

The Kantian Paradox: Identity, Intersectionality and The Universal Woman

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Abstract—This paper explores the fundamental tension between Kantian moral universalism and the contemporary feminist framework of Intersectionality. At the heart of this “Kantian Paradox” lies a conflict between the Enlightenment ideal of the Transcendental subject – a rational agent defined by Autonomy and stripped of personal particularities and the lived realities of women whose identities are forged through an overlapping system of race, gender and class.

The study begins by deconstructing the Kantian “Categorical Imperative” which demands that moral laws be applied universally. While this framework offers a robust defence of human dignity, it historically presumes an unmarked subject. In practice, this “universal” agent has often defaulted to a Western, male and bourgeois perspective, effectively rendering the specific experiences of marginalised women invisible.

The analysis further examines how the early Feminist movement inadvertently mirrors this Kantian flaw by pursuing the concept of “universal women”. By seeking a singular essence of womanhood, these movements often prioritise the concerns of white, middle-class subjects, thereby practising a form of “exclusionary Universalism”. This paper argues that intersectionality serves as a necessary corrective, revealing that “woman” is not a monolithic category but a site of intersecting power dynamics.

Index Terms—Immanuel Kant, Identity, Intersectionality, Universal women, Universalism, womanhood and Categorical Imperatives.

I. INTRODUCTION:

“Kant undoubtedly was a sexist {Palmquist: 2017 ;45}. This view is widely accepted in Kant’s scholarship and there is a little doubt in this topic. The question that remains is whether this should determine how the philosophy of the critiques, in which gender doesn’t feature, is assessed in terms of its feminist potential. The feminist potential of Immanuel Kant is mainly

sought in the perceived universal nature of the Kantian subject in the context of his moral theory. This perceived moral universality runs counter to the idea that Kant would exclude women from rational and moral abilities. So, there is a tension between Kant’s discriminatory remark and the potential for the reinterpretations of his abstract theories of self-hood and knowledge from an intersectional and feminist perspectives.

The article aims to establish a relationship between Kantian notion of selfhood and feminist or intersectional theories. The basic objective is a re-reading of Immanuel Kant that does justice to both potential for Kantian philosophy for Feminism and to Kant’s discriminatory comments. It aims to demonstrate that a more robust conceptualization of selfhood is pivotal for understanding of both historical philosophy and present-day theories of social justice.

Rational Feminist criticism towards Kant versus the rational potential of Kant:

This is considered to be the most important question of the paper. The Feminist theorisation of Kant has evolved over the decade and reflects over both the changing interpretation of Kant and changes in feminist discourses. The most important and influential tradition in this respect is 1997 essay “Feminist Interpretation of Immanuel Kant”. This work is edited by Robin May Shott. It discusses a wide range of things selfhood, ethics and aesthetics. This tradition applies a relational perspective to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, particularly from a feminist’s perspectives.

Drawing from Immanuel Kant’s notable work “The Third Critique” Marica Menon wrote that “Kant came to recognise the cognitive value of reflective knowledge, the locus of which not the objective,

singular TUA {Transcendental Unity of Appreciation} but rather the space of intersubjectivity where one subject is connected with others in a knowing community, through their mutual connection and transaction with shared object of thought. With hindsight, one obvious move would have been to the concept of rational self, like that being developed by Feminist thinkers today. {Menon 1997: 215}.

The most important notion is “the occurrence of knowledge in a space of “intersubjectivity” {instead of an isolated, independent individual mind} and related to the idea of rational self. This is uncovering the possible feminist potential of Immanuel Kant. It was primarily developed by Feminist care ethicists in the 17th and 18th century. The emergence of care ethics and the feminist rational self is the extended aftermath of the second wave of Feminism during which many women’s right in Europe and USA was enshrined in law, resulting in a political and legal emphasis on Individualism, personal Autonomy and Freedom”. These were revolutionary developments and they showed that, individualism as an ontological and epistemological model developed an alternative concept of selfhood and the alternative model is the care ethics which criticised the patriarchal canon.

Role of Epistemology in understanding Kantian self: In Kant’s scholarship, the theorisation of self is completely absent especially in the “Critiques”. Henery Allison “Kant never developed what might called the theory of Self” Allison {2012: 219}. Immanuel Kant’s theory of Transcendental unity of Appreciation greatly influenced the theory of Feminism in particular and western political thought in general. The Transcendental unity of Appreciation according to Immanuel Kant is the mechanism by which we come to knowledge through synthesis by assessing and categorising our cognition as they occur to us.

According to Kant “the thing in itself which is a part of reality that exist outside of the representation of things in our mind, is fully unknowable. This unknowability logically makes any forms of epistemological certainty or universalism which is difficult to underpin. Due to the presence of unknowable “Thing in itself in everything, including the subject itself, both the subject themselves and any possible object of knowledge are affected by this unknowable dimension. Afterall, from a Kantian

Perspective, self-knowledge doesn’t occupy any privileged position in relation to our knowledge of the external world. {Palmquist: 2016:204}.

Epistemology and epistemic features such as objectivity, have direct implications for social justice. Miranda Fricker, an eminent scholar of epistemic injustice, observes a connection between the factor of discrimination someone faces and their access to discursive means to convey their experience within the dominant framework of objectivity. The conceptualization of epistemic injustice makes clear that the notion of objectivity can be weaponised.

II. MATTER OF INTERSECTIONALITY

The concept of Intersectionality entering western academic feminism on a large scale has changed the discussion around the movement and made it more realistic and complete. Intersectionality offers a practical framework for the interpretation of wider context of oppression. It presents an epistemic shift towards understanding oppressed social identities, the implication of which for underlying notions of subjectivity. An intersectional perspective of Immanuel Kant’s discriminatory writings could expose similarities and differences between his racists and sexist remark which should inform the extent to which Kant’s philosophy is a fruitful addition to the present-day situation.

Viewing Kantian Philosophy through the lenses of Intersectionality is really a difficult perspective. In his famous work “Religion within the limits of reason alone” which is deals with the human tendencies towards both good and evil primarily in the realm of religion alone. The Kantian self is not only rational but also multiple because it is maintaining a connection between the Phenomena {Knowable self-} and Noumena {the unknowable self-}.

The theory of Intersectionality, established by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) revolve around the impact of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia and other mechanism of discrimination as intersecting mechanism of oppression. Rather than separate discriminatory categories, these mechanisms function as intersecting axes creating social positionalities for subjects which cannot be understood if the axes are regarded as independent from each other.

Afterall, Immanuel Kant did discriminate against people on racists and sexiest ground in some of his

writings like – the people of colour are less talented than the white people. However, Helga Verden has made preliminary effort to develop a Kantian theory of intersectionality. According to Verden, Kant's concept of good and evil are productive because they can help us better understand why people sometimes condemn some forms of discrimination while actively participating in others. So, it could contribute to intersectional awareness.

Verden explores how Kant's theory of human nature the predisposition to good and the propensity to evil together with his theory of Freedom {of virtue and of right} are useful as we strive to capture these ideas as one philosophical theory of Intersectionality. The predisposition to good and the propensity to evil, which Vardan translate it into moral dimensions focussing on social justice in society are deemed pivotal in determining the relationship between Kant and Intersectionality.

Deconstructing the universal women:

The article highlights a critical flaw in traditional enlightenment thinking: the categorical imperative. This is Kant's famous rule that one should act only according to that maxims that could be willed as universal laws. However, feminism scholars and intersectionality theorists argue that "universal laws" are rarely neutral. When we stripe away a person's identity to find "universal women", we often end up defaulting to the experiences of the most privileged. This leaves the specific struggles of women of colour, working class women and marginalised groups invisible to the law and to the moral theory.

The core of the Paradox:

At the heart of Kant's moral philosophy is the "Transcendental subject. Kant argues that to be truly moral and autonomous, a person must act as a rational agent, stripped of personal particularities.

While this framework, once race, gender and social class shouldn't matter, what matter is your capacity for reason. While this sound liberating, it creates a fundamental tension:

The Kantian Ideal: A universal human who exist above social context.

The Intersectional Reality: A person whose identity and lived experience are forged through an overlapping system of race, gender and class.

The paradox emerges when the abstract ideal meet the lived reality of women. When Kantianism demands that we stripe away identity to find the "Universal Women" it inadvertently performs an act of erasure.

If the law is blind to race and class to ensure equality, it becomes unable to see how a Dalit women's experience of patriarchy differs fundamentally from that of a Brahmin women, or how economic class reshapes the meaning of autonomy.

Historically, when philosophy speaks of the "universal women" it has often defaulted to the image of the western, propertied male feminist theory argues that a "universalism" that ignores the situated subject --- the person rooted in a specific history and body--- ultimately protects the statuquo rather than the marginalized.

Deconstructing the Categorical Imperative:

The challenge presented in the contemporary research is to deconstruct the Categorical Imperative to see if it can survive the intersectional turn.

III. CONCLUSION:

The Kantian Paradox doesn't require us to abandon the idea of universal rights. Instead, it demands that we broaden our vision. The "Universal Women" must be replaced by a subject who is both autonomous {capable of self-legislation} and situated {shaped by her environment}. By acknowledging that identity and intersectionality are not obstacle to reason but the very context in which reason is practiced, we can begin to build a study which is purely inclusive. The goal is a moral project where the "universal" finally has room for everyone.

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