

Kant on sex and gender. Or: Is femininity only education?

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Abstract. Much has been written about Kant’s misogyny. His remarks about the “*Geschlechtscharaktere*” (features of the sexes) have been interpreted as evidence of his negative attitude towards women. Most of these comments on “women’s nature” overlook the fact that Kant used the term “nature” differently, depending on the focus of each writing. Such a focus might be empirical, transcendental or pragmatic. In fact, Kant described “masculine” and “feminine” as social categories in the sense of twentieth-century gender concepts that assume a biological sex and a cultural or social gender. A small side-note on whether “femininity is only education or a natural disposition” illustrates Kant’s awareness of these categories and the importance of socio-cultural influences. In his opinion, both sexes can exceed both gender ideals, the feminine and the masculine, and thus present a distorted picture of the respective gender ideal – independently of the biological sex. I will show that Kant advocated a degree of freedom regarding gender identity and thus foreshadowed the gender theories developed in the late twentieth century, which are heteronormative but not essentialist.

Keywords: gender, sex, heteronormativity, heterosexual matrix, essentialism, Kant, Butler

Introduction

The term “gender” refers to a social concept. Accordingly, besides the highly criticised popular writings on the features of the sexes, like the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* or the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, we find remarks on sex and gender in Kant’s social, moral and political writings.

Kant’s moral philosophy is demanding, not only intellectually, but also and especially in its practical implementation. The Categorical Imperative, for example, is an ideal. Even if Kant, in my opinion, did not assume that people would reach this ideal completely, even striving for it and orienting oneself toward the Categorical Imperative as a “touchstone” (*Probirstein*) (*KpV*, AA 5: 63) is demanding and requires sacrifices. This is related to the idea of autonomy.

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1 Autonomy, sex and gender

Since *auto-nomy* means “self-legislation”, not “arbitrariness”, it includes a self-limitation of one’s freedom. Kant discussed conflicts of different claims for freedom in the “Doctrine of Right” (*Rechtslehre*). Such conflicts are very common. For example, my free choice of my music’s sound level may collide with my neighbour’s wish for quietness after 8 pm. An appropriate reaction to such conflicts is a compromise. In Kant’s “Doctrine of Right”, this compromise is named “hindering of a hindrance to freedom” (*Verhinderung eines Hindernisses der Freiheit*; *MS*, AA 6: 231; Kant, 1996, p. 388). It is realised through autonomous self-limitation (I turn down the music, realising my neighbour’s wish to be free from noise).

The “hindering of a hindrance to freedom” is the idea to take responsibility for oneself and others by limiting our freedom by choice in a way that it does not endanger others’ freedom. In this way I ensure my own (limited) freedom of listening to heavy-metal music. As Volker Gerhardt puts it, the “truly dialectic” concept (Gerhardt, 2002, p. 229) of the hindrance of a hindrance of freedom and the idea of autonomy apply to sex and gender identity as well. I argue that Kant supported a certain freedom regarding gender identity and thus anticipated the gender theories developed in the late twentieth century which assume a biological sex and a cultural or social gender (yet both correlate with each other: see Haraway, 1991, p. 12).

Since the sexologist John Money introduced the terminological distinction between the biological sex and the (social) gender in 1955, “gender” has been used to describe social roles based on the sex of a person. In his theory, the gender of a person *could* differ from her sex, but it was also somehow still defined by biological features. The concepts “gender role” and “gender identity” have both been adopted and criticised by feminist theory since then. Feminists especially criticised Money’s heteronormativity, his binary concept of sex and gender; for he did not see anything other than a feminine or masculine option. Money was harshly criticised for his role in the case of David Reimer. Reimer had a sex reassignment as a child, partly based on Money’s recommendation, who thereby wanted to prove his theory. According to the recommendation, Reimer was raised as a girl and later committed suicide.

Judith Butler discussed this case in her famous book, “Undoing Gender” (Butler, 2004, pp. 58-74). According to her, gender is “real only to the extent that it is performed” (Butler, 1997, p. 411). This seems to offer choices. However, the diverse norms related to masculinity and femininity (dress and hair style, activities etc.) are embedded within the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler, 1990, p. 151): “a set of norms which pushes everyone to act *either* masculine or feminine” (Stone, 2007, p. 63; see also Warner, 1991; Meyer, 2010, p. 143).

Even though the sex-gender distinction was terminologically explicated in the twentieth century, the idea of a social gender differing from the biological sex is older. Those who have argued that Kant’s sexist remarks on women’s nature are essentialist have overlooked that this assumption contradicts those of Kant’s remarks which distinguish between the physical sex and the social gender of a person. His sex-gender distinction is as heteronormative as Money’s distinction, but neither of them is essentialist.

2 “*Geschlechtscharaktere*” between sex and gender

Kant’s remarks on the “*Geschlechtscharaktere*” (features of the sexes) were interpreted as evidence for his negative attitude towards women. Robin May Schott (1997, p. 323) argued that the “woman’s lack of self-determination, in [Kant’s] view, was intrinsic to her nature” and that, due to his naturalistic determinist approach, women were consequently “incapable of rational thought” (Schott, 1988, p. viii; see also Antony, 1998, pp. 63-64). I argue that

those “comments on women’s nature” (Schott, 2000, p. 45) overlook the fact that Kant used the term “nature” differently, depending on the respective writing’s focus.

In this respect, the lectures on “Pedagogy” share much with the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Both writings are pragmatic, insofar as they ask what the human “as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself” (*Anth*, AA 07: 119; Kant, 2007, p. 231). They do not ask what humans intrinsically are. Accordingly, Kant described “masculine” and “feminine” as social categories in the sense of the gender concepts of the twentieth century. A small note on whether “femininity is only education or a natural disposition” (*Refl* 1461, AA 15: 642) illustrates Kant’s awareness of these categories and the role that he ascribed to socio-cultural influences such as education, peer group or fashions. But even more interesting is the fact that in Kant’s theory this femininity is by no means limited to women.

Kant only used the German term “*Geschlecht*” which refers to both sex and gender, but his description fits exactly the modern sex-gender distinction, including the heteronormativity. Another side-note sheds light on this, even though it also caused some confusion: “The *coquette* overdoes the feminine ideal; the rough rule-monger exaggerates the masculine one. A prudish woman is too masculine and a *petit maître* is too feminine”¹ (*HN*, AA 20: 3). It was stated that Kant “describes women as coquettes” in general (Mikkola, 2011, p. 89). However, in fact, he did not criticise women for their coquetry, but he criticised coquetry as a misfortune for *both* sexes.

The *coquette* and the *petit maître* were social roles at the peak of the Baroque age with its artificial or superficial tendencies. Kant was very critical towards fashion in general (*Anth*, AA 07: 174-174) and towards those tendencies and the social roles related to that in particular. Both the attitudes of the *coquette* and the *petit maître* (a dandy or fashion-monger) acquired a negative connotation in the later eighteenth century as artificial, superficial or immoral. Kant’s comments marked the turning point. Until today the term “coquette” retains the ambivalent connotation between sex-appeal and immorality.

What is interesting now is that, according to Kant, the female *coquette* overdoes (“*überschreitet*”) the feminine *ideal* or the idea of femininity (“*das Weibliche*”), which is related to beauty. And so does the male *petit maître*. The female “prude” overdoes the opposite masculine ideal, related to duty, just as well as the male rule-monger (“*rauhe pedant*”) does. That means that both sexes can exceed both gender ideals and thus present a distorted picture of the respective gender – independently of their physical sex (*HN*, AA 20: 3). Kant argued that each sex should embrace both gender aspects (*GSE*, AA 02: 228), though he then limited the free “choice” of a certain gender. Why? Because, according to Kant, the “feminine” and the “masculine” are supposed to complement each other (Kersting, 2012, pp. 188-191, 194-197), within the person and within society.

3 Autonomous choices of gender roles?

Kant assumed that we all serve society best if a “man become more perfect as a man and the woman as a woman” (*GSE*, AA 02: 242; Kant, 2007, p. 51). Nevertheless, in “the absence of such principles” (*in Ermangelung solcher Grundsätze*) one might take over the merits of the opposite sex now and then (*ibid.*).

“The absence of such principles” means that, according to Kant, we *can* act from principles when displaying a certain gender. We could not act from principles, if there were no freedom – both only come in pairs. Thus femininity is not something we *are*, but something we *do*, display or perform, just as Butler described it some two hundred years

¹ Cf. “Die Coquette überschreitet das Weibliche der Rauhe pedant das Männliche Eine prude ist zu männlich u. ein petit maitre zu weiblich.”

later. If the discussed Kantian “female nature” were essentialist, one would have no freedom to “overdo” it, like the *coquette* or the *petit maître*, independently of their sex. The nature of the two sexes (*GSE*, AA 02: 242) in the *Anthropology* is indeed the nature of two genders. This “nature” refers to the “formal term of nature”, which is teleological or pragmatic, not empirical (*KrV*, A 419 / B 446). Kant described the feminine and the masculine as sets of features, which have to be cultivated (Jauch, 1988, p. 23). Butler (1990, p. 22) would say: “an achievement”.

Why should men cultivate their masculine qualities and women their feminine ones, according to Kant? The answer is simple, but not uncontroversial: because every community can only be organised free of conflict if there is no complete “equality of claims?” (*MS*, AA 06: 303). The conflict that results from an identical claim does not only affect (heterosexual) couples. It is already apparent if there is only one bathroom in a shared apartment. Only one person can use the bathroom at the same time.

In the same way it does not only affect claims, but responsibilities, too: only one person can stay at home with the children and the other go to work *at the same time*. Thus, I agree with the basic statement that an absolute equality of claims (at the same time, to the same extent etc.) is problematic. However, the heteronormative distribution of claims “male work – female care-work” is not justified by that. The smallest community of people is a couple. Kant discussed the couple in the form of husband and wife and argued for such a heteronormative distribution. Let us examine Kant’s basic statement concerning the problematic equality of claims, bearing in mind that we can transfer it to all kinds of communities of persons, whether they are lovers or friends, men or women.

The differences between husband and wife should complement each other, so that the couple “constitute a single moral person” that combines the best of both sexes (*GSE*, AA 02: 242; Kant, 2007, p. 51). Every person has both feminine and masculine features, which, according to Kant, should be balanced within the person. If a person has to live her life on her own, for example a single working mother, she indeed has to combine stereotypically feminine features such as caring, warmth, social skills, and stereotypically masculine features such as strength, labour or *ratio*. If two persons master their life together, they have the opportunity to ‘specialise’ in either one of these. If they succeed in that, within the single moral person composed of two people, masculine and feminine features are balanced and complement each other. Just like the Categorical Imperative, this is an ideal and it is not less demanding.

In fact, Kant proposed a ‘division of labour’, which is a self-created difference. Within the single moral person composed of two people, both husband and wife are equal again, provided that both voluntarily ‘sacrifice’ a part of their individual freedom to form the unit, the one moral person (*GSE*, AA 02: 242). Kant’s aim was a reciprocal and thereby self-neutralising interdependence of men and women, which generates “equality from difference” (Kersting, 2012, p. 196). The concrete consequences of such difference for women, especially the sacrifice of civil freedom, such as the right to vote or to work, are, of course, not acceptable. A division of labour in general is helpful, but it does not have to be heteronormative as Kant suggested. In his work, we find gender-specific prejudices, but also unsuspected claims for equality. First, I shall look at the prejudices, e.g. that women are more cultivated. This leads us to the answer to the question why men should cultivate their masculine qualities and women should cultivate their feminine ones, not the other way around.

4 Women – the more cultivated sex

The distribution of “a certain being as female and of an opposite ought as male” are repeatedly found in Kant’s work (Löchel, 2006, p. 50; *GSE*, AA 02: 231): “The male sex is

rougher (*roher*) by nature, the female sex is more cultivated (*ausgebildet*)” (*Refl* 1283, AA 15: 567).

Cultivated by nature – this nature must be the formal term of nature, a teleological principle, which might be cultivated itself. According to this, every shortcoming is compensated for by a tool. In the women’s case, physical weakness is compensated for by a “stronger innate feeling for everything that is beautiful” (*GSE*, AA 02: 229; Kant, 2007, p. 40). This facilitates their moral education, even though they mistakenly consider the beautiful to be the dutiful (*GSE*, AA 02: 229). These remarks display gender stereotypical prejudices which led to a manifestation of gender stereotypes in the nineteenth century. Such a manifestation also entailed a strange oblivion. We somehow forgot that there are more than a male sex accompanied by a masculine gender and a female sex accompanied by a feminine gender. The social varieties of gender identities which were still common in the eighteenth century, described by Kant’s *coquette*, *petit maître* etc., became the deviant, lived out only in private.

Even though Kant argued for a gender stereotypical distribution of claims and responsibilities he did not yet say that women are not *capable* of duty. According to Kant, the one moral person shall be ruled and stimulated by the man’s *ratio* (*Verstand*) and the woman’s taste. But this is not because he can think and she cannot, but because one can give him more credit for “insights based on experience” (*auf Erfahrung gegründete Einsicht*) and her for more “freedom and correctness concerning her senses” (*Freiheit und Richtigkeit in der Empfindung*) (*GSE*, AA 02: 242). This means that his merits result from hard work, insights based on experience, while she is given free and correct sense that includes a moral sense by her ‘nature’. This ‘nature’ is again the formal term of nature, not an empirical one.

Husband and wife complement each other, as long as “the man must be superior to the woman through his physical power and courage, while the woman must be superior to the man through her natural talent for mastering his desire for her” (*Anth*, AA 07: 303; Kant, 2007, p. 400). Actually, Kant did not state that women cannot think, but he argued that they should not expose themselves to “laborious learning or painful grubbing” (*mühsames Lernen oder peinliches Grübeln*), because this would reduce their feminine charms, their most powerful tool (*GSE*, AA 02: 229; Kant, 2007, p. 41). Well known is the remark on Émilie du Châtelet and other female intellectuals: a beard “might perhaps better express the mien of depth for which they strive” (*GSE*, AA 02: 229-230, Kant, 2007, p. 41). In other words: Painful cogitation does not suit them. Such stereotypes of intellectual women as “butches” or “poor creatures” are persistent (Beauvoir, 2015, p. 201).

What has received little attention so far is, firstly, that such heteronormative restriction of women is accompanied by an individual freedom and that the freedom of men is accompanied by a restriction. The male ideal of strength, strictly speaking, deprives the man of the freedom to show weakness, while the “weaknesses” of the woman are not only “beautiful faults”, but are a kind of “cultural technique” (*GSE*, AA 02: 232; Kant, 2007, p. 43). Kant’s scepticism about his own sex led him to assume that men *cannot* succeed in the social task of cultivation and care and that they *should* therefore *limit* themselves to “laborious learning or painful grubbing”. This applies to sexuality, too.

5 Men – the more reasonable sex?

In his *Pedagogy* Kant discussed the awakening sexual inclination (*Päd*, AA 09: 496) and emphasised how important it is to discuss this matter with the *protégé* (*Päd*, AA 09: 49). He first notes that nothing weakens the body and mind more than the kind of inclination that “one directs [...] towards oneself” (*Päd*, AA 09: 498; Kant, 2007, p. 483). Accordingly, the first German book on sex education was Christian Gotthilf Salzmann’s *Über die heimlichen Sünden der Jugend* (1785). These “secret sins of youth” were masturbation.

Remarkable, however, is Kant's explanation of the harmful consequences: "inclination rages without arrest because no real satisfaction takes place" (*Päd*, AA 09: 497-498; Kant, 2007, p. 484). I dare to assert that Kant is very progressive in that he distinguished between mechanical satisfaction of instincts (*Brünstigsein*) and human sexuality, which includes social aspects and intimacy. These social aspects are not present in masturbation and can have the effect that "no real satisfaction takes place".

Kant argued that it is better "to get involved with the opposite sex" (*Päd*, AA 09: 498; Kant, 2007, p. 484). At the same time he was aware that the dangers of irresponsible sexual behaviour affect women to a greater extent, as his comments on pregnancy and childbed show (*VAMS*, AA 23: 358). Kant pointed out the danger that the young man fathers children whom he does not have the maturity and means to raise yet. Therefore, it is best, "indeed, it is a duty, that the young man wait until he is capable of regular marriage. [...] The young man should learn early to foster a decent respect for the other sex, to earn its respect through activity which is free from vice, and thus to strive after the high prize of a happy marriage" (*Päd*, AA 09: 498; Kant, 2007, p. 484). Thus, sexual education for young men is characterised by duty and responsibility and aims at their becoming good fathers, husbands and citizens. Kant did not explicitly comment on the (sexual) education of young women in the *Pedagogy*. In another work, I have found a passage on sexuality which includes women. Surprisingly, this is the somewhat 'clinical' definition of sexual relationships according to the "laws of pure reason" in the *Metaphysics of Morals*: "If man and woman want to enjoy each other's sexual attributes, they must necessarily marry" (*MS*, AA 06: 278; Kant, 1996, p. 427; my emphasis).

No sexual activities outside marriage. This seems not very progressive, but we may easily overlook the interesting aspects here. While Kant mostly writes gender-neutrally about "persons" in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, he chooses at this point the explicit hint that the woman (potentially) enjoys the sexual act. This for Kant's times progressive utterance about female sexuality is in fact essential for the compatibility of *Brünstigsein* and Categorical Imperative. The sexual union is defined as one person's use of the sexual features of another person and *vice versa* (*MS*, AA 06: 277). The carnal-sexual desire in itself is thoroughly selfish and the persons involved reduce each other to a thing within this act. This conflicts with the Categorical Imperative and humanity's right to being respected and treated as a person, not as a thing (*MS*, AA 06: 277).

The conflict is solved as follows: Both individuals acquire each other as if they were a thing, thereby regaining themselves and restoring their personhood (*MS*, AA 06: 277). The two asymmetrical relations of possession neutralise each other. According to Kant, it is possible for both to acquire each other, thus regaining themselves and restoring their personhood, only if the woman is just as active in the sexual act as the man (*MS*, AA 06: 278). In fact, it is not surprising that female sexuality, albeit in small doses, is seen positively by Kant, while male sexuality is judged a problem. The female being is an achieved ought. Women achieve this ought more easily through their greater tendency to morality (*Sittlichkeit*) and through culture, according to Kant. However, since this female nature is indeed culture, it must not be restricted to women, but both sexes may take over the merits of the opposite sex now and then (*GSE*, AA 02: 242).

Conclusion

Recalling Kant's questioning whether "femininity is only education or a natural disposition", we see that his definition of the two sexes is, in fact, a definition of two genders and thus a claim based on pragmatic hypotheses. Both sexes should limit themselves in performing a certain gender for the sake of society. Kant's definition of marriage as an area of "intersexual equality" within a society with continuing "subordination of the female to the male" (Jauch,

1988, p. 164) corresponds to the subordination of all humans to their civic duties, conducted by their own reason: the autonomous self-limitation of freedom (*IaG*, AA 08: 37). He did not state that women cannot perform stereotypically masculine tasks, but they should not.

This is not an essentialist sexist position; it is, however, a heteronormative one. Kant did not see that a general gender stereotypical distribution might not be the best for society, because just like John Money he was not aware of anything other than a feminine or masculine option. Both assumed gender to be “performative”, as Butler coined it, but they did not see that there might be a third option – or even endless options, as they are currently lived out and discussed in current theoretical and political debates.

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