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PALMQUIST, Stephen R

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Egalitarian Sexism: A Kantian Framework for Assessing the Cultural Evolution of Marriage (I)

Stephen R. Palmquist

Abstract

This first part of a two-part series exploring implications of the natural differences between the sexes for the cultural evolution of marriage assesses whether Kant should be condemned as a sexist due to his various offensive claims about women. Being antithetical to modern-day assumptions regarding the equality of the sexes, Kant's views seem to contradict his own egalitarian ethics. A philosophical framework for making cross-cultural ethical assessments requires one to assess those in other cultures by their own ethical standards. Sexism is inappropriate if it exhibits or reinforces a tendency to *dominate* the opposite sex. Kant's theory of marriage, by contrast, illustrates how sexism can be egalitarian: given the natural differences between the sexes, different roles and cultural norms help to ensure that females and males are equal. Judged by the standards of his own day and in the context of his philosophical system, Kant's sexism is not ethically inappropriate.

Keywords: Immanuel Kant, sexism, marriage, egalitarian ethics, cross-cultural assessments, cultural evolution, nature of the sexes

Does Kant's view of women contradict his egalitarian ethics?

Allegations that Immanuel Kant was a sexist have become commonplace over the past few decades, especially since Barbara Herman dubbed Kant “the modern moral philosopher feminists find most objectionable” (Herman, 1993, p. 50).¹ That the great German philosopher made various remarks about women that seem “noxious and distasteful” (Mosser, 1999, p. 322)² to today's readers is an undeniable fact. Interpreters such as Robin May Schott take these remarks as constituting various “internal contradictions of Kant's philosophy”, most notably “the contradiction between his call for universal enlightenment and his exclusion of women and servants from enlightenment” (Schott, 1998, p. 41).³ She argues that this hidden sexism calls into question the validity of the entire Critical philosophy. Kantians such as Arnulf Zweig have agreed that Kant's remarks are surprising in view of the fact that his official Critical philosophy promotes what appears to be a “radical egalitarianism”, but tend to excuse Kant's remarks as being a mere product of his era; Kant was simply not as forward-looking on gender issues as we might have hoped (Zweig, 1993, p.

¹ Herman herself attempts to defend Kant against the most radical critiques that suggest Kant's whole Critical philosophy is compromised by his sexism, observing that in fact some of his claims (especially about the tendency of sexual interactions to treat persons as objects) are remarkably similar to claims that some feminists make about sexual oppression of females by males. For a brief but interesting critique of Herman's position, see Laurentiis, 2000, p. 298n.

² Mosser repeatedly refers to Kant's remarks as “noxious” (Mosser, 1999, pp. 343, 350, 351n, 353), yet never actually attempts to interpret or explain the offensive passages in their original context. Instead, he merely assumes we can take them at face value, as constituting “Kant's sexism” (Mosser, 1999, p. 329). After examining the proposals of several feminist writers for dealing with the obvious tension between the egalitarianism of Kant's Critical philosophy and the sexism of his passing remarks about the empirical nature of women, Mosser suggests his own alternative, “that we happily reject the sexism of Kant's texts, while retaining that which can, and should, be read in a gender-neutral fashion” (Mosser, 1999, p. 345).

³ While Schott's essay is a balanced survey of the array of varying feminist approaches to Kant, in her other work Schott actively defends the position quoted here. For an insightful critique of Schott's interpretation, see Mosser, 1999, pp. 338–343.

297).⁴ Mason Cash, by contrast, portrays Kant in a more “malicious” way, as intentionally reacting against a strikingly forward-looking position defended by his friend, Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel (Cash, 2002, p. 109).⁵ While commentators disagree, sometimes widely, on how (or whether it is even worth trying) to resolve this obvious “tension” between Kant’s official egalitarian ethics and his private views on the nature of women, all agree that the tension cannot simply be ignored but calls for *some* type of explanation, assessment, and response.

Kant’s offensive remarks about women occur in relatively few places and with just one exception only in his minor writings (i.e., in his early publications, short popular essays, or student lecture notes).⁶ The exception, significantly, is the last systematic work Kant completed, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), where we learn that his previous comments on women were not merely offhand remarks or bad jokes; for in this work he portrays his view of women as a consistent application of the systematic principles of his philosophical system to the cultural situation of his day – an application few if any recent commentators have found palatable. In her influential early survey of Kant’s various claims, Susan Mendus opines: “frequently Kant simply appears to indulge in an unthinking endorsement of the prejudices of his day and an uncritical acceptance of the dogma of others – notably Rousseau” (Mendus, 1992, pp. 21–22). Mendus helpfully groups Kant’s comments into four types: the legal status of women as second-class (“passive”) citizens; the function of monogamous marriage as the only rightful context for expressing sexual desire; the need for a hierarchical relationship between a husband and wife; and the fundamental differences between woman’s nature and man’s. Kant’s treatment of marriage, she says (Mendus, 1992, p. 31, quoting Aris, 1965, p. 102), “is notorious, an embarrassment to moral philosophers and philosophers of law alike. Few have found a good word to say about it, and at least one commentator has described Kant’s views as ‘shallow and repulsive’.” Similarly, in response to his comments on the differences between the sexes, Mendus laments: “Kant’s mind, almost wholly uncluttered by any actual experience, is laid bare and the prejudice and bigotry are revealed. A great deal of what he has to say about the inherent nature of woman is merely ludicrous” (Mendus (1992, p. 35). After quoting two examples, Mendus sighs: “And so it

⁴ Deranty argues that the philosophical systems of Fichte and Hegel exhibit the same tension Kant’s philosophy expresses, between formal promotion of an egalitarian agenda and a tendency to downplay the empirical status of women in the culture of their day. She portrays this not as a form of sexism, but as a direct implication of their overly male concepts of reason: “The reason for their choice must lie, not in personal animosity against the other sex, but in the concept of reason they were operating within and which was available at the time” (Deranty, 2000, p. 158).

⁵ Cash analyses some of Kant’s specific arguments and claims that “the devious rhetorical moves and fallacious argument forms” Kant employs suggest he was not just passively accepting the status quo of his day, but may have been actively reacting against more forward-looking ideas. For an account of Hippel’s views by an interpreter who, unlike Cash (Cash, 2002, cf. p. 135), believes Kant was intentionally defending a sexist agenda (Schröder, 1997). A point that typically goes unnoticed is that there is no evidence whatsoever in Kant’s texts that he was reacting against such early attempts to raise the status of women, especially since most of Kant’s comments predate the publication of Hippel’s position in 1792. Moreover, Hippel’s radical suggestions for integrating women into Prussian society had no significant impact on the political discussions of the day (Mosser, 1999, p. 346n), so Kant would not have felt any impelling need to react specifically to them.

⁶ Passages typically cited by those who wish to condemn Kant for being a sexist are: *Lectures on Ethics* (Kant, 1930), pp. (162–171); *On the Common Saying: “This May be True in Theory, but it does not Apply in Practice”* (Kant, 1991a), pp. 61–92; *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant, 1991b), pp. 277–280 (§§24–27 of “The Doctrine of Right”); *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Kant, 1974), pp. 303–311; and various passages throughout his early (1764) book, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (Kant, 1960). My references to Kant’s writings normally cite the original German (*Akademie Ausgabe*) pagination. When referencing translations that do not cite this pagination, I provide the translation’s pagination in parentheses. Mosser lists several other relevant passages that refer to women, but these all “have the flavor of offhand remarks or asides” and therefore add nothing significant to our understanding of Kant’s position (Mosser, 1999, p. 325n).

grinds on... [O]ne implausible remark following upon another". Significant here, as elsewhere in Mendus' essay, is the lack of argument to support her claims. Rather than attempting an exegesis of Kant's texts, she is content merely to quote passages and assume that Kant's meaning (and its implausibility) is unmistakable. Thus, for example, she later claims "it is hard to see what exactly distinguishes women from serfs or even animals"; even though she notes "the lip-service Kant pays to the equality of women in marriage", she opines "there can be little doubt that Kant took an extremely dim view of woman's nature and abilities" (Mendus, 1992, p. 37).

Sally Sedgwick starts out her assessment of how much of Kant's ethics can be preserved, in spite of his sexism, by explaining: "Kant is not much loved by feminist philosophers... not only because on his view women are passive by nature and determined more by inclination than reason and therefore cannot be legitimate citizens, equal partners in marriage or, even, capable scholars, but also because there is something supposed to be deeply androcentric built into the theoretical assumptions of his critical philosophy" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 60). Echoing Herman, she adds that Kant "simply got his facts about women wrong and was therefore blinded from recognizing their true potential as rational agents" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 71). But she disagrees that correcting this mistake on its own will protect Kant's philosophy from feminist criticisms. Ironically, in explaining what more is needed, Sedgwick implicitly *agrees* with Kant's basic claim that men and women are fundamentally different, for she argues there is "a [gender] bias in the categorical imperative itself", with the result that "the Kantian portrayal of moral subjectivity more mirrors male than female identity and thus leaves women and their experience out" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 72). What is needed, she claims, is not merely a revision of the *application* of the categorical imperative, but a revision of the categorical imperative *itself* "to include the different voice" represented by women, who by her own admission understand the meaning of "impartiality" in a fundamentally different way from men (Sedgwick, 1990, pp. 75–76). The irony, as we shall see below, is that this is the very goal Kant was trying to accomplish in making many of his allegedly sexist remarks.

Mosser also notes that some feminists (taking the natural difference between the sexes to an even greater extreme than Kant does) hold "the view that women... think, perceive, know, and reason about the world in ways fundamentally distinct from men" (Mosser, 1999, p. 336n). Mosser's essay persuasively argues that Kant's first *Critique* demonstrates that in the most fundamental senses, men and women must share an identical rational nature. However, his general remark about Kant's view of the differences between the sexes is less persuasive: "Kant's claims about women are not claimed to be logical consequences of the Critical philosophy, can draw no support from that philosophy, and seem to be the blinkered and confused generalizations by a philosopher whose interaction with women was limited and uncomfortable" (Mosser, 1999, p. 345; see also p. 351). In fact, as we shall see in §4, Kant may not have been as naïve concerning relations with the opposite sex as is often assumed. In any case, many of Kant's claims about the sexes *are* closely related, at least by way of analogy, to some of his most fundamental philosophical claims.

The rhetorical force of such assessments is so persuasive that more and more commentators have joined the chorus of those who label Kant as an outright "misogynist" (e.g., Mendus, 1992, p. 41). While Mendus' use of this term in the conclusion of her essay points only indirectly to Kant, others as notable as Martha Nussbaum have explicitly applied this label to Kant. Commenting on Barbara Herman's position, Nussbaum says: "Kant's evident misogyny and disdain for the body have caused feminists to dismiss his arguments without seriously considering them" (Nussbaum, 1994, p. 62). While she joins Herman in disapproving of those who claim we can dismiss Kant's entire philosophy because of this problem, Nussbaum does not deny that Kant's comments constitute misogyny. Indeed, few commentators nowadays regard such harsh condemnation as anything other than self-evident, so a mere quotation of the relevant texts (see note 6, above) typically takes the place of any

detailed analysis of Kant's intended meaning or refutation of his claims. Another typical example is Susan Feldman's undefended and unreferenced claim that Kant was "thoroughly anti-feminist and indeed misogynist" (Feldman, 1998). Similarly, Schott thinks Kant's "misogynist views" cannot "be dismissed as merely reflections of an earlier epoch" (Schott, 1998, p. 46). By contrast, Mosser thinks the term applies to Kant only because of "how generally misogynist that society was" and that it is therefore "unproductive to criticize him for not having been a visionary in Prussia relative to women" (Mosser, 1999, p. 346). Kant's remarks about women reveal what, Mosser claims, "can be described, at best, as his paternalism" (Mosser, 1999, p. 324).

Soble goes to the other extreme, accusing Kant of "heartlessness and brutal misogyny" for recommending in *Lectures on Ethics* that a woman would be better off allowing herself to be killed than to submit willingly to the sexual advances of a rapist (Soble, 2003, pp. 55–56); Soble presents no argument for his claim that such a view "is as deplorable as it is astonishing" and ignores the fact that the moral maxim Kant is applying here, that protecting one's honor is more important than protecting one's life, is based on a rational argument that applies *equally* to men and to women. (That is, Kant would have precisely the same advice for a man who is about to be raped as he has for a woman.) Likewise, he labels Kant's claim, that a husband may have sex with his wife even when she has no desire for it, as "another piece of Kantian misogyny" (Soble, 2003, p. 68) without supporting this claim with *any* argument and without noting that Kant would also allow the woman the same right, as an implication of her contractual ownership of her husband's sexual organs. To his credit, Soble does offer an important qualification: "Kant was writing *what we would consider* sexist accounts of women as early as 1764" (Soble, 2003, p. 82, emphasis added). He interprets Kant's claim that certain types of sex are "contrary to nature" as a mere sign of "Kant's allegiance to traditional cultural standards of masculinity"; by encouraging "men to be men... Kant engages in apologetics for the sexual-cultural order, not philosophy" (Soble, 2003, pp. 65–66). By the same token, however, Soble typically does not offer *arguments* to defend the judgment that Kant is a misogynist; in taking his own cultural presuppositions as self-evident, Soble (like most of the commentators cited in this section) assumes his readers will require no argument. Thus he ends his essay by admitting that his harsh response to Kant's position may reflect nothing more than the bias of his own "far away position of the early 21st-century" (Soble, 2003, p. 81). My task in this first article in the series is to demonstrate why an argument *is* needed, especially for anyone who applies such judgments to Kant *without* confessing his or her insensitivity to the constraints of Kant's culture, as Soble rightly does.

That today's readers do feel offended by many of Kant's remarks does not necessarily mean we are *justified* in being offended by them. We may be just as mistaken in our ethical assessments today as we believe Kant was in his remarks on women. Perhaps with this need for further justification in mind, several commentators have attempted a more systematic approach to assessing Kant's offensive comments. Pauline Kleingeld, for example, considers but rejects three common ways of responding to the tension between the apparent egalitarianism of Kant's official theories and the apparent sexism of his empirical understanding of women: readers have tended either to accept Kant's remarks as accurate (and therefore unproblematic), to claim that their problematic nature infects the Critical philosophy itself with an implicit misogyny, or to pretend that Kant's sexism doesn't exist by simply ignoring it when reading his systematic philosophical writings (Kleingeld, 1992–1993, pp. 134–150). Regarding the first option as self-evidently mistaken, she offers a solution that assumes the plausibility of both of the other options: commentators should interject "clarifying remarks, discussions, digressions, footnotes and annotations" into Kant's texts whenever quoting ideas that *seem* to be non-sexist, so that readers become aware that Kant himself might have intended many of his "universal" claims to apply only to males (Kleingeld, 1992–1993, p. 146).

Like Kleingeld, Mosser also offers three options: “Kant’s readers, then, are faced with the hermeneutical task of either 1) reconciling these seemingly inconsistent claims, 2) trying to eliminate that material that is indefensible, while retaining that which remains of philosophical interest, or 3) rejecting the entire Kantian approach as irredeemably sexist and oppressive” (Mosser, 1999, p. 322).⁷ The bulk of Mosser’s essay attempts to give due consideration to Kant’s theory of the subject, especially in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, a text that is almost always completely ignored in the literature on Kant’s alleged sexism. Such an approach, he claims, provides “good reasons to regard [Kant’s philosophy]... as *not* resulting in the kind of sexism conveyed by Kant’s own remarks” (Mosser, 1999, p. 323). Mosser’s impressive attempt at an even-handed approach illustrates that interpreters who wish to preserve the integrity of Kant’s philosophy often still merely *assume* that Kant’s remarks on women should be condemned as sexist. Let us therefore turn in the next section to consider the relevance a person’s cultural background may have on the issue of how those in a different culture should assess apparently sexist remarks. This alone can prepare us for an adequate assessment (in §§3–4) of the true nature of Kant’s sexism.

A philosophical framework for making cross-cultural ethical assessments

A problem that is rarely mentioned and whose implications have never been fully acknowledged by those who condemn Kant for being a sexist is that we live in a culture that is radically different from Kant’s. Kant himself recognized that, to a large extent, ethical judgments (especially those of the sort he makes in *The Metaphysics of Morals*) are necessarily tied to a specific cultural context. He explicitly points out that ethical norms *evolve*, thus implying that the *empirical* theories he advances (including all the rules and guidelines he suggests in his remarks on women) are not meant as universal judgments: they apply not to all cultures in all possible times, but only to the cultural context of his day.⁸ Typically ignoring the differences between Kant’s culture and our own, the literature on Kant’s alleged sexism never addresses the question of how it is *possible* to assess a person who belongs to a different culture. In the remainder of this essay I will advance the discussion of Kant’s alleged sexism by setting right this neglect: I shall ground my discussion on a specific philosophical framework that can guide the way a person makes ethical assessments of another person who lived (or lives) in a radically different culture from their own.

Kant calls attention in several places to the evolution of various ethical norms, most notably in the discussion of marriage in his *Anthropology* (Kant, 1974, pp. 303–311). Primarily for this reason, Part II of this series (Palmquist, 2017) will focus on whether Kant’s specific theory of the nature of marriage can be justifiably assessed by his twenty-first century readers as implying an objectionable form of sexism. However, understanding Kant’s position on the cultural evolution of marriage requires some prior familiarity with the other three topics relating to his alleged sexism (i.e., the legal status of women, the nature of human sexuality, and the distinctive nature of women as compared to men). because marriage can be regarded as *the* key issue for assessing the compatibility between Kant’s alleged sexism and his egalitarian moral philosophy, my goal in this first article will be to define the nature of the

⁷ A Google search using “Kant+sexism” reveals thousands of web pages (many set up by teachers for their students) where quotes are taken out of context and used to make Kant a scapegoat, an apparently easy target, exemplifying the evil tendency of past philosophers to be sexist. Mikkola does not question the assessment of Kant as a sexist, but does defend a more moderate position, calling attention to the incoherence of throwing out the entire Kantian System simply for this reason (Mikkola, 2011).

⁸ Kant’s belief that cultures evolve and that ethical norms will inevitably evolve with them is expressed primarily in his historically-oriented essays, such as “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View” (1784), “Conjectural Beginning of Human History” (1786), “The End of All Things” (1794), and especially “Perpetual Peace” (1795). On the evolution of marriage in particular, see his *Anthropology* (Kant, 1974, pp. 303–311).

question that must be answered with respect to Kant's theory of marriage, if a conclusive answer to the broader question of compatibility is to be given. As we shall see, understanding Kant's justification for viewing marriage as he did *for the culture of his time* will serve as the final step in the process, which I shall begin in this article, of accurately assessing whether his comments on *all* these topics are properly judged to be sexist. Fully elucidating all the texts relevant to Kant's views on women would require a book-length study; my central aim in this initial essay, therefore, will be to sketch a contextual backdrop – a way of seeing Kant, his ethics, and his approach to anthropology – that will enable twenty-first century readers to evaluate the implications of those other texts in a judicious way.

The theory of cross-cultural assessment that I shall develop in this section and apply to issues concerning Kant's alleged sexism throughout the remainder of this study rests on a set of fairly ordinary terms that take on very specific meanings when used within the context of this theory. To insure clarity and consistency, I shall begin by offering definitions of three key terms: "nature", "culture", and "sexism". In each case I shall distinguish between several senses each term will take on at various stages in the argument. After setting out these definitions in the remainder of this section, I will use the aforementioned three issues relating to Kant's alleged sexism to illustrate (in §§3–4) how this theory of cross-cultural ethical assessment can be used as a guide for *anyone* within one culture who seeks to assess an ethical situation or issue that arises within a different culture.

The words *nature* and *natural* shall refer to any characteristic(s) that determine the difference(s) between male and female human beings, in general.⁹ (The qualification "in general" implies that exceptions may exist; but in most cases, the claimed difference[s] will apply.) As such, nature manifests itself in two distinct forms: (a) biological differences; and (b) social and/or psychological differences.¹⁰ Examples of *biological nature* are that normal mature males produce many sperm per day, while normal mature females have only one ovum available during each menstrual cycle, and that normal healthy males may continue to produce sperm throughout their adult lives, whereas normal healthy females will experience menopause once their store of ova is exhausted.¹¹ Examples of *social-psychological nature* will vary from one culture to another, to the extent that they are socially-determined (see note 10); but they may still be called "natural" in the sense that the different gender traits are grounded in and/or manifest themselves through (or are at least related symbolically to) our biological nature. Thus, one culture might view men as having a natural social responsibility to play a more active role in *creating* babies (e.g., by initiating a relationship, arousing the woman's interest in him as a sexual partner, and eventually penetrating the woman's vagina with his penis, so that his sperm can search out and eventually penetrate her immobile ovum),

⁹ This definition is consistent with the way Kant uses the equivalent German words, *Natur* and *natürlichen*. Of course, his usage (like the normal use of the English terms) has a broader range of application, because the nature of human beings consists mostly of characteristics that males and females share in common. I narrow the definition here to focus on those features of human nature believed to distinguish the sexes. As we shall see, Kant also sometimes uses these terms in this narrower sense; he undoubtedly believed the differences between the sexes constitute a significant aspect of human nature.

¹⁰ I lump social and psychological differences together at this point to avoid weighing in on the controversy over whether or not the latter eventually reduce to the former. Social differences, of course, have a social origin by definition. But opinions differ over whether or not psychological differences between the sexes are also socially conditioned. My wording here is intentionally designed to render this disagreement irrelevant: for our purposes, all such differences will count as "natural", in the social/psychological sense, regardless of whether or not all such differences are at bottom social (or, for that matter, psychological).

¹¹ Technological developments in recent decades, such as test-tube fertilization and genetic engineering, provide a means of overcoming, or at least circumventing, some of what might be included as biological nature. As the reality of human cloning approaches ever nearer, the possibility of producing human life *itself* without reference to *nature* in the sense used here (i.e., without requiring a human sperm and ovum which presumably possess certain in-built, natural differences) seems more and more likely. For a more detailed discussion of the natural differences between the sexes, see Palmquist, 2003, especially Lecture 11.

while women play a more active role in *nurturing* babies (e.g., by carrying them within their bodies while they develop for approximately nine months, breast-feeding them once they are born, and being their primary care-giver at least until they reach a certain stage of independence).¹² Such expectations (and numerous others, such as “men don’t cry” or “women don’t play with cars”), or nowadays sometimes their *opposites* (see note 12), will count as *natural* (i.e., as part of the general *nature* of men and women) only insofar as the culture determining such social-psychological norms regards these differences as *part of what it means to be a normal person of that sex*.

As already used in the previous paragraph, the term *culture* refers in this study to the explanation given by any group of people as to how (if at all) biological nature relates to social-psychological nature. This relation may be explicitly acknowledged through religious, political, or other forms of social conventions or traditions; or it may remain only implicit in the way males and females interact within a given group. Of course, references to a group’s culture normally designate much more than just the way it views the relationship (if any) between the biological and social-psychological differences between the sexes; as with the foregoing definition of “nature” (see note 9), my use of “culture” here is intentionally narrowed to focus only on this aspect of a social group’s dynamics. I am assuming for the sake of descriptive simplicity (what would not normally be assumed in examining the general characteristics of a given culture) that a culture is *defined* by the way it relates (or refuses to relate¹³) the social-psychological nature of its members to their biological nature. In what follows, I shall employ this narrow definition to distinguish four ideal types of culture, based on different ways of conceiving this basic relationship. While these ideal types may resemble specific historical cultures, my central argument does not depend on their real existence.

In common usage “*sexism*” and “*sexist*” typically apply to persons or language exhibiting a wide range of different characteristics, with the common feature being that the terms tend to be used in an emotionally-charged way in order to condemn the person or idea exhibiting what the user regards as an ethically objectionable attitude toward one’s own or the opposite sex. Here I refine this vague usage in hopes of bringing some much-needed clarity and precision to the use of these common terms. I define “sexism” in general as the belief that certain basic social-psychological differences do exist between male and female human beings, and that these differences are natural, in the previously defined sense of being rooted somehow in our biological nature. Two main types of sexism can be distinguished, depending on how the “sexist” (i.e., the person who maintains that such differences do exist) employs his or her set of sexist beliefs: “domineering” sexism refers to a form of sexism whereby a

¹² These examples of natural differences are strictly illustrative. One could, admittedly, offer a *very* different account of the relevant phenomena. Indeed, women nowadays are far more likely than in the past to choose their sex partners *rather than* passively waiting to be chosen. As an anonymous reviewer of a previous version of this article rightly pointed out, in some situations a woman might initiate a sexual encounter, actively *causing* a man’s (in this sense, passive) erection; in such cases, sexual intercourse would be most accurately described not as the active penetration of a penis into a passive vagina, but as a craving vagina’s active engulfing of an initially passive penis. Indeed, the days are long since gone when females were not “allowed” to experience pleasure during intercourse; they can now openly admit if they enjoy sex most when straddling the male from above, doing most if not all of the moving during sex, virtually sucking the ejaculate out of the passive male’s body. Obviously, those such as Andrea Dworkin (who might prefer this way of interpreting the social-psychological nature of males and females) would hotly dispute any claim that the man’s role as the more active agent in male-female relationships is somehow rooted in our respective biological natures. Even when it comes to biological differences, some researchers now claim that (despite appearances to the contrary) the ovum is not a dumb, passive target for a smart, active sperm; instead, the ovum may be the master, calling the shots, as it were, from her queenly throne as she decides which sperm to pull toward her for fertilization.

¹³ A culture that completely rejects the notion that *any* social-psychological differences are grounded in the biological nature of the sexes would still be a culture; it would simply deny that social-psychological differences are *ever* natural. Members of such a culture would therefore dispute my use of the words “nature” and “natural” when applied to such differences, or might insist that in all such uses the words should be put in quotation marks to convey their merely metaphorical meaning.

person of one sex seeks to *control* members of the other sex and justifies such behavior by appealing to the standards their own culture upholds with respect to nature; “egalitarian” sexism, by contrast, refers to a form of sexism whereby a person *believes* in certain basic natural differences, as determined by the standards of their own culture, yet interprets these in such a way as to treat individuals of both sexes with *equal respect and dignity* in spite of whatever natural differences (whether biological or social-psychological) may exist. Egalitarian sexism is still a form of sexism, in the broad sense defined above, insofar as it affirms that certain basic natural differences *do* exist. A *non-sexist*, on this account, is someone who does not believe in *any* significant social-psychological nature and for whom the undeniably natural biological differences between the sexes, if any, do not require *any* distinction to be made between the way males and females relate in the group that constitutes the culture in question.

A possible objection to this refined, twofold definition of sexism is that it begs the question regarding the inappropriateness of sexist language and beliefs: according to the common use of the term, accusing someone of being a sexist entails imputing an ethically *inappropriate* belief system to the accused. My refined definition, so this objection goes, surreptitiously allows for a possibility that common users of the term would never allow: sexists can *remain* sexist without thereby rendering themselves blameworthy. Yet this possibility is precisely what those who accuse others of being sexist will typically *refuse* to allow; they often respond with incredulity, if not horror, to the mere suggestion that some instance of sexist language or behavior might be unobjectionable, or that some forms of sexism might *not* be an affront to the dignity of their sex after all. On the common view that I am challenging, “sexism” is a term like “rape” or “blasphemy”, carrying with it an assumed culpability that applies analytically to anyone who is properly identified as having committed the offense in question. Those who assume this common meaning are likely to view my attempt to redefine the term as offensive in the extreme and to resist it for this reason – especially those who have suffered as a result of their association with a sexist. But does my redefinition constitute the logical fallacy of *begging the question*?

The foregoing objection correctly points out that my redefinition of “sexism” *forces* us to ask the (potentially uncomfortable) question whether a given instance of sexism is morally blameworthy. However, in so doing, I am not presupposing one answer or the other, so in no way can this be a case of begging the question. By contrast, the common use of the term *does* beg the question, by requiring in advance that everyone deny the existence of the kind of natural cultural differences outlined above. By refining the range of possible meanings of the terms “sexism” and “sexist” I am not begging any question, but *opening up* the question of the ethical status of sexist claims to a rational discussion, where previously emotive responses have been the norm. Human males and females either do or do not have natural biological differences, and these either do or do not exhibit themselves through social-psychological traits that become, as it were, second nature to those sharing a common culture. The point of my refined definition is not to declare that such differences do, in fact, occur but only to make allowance for the possibility that *if* they occur, then the mere acknowledgment of this fact could not be ethically inappropriate even though it would be the kind of belief that is nowadays often labeled as sexist and therefore deemed blameworthy. If such differences *do* exist as a matter of biological fact, then the simple declaration of this fact is in no way comparable to a criminal act such as rape or the sacrilege of blasphemy. Rather, an attempt to portray those who do believe in such differences as *unethical* would, in that event, itself be a case of attempting to dominate another person by exercising illegitimate control over them. Thus, my refined definition implies that those who use these terms in the common, *unrefined* way may themselves sometimes be guilty of an inappropriate, domineering attitude toward the accused person; for even if an accusation of ethical misconduct is merely implied, the accusation is nonetheless real. In other words, *antisexism* is also a belief system that (like

refined sexism) can be upheld in either a domineering or an egalitarian way. That both sexists and antisexists may hold their beliefs in either a domineering or an egalitarian way is a possibility that only arises once we acknowledge the refined definition I have suggested.

In order to assist in determining when a person in one culture is *justified* in regarding a person in another culture – or regarding the other culture in general – as sexist, let us now construct a framework of ideal (philosophically-delineated) cultures that can be used to illustrate and examine how cultures relate to each other in such assessments. An often unacknowledged difficulty in determining whether Kant was a sexist is that this judgment involves the assessment of someone who lived in one culture by those who live in another culture that is separated from the first by a significant lapse of time. By defining each ideal type of culture primarily according to its temporal relation to other ideal cultures, then associating each type (though only loosely) with a real historical example, we shall ensure that our framework for cross-cultural assessment is relevant to the case at hand. Some looseness of fit between each ideal type and its historical illustration is necessary in order to prevent this study from taking the form of a historical commentary, rather than a philosophical analysis of how such cross-cultural assessments in general ought to be made. If the framework is correct, then it can be applied to a wide variety of actual historical cases, not just those used here as examples.

First, let *culture-k* be a culture from the moderately distant past, perhaps two to three centuries ago, wherein (a) men were generally regarded as having a naturally dominant social role in relation to women, due in part to their presumed physical and/or intellectual superiority, whereas women were generally assumed to be naturally more refined than men, due in part to a presumed superior aesthetic and/or emotional awareness, and (b) monogamous marriage between heterosexuals was considered to be the only morally acceptable context for sexual relations. My use of “k” as the label signaling any reference to this ideal type is based on the assumption that *Kant’s* Europe was a typical example of this type of culture. Kant himself clearly and repeatedly appealed to *nature* (and to nature’s *end* or “purpose”) as the proper philosophical grounding for his claims about the proper social roles for men and women; this reflects the fact that the truth of such claims seemed virtually self-evident to most members of his culture. Thus, for example, Kant grounds his defense of monogamy on a direct appeal to its teleological (what we today might call “evolutionary”) survival value: “Nature’s end in the cohabitation of the sexes is procreation, that is, the preservation of the species” (Kant, 1991b, p. 426). His controversial comments about women are all grounded on his fundamental belief that monogamous marriage is the only way the human species can survive without violating the moral integrity of the persons who participate in procreative activities. For the mechanism that impels the sexes to procreate is precisely “nature”¹⁴ – that is, the biological differences between the sexes, as supported by

¹⁴ Soble acknowledges that Kant repeatedly refers to nature and nature’s ends as the proper grounding of his arguments regarding various forms of sexual perversion, but points out that in *some* cases Kant also presents arguments that are based directly on the second formulation of the categorical imperative (i.e., the duty to respect humanity in all persons). However, he regards the former as “an additional, independent feature” of such arguments (Soble, 2003, p. 65) and as “irrelevant” because “Kant’s appeal to nature does no philosophical work, but allows him to vent his emotions” (Soble, 2003, pp. 63–64; see also p. 73). Ironically, Soble’s careful scholarship in quoting numerous relevant passages from Kant’s writings confirms that in *each case* Kant does appeal to nature as the grounding for his arguments. That Soble decides in advance to dismiss each such reference as a mere expression of emotion does not detract from the fact that *Kant* sees such appeals as the bedrock of his position. Soble himself even quotes Kant’s claim (in Kant, 1930, p. [122]): “The fundamental rule” in matters relating to duties to oneself “is the conformity of free behaviour [sic] to the essential ends of humanity” (Soble, 2003, p. 75). Perhaps the greatest irony, however, is that Soble ends his article with an *explicitly* emotional appeal, telling a story of his own experience of feeling psychologically wounded by listening to a group of students making fun of allegedly perverted sexual behavior that he himself regards as quite natural. That what is occurring in such situations is grounded in a clash between fundamentally different cultural assumptions, rather than a difference in the ethical integrity of either party, is an option Soble never

the social-psychological differences that persons living in culture-k assume must apply as a result of the biological differences.

The second ideal type, *culture-p*, shall refer to a culture that is developmentally *prior* to (i.e., typically considered to be less “modern” than) culture-k, wherein (a) men are generally assumed to be superior to women in every (or most significant) respect(s), to the extent that a wife is considered to be the exclusive property of her husband, but not vice versa, and (b) *polygamy* is therefore regarded as a morally acceptable form of marital relation, inasmuch as it expresses the fundamental superiority men have over women. Examples of this type of culture can be found throughout the Jewish Bible (the Christian Old Testament) and still exist in some traditional societies around the world,¹⁵ but had already become very rare (considered a thing of the past) throughout most of Kant’s Europe. As I will explain further in Part II (Palmquist 2017), Kant therefore assesses polygamy to be an ethically inappropriate form of marital relation; from the point of view of culture-k, it appears to be a form of culturally-sanctioned sexism.

The third ideal type, *culture-m*, shall refer to a culture that is developmentally subsequent to (i.e., typically considered to be more *modern* than) culture-k, wherein (a) men and women are generally assumed to be *equal in every essential respect* (i.e., while some minimal biological differences may be admitted, these are regarded as irrelevant to the social-psychological nature of the sexes, for in the latter sense the sexes are *the same*), and (b) monogamy is considered to be the only morally acceptable form of marital relation. Examples of real cultures that espouse or aspire to instantiate culture-m can be found throughout the world today, not only in the West, but also in places such as China, even though culture-p was the cultural norm not long ago.¹⁶ From the vantage point of culture-m, many of Kant’s comments about women seem to be so obviously inappropriate that assessing him to be a sexist seems self-evident. I shall examine the legitimacy of such assessments in §§3–4.

Finally, *culture-f* shall refer to a *future* culture that is presumed to be developmentally subsequent to culture-m, wherein (a) men and women regard both sexes as essentially equal, but acknowledge that their different biological natures give rise to corresponding differences in their social-psychological nature and that these must be recognized in order to guarantee equality, and (b) polygamy is sanctioned as morally acceptable within certain conditions – most notably, only where polyandry (marriage between one woman and more than one man) is also allowed, because legalizing plural marriage for only one sex would be fundamentally inequitable. Assuming this culture lies in the *future*, I cannot cite any past or present example to illustrate its features. I shall argue in Part II (Palmquist 2017), however, that from the vantage point of such a future culture, many of the statements and beliefs upheld as self-evidently correct by those in culture-m would appear to be just as sexist as Kant’s remarks seem to be for those in culture-m.

Based on the foregoing definitions and the resulting framework of four ideal cultures, how should an impartial observer go about assessing a person with respect to the issue of an alleged claim of sexism? A three-step procedure must be followed. First, identify which type of culture influenced the person being assessed, particularly with regard to its assumptions

considers.

¹⁵ The Koran, for example, allows men to have up to four wives – a religious law that is used as the basis for legalized polygamy in some countries even today – though the extent of actual practice tends to be lower, the more westernized a country becomes. In China, this second feature of culture-p remained until the 1950s, when anti-polygamy laws were instituted by the Communist regime. Surprisingly, in Hong Kong, despite its many decades under British rule, such laws did not come into effect until the mid-1970s.

¹⁶ Perhaps as a result of (or in response to) the relatively recent change in cultural norms (see note 15, above), a report published shortly after Hong Kong’s handover to China (Finlay, 1999, p. 2) estimated that about half a million men in Hong Kong (about one-fourth of the adult males) had fathered children (mostly from illegal or unofficial second wives or concubines) in mainland China.

about the natural differences between men and women. Second, seek to understand how the distinction between domineering and egalitarian sexism would be made *within* that culture. Finally, taking care to *suspend* one's own cultural biases, examine whether the person's views would be assessed as domineering or egalitarian within his or her own cultural context. Any reader who acknowledges the *possibility* of egalitarian sexism is likely to regard it as ethically acceptable, while condemning domineering sexism as ethically inappropriate *even if* it was condoned by the culture of the person being assessed. That is, by positing this new distinction we can no longer attribute domineering sexism to a person living in another culture simply on the grounds that the latter person views nature in a way that is foreign to *our own* culture (i.e., to culture-m). The person being assessed might have assumed natural differences simply because they were considered self-evident for anyone in their culture, yet might have employed them in a way that implied no fundamental *inequality* between the sexes, as understood within his or her own culture.

One might object to the foregoing three-step procedure on the grounds that it entails a commitment to cultural relativism. This, however, would be a mistaken inference, as can be clarified by calling attention to the difference between the terms *Sitten* and *Moralisch* for Kant. The former is culture-based, referring to the ethical norms that a person assumes, as a result of his or her educational and cultural background. The latter, by contrast, is independent of any given historical context, referring to the rational basis for any claim to moral rectitude. We can express the three-step procedure in terms of this distinction by saying that it bids us to ask whether a person, in seeking to abide by the *Sitten* of his or her culture, manages to manifest *Moralisch*. If a given norm passed on by the former makes the latter *impossible*, then the culture itself must be assessed as morally defective; but if it leaves room for the latter, then far from entailing relativism, the possibility of employing a foreign *Sitten* in order to reach genuine moral goodness always remains open.

In the remainder of this article and in Part II (Palmquist 2017), I shall use this framework to conduct a three-stage analysis of Kant's alleged sexism. After a brief account of Kant's views on sex and marriage, §3 examines how Kant would assess the apparent sexism of a person living in culture-p. This will illustrate the importance of avoiding an appeal to foreign cultures (including one's own) when assessing the nature or extent of another person's alleged sexism. I shall then consider in §4 the central question of how we ought to assess *Kant's* alleged sexism. Again, Kant's writings undoubtedly do exhibit *some* form of sexism, for he clearly and repeatedly distinguishes between the nature of men and women in ways that go beyond merely biological differences. The main issue will be whether he was guilty of promoting a domineering form of sexism, or whether his sexism was the ethically admissible, egalitarian form. Finally, Part II (Palmquist 2017) will continue this enquiry by focusing on assessing the type of culture assumed by most readers of this study – i.e., culture-m – by projecting how a presumed culture-f might evolve in its conception of nature and sexism. In Part II each stage of the argument will take marriage as the test case for examining how sexism manifests itself not only in Kant's writings but also more generally in humanity's cultural evolution.

How should we assess Kant's sexism?

Kant undoubtedly was a sexist in the limited sense that he believed men and women are distinguished by natural differences, differences he thought *must* be taken into consideration when engaging in practical reflection on human nature.¹⁷ In *Anthropology*, for example, he

¹⁷ In *Observations*, Kant says: "For here it is not enough to keep in mind that we are dealing with human beings; we must also remember that they are not all alike" (Kant, 1960, p. 229[77]). If such open confessions of the *need* to acknowledge difference is all what Gangavane has in mind when she concludes "Kant is not free from gender bias" (Gangavane, 2004, p. 374), then her accusation does not amount to charging Kant with domineering sexism.

states two “principles” that determine how “the end of nature” distinguishes women from men: biologically, they carry and give birth to babies; and social-psychologically, they have a moralizing effect on men – and by extension, so also on all human beings, through their more direct role in child-rearing.¹⁸ Similarly, his early *Observations* essay portrays women as the beautiful and “fair sex” and men as the sublime and “noble” sex, with all sorts of implications that may seem silly if not offensive to many readers today. For example, he claims men tend to be more adept at the natural sciences, while women tend to be better in the human sciences, especially the science of manipulating men, inasmuch as women “refine even the masculine sex” (Kant, 1960, p. 229, 78f).¹⁹

While such comments may sound patronizing today, there is no evidence that Kant meant them to be in the least offensive. On the contrary, he repeatedly stresses that the sexes have an *equal* status, philosophically, even though their nature is significantly different. This is why he almost always describes natural differences in terms of an opposition between two positive (or occasionally, two negative) tendencies; he *never* associates men and women with good and evil characteristics, respectively. Many commentators have claimed Kant viewed women as irrational, yet what he actually says is that they have an *equal but different* type of rationality: “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” (Kant, 1960, p. 229(78); see also Kant, 1974, p. 303).²⁰

Gangavane acknowledges that Kant would defend himself against the charge of sexism by saying “that by nature men and women are equal, for they excel each other in different domains, and also that as rational beings they have equal moral dignity” (Gangavane, 2004, p. 367); what remains objectionable, she thinks, is his view “that in both domestic life as well as civil life they are subordinate, and should ever be so!” Yet this assumes what is clearly false, that Kant had no conception of the *evolution* of ethical norms relating to marriage and civil life, treating the “nature of people ... generally in an a-historical manner” (Gangavane, 2004, p. 367). She contradicts her own claim on the next page by citing Kant’s example of Canadian women who are the primary decision-makers on matters of public interest. Her most weighty criticism of Kant is that “most of what according to him are feminine virtues actually underlie her dependence on men” (Gangavane, 2004, p. 369).²¹ The concept of marriage as a union of persons under a clear hierarchy of roles, she argues, is what enabled men in culture-k to continue dominating women in both the public and private domains. While this may have been the actual historical situation in Kant’s day, it is neither a necessary outcome of Kant’s position nor (as I will argue more fully in Part II, Palmquist 2017) is it consistent with his own account of the marital union.

One example will suffice to illustrate this point. Kant’s claim that women have a moralizing effect on men clearly indicates that he thinks of women as *dominating men*, not

¹⁸ See *Anthropology* (Kant, 1974, pp. 303–311; quoted words taken from p. 305). I discuss this passage later in this section.

¹⁹ Mosser quotes a passage from the Blomberg Logic lectures where Kant makes a similar distinction between the sexes (Mosser, 1999, p. 324). Whereas many in culture-m find such generalizations offensive, others might take the percentage of male versus female enrolments in relevant university majors as evidence confirming the accuracy of Kant’s empirical observation about educational aptitude, even today. This would assume that enrolment numbers correlate positively with aptitude and are not themselves a result of pre-existing gender bias. Of course, opponents could argue that the larger numbers of males enrolled in science subjects and of females enrolled in arts and humanities subjects is a result of gender bias throughout the educational system, rather than a result of basic differences in natural aptitude.

²⁰ Cash makes the helpful observation that Kant’s reason for thinking females should not be entrusted with completely equal authority, both in public affairs and in the home, is *not* that women have less reason than men; rather, it is that they are more susceptible to the influence of emotion (Cash, 2002, pp. 133–134). Women tend to be “too weak to control their emotions” (Cash, 2002, p. 155), and one who is “subject to emotions and passions” tends to “exclude the sovereignty of reason” (quoting Kant, 1960, p. 251).

²¹ The example comes from Kant, 1960, p. 255(113–114).

only emotionally (manipulating men to be more inclined to obey the moral law), but through “the cultivated propriety that is the preparatory training for morality and its recommendation” (Kant, 1974, p. 306). Ironically, as Kant suggests in the same passage, women on their own have more trouble being moral than do men who are under a woman’s influence. This is a good example of how Kant’s theory of marriage is meant to present a genuinely egalitarian arrangement, wherein each spouse’s natural weakness is balanced by the other spouse’s natural strength. It should go without saying that Kant’s theory is describing *general tendencies*, rules of thumb, rather than absolute necessities. Yet it must be said, because many interpreters fail to read him in this way. For instance, Cash, like Gangavane, thinks Kant gives “a contingent empirical observation about the nature of women – that they appear to be more emotional than men and thus are less capable of acting according to the dictates of their reason – the status of *necessary* fact; one which could not be otherwise” (Cash, 2002, p. 135). Yet this wholly ignores Kant’s emphasis on the *evolution* of cultural values. Cash eventually acknowledges Kant’s reliance on nature (Cash, 2002, p. 141), but claims that Kant appeals to nature only to establish the *absolute necessity* of such arrangements. However, Kant would never appeal to nature in this manner: necessity always has its origin in the *mind*; nature is the source of ever-changing *contingencies*.

That Kant viewed his various generalizations about the sexes as contingent rather than necessary is evidenced by the fact that he has no problem admitting that exceptions are easy to find. In discussing nature’s end in human sexuality, for instance, he intends his comments to be both descriptive of general patterns that the sexes tend to follow and normative, inasmuch as such patterns are deemed to exist for the good of the species. This philosophical agenda, and not any feeling of hatred, fear or disdain for women, is what prompts him occasionally to make jokes about those who choose a path that seems contrary to nature as understood by culture-k.²² Such jokes must have seemed justifiable to Kant, inasmuch as people who struggle against the norm in this way seemed to him to be *doing damage* to human progress in realizing the end of nature for the species. As Deranty puts it, “Kant’s argument is basically that theoretical equality requires factual inequality to remain valid. But it is worthwhile noting that as man’s superiority is only deemed natural or factual, other times and other mores might require new means for the same end” (Deranty, 2000, p. 147).²³ Indeed, Kant himself links the husband’s dominance to an empirical, contingent fact “this dominance is based only on the natural superiority of the husband to the wife in his capacity to promote the common interest of the household, and the right to direct that is based on this can be derived from the very duty of unity and equality with respect to the *end*” (Kant, 1991b, p. 279). If Kant were presented with one of the many marriages where the husband is incompetent with money while the wife is a financial whiz, he would surely have regarded this as an acceptable exception, even within the context of culture-k, to the general rule that the husband should direct the family finances.

The sexual nature of human beings functions as more than just a side-issue in Kant’s philosophy; rather, it serves as the engine for cultural change, as a key aspect of what Kant

²² Perhaps the harshest and most commonly quoted example of such a joke is his claim that a woman who seeks to become a serious scholar in such “male” fields as Greek or mechanics “might as well even have a beard” (Kant, 1960, p. 230[78]). Kant’s point was not that women are *incapable* of challenging men in the areas where men tend to excel; empirical evidence would have refuted that claim even in Kant’s day. His point was rather that women are struggling against their nature, and so also (at least by extension) threatening to disrupt the end of nature (most importantly, the propagation of the species), when they insist on taking up a position that culture-k regards as more suited to the social-psychological nature of males. What makes this a joke, of course (albeit, a distasteful one), is that comparative intellectual ability is a social-psychological issue, whereas the ability to grow a beard is purely biological.

²³ Assessing Kant’s claim that inequality in the domestic and civil domains is needed to balance the natural inequality of the sexes, Laurentiis somewhat cynically (and unfairly) boils Kant’s position down to the maxim: “two wrongs make a right” (Laurentiis, 2000, p. 312).

calls “unsocial sociability” – the tendency of all human beings to desire social interaction and yet to respond to it in unsociable ways, due to the radical evil in human nature (See e.g., Kant, 2009, pp. 93–94).²⁴ Donald Wilson makes a similar point, that our radical evil gives rise to the need for the controlling influence of laws, lest we abuse the freedom we have in relation to our equals. “The purpose of a civil condition is... to constrain our ‘selfish animal propensities’” (Wilson, 2004, pp. 103–104). As we shall see in §4, Kant’s theory of the way males and females ought to relate in marriage illustrates this point: just as laws are needed to constrain selfish behavior in society, marriage requires a hierarchical relation in order to prevent unnecessary strife.

In *The Metaphysics of Morals* Kant points out that “we shall often have to take as our object the particular *nature* of man, which is known only by experience, in order to *show* in it what can be inferred from the universal moral principles” (Kant, 1991b, p. 217). Laurentiis points out that this book “does not concern itself with the evolution of human relations and institutions in history. The justification of (hetero-)sexual relations ‘according to principle’ refers exclusively to marriage in the modern civil society” (Laurentiis, 2000, p. 311n).²⁵ This fact about Kant’s intentions must be understood in order to avoid the false assumption that he intends his conclusions to apply for all people in all times – a position that would utterly contradict the explicitly evolutionary approach that, as we saw above, he takes in *Anthropology*. Cash ignores this point when he says the “accusation *that* Kant elevated particular morals and laws of his society to the status of universally applicable truths” is “by now rather trivial and pedestrian”; he claims to explain “*why* he thought that these judgements [sic] were universally applicable” (Cash, 2002, p. 106). But as the quote at the beginning of this paragraph shows, this is not how Kant understood his project: he was not claiming that his interpretations of his own culture must remain true for all time; rather he was showing how the mores and social norms of his day *can be* justified as philosophically acceptable, by showing how they can be grounded in the categorical imperative. Demonstrating such grounding does not exclude the possibility that *other* norms from other cultures might also be grounded in the same universal law.

What must be kept in mind, therefore, when assessing Kant’s comments about the sexes in *The Metaphysics of Morals* and elsewhere, is that in making such comments he is putting aside the transcendental abstractions of his Critical philosopher’s cloak of necessity and making empirical observations about the way human beings actually are or seem to be, within a specific cultural context. Thus, when Kant says “I hardly believe that the fair sex is capable of principles” (a statement frequently taken out of context by Kant’s detractors), he recognizes that readers *even in culture-k* might construe such a comment as promoting domineering sexism, so he immediately adds: “and I hope by that not to offend, for these [i.e., rational principles] are also *extremely rare* in the male” (Kant, 1960, p. 232[81], emphasis added). That is, while women are *hardly capable* of thinking rationally, men also exhibit this ability *extremely rarely*. Far from reflecting a bias against women, Kant is here acknowledging a problem *all* human beings have, the problem of not being able to fulfill the true potentials of our nature. If he shows any gender bias in this passage, it is against males, not females: that *any* females in culture-k exhibited rationality constituted an achievement; that males tend to be just as irrational despite the privilege culture-k affords them is the greater shortcoming.

A clear understanding of Kant’s purpose in such passages enables us to recognize that

²⁴ Gangavane points out that Kant never explicitly assigns unsocial sociability “any role within the family” (Gangavane, 2004 p. 369). While this is true, such a role is clearly implied, for the section of Kant’s *Anthropology* entitled “On the Character of the Sexes” comes within a broader discussion of the ultimate destiny of the human race. The section argues that nature uses sex to drive cultural evolution. For a discussion of this point, see Wilson, 1998.

²⁵ Laurentiis’ point is accurate, provided we take “modern” as a reference to culture-k, not culture-m.

Gangavane is mistaken to claim Kant treats women “as being physically weaker than, and intellectually inferior to men” (Gangavane, 2004, p. 365). While Kant may indeed affirm the former as a rough generalization – a claim that, however unpopular it may be to say so in some circles, is empirically true *as* a generalization (for indeed, this is the rationale for dividing most sports events into different competitions for men and women) – he never intends to impute intellectual *inferiority* to women, but only intellectual *difference*. And the latter is something many feminists readily affirm as a core thesis. Gangavane’s claim that “it is a plain falsehood that all women by nature have less physical strength and intellect than all men” (Gangavane, 2004, pp. 367–368) reveals a gross misunderstanding of the nature of Kant’s generalizations about nature; for as we have seen, such generalizations cannot be refuted merely by citing individual exceptions. Similar claims that Kant was led astray primarily by his “false assumptions” about the sexes abound in the literature (see e.g., Denis, 2001, p. 23), yet they are almost never accompanied even by an *attempt* to provide any concrete evidence that he was wrong. The statement “*p* is false” in such contexts means little more than the unjustified observation: “To believe *p* is ethically inappropriate for anyone in my culture.”

Kant’s view of marriage as illustrating the egalitarian grounding of his sexism

Having introduced the key issues relating to Kant’s alleged sexism (in §1 and §3), I shall now conclude by employing the framework for cross-cultural comparisons (sketched in §2) to offer two arguments in Kant’s defense: one based on his philosophical system, the other on his personal life. First, when reading passages from Kant’s non-systematic writings (where most of his allegedly sexist comments appear), such as his *Anthropology*, we must keep firmly in mind that in his official moral theory Kant never attempts to defend or legitimate sexism, not even egalitarian sexism. Most significantly, when determining what makes an act morally good or evil, Kant draws no distinction whatsoever between males and females. The categorical imperative applies equally to women and men; for men and women alike, only a “good will” can be regarded as absolutely good (see Kant, 1959, pp. 392–393[9]); both women and men need freedom of choice to have moral responsibility; both sexes are implicated by the self-deception inherent in our radically evil nature; and in the realm of political theory, the rights of both men and women are to be protected by laws that prevent the abuse of one person’s freedom by another.

On precisely this basis arises a key difference between culture-k and culture-p: unlike the typical person living in culture-p, Kant and the culture of his day regarded polygamy as ethically inappropriate. Kant argued against polygamy on the grounds that marriage is an agreement to give the ownership of one’s sexual organs to another person, and that it is impossible for a person to give a second person something that no longer belongs to him (or her) by right (See Kant, 1991b, pp. 277–280, §§24–27 of “The Doctrine of Right”).²⁶ That is, once a man marries a woman, his wife “owns” his sexual organ, so he cannot offer to give ownership of his sexual organ to another woman through a second marriage. Kant is here accepting the very “ownership” view of marriage that is often used by men in culture-p to justify cultural attitudes that we would now regard as an institutionalized form of domineering sexism. Much as members of culture-m may dislike the ownership metaphor, we must recognize that Kant used it to *guarantee* women an equal status in sexual relations with men, to *protect* them against the abusive inequalities of culture-p and the domineering sexism he must have seen as likely to arise from it. The egalitarian grounding of Kant’s sexism therefore suggests that he is unlikely to have held his sexist views in a domineering way.

Although this rationale for rejecting polygamy²⁷ seems inappropriate to those living in

²⁶ Kant’s explanation of why polygamy is wrong on this basis comes in §26 (see also Kant, 1974, p. 304).

²⁷ Kant rejects both polyandry and polygyny, for essentially the same reasons (Kant, 1997, pp. 27, 389, 536, and 641).

culture-m, it at least demonstrates that Kant was concerned about the problem of men tending to treat women unfairly. Most of the passages that are typically cited as indications of Kant's sexism are actually expressions of his desire to show the highest possible respect for women, given the norms of his own culture. Within the context of culture-k, honoring the woman as an object of beauty, whose participation in scholarly discussions need not be taken too seriously, except perhaps as a "check" on the tendencies males might otherwise have to cut each other's throats in the heat of debate, is not an expression of oppressive domination. If anything, we should praise Kant for providing a rationale for *encouraging* women to participate in scholarly discussions, as well as in various aspects of political decision-making, on the grounds that their distinctive nature enables them to contribute something that men on their own are unlikely to contribute.

With the above argument in mind, let us now examine Kant's above-quoted claim in *Anthropology*, that women (like monarchs) are to "reign" in the home, whereas men (like prime ministers) are to "govern" (Kant, 1974, pp. 309–310).²⁸ As much as this might sound like domineering sexism to our modern ear, in Kant's day this was a valiant attempt to provide for *equal but different* roles for men and women living in culture-k; as he says in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, the husband's position of superiority in the family "cannot be regarded as conflicting with the natural equality of a couple" (Kant, 1991b, p. 279). By rooting these roles in the nature of the sexes, Kant guarantees that men *must* respect women (and vice versa), lest they lose access to this (the all-important feminine, *moral*) aspect of their common human nature. His theory of marital roles is therefore an attempt not to promote domineering sexism, but to protect both sexes from anyone who would use the norms of culture-k to abuse or oppress either sex.

Without the benefit of an interpretive framework for cross-cultural comparison, interpreters tend to regard Kant's position here as self-contradictory. Cash, for example, calls Kant's view "indefensible" and shockingly illogical "for someone as unquestionably astute as Kant." He quotes Kant's claims that "innate equality" is a right that "belongs to everyone by nature" and that this protects people "from being bound by others to more than one can in turn bind them" (Cash, 2002, pp. 108f).²⁹ And he admits that Kant applies this explicitly to the marriage relationship by defining it in terms of "*equality* of possession, equality both in their possession of each other as persons ... and also equality in their possession of material goods".³⁰ That Kant even describes this reciprocal possession as "a unity of will", whereby each partner shares any "good or ill, joy or sorrow" that the other experiences, is on Cash's view "quite contrary to his remarks that a harmonious union can only be achieved if one partner is subject to the other" (Cash, 2002, p. 113).³¹ However, this depends on what we think Kant means by "subject"; if it refers to a yin-yang type of relationship – a "weak" and "strong" force whereby each depends entirely for its own nature on the equal and opposite existence of the other – then no *domination* of one partner over the other needs to be read into Kant's position. In any case, Kant bases the husband's position on an *empirical* claim that he believed was *generally* true for married couples in culture-k, namely, "on the natural superiority of the husband to the wife in his capacity to promote the common interests of the household".³² Cash rightly points out that this "empirical claim... is one which contemporary readers would see as mistaken" (Cash, 2002, p. 117). Thus he claims to unveil a "glaring flaw" in Kant's argument, one so obvious that he replies to Kant's claim, that his theory of

²⁸ Kant makes a similar remark about marriage: "the united pair should ... constitute a single moral person, which is animated and governed by the understanding of the man and the taste of the wife" (Kant, 1960, p. 242(95)).

²⁹ It is quoting from Kant, 1991b, p. 237.

³⁰ Cash is here quoting from Kant, 1991b, p. 278.

³¹ It is quoting from Kant, 1960, p. 167.

³² Cash is here quoting from Kant, 1991b, p. 279(98); also quoted above, in §3.

the husband's superiority does not conflict with the duty married couples have to be united in equality, merely by exclaiming: "*of course* it is in conflict!" (Cash, 2002, p. 141). But Cash is able to *see* a glaring conflict where Kant did not see one *only* because in culture-m women have gained a great deal more political power and social recognition than they had in culture-k. That is, Kant's empirical claim is no less accurate than Cash's claim is; the difference is due solely to the fact that western culture has evolved. It is therefore not Kant but Cash who is "mistaken" (Cash, 2002, pp. 119–120), for expecting Kant somehow to have known and applied to his own day cultural norms that only came to be widely accepted roughly two centuries later.

The main reason Cash sees Kant's two claims (that marriage partners are fully equal in their external, public relation to each other, under the law, and that the wife ought to be subordinate to her husband in their private relation, at home) as being "*directly* in conflict" (Cash, 2002, p. 122) is that he completely ignores the fact that Kant grounds the *private* inequality explicitly on the *natural* inequality of the sexes. As a child of culture-m, Cash is unwilling to admit any such natural inequality and expects Kant to follow suit. Thus, while he is right to argue that Kant cannot justify his theory by appealing either "to legal equality or to natural equality", Cash overlooks the fact that Kant's appeal is to the natural *differences* between the sexes, not to their equality as members of the human race. Cash's allegation that "Kant employs a rather insidious piece of logical sleight-of-hand" (Cash, 2002, p. 122) loses its force once we allow Kant to play his ace – i.e., once we grant his claim that men and women are *significantly different by nature*. Kant's conclusion then follows with flawless logic: the only way for a man and woman, if they are different by nature, to enjoy the "natural equality" that marriage is supposed to produce, as a *public* relation under the law, is for their *internal* relationship (i.e., within the family) to compensate for any natural differences they may have through appropriately balanced *private* differences in the roles they play. Contrary to Cash's assumption, Kant's theory of spousal roles in marriage does not require either person to "relinquish their natural equality and make someone else their master." Rather, as I shall argue below, they mutually agree to an equitable situation whereby each is master and servant of the other in complementary balance. Cash thinks "we can conclude in one step" (Cash, 2002, p. 123), from the premises that we have a duty to equality and that no person can cease to be his or her own master, to the conclusion "that neither partner in marriage should, or could, become the master of the other through the consummation of the marriage contract." But again, this is only because he presents an eclipsed version of Kant's theory, neglecting the crucial role of biological nature.

The section of *Anthropology* entitled "On the Character of the Sexes" (Kant, 1974, pp. 303–311) is likewise bound to be misunderstood unless we keep in mind that Kant's goal is not to defend the right of men to *dominate* women, but rather to promote a vision of *harmony* within the home, through a mutual understanding of role differences that members of culture-k assumed were grounded in human nature. Thus, we may not agree with the specifics when Kant asks "Who, then, should have supreme command in the household?" and answers "the woman should *reign* and the man *govern*; for inclination reigns and understanding governs" (Kant, 1974, p. 309).³³ But those who accuse Kant, in appealing to this metaphor, of sanctioning a husband's *dominance* over his wife (see e.g., note 33, above) are failing to take into account the subtle balance, the *harmony of the faculties*, implied by the relation between sensibility (the source of human inclination) and understanding in Kant's philosophical System. For practical reason has *primacy* over theoretical reason, and Kant's whole Critical philosophy is based on the assumption that sensibility naturally tends to dominate the former realm while understanding tends to dominate the latter; indeed, the primary function of

³³ Mendus calls this "identification of woman with inclination and of man with reason" Kant's "final dismissal of woman" (Mendus, 1992, pp. 35–36). But I argue below that Kant intended to emphasize the tendency of *women* to dominate *men*, rather than vice versa.

Critique is to expose the errors that result from a failure to acknowledge these natural tendencies.

Despite acknowledging this Critical backdrop, Sedgwick interprets Kant's metaphor negatively on the grounds that Kant's philosophical hierarchy has "reason very clearly on the top" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 73). While it is true that Kant thinks reason *ought* to control inclination, he also takes the actual human situation to be that it normally does not. Similarly failing to realize that the principle guiding Kant's metaphor is egalitarian harmony rather than sexist domination, Denis claims Kant's metaphor "denies the wife her equality as a rational being" (Denis, 2001, p. 14). Even where not explicit, she reads sexist themes into Kant's texts, claiming he believes men have "authority" over women "because women are not capable" (Denis, 2001, p. 14), whereas Kant's actual view is that women *tend* to be not as capable as men in certain areas, just as *men* tend to be less capable than *women* in other areas, and that a well-functioning household ought to take such strengths and weaknesses into consideration. Denis concludes: "We should omit Kant's presupposition of a ruling and a ruled party from our revised picture of a Kantian marriage" (Denis, 2001, p. 19). This is not only unnecessary but unwise, however, once we interpret the metaphor as Kant portrays it, in terms of freely chosen, mutual (yin-yang style) harmony.

Interpreted in the latter way, we can see that Kant's further explanation of his metaphor does not promote domineering sexism but rather calls for culture-k men to become aware of the power women tend to have over them: "The husband's behavior must show that his wife's welfare is the thing closest to his heart. But since the man must know best how his affairs stand and how far he can go, he will be like a minister to his monarch who thinks only of amusement" (Kant, 1974, p. 310). The monarch, not the minister, is the more powerful figure here: Kant's claim is that in the household, just as in government, the one with a position of greater power and authority has an obligation to defer decisions to the one with a lower position in order to maximize the efficiency of the system. So Kant is arguing for a *harmony* of roles that is consistent with egalitarian sexism, not for oppressive roles that would constitute domineering sexism.

Ignoring the implications of Kant's analogy between proper marital roles and the proper functioning of the faculties of the mind, many interpreters find Kant's position here to be highly offensive. Pateman, for example, regards Kant's extension of this analogy to governmental power-relations as "bitterly ironic, for it was by means of the marriage contract that European women of the eighteenth century were removed from civil life to the domestic sphere, undergoing a diminishment in legal status" (Pateman, 1988, p. 119). Similarly, Benbow offers a skewed interpretation based on the assumption that this analogy is a sexist joke with an *intended* double meaning: she claims Kant compares the wife to a *male* monarch as a way of poking fun at the uselessness of the monarchy while at the same time relegating the wife to the position of a mere figurehead (Benbow, 2006). But a more straightforward reading would be that when Kant writes that the husband will act "like a minister to the order of a monarch who thinks only of his [the monarch's] pleasure" (Kant, 1974, p. 310), he uses the masculine pronoun simply because the Prussian monarch was in fact male. Benbow cites a number of studies that document the decreased rights of women during the Enlightenment, as a backlash against early attempts at female emancipation. This general trend may have contributed to Kant's reluctance to think outside the box on this issue; but this does not make his analogy "disingenuous", as Benbow claims, for the analogy fits very well with Kant's belief that the higher one's political authority or position, the *less* one should utilize one's power in controlling others.

One reason Kant is so often assessed as a domineering sexist may be that he never married. The assumption here would be that Kant regarded himself as "too good" to stoop to the level of uniting his will with that of a "mere woman." But the facts of Kant's life do not justify such an assumption. His biographers report that Kant fell deeply in love at least twice.

On these occasions, he hesitated for so long in making a formal proposal of marriage to his beloved that the woman apparently gave up waiting. What was the reason for his hesitation? It was not, as might be thought, that he was too preoccupied with his philosophizing. Kant wrote all of his main works in his mature years, after the love affairs of his youth and middle age were mere memories. He hesitated because of his great concern that, if he were to marry, he would not be able to provide a good, comfortable life for his wife and family. His notes show that he made numerous calculations based on his then meager income and was simply unable to convince himself that he had the financial means to support a wife. Toward the end of his life, Kant recollected (as quoted in Klinker, 1951, p. 40): “When I could have done with a wife, I wasn’t in a position to support one, and when I was in a position to support one I had no further use for one.” We might speculate that Kant’s relationship with his British friend, Joseph Green, whom he visited every day at 7pm *sharp* in his later years (and whose insistence on punctuality may be the main reason Kant gained the reputation of following such a rigid schedule), served as an effective substitute for the intimacy of a woman’s love.³⁴

Would a domineering sexist be so concerned about his financial standing before offering a proposal of marriage? This seems unlikely. Quite aside from the question of whether Kant’s hesitation was *wise* – it certainly was not romantic! – I believe it illustrates Kant’s character as a man who was always careful to show the greatest respect to women, to do nothing that would curtail their freedom of choice through a domineering relationship. His letters, especially those exchanged with women, bear this out. His correspondence with women, when read in its cultural context, without mistaking his attention to the proper etiquette of the day as the kind of condescending attitude it might imply if penned by someone living in culture-m, reveals a man committed to egalitarian sexism – that is, a man who, though keenly aware that his female correspondents were not men, treated them as equals, refusing to allow natural differences to stain the relationships with any trace of dominance.

Clearly, Kant accepted certain key assumptions of culture-k, including the belief that *nature* justifies men in treating women in a fundamentally different way from the way they treat other men. But this does not make him a *domineering* sexist. For he applied his understanding of these presumably natural differences only in order to encourage what he believed to be the best way to establish *egalitarian* values in culture-k. The allegation that, quite to the contrary, Kant’s sexism is *grounded* in his philosophical system (or vice versa), in such a way that the sexism actually invalidates the entire system,³⁵ can arise only by imposing the standards of culture-m onto Kant, instead of assessing Kant in terms of culture-k. Yet as suggested in §2, cross-cultural assessments are philosophically justifiable only when they take into consideration just such differences in cultural assumptions. Kant did not have the benefit of either having lived through or having been told about Freudian psychology or the sexual revolution of the 1960s, as have those in culture-m who impute domineering sexism to Kant. The proper question should be: Within the context of culture-k, was Kant guilty of *domineering* sexism? An affirmative answer would require the interpreter to demonstrate that Kant viewed women in a way that allowed men to *control* women unfairly, as judged by the standards of culture-k, yet no study of Kant’s alleged sexism has come close to demonstrating this. Rather, they have merely demonstrated that Kant routinely *distinguished* between the natural biological characteristics, psychological tendencies, or proper social roles of women as opposed to men. As I have argued, this bare distinction, on

³⁴ For a good account of this and Kant’s many other friendships, see Kuehn, 2001.

³⁵ In response to the all-too-common claim that Kant’s formalistic emphasis makes his general philosophical approach “masculinist” (see e.g., Mosser, 1999, p. 327), Sedgwick effectively argues that it is not Kant but his interpreters who are responsible for much of the sexism found in his official philosophy: “the proper application of the categorical imperative calls ... for sensitivity on the part of human judgment in deciding precisely what features of an individual case are to figure into our procedure of moral assessment.... [So] there is no reason to conclude that... Kantian moral theory lacks any of the essential ingredients of a morality of care” (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 67).

its own, in no way conflicts with his egalitarian moral theory but instead complements it. Thus, much as we members of culture-m may dislike his claims, Kant's insistence on distinguishing men from women implies only that he chose not to step outside the contingent norms of his own culture when defending the ideal of egalitarian sexism. Moreover, as I will argue in Part II of this series (Palmquist 2017), if we hold our own ethical presuppositions about marriage up to the ideal of egalitarian sexism, we will find signs that, in spite of the lip-service we so often give to equality, culture-m has a hidden tendency to encourage *domineering* sexism.

Stephen R. Palmquist (D.Phil., Oxford University) is Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Hong Kong Baptist University, where he has taught since 1987. He has over 180 publications (translated into at least 12 languages), which include about 100 refereed articles and book chapters, published in more than 25 countries. Among his 11 books are *The Tree of Philosophy* (Philopsychy Press, 1992/2000), *Kant's System of Perspectives* (University Press of America, 1993), *Kant's Critical Religion* (Ashgate, 2000), *Cultivating Personhood: Kant and Asian Philosophy* (Walter de Gruyter, 2010), *Comprehensive Commentary on Kant's Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), and *Baring All in Reason's Light: An Exposition and Defense of Kant's Critical Mysticism* (Noesis Press, 2017). In 1999 he founded the Hong Kong Philosophy Café, now comprising four branches and over 800 members.

Corresponding author:

Stephen R. Palmquist, Department of Religion and Philosophy, Hong Kong Baptist University, 224 Waterloo Road, Kowloon, Hong Kong SAR (China)
email: stevepq@hkbu.edu.hk

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