

A Feminist Perspective on Kant in the Context of Social Irrationality¹

[Uma perspectiva feminista sobre Kant no contexto da irracionalidade social]

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Abstract

A feminist reading of Kant faces several different problems, although Carol Hay's account gives a stimulating example. Outlining the harms of oppression as a denial of equal liberty in the tradition of John Stuart Mill, it will be pointed out how Kant's thinking can support the idea that there is a feminist goal of counteracting oppression and how Kant's anthropological writings in particular serve – heterogeneous in nature – as a reminder of women's potential rational qualities, whereas on the other hand the task of "preserving the species" binds women to ensuring the persistence of the natural order. That, in the matrimonial union, one partner must "yield to the other" leads to a claim of superiority that seems outdated – inequality, today, cannot be seen as equality anymore – it clashes with the demand that we should think for ourselves using our rational capacities. In this vein two feminist objections are raised: Kant is privileging the rational over the animal and the rational over the emotional. In further discussion the question arises if Kant's work can be neutralized or if he is to be read in a way not disguising his strictness. Finally social irrationality is thematized: distraction from the goal of rationality can be perceived as utterly human.

Keywords: Feminism; Embodiment; Emotions; Irrationality; Oppression.

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Carol Hay begins her account of Kantianism, Liberalism, and feminism with a rather provocative question: "What does the philosophy of a bunch of dead white men have to tell us about oppression? Rather a lot I will argue".² Feminism in a Kantian perspective raises several different questions: What can a feminist defense of Kant look like, are there elements in Kant's ethical and anthropological approach that do not belong in the defense model, and, which role plays the aspect of social irrationality in the feminist actualization of Kantian thought?

The harms of oppression shall be analyzed with reference to the resources of Kantianism. Oppression is defined by Hay with reference to John Stuart Mill and his *The Subjection of Women* as "a denial of equal liberty, which, for Mill is tantamount to a denial of the opportunity to develop one's rational capacities for thought and action. Mill's central concern in the *Subjection of Women* was to establish that 'the legal subordination of one sex to the other ... is wrong in itself, and...one of the chief hindrances to human improvement'".³ So the need for decreasing oppression in the interactions of the sexes is bound to a specific idea of progress. Progress as "human improvement" (Mill) denies that kind of oppression and subjection, which hinders equal liberty and its expression in human society. The question of progress and the danger of being progressistic – pursuing change for its own sake, thereby making progress an ideology – shall not be considered further. Apart from the overall question how feminism and Kantian thinking go together, there are two other points I shall address: How Kant's thinking can support the idea that there is a feminist goal of counteracting oppression and, secondly, that there is, with Hay and Kant, a "general obligation to resist oppression".⁴ These questions are connected to the general focus of social irrationality given that "our capacity for practical rationality can (...) be harmed when we face illegitimate restrictions on the full and proper exercise of these capacities".⁵

1. Kant and Women: A Case of Prejudice?

Hay's provocative claim concerning dead white men telling women how to live has two sides. On the one hand, Kant is quoted with remarks such as: "Scholarly women use their books somewhat like a watch, that is, they wear the watch so it can be noticed that they have one, although it is usually broken or does not show the correct time".⁶ This corresponds to the second end of nature pertaining women, that is, "the cultivation [Cultur] of society and its refinement by womankind".⁷ Cultivation itself is a step in the development of reason in humankind. It contributes to the enlightenment, even though using books as decorative items may not look like, at first sight, as an expression of the development of reason. Their time and perception of time is specific in a distracted and distracting way, as if they could use books only as a decoration of a vain and futile endeavor. On the other hand, Kant seems to have a misogynist view of women, for instance in this quotation:

When nature entrusted to woman's womb its dearest pledge, namely the species, in the fetus by which the race is to propagate and perpetuate itself, nature was frightened so to speak about the preservation of the species and so implanted this fear – namely fear of physical injury and timidity before similar dangers – in woman's nature; through which weakness this sex rightfully demands male protection for itself.⁸

2 Carol Hay, *Kantianism, Liberalism, and Feminism. Resisting Oppression*, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave 2013, p. viii.

3 Vgl. Ebenda, p. 2. The Quotation of Mill stems from: "John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*", in J.S. Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill, *Essays on Sex Equality*, Alice S. Rossi (ed.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1970 (1869), p 125.

4 Ebenda, p. x.

5 Ebenda, p. 123.

6 Anth, AA 7: 307; Hay, 2013, p. 51

7 Anth, AA 7: 306.

8 Anth, AA 7: 306.

What is called biologicist today, binds women to the procreational purpose. Perpetuating the species means for women to be a container or vessel of something growing in them, not being an agent putting herself out in the world and to worldly purposes apart from the procreational one. A question to ask concerns the nature of protection, which is seemingly a necessity when facing women's weakness. But is this correct? When is the protection of women needed? Women need protection against men harming them in a specific societal and cultural context, not because of an innate shortcoming rooted in "woman's nature". Kant's anthropological writings, thus, present a limited view of women because of an unreflective biologicist stance on the one hand and a false implication of the kind of violence women need to be protected against on the other: this violence against women lies in most cases in the behavior of men, especially in the private realm, not in some anonymous threat. Thus, it is a paradox that women should seek help and protection in those who – seeing it in the binary difference of the sexes – are the one's trying to harm them. This does include personal acts of violence, abuse, or dominance and structural violence against women, namely hindering them to pursue university education or raising their voice publicly, etc. Kant's stressing of a female vulnerability rooted in procreation, in the fact that women can carry a child, seems to exclude women from practices in which autonomy is required in current society. That they should – as servants – not vote, as they are dependent on someone else (*Wes Brot ich ess, des Lied ich sing*), narrows women's possibilities of expression further.

Another quotation from Kant's anthropological writings, in *The character of the sexes*, illuminates how perceived weakness of women led to the assumption that

in all machines that are supposed to accomplish with little power just as much as those with great power, art must be put in. Consequently, one can already assume that the provision of nature put more art into the organization of the female part than of the male; for it furnished the man with greater power than the woman in order to bring both into the most intimate physical union, which, in so far as they are nevertheless also rational beings, it orders to the end most important to it, the preservation of the species.⁹

We find here two heterogeneous elements of thought: the one considering women as rational beings, which puts Kant ahead of his time, the other insisting on women's responsibility to preserve mankind, in order to ensure the persistence of the species. The latter, in Kantian times, was nearly undisputable. It was seemingly not feasible to imagine women being as free as men, thus being able to abstain from motherhood. In other words, rationality was attributed to women, but together with attributing eternal responsibility for the fetus. That the mother should not be rational is not of Kant's concern, which is, in fact, at first glance, a rather modern thought. Motherhood and being responsible for preserving the species, indeed, do not hinder rationality. But, still today, the mother is an over determined figure in our culture. Motherhood is one of the few areas where women are allowed to exert authority over others, namely, their children. But this kind of authority is, firstly, bound to the private realm and, secondly, only allowed over children, who, in turn, are meant to take on as adults their conventional gender roles. The authority of the mother stems not from her being a rational human being but from her role in reproducing the old order in which her own place, in most cases, is only a subordinate one. We can see in this context how the ascription of rationality is also intended for women, but, at the same time, they are bound to their species in a way that oppresses them. However, not if motherhood were their real preference. But, in Kant's lifetime till today, women are often forced to want something for the sake of the persistence of the conventional order. Motherhood, in many cases, is an adaptive preference only. Relating back to the quotation above, today we would expect an ascribed rationality to show in behaviors and actions that women for a long time could not produce – they had, for instance, no access to higher education, let alone political leadership. But when women in this limited way have been considered as "rational", it was, as we see from today's point of view, often a rather empty word. Today we would expect

⁹ Anth, AA 7:303.

additional and more specific signs of someone being rational, i.e., the ability to decide, to choose, to judge in not merely a reactive way. Kant's prejudice against women seems to deny such capacities but does not explicitly exclude women from further development. It is after this first look at Kant's thoughts on the character of the sexes in his anthropological writings that he ascribes rationality to women as a mere potential, not something women could de facto express in self-governed actions and beliefs, because they, for the sake of the fetus and their own fragile nature, must depend on others.

The union of two rational beings, then, says Kant must follow a pattern where "one partner must *yield* to the other, and, in turn, one must be superior to the other in some way, in order to be able to rule over or govern him".¹⁰ The problem of this claim is that superiority from one over the other is in Kant a thought based on inequality seen as equality: "each partner must be superior in a different way: 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; on the other hand, in still uncivilized conditions superiority is simply on the side of the man".¹¹

The different kinds of superiority are meant to make, for instance, matrimonial life equal. Can superiority be ascribed in such fundamentally different ways? It is obvious that, especially seen from a contemporary perspective, the superiority of women that Kant concedes exists merely in reference to the man. It is not rooted in the woman herself. Mastering a man's desire is, moreover, a rather fragile kind of superiority, because beauty fades over time, so the desire may not be there anymore. It is as well a weak basis for the woman's superiority to rely on, i.e., being liked or wanted by a man for physical features, as opposed to being superior because of innate qualities such as the physical power of men. Even when a man gets older and one could argue his physical power fades, in most cases, the average man will still be physically stronger than the average woman. This kind of superiority specific to women is ephemeral, and it is not appropriate to rational agents. In fact, this kind of superiority pertains only to the body, not to their mental strength, such as their capacity of imagination. The physical strength of men is a source of superiority that may hurt women. Hence, it is undesirable. The ability to awaken men's desire is useless in cases in which this desire is extinguished in a particular man. Furthermore, it supports the traditional patriarchal order and its role allocation. It is, moreover, a kind of superiority that is dependent on another person, but superiority cannot depend on the fleeting wants and needs of another person even if the matrimonial bond is strong.

What can be seen in Kant's anthropological writings is that he traces back the differences between the sexes to biological circumstances. Biologism does, as we can see today, close the possibilities of explanation when talking about men and women's roles in society. The idea of gendered role-play itself does not occur to Kant. He takes what he sees as facts. As we can conclude from the former examples, the ascription of rationality has different implications for men and women: The power of handling men's desire seems rather irrational today since it can wane at any moment. Over the centuries, it became clearer, although it is still contested today, that oppression begins not with outright acts of violence against women, but when they are not considered as victims of a whole system of oppression.¹² On the other hand, Kant concedes very clearly in *What is Enlightenment?* (1784) the oppressed status of women as *Hausvieh* which are *held am Gängelwagen*, quiet animals not daring or wanting to live without *Vormünder*, legal guardians of many a kind. There seems to be a tension in Kant's work: seeing the general oppression of women, their subordinate status in society, and, at the same time, ascribing (in his anthropological writings) rationality or potential rationality to both sexes – in so far as the expression of authority is different, which we would mostly criticize from today's point of view as a double standard. Is it not precisely the difference of states of superiority that ensures a

10 Anth, AA 7: 303.

11 Anth, AA 7: 303.

12 Hay, 2013, p. 7.

lasting inequality? And, to address an even more complicated point: Is the connection between the sexes (matrimonial or not) in need of a reciprocated condition of superiority? When this word is seen as an expression and concept with positive connotations, the union is in danger of being a place of negotiating authority more than negotiating the good life or even emancipatory side effects, such as enabling each other to develop one's own character, to do beneficial things to society, etc.

The idea of someone leading the union is meant to serve rationality – of both partners and the union between a man and a woman itself. As we might put it now, rational behavior begins with self-government not with being governed by others. However, on a broader scale, could it be a sign of freedom to resist the demand of someone close to us to lead since we should judge for ourselves as rational human beings? Furthermore, how is a woman's rationality to be combined with Kant's claim "she does not shy away from *domestic warfare*, which she conducts with her tongue and for which nature endowed her with loquacity and eloquence full of affect, which disarms the man"?¹³ This description of the shared household is almost a caricature and, moreover, repeating a hackneyed cliché concerning one of women's weaknesses consisting in her talking too much. Furthermore, in this scenario, the man even "relies on the right of the stronger to give orders at home because he is supposed to protect it against external enemies; she relies on the right of the weaker to be protected by the male partner against men, and disarms him by tears of exasperation while reproaching him with his lack of generosity".¹⁴ The right of the stronger is one classic aspect of the definition of power: to be able to force someone to do something against their own will. Forcing someone is at the heart of the union, again, as part of a protection that would not be needed if men would not behave as enemies towards women. To conclude these considerations concerning Kant's possible prejudice against women: Prejudice is already there, when superiority is considered a necessary part of marriage, be it on both sides though shown by different capacities. That women should be led is still a misunderstanding today – her alleged weakness is only weak in uncivilized circumstances. However, if the philosopher can discern the *Gängelwagen* which is holding women back from their true potential, forcing them to live under the control of legal guardians, then, seen from our point of view, this insight is not consistent. The *Gängelwagen* cannot be overcome by replicating old prejudices about women being matrimonial monsters or as the sex that is "constantly feuding with itself, whereas it remains on very good terms with the other sex".¹⁵ This is, in fact, not a genuine character trait of all women or lack of good conduct, but deeply rooted in all women being treated, and used to being treated, as subordinate in societal entities. It must be remembered that women were and still are in many cases not allowed to exert real authority over other grown-ups, only in the context of caring for others who depend on them for a limited amount of time.

2. A feminist reading of Kant

Kant's view of women understands, on the one hand, that women are oppressed in a fundamental way by the *Gängelwagen*. This insight is, on the other hand, not followed through. Biologicist prejudice merges with knowing that women are not free. When Carol Hay states, "it is clear enough that Kant himself was no friend to women",¹⁶ this, in my view, is to be taken with a grain of salt. She differentiates further: "I count myself among the feminist philosophers who think there is no reason to insist that these anthropological views must fully infect Kant's central philosophical views".¹⁷ I wonder if the metaphor of an infection is fully suitable here.

13 Anth, AA 7: 304.

14 Anth, AA 7: 304.

15 Anth, AA 7: 305.

16 Hay, 2013, p. 51.

17 Hay, 2013, p. 51.

One should not separate good causes of autonomy and the value of the moral law from bad aspects of a philosophical stance. Hay admits, “the society in which Kant lived was deeply sexist; that this sexism is sometimes apparent in the works of someone writing against such background social conditions should be just as unsurprising”.¹⁸ How does this feminist reading treat important aspects of Kant’s work? I would like to outline and discuss – with Hay – two criticisms feminist readers may have in reference to Kant’s philosophy. Given the limited amount of time in our context, these outlines are given in a rather broad way. The first criticism “focuses on Kant’s privileging the rational over the animal” and the second consists of Kant’s “privileging the rational over the emotional”.¹⁹ The main aspects of these criticisms are bound to a positive view on Kant, because his philosophical account “of duties to the self” is needed to help feminist critiques to explain the problem of “the gendered norms of self-sacrifice that have historically exploited women”.²⁰

Can those considered as weak have duties to the self? Especially when a “self” is not ascribed to them due to sexist standards in society? Mustn’t women accept the adaption of numerous values foreign to them? Can personhood and centuries of oppression go together? Can one deliberately choose to be a person (personhood) with an ideal of autonomy when still today the *Gängelwagen* traditionally holds women back? This restriction affects not only a surface of regulations in a governmental reality, but limits women’s idea of themselves, if any, because the habit of socially deprecating ascriptions to women leads, in most cases, to a limited, non-imaginative, overly pragmatic view of the self and its capacities. Women learn to adapt to their circumstances in a different sense than men do.

A feminist view on Kant not only states the obvious – that women had no equal rights in Kant’s lifetime – but also illuminates the implications of someone having no possibility of seeing oneself in a benign, appreciating way which is reflected by the values of a societal entity and thus strengthened.

This is directly connected with the first feminist criticism of Kant: His privileging the rational over the animal. Women have been considered as non-rational throughout the centuries: as decorum, object, or commodity to the behalf of men using them in different segments of society and among all social strata. Their being sophisticated or wealthy in most cases was not attributable to them, but rather bound to the duty of representation, of representing a man’s status in society – father or husband – and sticking to social hierarchy. Apart from the fact that every human being represents something via physical impression, way of speaking, behaving, etc., the expectation of representing others, not myself, alienates women from genuine self-expression. In our societies, it is a person not being transcendent, per de Beauvoir’s sense in *The Second Sex*, but only immanent (bound to a small radius of self-expression not going out into the world) that makes them not rational enough to act from moral principles. The animal is rationality’s enemy. The way women are looked at directly affects their worth as moral agents; they are human beings of a lesser value, needing protection as all domesticized animals do.

Hay’s premise in dealing with Kant, then, is that “Kant’s work can be read in a gender-neutral manner and thus we can use his moral framework for explicitly feminist purposes”.²¹ I would not agree with this premise. Briefly, I shall simply say that the problem of neutralizing Kant’s view is that the seemingly neutral concepts, such as autonomy and duty, could carry dangers of their own since only the ascription of rationality appears to enable human beings to do good things to others. In any case, we face a neutralized philosopher made useful against the background of a former sexist society.

But back to the feminist criticism of Kant: In the *Doctrine of Right* in the *Metaphysics of*

18 Hay, 2013, p. 51.

19 Hay, 2013, p. 50.

20 Hay, 2013, p. 50.

21 Hay, 2013, p. 51.

Morals, Kant states that women lack “civil personality”.²² They are “passive citizens”, “mere underlings of the commonwealth because they have to be under the direction or protection of other individuals, and so do not possess civil independence”²³ (MM 6:314-315).

Apart from that, the so-called Kantian split affects women: We are split beings, separated into an animal and a rational side. Hay refers to Martha Nussbaum’s remark on the Kantian split in her article *The Future of Feminist Liberalism* (2004). Nussbaum claims that our dignity is the dignity of an animal. “It is the animal sort of dignity, and that very sort of dignity could not be possessed by a being who was not mortal and vulnerable...”²⁴ Oppressing the animal side means to miss a huge part of what it means to be alive as we are, to carry our human endowment intertwined with the animal features. When can animality be perceived as a threat to rationality? Only, as we might put it, when the latter is overemphasized, because the good things human beings are capable of must be thought of as being rooted in the rational aspect of their lives. Could, with Nussbaum, human vulnerability (the general need for protection) be an emancipatory potential to exerting individual freedom? If so, then the difference between men and women that Kant stresses in his anthropological remarks as well as in the *Metaphysics of Morals* would wane. Nussbaum claims, too, that animality “itself could have a dignity”.²⁵ We see, for instance, in Eisler’s *Wörterbuch*, that dignity in Kant’s moral system is a fixed term. Can we change meanings as we like, since the context of Kant’s work determines the meaning of “dignity”? This would adapt dignity to our present ideas and circumstances but decontextualize Kant’s use of the term. On a fundamental level we have to decide if conceptual aspects, such as decontextualizing Kant’s central expressions, should be possible or not. This is not only true for feminist critiques of Kant, but for any discussion of philosophically or culturally problematic terms. Apart from that *Würde*, dignity for Kant is the idea that is followed by the “sittliche Handeln”.²⁶ Does Hay’s attempts to neutralize Kant’s work, rendering it prolific for feminist discourse, destroy a given philosophical architecture? Or, is decontextualization serving as an unexpected enhancement of outdated philosophical claims and anthropological views?

Dignity, in the *Kingdom of Ends*, is antagonistic to those things having a price. So the feminist criticism that connects dignity and animality would devalue what the *Kingdom of Ends* is about. Already the first feminist criticism of Kant, that animality is separate from rationality and ascribed to women, finds reference in his anthropological writings: women’s philosophy is “not to reason, but to sense”.²⁷ This first feminist criticism is called *The embodiment objection*: our bodily existence has to be oppressed to secure the course of reason. The oppression of women as only sensing not reasoning beings is part of the more general oppression human beings should want for their own moral advancement. It seems as if soft standards, such as the vulnerability Nussbaum refers to, would alter the implication of Kant’s idea greatly and lead us to the questions outlined in the first feminist criticism (the embodiment objection) as to how far a well-meant neutralization of Kant can go and if it is possible without destroying Kant’s work. Feminist justice, as we have seen so far, comes with decontextualization and extracting the good from the bad where it might also be better to draw conclusions from the seemingly neutral aspects of Kant’s work. Maybe the feminist criticism, as Hay presents it in the beginning of her book, should address concepts of autonomy as an androcentric male obsession²⁸ or universalism: “anti-colonialist critics point out that liberalism’s ideals have been implemented historically in ways

22 Vgl. Hay, 2013, p. 52.

23 Quoted in Hay, 2013, p. 52.

24 Martha Nussbaum, “The Future of Feminist Liberalism”, In: Baehr (ed.), *Varieties of Feminist Liberalism*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield 2004, p. 106, quoted in: Hay, Kantianism, Liberalism, and Feminism, p. 53.

25 Nussbaum, “The Future of Feminist Liberalism”, p. 106, quoted in: Hay, 2013, p. 53.

26 Rudolf Eisler, *Kant-Lexikon. Nachschlagewerk zu Kants Sämtlichen Schriften / Briefen und handschriftlichem Nachlass*, Hildesheim: Olms 1964, S. 612.

27 Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Frierson and Guyer (eds.), Cambridge 2011 (1764) (Cambridge University Press), p. 132-133, quoted in Hay, 2013, p. 51.

28 Vgl. Hay, 2013, p. 15.

that consistently ignore the experiences of the oppressed members of society".²⁹ Universalism, then, does not include women as oppressed members of society, whatever "member" may mean. Not all members of a group or larger social entity are treated equally. As long as we stick to the usual way those entities are perceived, there is an inner hierarchy of each social entity or group. Perception, in this respect, shapes experience. The embodiment objection of feminist critique reminds us of the "fundamentally embodied and social character of our rational nature", namely, that rationality cannot be split from our bodily experience. When women are described as those needing protection in Kantian anthropology, being creatures not reasoning but sensing, it seems that they belong or should belong to the animal side of existence. This devalues women in the Kantian approach that "locates every bit of our value in our rationality...".³⁰ The depiction of women as depending on others, furthermore, weakens their capacity of being autonomous – they stand under the law of others as servants or as underprivileged men do. The rational person is depicted as independent, capable of making choices, thinking, judging, obeying only principles that are, of course, not adaptive nor false preferences unlike the weak and dependent things women have to do as those being colonialized, e.g., creating a place for others to thrive, not deciding themselves what to do in their lives, etc. Can they live beyond adaptive preferences? Martha Nussbaum calls the idea of the rational being, as Hay points out, "the fiction of competent adulthood".³¹ This means that feminist discourse, again, reminds us of our shared vulnerability. Does privileging the rational pay tribute to our actual endowment as men and women, where vulnerability, even a fragile constitution is how we begin and how we end? In sum, the first feminist criticism is that Kant splits the rational and animal in human beings although these two aspects of life are intertwined. Or, can the objection be defused by saying that Kant's claims are only normative? Yet isn't normativity deeply connected with how a descriptive approach is shaped? Does there not seem to be a gap between, for instance, saying that women need shelter and therefore can only lead in a marriage by holding a men's desire (which, to the average feminist view, is rather unattractive) and being a rational being with dignity and, according to Kant, *sittliche Handeln*? When women are closer to the animal side of things, "only" sensing, this seems to devalue them in a moral architecture. Apart from that, returning to Hay's constructive approach to Kant, she defends the philosopher by stressing how "we are fundamentally distinct from the rest of nature".³² We are not, as animals, unpredictable, and it is precisely this element of unpredictability, uncanniness or, using a Wittgensteinian expression, that we do not know our way around with creatures other than humans, that is the threatening aspect of animality. In short, we cannot trust instinctive behaviors when our own instincts are seen not as natural or positive but as hindrances to the rational adulthood of men. Rationality being grounded in the noumenal rather than in the phenomenal realm, has, as Hay puts it in her feminist view, led to interpret Kant "as conceiving rationality as *fundamentally immune* to the sorts of harms that our animal bodies are vulnerable to".³³ Again, rationality is a normative claim as the best human beings can possibly be, but why? Is Kant's epistemological project of securing science against former mere metaphysical philosophical models tied to anthropological views devaluing what needs protection and is not autonomous? Feminist criticisms remind us that we are not only rational agents and should, maybe, not strive to be. Women are capable of rationality – as men are – but something seems lost when the principle has no exception: Is it not the fragile part making us human, our dependency, moodiness, childlike sense of wonder and intuition (*Ahnungsvermögen*)?

Since we cannot dwell on this further, let's move forward to the second feminist objection, what Hay calls the *emotions objection*. Kant is privileging "the rational over the emotional".³⁴ The

29 Hay, 2013, p. 27.

30 Hay, 2013, p. 53.

31 Nussbaum, "The Future of Feminist Liberalism", p. 105, quoted in Hay, 2013, p. 54.

32 Hay, 2013, p. 54.

33 Hay, 2013, p.55.

34 Hay, 2013, p. 56.

emotional aspects of our lives seem to be neglected; we are not seen fully as human beings. Hay refers to Kant talking “as if inclinations are nothing more than a hindrance to the possibility of morality”.³⁵ She not only criticizes this from a feminist point of view but refers to Friedrich Schiller arguing in 1794 that “man can be self-opposed in a twofold manner; either as savage, if his feelings rule his principles, or as barbarian, if his principles destroy his feelings”.³⁶ Kant also says that inclinations should not be destroyed totally, but held in their place, because, when not hindered, they grow. In any case the fiction of the competent adult having mastered his feelings could become, with Schiller and the feminist emotions objection, a cold and hard caricature of a lively human being. It is not only the general *Menschenbild* / human image this seems to imply that is problematic. A person that is morally excellent but oppressing their feelings pays a huge price for excelling morally, leading a life that is a shadow of the full human experience. This is precisely (and this is how embodiment and emotions objection are connected) what Martha Nussbaum meant when she stressed our shared dependent human nature. This shared nature should not lead to oppressing important aspects of ourselves. Because the oppression of women in ordinary societies is, since women are commonly prejudiced as being the emotional sex, to be equated with the oppression of emotions in a society where the rational is seen as the most human expression of humans. In contrast, the feminist claim that the rational should not be privileged over the emotional is what makes us human. The discussion is centered not only around the role of the emotional itself, but around an underlying concept of humanity. In paraphrasing Carol McMillan, feminist thought characterizes Kant as a philosopher saying that no action springing from natural inclination, rather than duty, can have moral worth.³⁷ Instead, the feminist emotions objection reminds us that “liking” or “preference” should also be taken into account when talking about what it means to act for human beings and what it means for human beings to act morally. The objection boils down to an insistence that Kant is wrong to think that morality must be grounded in something non-contingent”.³⁸

Contemporary Kantians, as Hay puts it, have argued for the moral framework against the emotions objection.³⁹ We find this with Marcia Baron, in “The Alleged Moral Repugnance of Acting from Duty”, Barbara Herman, in “On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty”, or Thomas Hill, in “The Importance of Autonomy”.⁴⁰ Hay then stresses that “nothing in Kant’s view implies that acting in the absence of emotions, or in opposition to them, is required or even desirable from a moral point of view”.⁴¹ But does this not mean to defuse Kant again, being unable to bear his rigor? It reminds me of people removing all challenging elements from a religion, making it into something like a feel-good attitude instead of something where obeying god is crucial. Can the feminist critique of the emotions objection be met by saying that Kant was actually not that serious about oppressing one’s feelings, etc.? In the end, the objection brings to light different forms of answering the critique: The easy way out, i.e., Kant did not mean it in such a strict way, or the one I feel is more ethical in nature, that is, insisting on Kant challenging the reader and demanding a lot but sticking to it. An underlying question of the two feminist objections might be if oppressing women as emotional – following the path of prejudice - might lead not only to their own irrationality and strengthen this impression, but also to social irrationality. One solution to see women as ordinary human beings and not as something beyond the male norm is presented by feminist criticism: Valuing our rational nature

35 Hay, 2013, p. 57.

36 Schiller, 1854, p. 14.

37 Vgl. Hay, 2013, p. 57. Carol Mc Millan is quoted from her book: Carol McMillan, *Women, Reason, and Nature*, Princeton 1982 (Princeton University Press), p. 20.

38 Hay, 2013, p. 57.

39 Vgl. Hay, 2013, p. 58.

40 Vgl. Marcia Baron, “The Alleged Moral Repugnance of Acting from Duty”, in: *Journal of Philosophy* 81 (1984), p. 197-220; Barbara Herman, “On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty”, in: *Philosophical Review* 90 (1981), p. 359-382; Thomas Hill, “The Importance of Autonomy”, in: *Women and Moral Theory*, ed. by Eva Feder Kittay and Diana T. Myers, Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield 1987, p. 129-138.

41 Hay, 2013, p. 58.

and the idea of self-respect.

3. Feminism and Social Irrationality

Criticisms are only hints not a cure. To say that denying women a capacity for rationality might itself be irrational, as one might imagine a kind of clever remark, is only a superficial trick. It reminds me of the argument stating that men and women should have equal rights in the workplace, because this increases productivity and general output. The process of neutralizing Kant, cleaning his work, so to speak, from its misogynist elements, also has dangers of its own. Yes, women can be rational, but should they only be rational, and should men be either? Along Hay's lines of argumentation, Kant's legacy and importance for feminist discourse consists, above all, in reminding us of two capacities of human beings that make their lives worth living: rational nature and self-respect. Whereas the oppression of will can make human beings weak and destroy their self-image as well as any ambition or ability to thrive, it can also make these oppressed persons act irrationally.⁴² Yet, this is differentiated further, because "it is not the members of oppressed groups who are in danger of acting irrationally; it is the members of oppressor groups".⁴³ For Mill, as we heard in the beginning, oppression consists in not being able to develop one's rational capacities for thought and action. This becomes clear when self-respect is also seen as an element of the rational characteristic. Can irrational subjects respect themselves? And is not respecting oneself an acceptance of oppression? Hay stresses that self-respect consists in recognizing the intrinsic value that other people have and respect them accordingly, in the same vein, we must recognize our own intrinsic value and act accordingly.⁴⁴

It seems to be an implicit belief that after recognizing one's worth, the capacity to act rationally will go along with it. If we remember the feminist goal to counter-act oppression, we must create contexts in which distractions from this goal, such as human exhaustion,⁴⁵ are not overlooked but accepted as utterly human. Not for the sake of productivity – this would again be a progressistic mistake – but because the animal and emotional side of humans not being machines must be considered by any concept that tries to overcome social irrationality. Self-respect, as one of Kant's legacies to feminist discourse, means being able to act for one's causes. It is a highly ambivalent goal because, as we can conclude, it is not always possible for women to express "a righteous and self-respecting concern"⁴⁶ for themselves, thus also fostering the common goal of social rationality. The oppressed had to learn the opposite: that their concerns for themselves did not matter. Showing concern for myself to prevent social irrationality on a larger scale needs a history, a practice of self-care, even pride; the kind of *Selbstverhältnis*, self-relationship, which is mirrored and strengthened in the contexts a potentially moral subject is surrounded by. Feminist objection does not only refer to the role of women, but to the traditional social role-play of men alike. Changes can come, when resisting oppression is seen as a necessity to all, not only an obligation of some.

42 Vgl. Hay, 2013, p. 127.

43 Hay, 2013, p. 127.

44 Vgl. Hay, 2013, p. 66.

45 Vgl. Hay, 2013, p. 129.

46 Bernard R. Boxill, "Self-respect and Protest", in: *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6 (1976), p. 58-96, 61. Quoted in Hay, 2013, p. 113.

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