

Chapter 2

Maturity, Universalism and Emancipation

— On Kant's *What Is Enlightenment?* Part II

Exhortations to aspire to a humanistic universalism and appeals to think beyond a tribalistic “we,” beyond any particular identity or group interest, remain gratuitous without an appeal to individual responsibility and judgement and when no room is made for the possibility of actually realizing such lofty ideals. Universal ideals are after all pursued by subjects that are aware of themselves as self-thinking agents pursuing such ideals. However, not everyone ipso facto meets the epistemic duty to think “for oneself” and judge in accordance with reason at all times, and thus help realize the universal ideal of the self-preservation of reason (*die Selbsterhaltung der Vernunft*) (*Orientieren*, AA 8:146, footnote [Kant 2001b:18]).¹

To think for oneself means to submit to no heteronomous authority, recognizing solely the jurisdiction of reason. “Self-thinking” people recognize nothing as reasonable but what they themselves grasp as reasonable. “Self-thinking” means that with every action or view one must ask oneself if the maxim or rule on the basis of which one carries out any action or adopts a particular view could be adopted as a universal law, applicable to everyone (see e.g., *Orientieren*, AA 8:146). Put simply, are the reasons why I say or do something also universalizable? That is to say, is what I say or do in principle also something everyone else should say or do? To ask oneself such

¹ Cf. Refl. 1509, AA 15:823: “Grundsatz der Vernunft: ihre Selbsterhaltung.”

questions constitutes, for Kant, the essence of “enlightenment.”

But self-thinking is a mentality or stance, not an innate factual quality or a dispositional trait that automatically manifests itself, nor a trait that could be causally explained by one’s genetic makeup or cultural background, or indeed group identity. Every adult human being, regardless of background or identity, possesses this quality inherently *just because* he or she is a human rational being, but it must be cultivated. Every adult person has the *capacity* for enlightenment, regardless of circumstances, “however small the scope and degree of a person’s natural endowment may be” (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*, AA 5:295 [Kant 2001a:175]).

For Kant, having the capacity of understanding and being able to use that capacity independently of others is a universal maxim that is valid for every human being without exception, that is to say for every adult human being whose cognitive abilities are properly functioning. But note: “is valid.” We must talk here about validity, not about facts or factuality per se, or at least these two realms, facticity and validity, must not be conflated. After all, it is not the case that everyone also thinks in accordance with reason or makes proper use of his or her capacity for thought in actual fact, always, and in all respects. Some people or groups of people do not seem to be making much use of their capacity for thought at all.

Having the capacity of the mind, the ability to think according to rules that one imposes on oneself strictly in accordance with reason, does not by itself imply *strict* universal validity, as is the case with the categorical imperative which can be deduced a priori from reason, or indeed with the constitutive rules of logic to which using that capacity is bound. Having the capacity to think is itself not like a logical law that always applies univocally, such that everything that I think is always true or even logically valid. The capacity of self-thinking is in a sense an assumption rooted in rational faith (*Vernunftglaube*) (*Orientieren*, AA 8:140–1), which, although inextricably bound up with the possibility of philosophy, cannot be derived from it as if it concerned a principle of logic.

Rational faith, a central Kantian concept that appears in various of his works and which we cannot examine further here, and the assumption of an innate predisposition to think for oneself are related and presuppose each other. In principle we thus have a capacity for reasonable thinking based on rational faith. However, that does not automatically mean that everything that is in actual fact being thought is thereby also reasonable, in accordance with reason (even if *what* we think may still be valid purely *logically*). As Heiner Klemme recently put it succinctly: “The maxims of the self-preservation of reason do not protect the individual against foolish acts” (Klemme 2023:66).

It is thus important that we exercise judgement (*Urteilstkraft*) in making use of our thinking capacity (*Denkvermögen*). It also means that we must be open to the special circumstances under which we apply our maxims for judgement and action. Simply put, everything we do and think must always be put in context, and is defeasible. We must always ask ourselves whether certain rules we employ for our actions, and certain views we hold, are actually applicable in, or effectively relate to, reality. There is a fundamental discrepancy between a rule or maxim taken *in abstracto* and its actual application or realization. We cannot simply ignore the particular context of that about which one makes a judgement or in respect of which one formulates a maxim for action. Therefore, universalist platitudes such as “All people are equal” or “The intrinsic dignity of all people is inviolable,” while true, are meaningless pronouncements when expressed merely in the abstract without taking into account contingent external factors. Such in principle true statements cannot be utilized as a panacea for social or political problems if their concrete context is not further addressed and politically feasible solutions are not carefully deliberated. There are often conflicting interests, and liberal sounding statements that merely make a point of stressing equality and unity tend to be clichéd and moralistic and as such do not contribute to a practical resolution of such conflicts. Sometimes an idealist stance is ill-advised and one must be realistic and simply

acknowledge that a conflict cannot be resolved or cannot be resolved immediately, without thereby detracting from the in principle equal status of the parties in the conflict. Not everyone makes proper use in actual fact of his or her capacity for thought, or bears responsibility in actual fact for his or her actions. Such observations are not value judgements about people's innate *capacities*. They are judgments about the *proper use* of one's capacity for thought and judgement *in particular circumstances*.

Abstract universalism and the rejection of universalism are two sides of the same coin. Just like abstract universalism, which foregrounds the universal truths of equality and intrinsic dignity for all while ignoring particular circumstances, the generalizing, formalistic criticism of, or rejection of, universalism as such expresses the same abstract interpretation of it. On account of such critical views, Kant's universalism is considered not truly universal because supposedly certain groups of people would be excluded from that same universalism in actual cases where the tenets of universalism such as "Equality for all" or "The intrinsic dignity of all people is inviolable" do not seem to apply, or at least not completely. Ergo, Kant's universalism would in reality be particularistic and exclusive, intended exclusively for the privileged Western white man, who alone enjoys universal rights to the full. People of non-Western backgrounds or women in general would supposedly not be the subjects of Kant's universalism, or in fact explicitly be excluded from it. This criticism can be heard more and more in contemporary debates about Kant, especially in the context of discussions of his alleged racism and position on colonialism.

But here too validity (*Gültigkeit*) and application (*Geltung*), or validity and realization, are easily conflated. Such a reading that appeals to specific irreducible cultural differences rests—just like an overly abstract universalism that holds forth with hollow declarations such as "All are equal"—on an abstract distinction between form and content, which holds that either the general form is stressed at the expense of the particular content, or the particular content is seen as stressed too much at the expense of universal form.

We can illustrate such an overly formalistic, cursory reading of Kant's texts with the standard account of his views on women. There are texts in Kant's oeuvre that, at first glance, appear to show unsettling examples of misogyny or are, at the very least, not particularly favorable to women (see e.g., AA 6:279; 7:209, 307; 27:36, 48). Kant is not particularly known for his feminism! It thus seems that Kant excludes women, as apparently he does other groups of people, from his universalist perspective, regardless whether this has to do with moral action or more generally with the capacity for judgement associated with the use of one's reason. But are women, by definition, as adult human beings, on Kant's account then not mature citizens who must be able to use their capacity for thinking without the guidance of others?

Klemme quotes a telling passage from one of the *Vorlesungen zur Anthropologie* (*Anthropologische Menschenkunde*):

It is assumed that certain people are not authorized to use their understanding on their own but are capable of [*können*] judging only with the help of a foreign understanding. Such people are called minors [*Unmündige*]. Some are minors according to age; they are incapable of [*können...nicht*] complying with their own understanding and reason but must be guided by another. Others are minors according to sex; certain insights and businesses are wholly outside the sphere of the female room. They are not allowed [*dürfen...nicht*] to make use of their own reason but must submit to the observations of a foreign reason; but as regards public matters, they must rely on foreign reason. With children immaturity is natural; the guardian of a woman's room is called a custodian. (*Anthr. Menschenkunde*, AA 25:1046–7, translation mine)

On a superficial reading, this passage from one of his many *Vorlesungen* on anthropology seems to indicate that Kant regards women as immature. In the published *Anthropology* from 1798, he indeed appears to deny

(married) women maturity, as wives are to be submissive to their husbands as their guardians. He curiously contends that a woman who “by the nature of her sex has enough of a mouth [*Mundwerk genug hat*] to represent both herself and her husband, even in court [...], could literally be declared to be *over-mature* [*übermündig*]” (AA 7:209 [Kant 2007:315]). But Kant makes no validity judgements in the passage in the anthropology lecture quoted above. Rather, he points to the concrete, actual condition of immaturity in which women largely find themselves—this was certainly the case in Kant’s days. At least two things bear this out.

First, Kant uses the modal verb “*dürfen*” here (and not, for example, the imperative “*sollen*”). There is a restriction imposed from outside: either something is allowed or prohibited, or one is obliged to do something. This is significant in view of the fact that Kant believes that immaturity is something that is rather “self-incurred” (*selbstverschuldet*) and deserving of blame. Of course, the imposed restriction also applies to children: both children and women “have to” (*müssen*) be guided by others. But the important distinction between minors and women is that, according to Kant, immaturity in children is “natural,” since children by definition have not yet reached a certain age and therefore maturity, hence they are called minors, while women need a chaperone or custodian, suggesting that immaturity in women is not natural. Note also that Kant contrasts “*können*” in the first sentence with “*dürfen*” in the second: whereas women are presumably not *permitted* to make use of their own understanding, children *cannot* make use of their understanding without the guidance of others. Likewise, to speak of “self-incurred immaturity” in the case of children would be inapposite because children cannot be blamed for their being underage. The culpability condition does not apply in their case. Therefore, a categorical distinction should be heeded between immaturity “according to age” (*den Jahren nach*) and that “according to sex” (*dem Geschlecht nach*). The latter is not natural but socially constructed.

This latter way of conceiving of maturity is what Kant elsewhere associates with “legal” or “civil” immaturity,

which can be so called “if it rests on legal arrangements with regard to civil affairs” (*Anthropology*, AA 7:208–9 [Kant 2007:315]). It may seem at first sight that Kant endorses such “legal” immaturity for women, who “cannot personally defend their rights and pursue civil affairs for themselves.” It is not clear, from the declarative manner of reasoning in the published *Anthropology* text—which we recall is not part of Kant’s corpus of transcendental or critical philosophy, and was compiled on the basis of his many lectures over the years, even if Kant authorized it as being the latest version of his views on anthropology—whether a) Kant thinks women *ought* not be able to personally exercise their rights and thus enjoy civil independence, or b) just that, in given social and economic circumstances, women’s actual civil status can be guaranteed only by the husband in a marriage, thus more reflecting women’s current status in society than prescribing a normative rule. Kant argues that, in principle, there is a “natural” equality in a couple but that the husband’s dominance over his wife is not contradictory to it to the extent that it functions “to promote the common interest of the household” (AA 6:279 [Kant 1999:428]). But the former (a) could hardly be justified a priori just on the basis of the precept of maturity, and it also conflicts with the idea that immaturity is self-incurred, for if their “legal” immaturity is warranted or even a priori justified and they *ought* to be immature, women could hardly be blamed for it (see further below on the culpability condition). So, it seems that there is room on a Kantian view, if not strictly speaking in Kant’s own view, for the idea that women can and even must achieve some sort of civil independence, inside marriage and indeed outside it.

Kant should at any rate have drawn that conclusion also based on the fact that he encountered many women in prominent positions, either in person or through correspondence, women who were quite obviously articulate and made use of their own capacity for thinking and judging without the guidance of others. Between 1758 and 1762 two Russian Tsarinas ruled in Königsberg. He even writes a letter to Tsarina Elisabeth in which he

addresses her with all manner of honorifics such as “allerdurchlauchtigste Großmächtigste Kaiserin.” There was undoubtedly something opportunistic about the way Kant formulated his address to the Tsarina, because he wanted to obtain the position of professor at the University of Königsberg (which he only succeeded in doing years later). But a “Selbstherrscherin” is not exactly someone who needs a custodian (quotations from Klemme 2023:67–8).

Secondly, someone who is immature “according to age,” such as an underage child, cannot be held responsible for being underage. After all, it is its natural state. However, the aspect of culpability is precisely what Kant emphasizes in *Aufklärung*. Immaturity, including that of women, is “self-incurred” or culpable if it is not due to lack of understanding but because one fails to try and get oneself out of it, something for which one is to be blamed and for which one is responsible oneself. This sounds paradoxical at first: if it is true that women are not *permitted* to be “legally” mature in virtue of society’s limitations of the exercise of their freedom, also and particularly in business and legal affairs—their immaturity is imposed on them by society’s structures and social mechanisms—how can it be that they themselves are to be blamed for this? Are they really responsible for their own imposed immaturity?

Klemme writes regarding this:

Kant does not mean that women could not, and do not want to, be partially mature. After all, they run the household and are legal subjects who can enter into a marriage contract. However, they do not take an active interest in their civic independence. (2023:68, translation mine)

What Klemme points out here is the importance of a citizen’s independence, which is to be claimed by the subject herself alone (but cf. AA 6:314 and the earlier cited *Anthropology* at AA 7:208–9). This is about autonomy and self-agency. Although immaturity may be the effect of external hindering circumstances, the responsibility for remaining in that immature state ultimately lies with the

subject herself. Outside hindrances, social or otherwise, cannot be exculpatory reasons to remain in a state of immaturity. Thus, she herself must take an “active interest” in acquiring “civic independence” in social life. That is why Kant speaks of immaturity as something “self-incurred.” The contingent circumstances in which one finds oneself at the hands of others do not provide a license to shift the blame for one’s situation to others. One owes it to oneself to break free from the reins of tutelage, if at all possible. And this I contend is the general dialectic of Kant’s reasoning in *Aufklärung*, also in regard to women, as I shall argue below.

Here, Kant could in fact be taken to be advocating for the liberation of women, which however women must foster of their own accord. This is only logical because liberation cannot be a heteronomous cause, something done by others on your behalf. For if it were, this would imply a degree of tutelage or paternalism that one wants precisely to get away from. To no longer bow under the yoke of tutelage, to emerge from immaturity, is an action that the subject must undertake herself, an act for which she herself must take responsibility. It is always a matter of resolutely “to make use of one’s *own* reason” (*Orientieren*, AA 8:146, footnote, emphasis added [Kant 2001b:18]).

This is of course far easier said than done, and Kant is well aware of this, even though one may find that Kant is perhaps somewhat too optimistic (or too negative for that matter, on a certain reading of his views of a woman’s place in marriage). He speaks of a “progress of enlightenment” (*Aufklärung*, AA 8:37 [Kant 1999:18]), but the “great unthinking masses” develop in that direction only very slowly, for to “enlighten an age” is “arduous” (*Orientieren*, AA 8:146 [Kant 2001b:18]). “Precepts and formulas, those mechanical instruments of a ... misuse of [one’s] natural endowments,” keep the general public in a permanent state of immaturity. Only few manage to escape from it. Immaturity seems to have “almost become nature” (all quotations *Aufklärung*, AA 8:36 [Kant 1999:17–18]).

Nevertheless, “we do have distinct intimations that the field is now being opened for them to work freely in this direction and that the hindrances to *universal*

enlightenment or to *humankind's* emergence from its self-incurred minority are gradually become fewer” (*Aufklärung*, 8:40, emphasis added [Kant 1999:21]). Notice that Kant talks about “*universal* enlightenment” and “*humankind's* emergence” as a goal toward which we gradually progress. This suggests again that the *universal* validity of the precept of maturity must be read in terms of a regulative ideal for everyone, women included, which in practice is not yet actualized to its full potential, and in all likelihood remains something realized in full only in potentiality. Not everyone everywhere may already enjoy the freedom to make use of one’s own reason without sanction. In reality, while the emergence from immaturity is the aim which is realizable just because the maxim or principle of maturity, of thinking for oneself, is universally valid, the state of minority is still the factual situation for the greater part of humanity, and sadly in particular for most women in the non-Western regions of the world. The universal validity of the maxim of maturity does not take away the fact that it is really possible and indeed actual that large groups of people remain constrained by the shackles of immaturity at least for some time, and that contingent sociopolitical forces are largely the cause of this. The universality of the principle or maxim cannot undo the fact of the matter of external restriction and oppression, just as much as contingent facts cannot undermine the universal validity of the maxim. “People gradually work their way out of barbarism of their own accord *if only one does not intentionally contrive to keep them in it*” (*Aufklärung*, AA 8:41, emphasis added [Kant 1999:21]).

Enlightenment is a continuous development, not a closed, finite collection of achievements: “As matters now stand, a good deal more is required for people on the whole to be in the position, or even able to be put into the position, of using their own understanding confidently and well in religious matters, without another’s guidance” (*Aufklärung*, AA 8:40 [Kant 1999:21]).²

² Kant focuses on religion because religious immaturity is “the most harmful [as well as] the most degrading [*entehrendste*] of all” (*Aufklärung*, AA 8:41, trans. emended [Kant 1999:21]).

When Kant therefore writes that “by far the greatest part of humankind (*including the entire fair sex*) should hold the step toward majority to be not only troublesome but also highly dangerous” (*Aufklärung*, AA 8:35, emphasis added [Kant 1999:17]), Kant is not, despite appearances and despite apparent contradictory views stated elsewhere, making a misogynistic statement about women (as well as other groups) and their perceived *natural* inability to be mature. On the contrary, in the remainder of the sentence he makes it perfectly clear that “guardians” see to it that women are kept under control, and

have kindly taken it upon themselves to supervise them; after they have made their domesticated animals dumb and carefully prevented these placid creatures from daring to take a single step without the walking cart [*Gängelwagen*]³ in which they have confined them, they then show them the danger that threatens them if they try to walk alone. (*Aufklärung*, AA 8:35 [Kant 1999:17])

This domineering guardianship ensures that large groups of people do not dare to think for themselves, “to walk alone.” The real danger associated with assertiveness may not be all that great. However, for many people the real life consequences of self-thinking by way of criticism of the accepted norm—the risk of social isolation, disapproval by peers, denunciation, “cancelling,” etc.—do “make them timid and usually frightens them away from any further attempt” (*Aufklärung*, AA 8:35–6 [Kant 1999:17]). Self-thinking therefore requires “resolution and courage,” hence the exhortation quoted from Horace at the start of

³ Kant uses the same word for “walking cart,” *Gängelwagen*, in *Conjectural Beginning of Human History* (1786), where, translated as “go-cart,” it is associated with the “guardianship of nature” and “instinct” in contrast to “reason” and “the condition of freedom” (AA 8:115 [Kant 2007:168]). Earlier in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant uses the term *Gängelwagen*, translated as “leading-strings,” in a theoretical context, that is, the introductory section of the *Analytic of Principles*, to signify the assistance that examples provide to “sharpen the power of judgment” (A134/B173–4 [Kant 1998:269]).

Aufklärung: “*Sapere aude!*” “Dare to think!” (*Aufklärung*, AA 8:35 [Kant 1999:17]).

Women are subjected to oppressive institutionalized structures and social mechanisms in large parts of the world, which prevents them from benefiting from their natural right to take responsibility, and think, for themselves. These factual circumstances do not have a negative influence on the universal *validity* of the rational maxim of maturity as such but they have an effect on the extent to which what is universally valid is also realized, actualized.

Kant makes no pronouncements about how the emancipation of women or any other group of civil minors could or should take shape. That is simply not his philosophical project. To criticize him for it is to misapprehend the nature of his thought, and also to overstate its scope—notwithstanding prevaricating statements in the various texts in which he addresses the status of women. In *Aufklärung*, he merely 1) argues that the practical precept of maturity is valid for every adult human being and 2) observes that in many cases circumstances have a negative or inhibiting effect on the actual possibilities for realization (the application range of the regulative ideal of maturity). This concerns a certain anthropology that describes the subjective, both hindering and facilitating conditions for its application, comparable to how Kant sees this in the context of the a priori laws of morality and its relation to a moral anthropology (cf. AA 6:217). Such an anthropology—and it certainly need not be the *Anthropology* that Kant actually published but could be a more critical one—is important but does not in any way detract from the universality of the maxim of maturity as such. The latter is not grounded on such an anthropology. After all, if it were so grounded, that would mean that the principle would be dependent on empirical, contingent factors, which would contradict Kant’s view that to persist in immaturity is something for which one is culpable. Such culpability can only be apportioned to human rational beings who in principle have the freedom of thought and who by nature, that is to say by virtue of their possessing the capacity of reason, must be treated as

mature. They can be blamed for their rational decisions, not for their temperament or cultural background, let alone their social conditions, or the simple fact that one is a man or a woman.

Maturity, in which enlightenment basically exists, is actually only in its infancy as far as the wider populace is concerned, says Kant. We do not yet live in an “*enlightened* age,” but we do live in an “age of enlightenment,” says Kant, suggesting that it concerns not a completed project but a continuous process of *enlightening* (*Aufklärung*, AA 8:40 [Kant 1999:21]). This was certainly the case in Kant’s own time when large parts of humanity still found themselves in a state of minority, but it remains true in our own time despite the achievements of the past two centuries of European civilization since Kant’s essay. This indicates that, for Kant, enlightenment is not a completed entity with a definable historical limit, nor a body of doctrines or a hereditary ideology. Rather, enlightenment is a universal ideal to be realized, a process, not a closed project that supposedly failed because not everyone enjoys in actual fact the same benefits that it promised to all. It is a continuous, live task for every person alike to extricate oneself, to self-emancipate, from the chains of tutelage.