KANT, IMMANUEL (1724–1804). Born in Königsberg, a center of Prussian political and intellectual life, Immanuel Kant never traveled far from his hometown. He held a series of professorships at the University of Königsberg. His schedule was notoriously regular: Neighbors set their clocks by his evening walk. However, this infamous picture depicts the older Kant (Kuehn, 1–23). The younger Kant was devoted to sartorial elegance and billiards, enjoyed socializing, and decided against marriage due to poverty, not from a dislike of female company (George; Kuehn, 117, 169). Kant was reared as a Pietist Protestant but in maturity was skeptical of organized religion (Wood, "Rational Theology," 394–97).

Kant’s contributions to philosophy in the areas of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics are fundamental to modern philosophy. His Critique of Pure Reason (1781) addressed, among others, questions about knowledge and freedom. In response to skepticism, the view that we can have no certain knowledge, Kant advanced what may be taken to be a two-world theory: There is the phenomenal world, which we experience through our senses, and the noumenal world, about which we never have direct knowledge. Kant argued that our minds impose categories that order the world of experience. Knowledge of the foundations of science is therefore possible through interrogation of our own reason (Guyer). Similarly, ethical principles are constructions of reason (O'Neill, "Kantian Ethics"). The two-world theory also addresses the problem of free will. Since everything in the physical world is subject to physical laws, human beings must be as well. So our actions are determined, which, for Kant, is incompatible with free will. In two-world theory, we can have freedom in the noumenal realm.

Kant’s ethics, expounded primarily in his 1785 Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals, centers on freedom, rationality, and equality. We must assume that all rational agents possess free will, or autonomy (Groundwork, Ak 4:446–48). Autonomous rational agency is the source of our equal moral value (Ak 4:428). It is also the source of moral obligation. Reason prescribes absolute rules for our conduct that, as rational agents, we are committed to follow. These rules are proved through reason alone, not from experience, although human nature plays a role in their application (Ak 4:388–90, 410–12; Wood, Kant’s Ethical Thought, 8–11). In the Groundwork, Kant derives the supreme moral law.

This law, called the Categorical Imperative, is a command we must follow regardless of our desires or inclinations. The “Formula of the Universal Law,” the first of Kant’s several ways of formulating the Categorical Imperative, enjoins: “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Groundwork, Ak 4:421). This formula captures the moral importance of universality and impartiality. It also signals Kant’s view that an act’s intention in part determines its moral status. For Kant, a deontologist in ethics, some actions are inherently wrong. Intending to lie is wrong in itself, no matter what the consequences are. Further, acting morally requires more than
simply acting in conformity with duty; an action has moral worth only when done from the
motive of duty, as opposed to motives such as self-interest or sympathy (Ak 4:397–99). Al-
though Kant has been criticized for not valuing emotions, he does allow a role for moral
emotions such as love of one’s neighbor (Metaphysics of Morals, Ak 6:399–403; for dis-
cussion, see Baron, Kantian Ethics, 194–226; Velleman).

Kant’s second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, the “Formula of Humanity”
(FH), commands: “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own
person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as
an end” (Groundwork, Ak 4:429). We must respect the autonomy of other people by refrain-
ing from using them as mere means or instruments for our own purposes or to achieve our
own goals. To respect their autonomy, we must recognize their ability to make their own
decisions. We must not treat others, or ourselves, as things or objects, that is, as not being
rational and autonomous. Coercion and threats violate this injunction, as do lying to others
and manipulating them. Of course, we often do use other people, as when we mail a letter
that is handled by post office employees (see Paton, Categorical Imperative, 165). We may
use other people, however, as long as they consent—with important limits. That is, on
Kant’s view some actions fail to respect humanity even when consent is present and so are
morally wrong (O’Neill, “Between”). For example, one may not sell oneself into slavery,
engage in unmarried sexual acts, or commit suicide.

Ethical duties are categorized as “perfect duties,” which one must follow at all times, and
“imperfect duties,” which allow some latitude (Groundwork, Ak 4:421–24). These two
types of duty correspond (roughly) to Kant’s later division in The Metaphysics of Morals
(1797–1798) between the Doctrine of Justice and the Doctrine of Virtue. Justice consists
of perfect duties to others and the legal institutions corresponding to these duties (Ak 6:229–40). Kant argues that the state and its legal institutions are morally justified since they are necessary to preserve freedom. Property is fundamental to justice, on his view, and Kant ends up subsuming marriage and family, along with property and contract, under principles of acquisition (Metaphysics, Ak 6:276–84). Virtue consists of moral duties that are not coercively enforceable (unlike legal duties) and involve having the ends of one’s own perfection and the happiness of others (Ak 6:391–94). In examining Kant’s philosophy of sex, the theoretical frameworks provided by both the Groundwork and the Metaphysics are important.

Kant’s views on sex, marriage, procreation, family, and related topics can be found pri-
marily in the Metaphysics (Ak 6:276–84, 358–61, 424–26, 469–73); the posthumously pub-
ished Lectures on Ethics (Ak 27:48–52, 384–92); Observations on the Feeling of the
Beautiful and Sublime (1764; 76–96); “Conjectural Beginning of Human History” (1786);
and Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View (1798; Ak 7:303–11). What emerges is a
psychological and anthropological account of sexuality, and an ethics of both sexual desire
and sexual activity, according to which sexuality demeans humanity. From these founda-
tions, Kant concludes that sexual activity is permissible only in marriage. Other expressions
of the sexual impulse are, for him, morally wrong as being either contrary to nature (besti-
tality, homosexuality, masturbation) or contrary to reason (prostitution, adultery).

In his account of the nature of the sexual, Kant asserts that in sexual activity each person
gives himself or herself to the other. A person, however, is a unity. Thus, if one surrenders
part of oneself (for example, the genitals), one necessarily surrenders the whole. But—
here enters Kant’s ethics—such a surrender or giving up of oneself violates the FH: “In
this act a human being makes himself into a thing, which conflicts with the Right of hu-
manship in his own person” (Metaphysics, Ak 6:278). We have, then, the problem of sex in
Kant: Because all sexual activity seems morally wrong, how can Kant make room for morally permissible sex (only) in marriage? The problem is made even more acute when Kant elaborates his account of the nature of the sexual with respect to desire. Kant thought, dramatically, that sexual desire was inherently immoral:

In loving from sexual inclination, they make the person into an object of their appetite. As soon as the person is possessed, and the appetite sated, they are thrown away, as one throws away a lemon after sucking the juice from it. The sexual impulse can admittedly be combined with human affection, and then it also carries with it the aims of the latter, but if it is taken in and by itself, it is nothing more than appetite. But, so considered, there lies in this inclination a degradation of man; for as soon as anyone becomes an object of another’s appetite, all motives of moral relationship fall away; as object of the other’s appetite, that person is in fact a thing, whereby the other’s appetite is sated, and can be misused as such a thing by anybody. (Lectures, Ak 27:384–85)

Unlike genuine human love, which is benevolent, sexual “love” both objectifies the other and is not concerned about his or her well-being.

Sexual desire, for Kant, violates the FH by making the other an object of appetite. His point is not that sexual desire, qua desire, has an “intentional object,” in the way one can be the intentional object of respect and other emotions or attitudes (Langton, “Love and Solipsism,” 134). Kant’s point is that in sexual desire (and only here) another person is the “object of another’s enjoyment” (Lectures, Ak 27:385), so “carnal enjoyment is cannibalistic in principle. . . . Each is actually a consumable thing. . . . to the other” (Metaphysics, Ak 6:359–60). Kant’s view may be that sexual desire seeks to consume and possess a person as if he or she were merely a thing, which fails to respect the other’s humanity (Korsgaard, “Creating the Kingdom,” 310). Or Kant’s view may be that sexual desire reduces a person to a thing. The sexual “impulse is. . . directed to sex, merely, and not to humanity” (Lectures, Ak 27:387). A person is seen, approached, as a body to be manipulated, a set of genitals, or an interchangeable representative of his or her sex (Herman; Langton, “Love and Solipsism,” “Sexual Solipsism”). If sexual desire causes us to see another person as a mere thing, lack of moral regard for the other naturally follows. Further, if one allows himself or herself to be approached in this way, or welcomes it, one makes oneself into a thing for the other. In this way a person can become an immoral accomplice in the other’s objectifying desire—sometimes through the allures of personal adornment (Lectures, Ak 27:385). It has been proposed, in light of the FH’s prohibition against treating oneself as an object, that being an accomplice was perhaps Kant’s major worry about sex (Soble, “Sexual Use”).

Kant noted that animal instincts, such as the desires for food and sex, can overwhelm duty. While such instincts serve purposes (eating, procreating), Kant adjures that they be disciplined so that sensuality does not overrun intellect (Lectures, Ak 27:378–81). He included sexual desire among the passions, which are “appetites directed by men to men, not to things” (Anthropology, Ak 267–70; on the passions, compare Wood, Kant’s Ethical Thought, 256–59, with Baron, Kantian Ethics, 199–203). Passions, Kant claims, “do the greatest damage to freedom” (Anthropology, Ak 265). Diminishing one’s autonomy or rationality through passion or animal instinct, he thinks, violates our duty to pursue moral perfection. (Some of Kant’s ideas here—the need to discipline sexuality, the conflict between sex and freedom—were also themes of Saint Augustine [354–430]. See City of God, bk. 14, passim, and Epistle 6’, 102.) But even though Kant understands sexual desire
as animalistic, he also identifies purely human elements in sexuality. For example, while interpreting Genesis, he suggests that the leaves concealing the genitals actually served to arouse desire, a sexual technique that marks an important distinction between humans and animals ("Conjectural Beginning," 56–57; see Wood, Kant’s Ethical Thought, 238, 256–59). Indeed, one might read Kantian sexual desire as a distinctively human passion of domination and competitiveness (see Morgan).

For Kant, a legal institution is required to preserve humanity in the face of these dangers of sexuality. This institution is marriage, which Kant understands as a contract between one man and one woman in which they exchange rights over each other. The marriage right is a “right to a person akin to a right to a thing,” so that “if one of the partners in a marriage has left or given itself into someone else’s possession, the other partner is justified, always and without question, in bringing its partner back under its control, just as it is justified in retrieving a thing” (Metaphysics, Ak 6:278). Each spouse must hold equal rights over the other (as in Saint Paul [5–64], 1 Cor. 7:3–4), which rules out morganatic marriage and polygamy, for these arrangements involve giving oneself totally but receiving in return only half or less of the other person (Lectures, Ak 27:389; Metaphysics, Ak 6:279).

But how the joint possession of marriage makes sexual activity permissible is unclear. Sex violates the FH because the parties give themselves to each other as things. Kant argues that marriage addresses this by giving the contracting parties equal rights over each other: “[W]hile one person is acquired by the other as if it were a thing, the one who is acquired acquires the other in turn; for in this way each reclaims itself and restores its personality” (Metaphysics, Ak 6:278). Again, “if I hand over my whole person to the other, and thereby obtain the person of the other in place of it, I get myself back again, and have thereby regained possession of myself . . . . The two persons thus constitute a unity of will. Neither will be subject to happiness or misfortune, joy or displeasure, without the other taking a share in it” (Lectures, Ak 27:388). One reading (Ladd’s) is that the freedom given up is reciprocally regained. But this reading is complicated by Kant’s idea that sexual desire, which compromises freedom, is always directed to sex, not humanity. So the exchange of rights does not seem to rehabilitate desire (see Brake). Further, possession of another person seems to violate the FH, although Kant does distinguish possession from property ownership, which is only of things (Metaphysics, Ak 6:359).

Kant’s explanation seems to be that marriage permits sexual objectification rather than transforms the objectifying nature of sexuality. Marriage allows spouses “to make direct use of a person as of a thing, as a means to my end, but still without infringing upon his personality” (Metaphysics, Ak 6:359). A bleak reading of Kant sees this as “a system of mutual exploitation” (Wood, Kant’s Ethical Thought, 257), and Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) made Kantian marriage an occasion for satire: “To get those organs duly confiscated,” the only recourse is Law (312). G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) denounced it as “disgraceful,” since the ethical content of marriage should not and cannot, contra Kant, be represented as a self-interested contract (Philosophy of Right, para. 75, 161A; see de Laurentis; Pateman, 168–88). Kant may be defended against Hegelian dismissals by arguing that marital rights (against abandonment, for example) protect people when the affection of a close relationship begins to fail (see Waldron). In a sympathetic reconstruction, Barbara Herman proposes that Kantian marriage rights “block the transformation of regard that comes with sexual appetite” by “secur[ing] regard for one’s partner as a person with a life, which is what the sexual appetite by itself causes one to disregard” (62–63). On this view, marriage does transform, curtail, or diminish the obnoxious nature of sexuality and does not merely make sexual objectification permissible.
Sexual "crimes" are taxonomized by Kant (in a manner reminiscent of Saint Thomas Aquinas [1224/25–1274], *Summa theologiae*, 2a2ae, ques. 154, art. 1–12) as those that follow nature but are contrary to reason and those that are contrary to nature (*Lectures*, Ak 27:390–92; *Metaphysics*, Ak 6:424–26). The former category includes unmarried sex and adultery—which is cause, along with "incompatibility," for divorce (*Lectures*, Ak 27:390). Prostitution offends reason and violates the FH: Selling the body treats it as a mere thing, and because we are not our own property, we cannot sell ourselves (Ak 27:386). *Incest* is inherently wrong only between a parent and child, not between siblings, because the subordination that occurs in sexual interactions must be mutual, not one-sided (Ak 27:389–90). *(Plato [427–347 BCE] reaches the same conclusion about vertical and horizontal incest, but on different grounds; *Republic*, 457c–62e.) Sibling incest, for Kant, is not against nature because it had to occur early in human history.

The sexual crimes contrary to nature discussed by Kant are homosexuality, bestiality, and masturbation, which contravene the natural end of the sexual instinct, procreation:

[U]natural, and even merely unpurposive [nonprocreative], use of one's sexual attribute is inadmissible as being a violation of duty to oneself...[B]y it man surrenders his personality (throwing it away), since he uses himself merely as a means to satisfy an animal impulse. (*Metaphysics*, Ak 6:425)

Kant writes that masturbation makes the agent "an object of enjoyment" and is morally worse than suicide (*Lectures*, Ak 27:391–92; *Metaphysics*, Ak 6:425). Kant's invocation of natural purpose has implications for marital sex; it, too, must not be "unnatural." Yet Kant seems to suggest that nonprocreative sex between spouses might be allowed by "a permissive law of morally practical reason, which in the collision of its determining grounds makes permitted something that is in itself not permitted (indulgently, as it were), to prevent a still greater violation" (*Metaphysics*, Ak 6:426). Perhaps what Kant means here is that sexual intercourse as *remedium ad concupiscentiae* is sometimes permitted—when, for example, the wife cannot become pregnant because she already is.

Regardless, Kant's appeals to nature are controversial, since he does not explain why the unnatural is immoral (Gregor, 133). In *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant justifies the attribution of purpose to nature, and he appeals to human nature in other ethical arguments (see Cooke; Williams, 4–10). But these arguments have been criticized as less than rational proofs (Denis, "Kant on the Wrongness"; Gregor, 134, 139–42; Soble, "Kant and Sexual Perversion"). Kant's views on homosexuality have been criticized as inconsistent, and elements of his ethics have even been invoked to defend *same-sex marriage* (Herman, 66n.22; Schaff). Kant does provide other grounds for the immorality of at least masturbation. His comment that "imagination brings forth a desire contrary to nature's end" (*Metaphysics*, Ak 6:425) might condemn the lawlessness of *fantasy* (Kielkopf; see Fortunata, 400; Soble, "Kant and Sexual Perversion," 58–59). And in *Education* (1803), Kant claims that masturbation is self-destructive (117–18).

In reconstructing a happier Kantian view of sex, love, and marriage, some philosophers have turned to his account of *friendship* (Denis, "From Friendship"; Korsgaard, "Creating"; Langton, "Love and Solipsism"). True friendship is an ideal moral relation of mutual benevolence, reciprocity, and self-sharing (*Metaphysics*, Ak 6:469–73; see Paton, "Kant on Friendship"); Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, 275–82), and Kant's description of friendship as a union echoes his view of marriage (Korsgaard, "Creating," 310–11). Notably, he thinks that we have a duty to share ourselves with friends, partly as a release from the "prison" of one's own mind (Langton, "Love and Solipsism," 127–31). Kant conceded that
sexuality “can... be combined with human affection” and carry with it “the aims” of human love (Lectures, Ak 27:384–85). In a letter to a heartbroken young woman who sought his moral advice (Maria von Herbert [1769–1803]), Kant replied that complete communication and mutual esteem are essential to love, “be it for one’s spouse or for a friend” (Correspondence, Ak 411, Ak 11:331; for the story of this interaction, see Langton, “Duty and Desolation”). Still, on his view, love’s tendency to pull people together must always be counterbalanced by the distancing effect of respect (Metaphysics, Ak 6:448–49; see Baron, “Love and Respect”).

What Kant wrote about women (see Anthropology, Ak 7:209, 262–63, 303–11; “On the Common Saying”) has been much criticized (Mendus; Schröder). For example, “A woman who has a head full of Greek, like Mme Dacier, or cavies on fundamental controversies about mechanics, like the Marquise de Châtelet, might as well even have a beard,” so contrary are such activities, Kant thought, to natural feminine “charms” (Observations, 78). And in the Metaphysics (Ak 6:279) we find his thought that “the natural superiority of the husband to the wife” justifies marriage law that appoints a husband as his wife’s “master (he is the party to direct, she to obey).” Perhaps Kant can be defended, in part, as having reported, but not endorsed, the sexist views of his time (Wilson). He did see women as rational agents and aimed to protect their rights in and through marriage (Ladd; Mosser; Wood, Kant’s Ethical Thought, 395–96n.9): “Scepticism about marriage... is bound to have bad consequences for the whole female sex; for woman would be degraded to a mere means for satisfying man’s desires. . . . It is by marriage that woman becomes free: man loses his freedom by it” (Anthropology, Ak 7:309).

Kant’s views on marriage, sex, and friendship reflect diverse influences. His account of friendship draws especially on Aristotle’s (384–322 BCE) Nicomachean Ethics and Michel Montaigne’s (1533–1592) famous essay. His thought about sexuality is indebted in many ways to earlier and continuing debates within Christianity and especially to Paul, Augustine, and Aquinas (although he does not acknowledge these predecessors). Kant’s account of the “unity of will” in the marriage contract echoes Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s (1712–1778) contract of mutual surrender (Social Contract, bk. 1, chap. 6). And Kantian marriage reflects Roman law (Ladd).

Kant’s influence in ethical philosophy, as in metaphysics and epistemology, has been extensive. Many contemporary ethicists advance Kantian theories in which rationality and autonomy are key elements (Donagan; Korsgaard; John Rawls [1921–2002]). Not surprisingly, many sexual ethicists draw on Kant, some giving detailed attention to his claims about sexuality, others attending more generally to his ethics. In the latter, the ideals of respecting persons and not using them figure prominently (see O’Neill, “Kantian Ethics”). But the implications of these Kantian notions for sexuality have been contested. Respect for autonomy may be taken to require allowing or adhering to whatever sexual decisions adults make. This reading results in a “liberal Kantian” sexual morality in which consent is not merely necessary (thereby prohibiting coercion and deception) but also sufficient, _ceteris paribus_, for the permissibility of sexual activity (Bauman; Belliotti; Mappes; Primoratz; for discussion, see Archard; Morgan; Solé, “Sexual Use”; Wertheimer, 131–35).

Many contemporary Kantians do not agree that consent is sufficient. For example, it has been argued that the FH prohibits exploitation (Donagan, 107; O’Neill, “Between Conscienting Adults”), that even _casual sex_ partners must exhibit concern for each other’s pleasure (Goldman), that we ought to refrain from mockery or boasting (Klepper), that we ought to attend to others in their particularity (O’Neill, “Between”), and that we should not engage in demeaning, even if consensual, sexual practices such as _sadomasochism_.

(reviewed by)
Further, the value of rational autonomy and the wrongness of using others and the self have also been invoked to generate "conservative Kantian" sexual moralities in which sex ought always to be linked with love, marriage, or procreation (Finnis; Karol Wojtyła [1920–2005]).

Respect for persons and Kant's view that sexuality objectifies are important themes in feminist literature. Some feminist philosophers have worked on the analysis of the concept of sexual objectification (Haslanger; LeMoncheck; Nussbaum). Catharine MacKinnon has drawn on Kant's moral ideal of respect for free and rational personhood (158), arguing that many contemporary sexual practices fail to respect that personhood by treating women as objects. Feminist discussions of respect and objectification have focused on sexual harassment, prostitution, other sex work, and pornography. Commercial sex, for example, has been regarded as an exchange in which both parties, the prostitute and the client, treat each other merely as means or objects (Anderson and Estes; Estes). Indeed, this may be a case in which, rather than mutual consent morally cleansing their activity, mutual consent is part of the moral problem, since in consenting each makes an object also of himself or herself. (Kant would agree.) Yet more liberal Kantian feminists argue that depending on various factors, including background context and intentions, respect for women may well be compatible with their participation in pornography and prostitution (Garry; Shrage).

The philosophical daughters of Kant have stirred up an especially contentious area of ethical, social, and political philosophy. Given the dual influence on Kant's thought—Enlightenment ideals of equal respect, Christian ideals of sexual ethics—it is not surprising that his views have been so variously interpreted.

See also Beauty; Casual Sex; Catholicism, Twentieth- and Twenty-First Century; Consequentialism; Descartes, René; Fantasy; Feminism, Liberal; Friendship; Hegel, G.W.F.; Hobbes, Thomas; Liberalism; Marriage; Objectification, Sexual; Personification, Sexual; Prostitution; Rape; Sade, Marquis de; Schopenhauer, Arthur; Scruton, Roger; Wojtyła, Karol (Pope John Paul II)

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ADDITIONAL READING