

Can Women be Autonomous? Kant and Gender

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“*Woman* regardless of age is declared to be immature in civil matters; her husband is her natural curator. . . women cannot personally defend their rights and pursue civil affairs for themselves.”¹

Why *exactly* does Kant maintain that women are “immature in civil matters”, and so incapable of political enfranchisement? This question has received its due share of attention in the literature, most of which answers with a truth that is hard to avoid: Kant was a product of his time, and shared in (and, as some commentators suggest, helped to further entrench) the less palatable views of his era². These are particularly glaring in his political thought: despite his firm commitment to moral egalitarianism, Kant restricts rights of citizenship by “natural” criteria (of not being a child or a woman), as well as by “*being one’s own master (sui iuris)*, hence having some *property*”³. But while the unpropertied may work their way up to civic enfranchisement, and while (male) children can grow to it, women face a perpetual state of political nonage. Kant’s view is undoubtedly misogynistic, but is not reducible to misogyny alone; there is (perhaps unfortunately) more to explore in Kant’s opinion of women than mere prejudice. This paper argues that women’s civil incapacities stem from defects relating to their capacities as *moral agents*⁴, and more specifically, to Kant’s teleological account of the conditions within which we, as imperfect beings, develop our moral capacities.

I begin by situating women in Kant’s teleological account of humanity’s historical development. In *Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime* and *Anthropology from a*

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, ed./trans. Robert Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 7:209. Given hereafter as AP.

² For two enduring critiques of Kant’s treatment of women as second-class subjects – both politically and morally – see Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Kant and Rational Politics: Woman as a Suspect Category”, in *Meditations of Modern Political Thought: Masculine/Feminine Themes from Luther to Arendt* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1986), 21-35; and Susan Moller Okin, “Women and the Making of the Sentimental Family”, in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 11, n. 1 (Winter 1982), 65-88.

³ Immanuel Kant, “On the common saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice”, in *Practical Philosophy*, ed./trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 8:296.

⁴ Commentators have, of course, argued that Kant regarded women as morally, and not just politically, inferior; however, I hope here to provide an original account of women’s “defects” as emerging from the tension between Kant’s transcendental and teleological views of human agency.

Pragmatic Point of View, his most sustained treatments of the nature, character and virtues of the sexes, Kant argues that men and women participate in moral personhood through gender-specific forms of character. Women and men are bestowed with different natures in order to fulfill their given roles in humanity's morally-inflected, historical destiny: to move towards an ever-greater realization of our naturally-given rational capacities. Kant's teleological account of our development directly informs his view of women's agency and character, and particularly, of their defects as moral actors. His developmental account of history suggests that women's natures are governed by ends that are not their own, throwing their moral status into question; worse yet, their particular character inhibits them from developing the rational capacities that are the *sine qua non* of autonomous moral agency.

Having examined the different nature, ends, virtues and character that Kant attributes to either sex, I consider two important problems resulting from Kant's gendered metaphysics, as well as the feminist literature addressing them. The first of these, what we might call the problem of masculinist bias, is that Kant's view of autonomous agency directly and indirectly excludes women from recognition as moral and political equals. Not only does Kant explicitly fail to recognize women as endowed with a rational faculty equal to men's, but his very conceptualization of autonomy harbours a deeply androcentric worldview. The second charge, which I'll refer to as the problem of ends, concerns Kant's differentiation between men's and women's moral ends. While men ultimately aim to develop the rational faculty at the heart of moral autonomy, women's highest end is given by *nature*, and not themselves. Women's naturally-given ends thus inhibit their autonomous self-determination.

Important and valuable though these lines of criticism are, I argue that they fail to capture a particularly problematic dimension of Kant's treatment of women. I describe this third point of criticism as the problem of teleology. While commentators such as Holly Wilson and Jean P. Rumsey have addressed the role of teleology in Kant's description of women's ends⁵, I argue that the depth to which his teleological arguments pervade the transcendental account of moral agency is more problematic than has been noted. Women are not incidentally or tangentially excluded from the boundaries of political and moral agency, but rather *must* adopt an explicitly un-moral character if we're to understand humanity as moving towards its naturally-given moral ends. In the final section, I argue (1) that Kant's teleology *requires* women develop an explicitly non-moral character; (2) that this teleology is inextricable from Kant's view of a *human* moral agency; and (3) that taken together, these suggest that women's subordinate status is *internally* connected to Kant's view of moral personhood.

i) *Women in Progressive History*

⁵ See Holly Wilson, "Kant's Evolutionary Theory of Marriage", in *Autonomy and Community: Readings in Contemporary Kantian Social Philosophy*, eds. Jane Kneller and Sidney Axinn (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 283-306; Jean P. Rumsey's "The Development of Character in Kantian Moral Theory", in *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 27, n.2, April 1989, 247-265; and Jean P. Rumsey, "Re-Visions of Agency in Kant's Moral Theory", in *Feminist Interpretations of Immanuel Kant*, ed. Robin May Schott (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 125-144.

Kant's theory of history situates humanity in a peculiar and somewhat uncomfortable place. As is well known, Kant understands humanity as fundamentally progressive; history, writ large and from a philosophical perspective, shows our collective progress, tracing our species-wide movement from nature to freedom⁶. This leaves us, for the vast majority of our collective existence, in the uneasy juncture between animality and humanity. As simple beasts, we might have lived a perfectly amoral existence driven entirely by the pursuit of happiness; we would have been significantly better equipped for this end if we'd only lacked the faculty of reason⁷. Conversely, as holy beings, we might have been entirely rational, aligning our wills in perfect harmony with the moral law. As it stands, however, humanity's lot lies between these extremes; and so we're bound to pursue a progressive improvement of the moral capacities that define our inner nature within the contexts that constrain our outer nature.

Kant's view of nature is teleological⁸; he argues that all creatures are bound to develop their naturally given capacities. Humanity is in the unique position of only being able to do so on a species-wide, rather than individual, level⁹. This is again a result of the *kind* of being that we are: rational and finite. Our capacity for reason compels us to perfect our rational faculties, and our finitude inhibits us from doing so as individuals; we're bound to improve ourselves collectively, over generations, moving towards an ever-greater realization of our shared capacity for autonomous moral action. We progress both *as* societies and *in* societies; Kant regards progressive social stages as reflecting stages of collective advancement, tying our individual rational growth to the developmental level of our social context. Collective and individual progress are inexorably intertwined and mutually reinforcing; as we emerge from our self-incurred

⁶ While Kant elaborates this philosophy of history in several essays and books, it is most clearly articulated in "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective", and in the second half of the *Critique of Judgment*.

⁷ See Immanuel Kant, "Conjectures on the Beginnings of Human History", in *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 8:109-23.

⁸ It can not be stated strongly enough that Kant's teleology is *regulative*, and not *objective*. Kant's claims are distinguished from an Aristotelian view of human nature in that they concern not what human nature *is*, but rather how we, as rational, and yet imperfect beings, *ought* to regard it. While we can't *know* nature's purposes in any objective sense, we're compelled to conceive of a purposive natural order if we're to understand humanity as progressive at all. Kant's view of our natural ends comprises postulates of reflection, concerning how we ought to regard humanity's destiny, not descriptions of an objective *telos*. As Kant himself asserts in the 3rd *Critique*: "these principles [of teleology] pertain merely to reflective judgment: they do not determine the actual [*an sich*] origin of these beings, but only say that the character of our understanding and of our reason is such that the only way we can conceive of the origin of such beings is in terms of final causes" (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987), 5:429). For helpful analyses of the role of teleology in Kant's thought, see Robert Louden's *Kant's Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Allen Wood's *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 216 – 225; and Robert Bernasconi's "Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant's Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race", in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), pp. 11 – 36.

⁹ "All the natural capacities of a creature are destined sooner or later to be developed completely and in conformity with their end... In man (as the only rational creature on earth), those natural capacities which are directed towards the use of his reason are such that they could be fully developed only in the species, but not in the individual." Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose", in *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 8:17-31, p.42.

immaturity, we develop social and political institutions that increasingly depend on the exercise of our rational faculties. These successive social stages are analogous with the stages of individual development outlined in Kant's writings on pedagogy. Early, or "savage", societies stand in need of discipline, in much the same way as do children; culture represents an intermediary point in our collective development, a preparatory stage enabling us to hone the skills required for moral action; civilization represents a higher stage of culture; and moralization comprises our collective end¹⁰. Each of these stages of social development – cultivation, civilization and moralization – is identified with distinctive achievements in our moral capacities:

We are *cultivated* to a high degree by art and science. We are *civilized* to the point of excess in all kinds of social courtesies and proprieties. But we are still a long way from the point where we could consider ourselves *morally* mature. For while the idea of morality is indeed present in culture, an application of this idea which only extends to the semblances of morality, as in love of honour and outward propriety, amounts merely to civilization.¹¹

Like our individual moral formation, our collective advancement follows a particular trajectory through given social stages; and like individuals, societies are entirely capable of misdirection and moral failure¹². Our movement through stages of moral development is enabled under particular social and political conditions; only *civilized* societies produce the habits, dispositions and propensities required of morally-progressive agents.

Women play an important role in developing and furthering this culture and civilization. In both the *Anthropology* and *Observations*, Kant describes women as integrally bound to humanity's moral-historical development; women *civilize* men by curbing the barbaric urges and impulses to which they are naturally prone, inhibiting the development of their rational faculties. Women's "qualities" – docility, vanity, loquacity and coquettishness among them – are providentially instilled in them as part of a larger teleological plan of nature, enabling them to manipulate men and exercise a measure of control over them despite a weaker physical constitution. In so doing, they bring about the refinements and improvements of a morally progressive culture, distinguished by its distance from the crudity of our barbaric origins. Such civilized cultures comprise a critical component of humanity's moral advancement: they "make great headway against the tyranny of man's propensity to the senses, and so prepare him for a sovereignty in which reason alone is to dominate"¹³. Women push the civilizing sentiments and propensities of a refined culture forward, stimulating humanity's movement towards a greater realization of our rational capacities, and so of our moral nature.

But this must lead us to wonder: *why* are women inclined to further the refinements of civilized cultures at all? Kant asserts that women's particular virtues and

¹⁰ For a careful account of these stages of individual and collective development, see chapters 2 ("Education") and 5 ("History") in Louden (2000).

¹¹ Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose", 49.

¹² Kant maintains that certain societies, and (arguably) certain races, suffer from limitations in their rational faculties. His remarks on the natural indolence of negroes and the stunted growth of North America's autochthons, for example, suggest that not all social groups enjoy an equal capacity to move towards humanity's collective ends. This is a subject of significant debate and disagreement in the literature.

¹³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 5:434.

character¹⁴ only become expressible within civilized contexts; women are thus naturally impelled to pursue the fineries of a highly cultivated society¹⁵. Feminine qualities, Kant observes, remain latent and inexpressible in savage societies, effectively depriving women of their measure of social power. In savage nations, “the woman is a domestic animal”; under a “barbaric civil constitution”¹⁶, she is treated as a piece of property. Civilized cultures comprise indispensable social conditions for the actualization of women’s particular dispositions. Women’s “characteristic features” remain hidden and ineffectual in the state of nature, as barbaric societies’ rule by force render them unresponsive to the feminine qualities that comprise women’s tools of social control. The development of more refined social conditions shepherds a greater responsiveness to forms of compulsion beyond mere force; women are thus inclined to push men towards the civilized social contexts within which their qualities enable them to exercise social power. “Culture”, Kant asserts, “does not introduce these feminine qualities, it only allows them to develop and become recognizable”¹⁷. Under civilized conditions, women exert control over men by manipulating their sexual desires (where in a savage state, they are simply subject to them); “feminine qualities” enable women to actualize their own desire to dominate men¹⁸. A wise and providential nature creates woman such that she is naturally motivated to push forward the civilization harboring her particular character and virtues, drawing the species towards higher stages of moral development.

ii) *Character, Virtue and Gendered Moral Agency*

Kant’s view of men and women’s “natures” is, like much of his writing on humanity’s empirical character, inconsistent and morally ambiguous. While gender differences ought to strike us – by Kant’s own reckoning – as morally irrelevant, his accounts of women’s character, virtues and nature consistently refer to their moral function, and to their role in humanity’s moral development. Women’s character, as well as gender relations more generally, comprise a particularly murky area in the ostensibly strict division separating moral and empirical facets of human existence, concerning empirical characteristics measured in relation to a moral end¹⁹. Despite his ambivalence, Kant’s treatment of the *character* and *virtues* associated with either sex suggests that they carry a moral content; he describes the “charming distinction” that nature sets between the sexes, for example, as “advanc[ing] the moral perfection of the one or the other”²⁰.

¹⁴ The distinctions between men and women’s character and virtues – and between intelligible and empirical character – are addressed in detail in the next section.

¹⁵ Holly Wilson echoes this point, arguing that for Kant, “[t]he proper nature of the female sex is civilization itself”; femininity can only become realized under conditions of civilization. See Wilson (1998), 290.

¹⁶ AP, 7:304.

¹⁷ Ibid., 7:303.

¹⁸ Kant asserts that “inclination to *dominate* is woman’s real aim” (AP, 7:305). The impulse to dominate rivals and partners is manifest both in women’s competitiveness with one another, and in their methods for dominating men.

¹⁹ Kant’s view of marriage similarly pulls at the empirical-moral divide: the marriage union moralizes the relationship between man and woman, enabling them to engage in sexual relations without reducing one another, and themselves, to a state more degraded than animality.

²⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 77. Given hereafter as OFBS.

How are we to understand gender-based divisions in character and virtue? While the constraints of this paper prevent a full exploration of this rich subject, Kant distinguishes two general uses of the concept of character: empirical character, concerning “*this* or that (physical) character”; and moral character, “which can only be one, or nothing at all”²¹. Most simply, moral character describes an agent’s basic disposition to consistently act from principles determined by the moral law²²: “to have a character signifies that property of the will by which the subject binds himself to definite practical principles that he has prescribed to himself irrevocably by his own reason”²³. As Manfred Kuehn observes, Kant’s views of character and virtue are closely associated²⁴; where moral character describes a subject’s capacity to bind himself to given principles, “[v]irtue signifies a moral strength of the will... Virtue is, therefore, the moral strength of a *human being’s* will in fulfilling his *duty*”²⁵. Virtue describes the moral person’s singular capacity to obey principles that are less immediately compelling than sensible inclinations. Virtue is the purview of human and not merely rational actors, as angels need never face the temptations of the sensible world; the virtuous person is the one who, in the face of these inclinations, nevertheless chooses to act on his moral duty. Virtue and character, in the strictly moral sense, concern (respectively) human beings’ strength of will in obeying the moral law, despite the sway of sensible inclinations, and their doing so as a matter of principled commitment.

Yet Kant also understands character and virtue (or rather, virtues) in a second sense. Character, as we saw above, also refers to humanity’s *physical* attributes, to “the distinguishing mark of the human being as a sensible or natural being”²⁶; empirical character does not concern our capacities as moral agents. Similarly, Kant differentiates between two uses of the idea of virtue(s), distinguishing “that which rests upon principles, *genuine virtue*” from forms of behaviour that “are not immediate grounds of virtue... [but] are ennobled by the relationship with it”, which he describes as “*adoptive virtues*”²⁷. Adoptive virtues describe behaviours and actions that develop our moral character, our subjective predilection to act in ways that conform to moral duty, preparing us for properly moral, virtuous action; they belong to the broadly acculturative process whereby we develop a receptivity to our moral obligations. These virtues do not constitute moral action itself – there is, after all, only one true virtue – but remain morally significant by awakening and enlivening our consciousness to moral action in empirical contexts²⁸. Kant describes these as social virtues in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, asserting a moral obligation “to cultivate a disposition of reciprocity – agreeableness, tolerance mutual love and respect (affability and propriety, *humanitas aesthetica et decorum*) and

²¹ AP, 7:285.

²² For a compelling argument showing the distinction between character and *good* character in Kant, see Patrick Frierson’s “Character and Evil in Kant’s Moral Anthropology”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2006, pp. 623 – 634.

²³ AP, 7:292.

²⁴ See Manfred Kuehn’s “Introduction”, in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, xxvi.

²⁵ MM, 6:405.

²⁶ AP, 7:285.

²⁷ OFBS, 61.

²⁸ Barbara Herman persuasively argues that moral agents must learn to identify “the rules of moral salience” – the basic units of morally-relevant data in the world in which they live – in order to develop the capacity for moral action at all. See Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), ch. 4.

so to associate the graces with virtue. To bring this about is itself a duty of virtue²⁹. Such socialized and virtuous behaviours fulfill an important moral function: without constituting explicitly moral action in themselves, they nevertheless remain morally significant by “promot[ing] a virtuous disposition³⁰”. Social or adoptive virtues develop our subjective predilection for recognizing and internalizing our obligations and duties as moral beings. Recall that we’re not born as fully formed moral agents; both individually (through moral pedagogy) and collectively (through the historical unfolding of civilization), human beings are compelled to develop not only their rational faculties, but their *consciousness* of moral duty. While true virtue incurs only a single obligation, there remain “*many* duties of virtue³¹”; these concern the development of a virtuous disposition.

Kant’s description of men’s and women’s natures employs this second sense of both virtue and character; yet he frequently lapses, as Robert Loudon observes at other points in the empirical-intelligible divide³², between merely observational and normative claims. Women’s character and virtues are qualitatively distinct from men’s; while men’s character is *sublime*, women’s is – and ought to be – measured by the standard of the *beautiful*³³. While both sexes participate in humanity’s ongoing moral development, each does so through gender-specific virtues and character which stand as their proper points of measure; the aims which men and women are bound to pursue as progressive agents are thus different. The panoply of feminine virtues which Kant elaborates is not unpredictable: women’s nature is characterized by patience, sensitivity and a driving desire for domination, where men are sensible, tolerant and better suited to govern. But more significant than Kant’s perception of feminine qualities is the *character* which stands as the measure of her moral perfection:

all the other merits of a woman should unite solely to enhance the character of the beautiful, which is the proper reference point; and on the other hand, among the masculine qualities the sublime clearly stands out as the criterion of his kind. All judgments of the two sexes must refer to these criteria, those that praise as well as those that blame; all education and instruction must have these before its eyes, and all efforts to advance the moral perfection of the one or the other – unless one wants to disguise the charming distinction that nature has chosen to make between the two sorts of human being.³⁴

²⁹ MM, 6:474.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ MM, 6:411.

³² Loudon (2000), 82.

³³ Kant’s thoughts on the beautiful and the sublime concern his aesthetic theory and are, of course, extensive; I restrict myself here to his appeals to beauty and sublimity only insofar as these relate to gender. Susan Moller Okin draws on Kant’s *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* to note the general point that “men and women are not similar but entirely complementary in their natures” (Okin (1982), 81); I pursue this further by considering men’s and women’s natures in relation to their function in humanity’s teleological development. Cornelia Klinger more specifically examines the connections between Kant’s aesthetic and moral theories, concluding, as I do here, that “Kant subsumes woman’s essence, her entire being, under the category of the beautiful” (194). See Cornelia Klinger, “The Concepts of the Sublime and the Beautiful in Kant and Lyotard”, in *Feminist Interpretations of Immanuel Kant*, ed. Robin May Schott (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 191-211.

³⁴ OFBS, 77.

These virtues toe the line between observational claims, describing each sex’s natural attributes, and normative imperatives: men and women *ought* to develop the character and virtues that advance their distinctive moral perfections. Character concerns our moral advancement and the acculturation upon which it depends: education must take each sex’s naturally-given character, and the virtues proper to it, as its appropriate point of reference. This is clearly not morally-benign; as Robert Louden observes, “[m]orality for human beings is, on Kant’s view, the intended outcome of an extensive educational process”³⁵. As imperfect beings that develop the capacity to recognize and act on objectively-given moral duties over time, our moral progress turns on (among other things) a properly-calibrated pedagogy³⁶. Educating women to masculine virtues, or vice versa, produces improperly oriented agents that pursue the wrong ends, detracting from humanity’s progress rather than contributing to it. Kant describes both effeminate, coquettish men and intellectually-driven women as misdirected, and so failing to actualize their moral natures. “Laborious learning or painful pondering, even if a woman should greatly succeed in it, destroy the merits that are proper to her sex”³⁷; such a woman fails to cultivate the beautiful character that draws men towards her as a matter of moral, and not merely animal, impulse. Kant identifies two forms of masculine desire for women, distinguishing a “coarse”, animalistic sexual impulse from that based in a “finer taste”, responding to the moral qualities in women’s “beautiful” character. The moralization of men’s desire – from sexual possession to moral inclination – *depends* on her developing a properly beautiful character; the masculinization of her character by “laborious learning” destroys men’s moral impulsion towards her³⁸. Kant equally chides preening, fastidious men for failing to develop the sublime character that is their natural end; their inclinations towards the beautiful detract from the cultivation of the rational faculty that is properly awed before the sublimity of the moral law.

But, the objection runs, these characterizations merely pertain to our empirical character, and so fail to impugn our intelligible character, as moral agents. Yet Kant’s observational and normative claims are often inextricable from one another; the compulsion to adopt a given set of virtues is derived from the natural imperative to pursue our moral perfections, to develop a *moral* character. He clearly recognizes the adoptive virtues and our empirical character as complicit in developing the moral feeling and virtuous disposition motivating us to moral action; by Kant’s own reckoning, they

³⁵ Louden (2000), 38.

³⁶ Kant developed a sophisticated pedagogical system attending to the development of students’ technical skills, social skills and moral cultivation, which ultimately aimed to foster moral character. He was also an enthusiastic supporter of Johann Bernhard Basedow’s *Philanthropin*, an educational institution built on Enlightenment and Rousseauian principles aiming to reorient children’s education from a skill-based program to one that aimed to form moral character. For Kant’s pedagogical system, see Immanuel Kant, *On Education*, trans. Annette Churton (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003). For a close analysis of his thoughts on education and on Basedow’s *Philanthropin*, see G. Felicitas Munzel’s *Kant’s Conception of Moral Character: The “Critical” Link of Morality, Anthropology and Reflective Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), ch. 5.

³⁷ OFBS, 78.

³⁸ Sarah Kofman argues that the *moral* qualities of women’s beautiful character allows for a form of attraction respecting both sexes’ humanity by avoiding the reduction of desire to animal impulses. For an account of the subtleties (and oddities) of Kant’s respect for women, see Sarah Kofman, “The Economy of Respect: Kant and Respect for Women”, in *Social Research*, 49:2 (Summer 1982), 383-404.

belong to an ethics that is to be more than “merely speculative”³⁹. Anthropology and our empirical natures more generally thus carry a normative moral valence; while Kant attributes gender-based differences to empirical character, these nevertheless affect the conditions within which we are to realize our moral ends. Even more directly pertinent to our moral status, gender differences concern men and women’s cognitive capacities: “The fair sex has just as much understanding as the male, but it is a *beautiful understanding*, whereas ours should be a *deep understanding*, an expression that signifies identity with the sublime”⁴⁰. The sublimity of men’s character inheres in its capacity for properly moral action, for the principled fulfillment of moral duty incumbent on all rational beings. Conversely, the beauty in women’s character awakens the moral feeling in men, arousing the virtuous disposition by which imperfect agents develop a consciousness of their moral obligations. This conforms to the teleological account described above: women civilize men, drawing them away from the crudity of their animal natures and towards the civilized culture within which they develop their rational faculties.

Women thus participate in moral life *indirectly*, by stimulating the moral feeling, rather than by engaging in immediately moral action; a woman’s “philosophy is not to reason, but to sense. In the opportunity that one wants to give to women to cultivate their beautiful nature, one must always keep this relation before his eyes”⁴¹. The beautiful and the sublime constitute the normative standards by which women’s and men’s virtues are measured, in relation to our ends as morally-progressive beings; the categories of the beautiful and sublime *mediate* our participation in moral life. In a dim echo of Aristotle’s view of goodness as related to function, Kant’s measure of men’s and women’s qualities relate to the *distinctive* ends given by their different natures. We exercise our moral perfections by acting on the qualities proper to our sex: “A woman in whom the agreeableness befitting her sex particularly makes manifest the moral expression of the sublime is called *beautiful* in the proper sense”⁴². For women, the moral expression of the sublime is articulated *through* the beautiful qualities given by her particular character. While the sublimity of men’s character lies in its capacity for principled, moral action, the sublimity of a woman’s character is articulated through the beautiful qualities that are her proper measure.

While the *Anthropology* – published almost 35 years after the *Observations*, yet echoing Kant’s persistent interest in the character of man, the sexes, nationality and the species writ large – abandons the language of the beautiful and the sublime, it retains his view of men and women’s differentiation by the artifice of a providential natural ordering. In the intervening years, Kant substantially developed his teleological account of historical development (most notably in the 3rd *Critique*); this is reflected in the *Anthropology*’s treatment of gender differences as attributable to humanity’s naturally-given and collectively-pursued moral ends. Despite the differing orientations of the two

³⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, eds. Peter Heath and J.B. Schneewind, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 27:245. Given hereafter as LE.

⁴⁰ OFBS, 78-79. Both Jean P. Rumsey and Cornelia Klinger draw on this passage to demonstrate that Kant’s identification of defects in women’s basic rational capacities impacts on their moral agency. Rumsey argues that “lacking a basis in principle, it [women’s cognitive faculty] falls short of the practical reason demanded by the predisposition to morality” (131); see Rumsey (1997) and Klinger (1997).

⁴¹ OFBS, 79-80.

⁴² OFBS, 87.

works, Kant's treatment of gendered virtue and character remains largely unchanged. While the *Observations* focuses on the aesthetic categories of beauty and sublimity, the *Anthropology* emphasizes teleology; yet, there is significant overlap between them. In the *Anthropology*, Kant asserts that "[f]emine virtue or lack of virtue is very different from masculine virtue or lack of virtue, not only in kind but also as regards incentive"⁴³, clearly retaining the gendered metaphysics initially outlined in the *Observations*. Conversely, his view of gender differences as situated within a teleological natural ordering is clear – and problematic – in the earlier text as well:

The virtue of a woman is a *beautiful virtue*. That of the male sex should be a *noble virtue*. Women will avoid the wicked not because it is unright, but because it is ugly; and virtuous actions mean to them such as are morally beautiful. Nothing of duty, nothing of compulsion, nothing of obligation! Woman is intolerant of all commands and all morose constraint. They do something only because it pleases them, and the art consists in making only that please them which is good. I hardly believe that the fair sex is capable of principles, and I hope by that not to offend, for these are also extremely rare in the male. But in place of it Providence has put in their breast kind and benevolent sensations, a fine feeling for propriety, and a complaisant soul.⁴⁴

Kant distinguishes animals from rational beings precisely by their inability to shelve the immediacy of natural inclinations and set their own ends; women appear similarly *incapable* of structuring their wills according to rational dictates before the greater volitional determination of pleasure and feeling. Like children, women can at best *conform* to morally upright action through the manipulation of their affects and desires; unlike (male) children, they retain no prospect of growing beyond this nonage. Kant's views are clearly objectionable; but more problematically, they're central to his account of men and women's – and the species' – moral realization. Women *need* to develop this beautiful character if we're to maintain a rational hope in humanity's movement towards the realization of our natural ends.

iii) *Three Kinds of Wrong: Masculinism, Moral Ends and Teleology*

What precisely are the wrongs that run through Kant's view of gender? Feminist scholars have treated this question in depth, presenting important challenges to Kant's moral and political thought. I begin by treating two lines of criticism that have been pursued in the feminist literature, before proposing a third point of critique, which is my own.

To begin with, as demonstrated above, Kant's account of gender is in the simplest and most banal way entirely misogynistic, pervaded by a masculinist bias that both directly and indirectly relegates women to a subordinate moral and political status. Kant adopts, reproduces and even furthers the tropes of his era by characterizing women as incapable of principled action, intellectually inferior, in need of governance, and beholden to their emotions. Women are characterized by a beautiful rather than sublime

⁴³ AP, 7:308.

⁴⁴ OFBS, 81.

cognitive faculty; their possession of the rational capacities grounding our moral status is at best limited, and at worst non-existent. Kant's considered opinion of women's "understanding", and of their cognitive abilities more generally, is persistently unclear; he appears to share in Aristotle's view that "the female indeed possesses it, but in a form which remains inconclusive"⁴⁵. Women's rational faculties are not merely quantitatively inferior to men's, but rather *qualitatively* distinct. Kant maintains that "[a]n understanding that is in itself sound (without mental deficiency) can still be accompanied by deficiencies with regard to its exercise"⁴⁶; women's understanding, sound though it may be, suffers from precisely such deficiencies. But while we can't fault Aristotle for failing to jump over Rhodes, Kant lived in an age of enlightenment; and as Robin May Schott and Susan Moller Okin have pointed out, his failure to recognize women as equals is all the more glaring in light of the depth of his commitment to ideals of human equality in so many other realms⁴⁷. This is no merely presentist critique; the conservatism of Kant's view of women was, while prevalent, not unchallenged in his day. In 1790, Condorcet published *De l'admission des femmes au droit de cité* ("On Women's Admission to the Rights of Citizenship"), advocating for women's right to political enfranchisement. Still closer to home, Hannelore Schröder shows that Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel, mayor of Königsberg and a personal acquaintance of Kant's, publicly declaimed against the perpetuation of women's disenfranchisement, arguing for their accession to equal civil and political rights⁴⁸. Jean P. Rumsey similarly observes that Kant's moral theory excludes women by "tak[ing] the pattern for "normal agency" to be that of the man of his time and place"⁴⁹. Kant not only resisted his contemporaries' efforts to recognize women as equal political agents, but actively opposed them by entrenching women's differences in a naturalized account of gendered virtues.

This line of critique pertains not only to Kant's *directly* misogynistic treatments of women, but to the androcentric presumptions pervading his moral and political thought. Drawing on Carol Gilligan's critique of Kohlberg's Kantian rationalism, Sally Sedgwick criticizes the ideal of isolated autonomy animating Kant's view of moral agency, arguing that "female identity development essentially involves community rather than detachment"⁵⁰. Kant's conceptualization of moral action explicitly denies the social and affective embeddedness and interactivity of human agency, dimensions of moral personhood that Gilligan and Sedgwick associate with female identity formation. Kant's ideal of moral autonomy is thus far from universal, failing to recognize the distinctive

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *The Politics of Aristotle*, ed./trans. Ernest Barker (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 35.

⁴⁶ AP, 7:209.

⁴⁷ See Robin May Schott, "Feminism and Kant: Antipathy or Sympathy?", in *Autonomy and Community: Readings in Contemporary Kantian Social Philosophy*, eds. Jane Kneller and Sidney Axinn (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 87-100; and Okin (1992). Cf. Manfred Kuehn's defense of Kant as simply reproducing the tropes of his day, and that "not much more could be expected" of him: Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 118.

⁴⁸ See Hannelore Schröder, "Kant's Patriarchal Order", in *Feminist Interpretations of Immanuel Kant*, ed. Robin May Schott (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 275-296.

⁴⁹ Rumsey (1997), 126.

⁵⁰ Sally Sedgwick, "Can Kant's Ethics Survive Feminist Critique?", in *Feminist Interpretations of Immanuel Kant*, ed. Robin May Schott (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 94. Jean P. Rumsey echoes this point: there is no reason to take individual autonomy as the starting point of human agency. She points to Hume's view of the importance of sociality for human agency as an alternative to Kant's atomism. See Rumsey (1997), 133.

features of women's experiences, and so producing a specifically male conception of moral agency. Jean Bethke Elshtain similarly argues that the abstract universalism of Kant's moral theory presumes and reproduces a particularly masculinist view of the world. She demonstrates that ideal of noumenal freedom, as entirely divorced from the phenomenal world, "cannot begin to get at complexities of women's embodied experiences"⁵¹. Kant's depiction of women as inexorably beholden to their emotions also makes them "a suspect category within a Kantian framework"⁵²; his mistrust of the emotions, from the moral point of view, is thus indirectly transferred onto women.

Helpful and persuasive though these critiques are, they often take Kant's sexism as a sufficient explanation and indictment of his conception of moral agency; this, however, tends to obscure a more particular view of *how* his sexism affects his moral theory. So, for example, Susan Mendus argues that Kant denies "that woman's nature has a connection with reason. Women's nature is identified with inclination, and it is for this reason that she must submit herself to man."⁵³ This is undoubtedly true, but the description obscures Kant's deeper reasoning; it fails to capture *why* women are not merely "identified" with inclination, but are rather *compelled* to develop an explicitly non-rational character, in conformity with their "moral perfections". The direct imputation of sexism, while true, does not tell the whole story.

Kant's view presents a second problem, concerning women's natural ends. As is well known, Kant's conception of freedom depends upon our rational capacity to set our own ends. Human autonomy is manifested in our unique ability to transcend the causal chains binding all natural creatures to the phenomenal world by setting and pursuing our own rationally-determined ends. Human beings set all kinds of ends that draw on our different skills and abilities; Kant distinguishes between technical skills (enabling us to fulfill any number of practical tasks), pragmatic skills (by which we pursue imperatives of happiness) and the rational faculty by which we fulfill moral imperatives, given by the dictates of pure reason. Each of these pertains to a given sphere of human action, skill and choice, and relates to a particular kind of end. The capacity to recognize and act on moral imperatives grounds our freedom as rational beings: true freedom, the exclusive property of autonomous agents, lies in the pursuit of ends unconditioned by natural inclinations. As rational and yet imperfect creatures, our *natural* end is thus to develop the capacity to set our *own* ends autonomously⁵⁴.

However, as Jean P. Rumsey observes, "Kant's primary reason for holding that women are morally immature is that their own purposes are co-opted by nature's. Unlike men... women must serve nature's purposes"⁵⁵. Women's highest end, their natural end, lies not in autonomous self-determination, but in the mediate moral goal of drawing *humanity* towards its moral realization. Kant argues that

⁵¹ Elshtain (1986), 26.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Susan Mendus, "Kant: 'An Honest but Narrow-Minded Bourgeois'?", in Howard Williams (ed) *Essays on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1992), 382.

⁵⁴ Kant distinguishes *man's* natural end from the role that man plays in *nature's* ultimate end; while nature requires man as an end to its own telos (what Kant refers to as "that *ultimate purpose* of nature" (*Critique of Judgment*, 5:431)), I am here concerned with the former: man's own end, rather than his role in nature's ends.

⁵⁵ Rumsey (1989), 260.

One can only come to the characterization of this sex if one uses as one's principle not what we *make* our end, but what *nature's end* was in establishing womankind... These ends are: 1) the preservation of the species, 2) the cultivation of society and its refinement by womankind...

Since nature also wanted [this follows Kant's description of the "preservation" function] to instill the finer feelings that belong to culture – namely those of sociability and propriety – it made this sex man's ruler through her modesty and eloquence in speech and expression. It made her clever while still young in claiming gentle and courteous treatment by the male, so that he would find himself imperceptibly fettered by a child through his own magnanimity, and led by her, if not to morality itself, to that which is its cloak, moral decency, which is the preparation for morality and its recommendation.⁵⁶

Where men's freedom inheres in their capacity to set ends independently of natural causality, women's ends are explicitly derived from, and determined by, nature's own design. Rumsey observes that Kant measures women's character in relation to a *functional*, rather than a moral end; theirs is to draw the species towards moralization, the ever-elusive endpoint of Kant's teleological history. Susan Meld Shell similarly asserts that "[t]he special role of women now lies, above all, in bringing about civil order and refinement "through inclination" rather than compulsion"⁵⁷. While women are capable of setting the morally inconsequential ends demanded by everyday life, they're unable to engage in the autonomous end-setting characterizing *free* agents; they're beholden to the ends that nature sets them. Men's moral nature is expressed in rational self-determination; "[t]he content of women's great science, rather, is humankind, and among humanity, men"⁵⁸. Women's ends are not their own; their moral end is to lead men if not to morality itself, then to its cloak, the moral decency that prepares them for it.

As a third point of criticism, I would like to suggest 1. that Kant's teleological account of humanity's moral advancement *requires* women to adopt an explicitly non-moral character; and 2. that this teleology is inextricable from his conceptualization of our moral personhood as *human* agents. Taken together, these suggest that women's subordinate status is not merely incidental to Kant's view of our moral agency, but is rather internally connected to the moral agency of human, and not merely rational, beings. I unpack the first claim here, and treat the second in more detail in the next section.

Much as Kant asserts that "these principles [of teleology] pertain merely to reflective judgment: they do not determine the actual [*an sich*] origin of these beings", his account of humanity's moral advancement *depends* on a progressive civilization, and on women's role in bringing it about. It is for this reason that Kant's pronouncements regarding women's virtues persistently slip from the reflective judgments to which he claims to confine them, to the normative imperatives by which they're frequently iterated. From the teleological perspective, women *must* foster virtues and a character that actively

⁵⁶ AP, 7:305.

⁵⁷ Susan Shell Meld, "Kant's 'True Economy of Human Nature'", in *Essays on Kant's Anthropology*, eds. Patrick Kain, Brian Jacobs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 211.

⁵⁸ OFBS, 79.

detracts from their capacities as autonomous, end-setting beings if they are to act in conformity with their moral perfections. This is problematic: the character which makes women good in Kant's teleological account is precisely what makes them bad by the transcendental standards of moral agency. The beautiful virtues exhibiting the sublimity of their *kind* of moral character are diametrically opposed to those demanded of rational, autonomous beings. Women participate in moral life by cultivating the moral feeling in men, drawing them away from the crudity of their barbaric proclivities and towards higher stages of civilization. They do so by manipulating men's sexual and affective drives; women "imperceptibly fetter" men by drawing them into relations of affective and sexual partnership, softening the edges of their barbarism. Women's capacity to shepherd humanity towards the civilization that is, by Kant's reckoning, a necessary preparatory stage for moralization depends on their cultivating the beautiful qualities which entrap men. These qualities – women's virtues – appeal to (and draw on) inclinations and emotions, rather than the rational faculty; what's more, women deform their character and fail to fulfill their naturally-given ends by developing or exercising their rational faculty. Humanity's development, our progressive civilization, *depends* on women's capacity to awaken the moral feeling, to play on men's affective drives in pushing them towards a higher stage of moral consciousness. Women are thus agents of moralization, and not moral agents, in Kant's teleological conception of human development.

In his writings on education, Kant describes the necessity of explicitly non-moral propaedeutic aids in developing children's moral disposition. Pedagogy employs habituation, shaming, moral examples, and rewards and punishments, none of which are operative in truly moral action, but which are invaluable in acculturating immature subjects to the moral feeling and to a virtuous disposition. On a global-historical stage, Kant understands humanity as analogically "immature" (or, in his vernacular, in an age of enlightenment, not an enlightened age); women similarly play on men's affective inclinations to bring about moral ends by un-moral means. Men develop a virtuous disposition and sublime character attuned to moral obligation through an acculturative process that confines women's character to the beautiful. This not only reduces women to the status of means, but also implies that the exercise of their virtues directly detracts from their capacities as moral agents, in the transcendental sense; theirs is to sense, not to reason. Women's moral agency is realized by shepherding the civilization within which humanity progresses, compelling them to adopt forms of character and virtue that inhibit the distinctly human capacity for free, autonomous, rational agency; the more they contribute to the development of the species, the less are they able to realize their own autonomous moral agency. Women's nature sits uneasily between Kant's transcendental view of *rational* agency and his teleological view of *human* development, a juncture which I turn to consider.

iv) *Teleological Agents, Transcendental Agents*

The difficulty in making sense of women's moral status stems from the fraught relationship between the transcendental *determination* of the moral law, of moral duty and of moral agency, and the teleological account of how we come to *develop* ourselves

as moral beings⁵⁹. This is an important problem in Kantian scholarship, and has been debated extensively⁶⁰; I here address only one small dimension of this much larger question. How, then, are we to understand the relation between Kant's teleological account of women's character and ends, and his transcendental account of moral personhood more generally?

Commentators approach the question in different ways. Robert Louden regards Kant's teleological understanding of women's nature as a regrettable, prejudiced deviation from his otherwise strict moral egalitarianism. He criticizes Kant's view on several fronts: first, for eliding the distinction between physical and moral character; secondly, for indulging in a "naïve teleologism" that perceived socially constructed attributes (women's coquettishness, loquacity, etc.) as natural; and finally, for uncritically accepting and reproducing the prejudices of his era⁶¹. But Louden's treatment is notably silent regarding the implications of these "lapses" for Kant's broader ethical theory; he observes Kant's defects without exploring their impact on his moral philosophy. This is particularly peculiar in light of his persuasive account of Kant's distinction between rational and human agents. Louden vacillates between bracketing Kant's views on women as aberrations from his moral theory and suggesting that Kant regards women "as still being in a state of *Unmundigkeit*: they do not yet have the courage to use their own reason"⁶². Neither argument is entirely convincing: as I argue below (following Louden's own arguments!), Kant's view of our teleological development belongs to an account of *human* moral agency (and so can not be regarded as a mere aberration from his moral thought), and as I've argued above, the "immaturity" which Kant attributes to women is clearly a permanent condition, embedded in their natural character (and so not amenable to future improvement).

Jean P. Rumsey is more directly critical, asserting that "Kant's teleological arguments about the contribution of women to the civilizing and thus the moralizing of the race are basically contrary to Kantian tenets"⁶³. She demonstrates that Kant's teleological arguments are "patently inconsistent" with his moral universalism, yet remains convinced that "this apparent inconsistency vanishes when one takes a broader perspective which includes Kant's theory of character"⁶⁴. Rumsey rightly argues that Kant's view of character relates to two connected problems: first, that human beings

⁵⁹ Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher first drew attention to the fundamental tension between the teleological and transcendental aspects of Kant's philosophy in an early review of the *Anthropology*; see Patrick Frierson's *Freedom and Anthropology in Kant's Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ch.1.

⁶⁰ Commentators vary widely in their efforts to synthesize the critical and empirical conceptions of the freedom of the will. Patrick Frierson provides a helpful overview of commentators' attempts to do so in a paper entitled "Moral Anthropology in Contemporary Neokantian Ethics", presented at the Kantian Ethics Conference at the University of San Diego on Jan. 16, 2003; for a video of the paper presentation, see <http://ethics.sandiego.edu/video/USD/Kant2003/Frierson/index.html>. For other compelling accounts suggesting such a reconciliation, see Frierson (2003); Louden (2000); Kleingeld (1999); and Nancy Sherman's "Kantian Virtue: Priggish or Passional?", in *Reclaiming the History of Ethics: Essays for John Rawls*, eds. Andrews Reath, Barbara Herman and Christine Korsgaard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 270-296.

⁶¹ Louden (2000), 82-87.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 87.

⁶³ Rumsey (1989), 262.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 251.

require social, political and pedagogical supports in order to develop themselves as moral agents, and secondly, that these conditions are in his eyes difficult to achieve. Women's moralizing function is to bring about an increasingly "civilized", progressive world; as we transcend our collective immaturity, we presumably create a social condition in which women can develop themselves as moral agents. From this perspective, Rumsey argues that Kant's view of women pertains to their *function* in this moralizing process; Kant does not *deny* women's "fundamental moral capacity", but rather explains "why she is unable to develop it properly, because of her function"⁶⁵. While Kant appears to explicitly deny women's moral capacities, we ought to interpret him as in fact preoccupied with the conditions in which "women would then find it possible to develop their latent but undeniable moral capacities"⁶⁶. Rumsey's broader perspective thus leads back to a version of Louden's argument from "maturity": the world's state of imperfection requires women to adopt a temporary "functional" role to bring about a condition in which their full moral realization becomes possible. But not only does this treat existing women as means for the realization of future others – untenable from a moral standpoint – but it also runs into Louden's problems. First, women's character is a natural and permanent condition; as we saw above, there's nothing in Kant's view of women's character to suggest their ever transcending its "defects" to develop a sublime cognitive faculty. Secondly, this future end-state, the state of maturity in which women switch from a functional to a moral role, is unattainable, a regulative and not objective end; unless and until we transcend our corporeality, human beings remain destined to approach, and never achieve, their moral ends.

Holly Wilson also explores the role of teleology in Kant's view of women, in the context of his much-maligned thoughts on marriage. While nature bestows a physical advantage on men, Wilson argues, Kant regards women as "developmentally" advantaged: their ability to manipulate men's impulses counters their weaker constitutions. Marriage thus unites men and women in a relation of approximate reciprocity in which gendered inequalities balance one another out. By Wilson's account, Kant thus recognizes an "equality of agency"⁶⁷ between the sexes; marriage provides the condition within which their inequalities are reconciled. But this fails to recognize moral discrepancies between ostensibly "equal, but different" forms of character; women's character-based "developmental advantages" *detract* from their capacities as moral agents. The character-based differences that Kant attributes to women are far from morally benign or equal; the character which comprises women's advantage in the context of marriage also renders them morally defective. Wilson's view of the "equivalence of inequalities" between the sexes elides their moral significance.

Commentators thus respond to Kant's teleological account of women's nature in one of a few ways: the teleology is bracketed off, either as inconsistent with Kant's deeper commitments (and so as an aberration from his more systematic, critical thought), or as reflecting humanity's state of imperfection (which, presumably, is resolved at an indeterminate future point, when women become "mature", rational agents). I would like to suggest, conversely, that Kant's teleological reflections belong to his mature view of

⁶⁵ Ibid., 251

⁶⁶ Ibid., 262.

⁶⁷ Wilson (1998), 291.

human, and not merely rational agency⁶⁸. Kant's post-critical works became increasingly preoccupied with the irreducible phenomenality of human nature and its implications for moral personhood; he recognized that "morality cannot exist without anthropology... One can, indeed, certainly consider practical philosophy even without anthropology, or without knowledge of the agent, only then it is merely speculative"⁶⁹. This assessment is not restricted to the *Anthropology* and *Lectures on Ethics*; in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant maintains that while empirical applications of moral duty "do not admit of a classification" in the same way as do *a priori* principles, an account of these "different ways of applying it... belongs to the complete presentation of the system"⁷⁰. We must, at the very least, know what *kind* of beings we are if we're to produce an ethics that it is in any sense practical. We must envision the nature of the creatures to whom ethics are to apply, as this nature conditions the kind of ethics of which we're capable. Our imperfectly rational nature as both noumenal and phenomenal beings thus binds us to developing ourselves in particular ways to move towards our moral realization.

This animates Kant's teleological developmentalism: as such imperfect beings, we need to awaken the moral feeling latent in us all to develop the virtuous disposition of moral agents. We're not born with the proper moral orientation; the "radical evil" characterizing human nature in fact suggests the opposite. In the *Religion*, Kant describes the radical evil in human nature as grounded in our natural impulsion to act on phenomenal, animal inclinations despite an awareness (however quietly whispered by our consciences) of our moral duties⁷¹. While we hear the call of moral obligation, it is obfuscated by the naturally-primary impetus of sensible inclinations. We are thus morally compelled to develop a greater receptivity and responsiveness to duty, to strengthen our resolve in resisting natural impulses and overcoming the radical evil in us all; in other words, to develop a moral character. This echoes Kant's account of the moral feeling in the 2nd *Critique*: the moral feeling enables us to prioritize our rationally-given obligations over the greater immediacy of our animal desires. Both cases point to the same conclusion: our naturally-occurring incentive structure requires us to *develop* ourselves as moral agents. We must, over time, foster a receptivity to moral obligation if we're to progress towards our natural end. Kant's moral theory is in a bind which teleology effectively solves: while our moral obligations are universally binding on all rational creatures, human beings persistently fail to conform to them. How, in the face of humanity's widespread moral failures, are we to maintain faith in our moral nature at all? Teleology responds to this: as imperfectly natural creatures, we must develop our moral capacities; we're not perfect, but we're getting better. This speaks to our nature – we are

⁶⁸ Vincent M. Cooke demonstrates that the teleological dimension of Kant's thought became increasingly pronounced and better developed towards the end of the critical period (seen most clearly, of course, in the *Critique of Judgment*) and into the 1790s. This is borne out by Kant's post-critical attention to the teleological and empirical dimensions of human agency in the *Religion*, the *Contest of Faculties*, and most clearly, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. See Vincent M. Cooke, "Kant, Teleology, and Sexual Ethics", in *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 31, 1991, 3-13.

⁶⁹ LE, 27:245.

⁷⁰ MM, 6:469.

⁷¹ Kant describes the radical evil in human nature in Part One (6:19 – 6:53) of the *Religion*. See Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, eds. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

the kind of moral agents that, unlike the angels, are necessarily committed to moral improvement. Kant's teleological developmentalism preserves a faith in humanity's moral nature while accounting for human imperfection.

This faith, the hope and belief that we are indeed improving, not only informs Kant's view of human nature but also sustains the *practical* dimension of his moral theory. Kant did not aim to develop a merely speculative ethics; his practical philosophy anchors a practicable project of moral improvement. The teleology is not only descriptive, accounting for our imperfections, but also anchors the practical dimension of Kant's ethics by sustaining moral hope. The accounts of history and humanity's development *preserve* the hope of moral improvement in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary: despite inhabiting a world mired in irrationality, war and prejudice, Kant's teleology sustains both the faith in our growing enlightenment, and the consequent imperative to pursue our moral amelioration. The teleology explains our imperfections and wards off what Kant describes as moral despair, the despondency to which human beings are prone when they lose faith in the possibility of moral progress. This hope-sustaining imperative runs through Kant's many developmental arguments. It leads him to, in the *The Contest of Faculties*, defend a eudaimonistic conception of history against the terroristic and abderistic views that would deny humanity's development⁷². His essay on *Perpetual Peace* is similarly animated by a faith in human progress; Kant asserts that we're duty-bound to retain this faith unless and until it can be proven chimerical. His controversially laudatory assessment of the French revolution stems from (and sustains) the same rational hope: while the revolution – like all revolutions – is categorically wrong from the perspective of right, it also, from the teleological standpoint, “allow[s] us to hope for human improvement” by indicating “a moral disposition within the human race”⁷³. Kant's teleological view informs his account of the kind of moral agents that we are, while also grounding the rational hope sustaining our desire to develop ourselves as moral beings at all. It preserves the *practical* imperative in Kant's moral project by assuring us that, imperfect though the world and its inhabitants are, we need not lose hope. If we can *see* that moral improvement is possible, we continue to feel the compulsion of moral duty itself; the teleology wards off the fear that ethics remain the purview of more perfect creatures than ourselves.

v) *Conclusion*

There remains an objection to the argument I've presented, the objection that we ought to take the *regulative* dimension of Kant's teleology seriously. If teleology concerns mere postulates of reflection, then it enables us to do nothing more than to *interpret* the world and properly understand human progress. Postulates of reflection have no place in the normative account of our moral duties and obligations; they merely enable us to make sense of humanity's nature as morally progressive. If this is the case, then teleology belongs exclusively to Kant's hope-sustaining project, anchoring our moral dispositions: it does not *justify* the world's immoralities, it simply explains them (as a consequence of our collective immaturity) and so preserves our desire to pursue

⁷² Immanuel Kant, “The Contest of Faculties”, in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 179.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 182-183.

moral progress. Against this view, Thomas McCarthy argues that the teleology in Kant's view of human development sanctifies racial injustice; Robert Bernasconi takes this a step further, suggesting that Kant regards non-European races as ultimately destined to die out⁷⁴. But McCarthy and Bernasconi's arguments can only be sustained by an objective, normative teleology: Kant could only *justify* the immoralities of war and the eventual assimilation or eradication of improperly civilized (or simply uncivilized) peoples by the sweep of moral progress if his teleology involved *objective* claims, as an Aristotelian telos might. If we take Kant's teleology as regulative, we are brought to a different conclusion: historical reflection does not justify or sanction war, prejudice or other human atrocities, it merely explains them as a consequence of our immaturity. If this is the case, Kant's teleology can't tell us what we ought to do, as given kinds of creatures, but only how creatures of our kind can understand ourselves. From this perspective, teleology belongs to the hope-sustaining project anchoring Kant's practical ethics: it preserves our moral commitments in the face of so much evidence suggesting our inability to pursue a moralized world. It thus anchors a moral orientation, without justifying an immoral world (as an objective teleology would).

Yet, as we've seen, much of Kant's writing on women's character *does* spill into the normative sphere – women *ought* to develop themselves in a given way if humanity is to move towards its natural ends. This concerns more than what could reasonably be understood as a mere postulate of reflection; Kant suggests that women's natures *compel* them to pursue the beautiful qualities conducive to humanity's moral development. This doesn't merely address how we can *make sense* of their naturally-occurring qualities – as a reflective teleology would do – but is clearly bound to a normative, gendered account of personhood bound to Kant's view of human, and not merely rational, nature. What *makes* us human is precisely the imperfection that women are bound to ameliorate. Strange though it may be to suggest, an objective teleology might well have been less problematic: this would enable us, with Loudon and Rumsey, to interpret Kant as suggesting that humanity's current state of imperfection accounts for women's temporary nonage, both morally and politically. But this is unwarranted on two fronts. First, it clearly is *not* Kant's view: he argues that “[w]oman regardless of age is declared to be immature in civil matters”, due to a permanent “incapacity” in her understanding⁷⁵. Secondly, as a species that is by Kant's own estimation inexorably bound to a phenomenality that conditions our moral agency, we are by our very nature destined for a *perpetual* immaturity; we never will entirely transcend the imperfections that make us the kind of beings that we are. The state in which women might be understood to achieve moral and political maturity thus appears unattainable.

And so we come to see the depth of the problem of Kant's view of women. If teleological development belongs to a full account of a properly human ethics, then it is inextricable from Kant's moral theory. We can not detach and distinguish a “pure”, transcendental moral subject from the conditions that characterize it as human, and not merely rational; developmentalism belongs to a *human* ethics. More generally, we can't

⁷⁴ See chapter 2 (“Kant on race and development”) in Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Robert Bernasconi, “Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Racism” in *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays*, eds. Julie K. Ward and Tommy Lee Lott (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).

⁷⁵ AP, 7:209.

simply extricate the parts we don't like from an otherwise purely transcendental ethics; Kant himself recognizes that the science of ethics *requires* anthropology to avoid lapsing into an idle reverie. His account of women's beautiful character and virtues is not a separable addendum appended to an independent, transcendental ethics, but is rather inextricably complicit in humanity's moral development. We can not isolate the teleological from the transcendental if the teleological comprises a qualifying condition for the ethical development of our kind of being; unlike rational angels whose wills can't help but to conform to the moral law, human beings *need* to grow into their moral personhood. In a nuanced treatment of Kant's account of marriage, Anthony J. La Vopa argues that

Kant's fear and disgust in the face of sexuality cannot be cleanly detached from his philosophy. However pathological they may be, they are also, in his systemic logic, implications of a mechanistic vision that linked intimacy ineluctably with moral degradation. That vision is too deeply inscribed in the logic of Kant's system to be excised by drawing a distinction between his psychology and his philosophy... If we lift Kant's concept of the person out of his system, what gives it philosophical cogency?⁷⁶

This strikes me as fundamentally correct; we can not excise Kant's full view of human beings, of women, and of our nature as morally progressive agents from an otherwise transcendental account of a purely rational humanity. Our impurities are a constitutive part of our condition; they condition our moral nature. Many of the fences that Kant erects to sustain the purity of his moral theory – between empirical and intelligible character, between virtue and virtues, between observation and prescription, between objective and regulative teleologies – collapse under scrutiny, suggesting that the conditions within which we develop ourselves as moral agents affect the nature of this agency in important ways. Given this, we see that women aren't incidentally neglected or even intentionally denigrated in Kant's view; they belong – in the worst sense of the word – to a teleological account of humanity's moral development. They belong *to* it, rather than being a part *of* it.

⁷⁶ Anthony J. La Vopa, "Thinking about Marriage: Kant's Liberalism and the Peculiar Morality of Conjugal Union", in *The Journal of Modern History*, 77 (March 2005), 33-34.