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The Categorical Imperative and Gender Justice: A Kantian Feminist Approach

Dr. Subhankar Mandal

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy

Rammohan College, Kolkata

E-mail- subhankarmandal@rammohancollege.ac.in

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Abstract: Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy—specifically, the idea of the categorical imperative—is critically examined in this article, which also examines its applicability and constraints in feminist discussions of gender justice. Feminist academics have tried to either question or recover Kantian ethics precepts in the sake of gender equality, even though his abstraction and assumed universality have frequently drawn criticism. The study investigates feminist attempts to appropriate Kantian moral frameworks without upholding patriarchal hierarchies and considers whether Kant's ideas of obligation, autonomy, and moral law might be reformulated to solve gender-based inequities. By analyzing selected feminist critiques and reinterpretations, the article argues that while Kant's categorical imperative has philosophical limitations, it can still offer valuable tools for ethical reflection on gender justice when situated within a critical, intersectional framework.

Keywords: Categorical Imperative, Gender Justice, Feminist Ethics, Autonomy, Universal Moral Law.

Introduction

Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, grounded in the principle of the categorical imperative, remains one of the most influential ethical frameworks in Western thought. According to the categorical imperative, which Kant outlines in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), one should "act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" since it is a universal moral law. Kant admitted that's, ethical behaviour is based on duty and reason rather than outcomes.

But Kantian philosophy's idea of the logical, independent moral actor has long been attacked by feminist theorists for its gender-blind and exclusive presuppositions. Kant's "universal subject" is subtly masculine and

detached from emotion, physical experience, and the larger social and political environment, all of which are major issues in feminist ethics.

The primary question this essay addresses is: Can the categorical imperative—a central component of Kant's moral philosophy—be reformulated to uphold feminist principles of gender justice? It works in conjunction with feminist and Kantian philosophy to determine if the feminist focus on relationality, caring, and structural critique can coexist with moral universality.

Kant's Categorical Imperative and Its Moral Promise

Kant's ethics presents a deontological system rooted in duty, autonomy, and moral law. His groundbreaking view of moral actors as self-legislative, rational creatures upholds moral equality and human dignity. "Act in such a way that you treat humanity... always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means" is the second version of the categorical imperative, and feminist discourses have referenced it because it has the ability to affirm the intrinsic dignity of every human being.

At first, Kant's ideal of autonomy was viewed as a liberal, individualist philosophy that was unaffected by connections or environment. This approach was criticized by feminist philosophers like Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings for ignoring the emotional and interconnected aspects of moral existence. However, by highlighting non-coercion, respect, and duty to others, authors such as Onora O'Neill have argued that when correctly understood, Kantian ethics may serve feminist goals.

Kant's claim that all rational beings are equal may also be utilized to combat gender inequality in interpersonal interactions as well as in institutions. Any institution or behavior that objectifies or marginalizes individuals based on their gender is a clear violation of the categorical imperative if all rational beings are to be seen as ends in themselves. This is how Kant's framework, when fully applied, may provide an internal critique of the very exclusions it has long been accused of upholding.

Feminist Critiques and Reinterpretations

Feminist engagements with Kant fall broadly into two camps: rejection and reconstruction. According to critics like Susan Bordo and Genevieve Lloyd, Kant's preference for reason over feeling solidifies gender dualisms and upholds patriarchal ideals. They contend that a masculine ideal of reason devoid of concern or relational context is perpetuated by the abstraction of moral actors, which ignores the lived reality of gendered oppression.

For example, Susan Bordo criticizes the "masculinization of thought" that is a feature of Kantian philosophy. She contends that social norms that link femininity to irrationality and dependency are reflected in the moral deliberation's repression of emotion and embodiment. Similarly, Genevieve Lloyd argues that the history of Western philosophy, including Kant's writings, marginalizes feminine ways of moral knowing by constructing an implicitly masculine image of reason.

On the other hand, female Kantians like Marcia Baron, Christine Korsgaard, and Onora O'Neill provide a more complex interpretation. Kantian autonomy, as interpreted by O'Neill in particular, is a rejection of dominance and exploitation, which is consistent with feminist objectives of overthrowing oppressive systems. According to Korsgaard, Kant's focus on respect and moral self-legislation might enable excluded actors to make moral claims, offering a conceptual foundation for confirming the moral authority of women.

These reinterpretations aim to reestablish Kantian ethics as one that is aware of power relations and structural injustice rather than as a strict framework of isolated rational persons. This makes it possible to interpret Kant's moral imperative as an exhortation to oppose systems that deprive people of the ability to act as independent agents, a situation that is frequently seen in situations involving gendered violence, discrimination, or economic reliance.

Additionally, by using intersectionality—a term used by Kimberlé Crenshaw—to examine how gender, race, and class overlap in experiences of injustice, feminist researchers have attempted to broaden Kantian ethics. These intricacies are not taken into consideration by Kant, but contemporary reinterpretations might modify the categorical imperative to call for justice that takes into account a variety of identities.

Through a feminist reinterpretation of Kant's philosophy, academics are criticizing its limitations as well as reclaiming its emancipatory promise. These initiatives demand that ethical frameworks must also address embodiment, care, and relational interdependence while highlighting the significance of moral consistency, universal dignity, and autonomy.

Applications in Contemporary Feminist Discourse

Kantian theories are still used in modern feminist ethics to address challenging concerns of gender justice. Physical autonomy and reproductive rights are two key application areas. A major ethical basis for opposing coercive reproductive policies or regulations that use women's bodies as vehicles for external ends—whether political, religious, or cultural—comes from Kant's argument that people must never be considered as simple means.

Kant's insistence that each individual be treated as an end in themselves serves as the foundation for ethical arguments against pay disparities, glass ceilings, and exploitative working conditions that disproportionately impact women and gender minorities in both the workplace and the economy. The conceptual foundation for ethical demands for gender equality and fair remuneration in positions of power is Kantian regard and dignity.

Kantian principles also resonate with the battle against gender-based violence. The categorical imperative is immediately violated by the dehumanizing aspect of violence, especially when it silences or objectifies people. Kantian reasoning can be used by feminist legal theorists and human rights advocates to demand legal systems that protect the fundamental value and autonomy of all gender subjects, ensuring that no one is exploited as a method of dominance or control.

In addition, Kant's concept of a "kingdom of ends" induces moral concepts of democratic, inclusive communities where individuals identify one another as co-legislators of moral norms in feminist debates worldwide. This concept, which demands respect for local autonomy and moral accountability, is in line with transnational feminist initiatives to promote cross-cultural solidarity.

Finally, by making Kant's views more acceptable to students who care about social justice, feminist reinterpretations of his work can aid in the teaching of moral philosophy, particularly in ethics classes. By

critically analyzing Kantian literature and using gender-sensitive examples, educators can develop ethical reasoning abilities that are both theoretically solid and socially relevant.

Conclusion

Kant's moral theory is nevertheless a rich source for female ethical research, despite its Enlightenment roots and abstract universalism. Although the categorical imperative is not fundamentally feminist, it provides a moral framework that can be adjusted to take into consideration the complex challenges of gender justice. Feminist researchers have shown how Kant's moral framework may be modified to aid in the struggle against patriarchal oppression by reinterpreting Kantian ideas like autonomy, dignity, and moral law through the lenses of relational ethics and intersectionality.

There is some conflict in this reinterpretation. It is impossible to overlook the difficulties posed by Kant's historical background, his sporadic gendered statements, and the abstraction of his moral actor. Nonetheless, in attempts to eliminate gender discrimination and validate moral agency across a range of identities, the normative power of the categorical imperative—its demand for consistency, universality, and respect—can act as an ethical compass.

After being critically reexamined, Kantian ethics continues to be a useful tool at a time of growing gender inequality and intersectional injustices. In addition to encouraging a reaffirmation of moral obligation and personal freedom, it also calls for a shared dedication to justice that goes beyond personal preferences and systemic prejudices. In this way, a Kantian feminist viewpoint emerges not as a contradiction but as an innovative and morally sound response to today's moral quandaries.

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