of the natural inferiority of women, or whether the inferiority of women is simply a reflection of their limited legal rights and opportunities. So, to understand the passage above, we need to ask: are women *naturally* inclined to be immature and unenlightened, or does their lack of legal rights force them into a life of immaturity?

In order to answer this question, I want to connect Kant's fuzzier claims about enlightenment and intellectual maturity in *What is Enlightenment?* to the more concrete political arguments he makes about independence, since both are concerned with the ability to think and act for oneself. In both *Theory and Practice* and the *Doctrine of Right*, Kant ties this idea of independence to a distinction between *active* and *passive* citizens. Active citizens, he argues, are those who have achieved political independence, and thus find themselves in a position where they can think for themselves (1996: 314). This qualifies them, he argues, to vote. Passive citizens, on the other hand, are those who find themselves dependent on others for their existence, and who therefore cannot be relied upon to think independently.

As in *What is Enlightenment?* the emphasis is on the capacity to think for oneself, although in the citizenship arguments, Kant seems concerned not only with intellectual maturity, but also with the material conditions that make independence possible. Kant claims that the central requirement for active citizenship is to 'be his own master', and argues that those who support themselves with 'any skill, trade, fine art, or science' qualify, whereas those who can earn a living only by 'allowing others to make use of him' would not (2006A: 295). On these grounds, Kant argues in the *Doctrine of Right* that passive citizens include 'an apprentice in the service of a merchant or artisan; a domestic servant (as distinguished from a civil servant); a minor (*naturaliter vel civiliter*); all women and, in general, anyone whose preservation in existence (his being fed and protected) depends not on his management of his own business but on arrangements made by another (except the state)' (1996: 314). Once again, we find Kant making the sweeping assumption that *all* women find themselves in a condition of dependency, although the reasons for this are not entirely clear. And so we must return to the question posed above: do women find themselves in positions of dependency by nature, or by law?

First, let's explore the evidence that Kant thought women were simply *naturally* inferior, particularly when it came to intellectual capacities. In an early text, the 1764 *Observations on the Beautiful and Sublime*, he argues that

'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 opposite sex'.⁴ In one of his latest published texts, the 1798 *Anthropology from a Practical Point of View* he adds, 'as concerns scholarly women: they use their *books* somewhat like their *watch*, that is, they carry one so that it will be seen that they have one; though it is usually not running or not set by the sun' (2006b: 307). These comments suggest that, whatever Kant hints at in *What is Enlightenment?* intellectual maturity is not a natural state for women, and those women who strive for intellectual independence deserve only mockery for their efforts.

But it need not follow from this that Kant thought women were naturally submissive and dependent. In his anthropological texts, Kant maps a story of gender relations in which each sex dominates the other in different domains. He argues that, because 'nature entrusted to woman's womb its dearest pledge', women tend to experience fear and timidity in their desire to provide safety and stability for their young, an urge that pushes them to seek male protection, to entreat men to behave 'sociably and with propriety' and to establish marriage and the household, those two key civilizing features of social life. Women are not *naturally* inferior to men, but a civilized condition and, as we will see, a *rightful* condition, will mean that women will find themselves in conditions of dependency, confined to a life within the household, where 'woman should dominate and the man should govern'.⁵ The domestic sphere is her domain, as the public sphere is his (2006b: 309).

In the anthropological texts, then, Kant does seem to be making essentialist claims about gender difference and women's nature. Kant's story is not one of simply domination and submission, however, but something akin to Rousseau's ideal of separate spheres. Nonetheless, a pattern emerges in these arguments that will echo in Kant's political arguments: men's and women's natures require the existence of institutionally produced separate spheres organized so that men may indeed become women's legal guardians. These separate spheres may complement and balance one another, but they do not grant equal access to the conditions of enlightenment.

Before we attribute a simplistic patriarchalism to Kant, let us explore one more passage that seems to support the progressive imperative from *What is Enlightenment?* – namely, that women ought to throw off their tutelage and seek maturity and independence. In the *Doctrine of Right*, he argues that all passive citizens (a category that includes women) ought to have the right to

‘work their way up’ towards active citizenship (1996: 315). A state is just, he says, only if every subject of that state could potentially work towards full political independence. And this suggests to many contemporary Kantians that Kant was far more progressive than we give him credit for, and that he envisioned a future in which men and women had full and equal political rights – and thus, an equal shot at achieving enlightenment.

Of course, in the same text in which Kant opens the door to women’s political equality, he also defends women’s inequality in marriage, pointing to the natural superiority of the husband. This does not conflict with the ‘natural equality of the partners’, he says, but it is necessary because of the duty of unity that marriage requires (1996: 279). This suggests that the problem is not that *women* are necessarily unequal to men, but that *wives* are necessarily unequal to their husbands – and this inequality is a necessary feature of the rightful state. Wives, after all, have the domestic sphere as their domain, while husbands participate in politics and public discourse.

If this is so, then we might argue that Kant’s account of gender inequality is merely an institutional inequality, created and maintained by law, such that wives are placed under the guardianship of their husbands, the better to ‘rule’ in the domestic sphere. And if this is so, then we can imagine that if a woman were to find herself in a position of independence – as a wealthy widow, perhaps, who owned her own property – then nothing would hold her back from working her way up to full citizenship, overthrowing her dependency and attaining full maturity. Thus, *wives* are barred from political equality for Kant, but *women* are indeed free to ‘work their way up’ to full participation in the public realm.

There is a catch, of course: Kant repeatedly assumes that all women have the political status of wives. He refers to ‘women’ and ‘wives’ more or less interchangeably in his political works, and assumes that even unmarried women find themselves under the guardianship of a man. In the *Anthropology*, recall, he argued that ‘woman regardless of age is declared to be immature in civil matters; her husband is her natural curator’ (2006b: 209).⁶ Women need not be naturally unequal: in a rightful political condition, women will be ‘declared to be’ legally unequal to men, placed in positions of dependency and tutelage by the normative requirements of law. And this is perhaps because, as Kant himself admits, his observations about women’s nature are necessarily shaped by the conditions in which he finds them – which, in late eighteenth-century Königsberg, were generally conditions of dependency.⁷ So, if Kant found women to be more emotional and less rational than men, or preoccupied with silly, domestic problems and thus unfit for public discourse,⁸ this may indeed be the

result of women's status as legal dependents. Women's dependency has 'become second nature' to her; her legal status has shaped her identity and sense of self. And if this is the case, then women, indeed, might be called to overthrow their guardians and fight for independence, equality and enlightenment, since it is the system of guardianship, rather than her own nature, that holds her back.

Kant's references to women in *What is Enlightenment?* suggest that whatever his anthropological views about women's nature, he leaves open the possibility that women, too, must achieve enlightenment, working their way out of dependence and immaturity. However, Kant's own account of the rightful civil condition poses significant challenges to this imperative. First, he explicitly argues that women ought to be *declared* legal minors as wives, and sets up significant obstacles to women gaining the status of active citizenship and the intellectual maturity it implies.

Second, he systematically constructs a social and legal structure in which it would be nearly impossible for *all* women – or even most women – to gain legal independence and equality. And this means that even if we can take Kant at his word that 'anyone' – including women – 'ought to be able to work their way up' (1996: 315) and envision cases in which individual women (like the wealthy widow) might achieve this status, it is virtually impossible that women *as a class* could obtain political and legal equality with men. This is so because of the structure of marriage and the family, the distribution of labour and its role in determining active citizenship, and Kant's own insistence that women's roles as mothers and breeders make them better suited to dominate the domestic realm than to participate in public discourse. Whatever his claims about the capacities of women to 'work their way up', Kant actively defends a patriarchal model of the state and consistently justifies the legal immaturity and political exclusion of women, and thus presents significant barriers to the fairer sex's access to enlightenment.

Of course, Kant was writing in the late eighteenth century, and so we might ask to what degree we can hold him responsible for this patriarchalism, and to what degree he is simply reflecting the norms and values of his time. We might also argue that we should take into account his more progressive moments – as in *What is Enlightenment?* – when he resists his own tendency towards patriarchalism.

I think we might have reason to excuse Kant's sexist remarks in his anthropological writings, where he is explicitly reflecting the state of gender relations as he saw them. But we will have a much harder time excusing the arguments in his philosophical texts, where he is making normative claims

about what a rightful world ought to look like. When Kant penned his most extended account of marriage in the *Doctrine of Right*, he was responding in part to a broad social debate about the nature and purpose of marriage, and about the place of women in society. His friend and frequent dinner companion Theodor von Hippel had anonymously written books arguing for the moral and legal emancipation of women, and a radical restructuring of marriage to make this emancipation possible.⁹ By comparison, Kant's arguments about women and marriage are quite reactionary, and suggest that he thought there was normative value in upholding patriarchal marriage and the legal minority of women.

Thus, despite Kant's promising 'feminist moments' including his suggestion in *What is Enlightenment?* that women have a duty to free themselves from their dependence and work their way towards enlightenment, he remains a staunch patriarchalist in both his anthropological works and in his more rigorous philosophical texts. This suggests a troubling answer to the question I originally posed. While there is evidence in the anthropological texts to suggest that Kant thought women's natures prevent them from achieving intellectual maturity, there is a more troubling sense in which Kant's own vision of the rightful political state is responsible for holding women back from enlightenment. Women find themselves in a condition of dependency not by choice, but because of the systemic and institutional order of the rightful Kantian state.