THE MASTER’S TOOLS WILL DISMANTLE THE MASTER’S HOUSE
- A DEFENCE OF A KANTIAN UNIVERSAL FEMINIST ETHICS

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Abstract
Is a ‘global feminist ethics’ possible? I take this phrase to mean that the principles upon which
this ethics is to be based need to be universal and justified, while taking the problem of
difference into account. The problem of difference challenges the assumption that individuals
are fundamentally alike, and emphasizes the risk of taking one’s own experiences as general,
thus making false generalizations. Hence, the challenge to feminist theory is: Are there
principles that can respond to the problem of difference, while still having critical potential in
the sense of being universal as well as objectively justified? I will answer this question
positively using a Kantian theory: Kant’s universality test has a different structure than other
universality tests and this very structure makes it compatible with the problem of difference.

Introduction
Is a global feminist ethics possible? This question has been the focus of much feminist scholarly
attention. The question points towards a tension between two recent developments in feminism. On
the one hand, there is a global feminism emerging, a movement that needs some common ground or
principles that unite it, while on the other hand, there is a criticism against these kind of attempts, most
notably stated in the problem of difference, i.e., the failure to do justice to the experience of the Other.

1 The title (and the view presented in this paper) expresses the opposite view of Audre Lorde’s “The master’s
tools will never dismantle the master’s house”. The difference can be put in terms of the following question; is
bias against women inherent in the tools of the tradition in a way that render it impossible to eliminate the bias? I
answer this question negatively, while I take Lorde to answer it positively. Quoted in Alison Jaggar, "Feminism
in ethics: Moral justification," in The Cambridge companion to feminism in philosophy, ed. Miranda Fricker and
2 I do not mean to imply that there should be a separate ethics for women and men. The term feminist ethics is
used in the sense that a Kantian ethics can work to solve the problems that feminists have pointed out as well as
be the basis for a ‘normal’ ethics.
3 Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding, eds., Decentering the center: Philosophy for a multicultural, postcolonial,
and feminist world (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000). Furthermore, Maria Stern discussed this
question during a lecture in Gothenburg, 29th of November, 2002.
4 Susan Okin shows that a global feminism is emerging, e.g., the recent global movement for women’s human
rights. Susan Moller Okin, "Feminism, women's human rights, and cultural differences," in Decentering the
center: Philosophy for a multicultural, postcolonial, and feminist world, ed. Sandra Harding and Uma Narayan
(Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000). Alison Jaggar writes “... I note that a global discourse community seems to be
emerging among feminists...” Alison M. Jaggar, "Globalizing feminist ethics,” in Decentering the center:
Philosophy for a multicultural, postcolonial, and feminist world, ed. Sandra Harding and Uma Narayan
Thus, it is a tension between the quest for common principles and the implications of the problem of difference.

In this paper, I make the first step in an argument that a global feminist ethics is possible. I take the terms ‘global feminist ethics’ to mean that the principles upon which this ethics is to be based need to be **universal** and **justified**, while taking the **problem of difference** into account. Hence, the challenge to feminist theory is: Are there principles that can adequately respond to the problem of difference, while still having critical potential in the sense of being universal as well as objectively justified?

I begin by explaining why a global feminist ethics needs to meet the three requirements: universal, justified, while taking the problem of difference into account. Thereafter, I argue that Immanuel Kant’s universality test can meet the three requirements. The reason that Kant’s theory can successfully meet the three requirements depends on a **structural feature**. Kant’s universality test has a certain structure that is different from the structure of a universality test that uses the idea of, for instance, a benevolent impartial spectator; the former does not rely on hypothetical role switching while the latter does. This difference in structure has often been neglected in feminist criticism of moral philosophy. This has the implication that universalism seems to be **incompatible** with taking the problem of difference into account. But, with this structural distinction in place, I will show that the problem of difference is not a problem for Kant’s version, i.e., the problem of difference does not apply to all kinds of universalistic theories, but only to some versions.

At last, I discuss an instance (the case of the racist and the sexist) of the general objection that Kant’s test fails to rule out immoral rules of conduct. I consider a solution to this problem, namely, Onora O’Neill’s ‘universalism as possible agreement’. I show that this test keeps the structural feature of Kant’s test, thus avoiding the problem of difference, and then discuss whether it can succeed in ruling out immoral rules of conduct.

**The challenge**

The first thing to note is the intense debate, in feminist theory, between proponents of a universal ethics, i.e., what is right holds across cultures, and proponents of cultural relativism, i.e., what is right is relative to the culture in question. The shift has been towards cultural relativism, which is by now the dominant position in feminist ethics. The main worry with this shift is that standards relative to

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5 I do not mean to imply that there is a necessary connection between universalism/universalistic theories and using a universality test. The idea is to use a universality test as a means of establishing universal principles/universalism in ethics.

6 Susan Moller Okin holds the former position, while Ann Ferguson holds the latter. See Ann Ferguson, "Resisting the veil of privilege: Building bridge identities as an ethico-politics of global feminism," in *Decentering the center: Philosophy for a multicultural, postcolonial, and feminist world*, ed. Sandra Harding and Uma Narayan (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), Okin, "Feminism, women's human rights, and cultural differences." in Uma Narayan and Harding, eds., *Decentering the center: Philosophy for a multicultural, postcolonial, and feminist world*. 

culture will not have sufficient critical potential: According to cultural relativism, right is determined from within the culture. But, male domination is often legitimized, more precisely rationalized, as Susan Okin has shown, with reference to culture and religion.\(^7\) Thus, to make right relative to the culture in question is presumably not sufficiently critical as a basis for a global feminist ethics.\(^8\)

The second point is that the principles need, of course, to be justified. Alison Jaggar puts it well: “The philosophical question of moral justification ... has always been central in western moral philosophy and it holds special significance for feminism, which is defined by its moral opposition to male dominance. Feminists need some means of establishing that their critiques of those actions, practices and institutions that rationalize or maintain male dominance are not merely personal opinions but instead are objectively justified.”\(^9\)

But, and this is the third point, the problem of difference limits the possibility of finding universal principles that are objectively justified. What, then, is the problem of difference? There are different versions of the problem. Sandra Lee Bartky, for instance, argues that the problem of difference should be understood as a political error and not as a cognitive error. That is, the problem is not a problem of knowledge, that is, not a cognitive problem of failing to understand the other, but it is rather a problem of outreach, that is, how to get the privileged woman to understand the other, in order for movement building to be possible.\(^10\) I view the cognitive version as a problem at the level of theory, while the political version is a problem at the level of practice. I will focus on theory, hence on the cognitive version.\(^11\)

There is a strong and weak claim of the cognitive version; the former states that certain methods are impossible in principle and the latter emphasizes the risk of false generalizations. In order to make the strong and weak claim clearer, consider the following criticism of a certain view on moral justification, namely, Richard M. Hare’s impartial spectator: “Hare considers universalizability to be the criterion of moral rationality; if a course of action can be prescribed universally, then it is objectively justified. In order to determine whether a proposed course of action is universalizable, Hare recommends that a moral deliberator should identify sympathetically with each of the parties who will be affected if the proposal is implemented, imaginatively representing to herself each party’s desires and aversions in turn.”\(^12\)

\(^7\) Okin, “Feminism, women’s human rights, and cultural differences.”
\(^8\) There is a further question of how global such an ethics can be if the standards are relative to the culture in question.
\(^9\) Jaggar, "Feminism in ethics: Moral justification.", p. 225.
\(^11\) During the course of this paper, I will use the distinction between theory and practice. At the level of feminist theory, one important aim is to find principles with critical potential. At the level of practice, one crucial aim is to find some common ground that makes it possible to unite women. I will focus on the first set of questions. Feminist theory, in general, seems to be sceptical of such a distinction. However, the distinction, besides having other advantages, will prove to have relevance for one’s understanding of the problem of difference.
\(^12\) Lynne S. Arnault, quoted in Jaggar, "Feminism in ethics: Moral justification.", p. 227
Note the structure of Hare’s theory; the impartial spectator needs to ‘put herself in the shoes’ of all the parties, that is, it requires a hypothetical role switching, or reversibility of perspectives. This reversibility of perspectives presupposes that individuals are fundamentally alike, or more precisely, sufficiently alike for the test to be possible: “Hare is explicit about the assumptions underlying his method of moral justification. One is that people are fundamentally alike…” The problem of difference challenges the assumption that individuals are fundamentally alike. There is a weak and strong claim about the implications of this challenge for methods in moral philosophy. The weak claim emphasizes the risk that the person who performs the role switching takes her own experiences as general, thus making false generalizations and thereby excluding experiences of persons that are different from her. In other words, one risks reasoning from one’s own prejudices about the other, rather than from the perspective of the other.

There is a stronger claim. For instance, Lynne S. Arnault writes: “If the epistemological consequences of differences among individuals were taken seriously … Hare’s method of moral justification would be revealed as evidently unworkable: his recommendations to adopt the standpoint of the other would be exposed as incoherent, impossible not only in practice but in principle.” Alison Jaggar’s example of sexual harassment might clarify this point: “The male manager might attempt to stand imaginatively in the shoes of his secretary but the individual wearing those shoes would be the manager, with his distinctive perceptions and values, rather than the secretary, with her different perceptions and values.” The argument seems to be that perceptions and values enters so deeply into the person that it is impossible to perform the role switching; one does not only risk reasoning from one’s own prejudices about the other (the weak claim), but one cannot reason from the perspective of the other (the strong claim). In short, the problem of difference challenges the assumption that people are fundamentally alike, and then argues that certain methods are inadequate; either because of the risk of false generalizations and/or because of impossibility in principle.

In this section, I have argued that the basis for a global feminist ethics needs to meet three criteria: universal principles that are objectively justified, while taking the cognitive version of the problem of difference (both the weak and strong claim) into account. Is there such a theory?

13 This criticism might be misguided. Hare does not presuppose a ‘thick’ notion of the self, but instead a ‘thin’ notion of the self in the sense of an indexical notion, for instance, Andersson and Persson. If this is right, then Hare does not presuppose reversibility in the sense described by Arnault. Still, the reversibility problem remains for a number of other theories, e.g. Okin’s use of Rawls’s original position and the veil of ignorance. Thus, it is still a relevant problem.
14 Ibid., p. 228
15 Ibid., p. 229.
16 Ibid., p. 229.
17 There is a third version that states that all accounts that rely on reversibility of perspectives are incoherent and hence impossible in principle. The claim that reversibility of perspectives is incoherent rests on the idea that ‘one cannot imaginatively identify with a different person and still remain oneself’. I have not been able to find the argument for the incoherence claim, and as it stands, it seems wrong to me, since it fails to make a distinction between being someone else and taking someone else’s perspective.
Feminist criticism of modern moral philosophy

But, before discussing the above question, I need to say a little bit more about the background of the problem of difference and its relation to universalism in ethics. There is a tendency in feminist criticism of modern moral philosophy to put all universalistic theories together in one class. This has the consequence that a crucial difference in structure between universalistic theories and different ways of universalizing has been neglected. I think that the problem of difference has been viewed as incompatible with universalistic theories due to this reason.

More precisely, the tendency is that feminist criticism of modern moral philosophy has viewed universalistic theories as constructing the moral point of view as involving reversibility of perspectives. For example, Seyla Benhabib writes: “This vision of the self, I want to claim, is incompatible with the very criteria of reversibility and universalizability advocated by defenders of universalism.”\(^{18}\)

The influence of the Kohlberg-Gilligan debate in feminist theory might be an explanation of why the moral point of view is constructed as involving reversibility of perspectives. Lawrence Kohlberg claims: “moral judgments involve role-taking, taking the viewpoints of the others conceived as subjects and coordinating these viewpoints…”\(^{19}\)

In short, the moral point of view is often constructed as involving reversibility of perspectives, and universalistic theories are taken to be committed to the idea of reversibility of perspectives. This has led to a failure to distinguish between different kinds of universalistic theories, namely, theories that use a universality test by an appeal to the idea of reversibility and theories that do not. The implication is that some objections, for instance, the problem of difference, are taken to apply to all universalistic theories, objections that, in fact, apply only to some theories.\(^{20}\)

But, there is one universalistic theory that does not use reversibility of perspectives and hence is not vulnerable to the problem of difference.

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\(^{19}\) Kohlberg quoted in Ibid., p. 159. I surely do not mean to say that Kohlberg is a feminist, but instead that Kohlberg’s view and the influence of the Kohlberg-Gilligan debate in feminist theory might explain why reversibility of perspectives has been seen as the moral point of view.

\(^{20}\) This implication can be seen in an article called “Feminism in ethics: Moral justification”, where Alison Jaggar discuss some recent feminist contributions to the philosophical debate on moral justification. The example she gives of the analytic canon is Moore, Hare, Rawls, and Habermas. Note that a Kant-inspired theory is not on the list of the analytic canon. Explanations for this might be that she is considering recent challenges, or that Rawls is taken to represent a Kant-inspired theory. My point is that this exclusion leads to a failure to notice that much of the criticism considered in that article does not apply to a Kantian theory, due to the specific structure of Kantian theories. For instance; the criticism of an appeal to intuitions (Moore) and the criticism of being vulnerable to the problem of difference (Hare).
The Categorical Imperative

I make a short summary of Kant’s universality test in order to show its structure, that is, to show how it differs in kind from a universality test that involves reversibility of perspectives. Kant states the Categorical Imperative in five different ways, but I will use the Formula of Universal Law ‘Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law’ and the Formula of the Law of Nature ‘Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature’.

The Formula of Universal Law has two aspects, one is that we act on maxims and the other is the universality test. A maxim is a principle on which the subject acts, it is an underlying principle by which we guide and control our more specific intentions. Maxims can fail the universality test in two ways, by contradiction in conception or by contradiction in the will. Kant explains: “We must be able to will that a maxim of our action should become a universal law – this is the general canon for all moral judgement of action. Some actions are so constituted that their maxim cannot even be conceived as a universal law of nature without contradiction, let alone be willed as what ought to become one. In the case of others we do not find this inner impossibility, but it is still impossible to will that their maxim should be raised to the universality of a law of nature, because such a will would contradict itself.”

Kant’s example of the maxim of making a false promise illustrates how this maxim is not universalizable due to contradiction in conception, that is, we cannot conceive of the maxim of making a false promise in a world where making false promises has become a universal law. Kant explains “For the universality of a law that every one believing himself to be in need can make any promise he pleases with the intention not to keep it would make promising, and the very purpose of promising, itself impossible, since no one would believe he was being promised anything [...]”.

Kant gives the cases of neglecting to develop one’s talents and refusing to help others as examples of contradiction in the will. The maxim of neglecting to develop one’s talents is conceivable as a universal law, that is, it is not a contradiction in conception, but we cannot will a world where no one develops their talents, i.e., it is a contradiction in the will. It is a contradiction in the will to neglect to develop one’s talents, since “as a rational being he necessarily wills that all his powers should be developed, since they serve him, and are given him, for all sorts of possible ends.” Thus, by using Kant’s universality test, one is able to rule out the following maxims: false promises, refusing to help others, and neglecting to develop one’s talents.

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21 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals.*, 421
22 Ibid., 421
24 Kant, *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals.*, 424
25 Ibid., 422
26 Ibid., 423
Can this test be the basis for a global feminist ethics? This test has several advantages. At first, this test has the potential of being universal in scope, which means that it can avoid lapsing into cultural relativism. Thus, this test is able to criticize certain practices that are judged internally to be in accordance with the norms of the culture. Secondly, the question of justification can be answered by showing that the critique of certain practices, e.g., deception, is not merely an expression of personal disliking, but those practices could not be done by all. Hence, it is not merely a personal opinion that these practices are wrong. Thirdly, the test can adequately respond to both the strong and weak claim of the cognitive version of the problem of difference. My idea is this: Instead of an endless debate of whether it is possible to take another’s perspective to a sufficient degree, i.e., sufficient to avoid the practical difficulty and/or principal impossibility, one can sidestep the whole problem by using another kind of method, namely, Kant’s.

To make this clearer, contrast Hare’s method to the categorical imperative.27 The former requires that one take another agent’s perspective, that is, reversibility of perspectives. Hence, when it comes to those kind of methods, one needs to ‘put oneself in the shoes’ of another person. But, the categorical imperative does not require reversibility of perspectives. Instead, one simply asks; what if everyone did that? Another way to put this point about difference in structure is that the former test uses the idea of universalizability and reversibility, while the latter uses the idea of universalizability as consistency as constituting the moral point of view.

This difference is crucial; it actually means that one can avoid the problem of difference in both its strong and weak version: Kant’s test does not rely on reversibility and thus the claim that the problem of difference makes it impossible to take someone else’s perspective is not a problem at all. In other words, the strong claim simply does not apply. What about the weak claim? The weak claim does not apply either; the risk of reasoning from one’s own prejudices, rather than from the perspective of the other is beside the point. Again, this is due to structural feature; Kant’s test relies on the question; ‘what if everyone did that?’ and not on the idea of reversibility of perspectives. Thus, the risk does not apply.28 In other words, the problem of difference has been eliminated from the level of theory. Another way to put this point is to say that only theories that try to attain the moral point of view by reversibility are vulnerable to the problem of difference. Thus, by constructing the moral point of view without the requirement of reversibility, one is not vulnerable to the problem of difference. Therefore, Kant’s test is compatible with the problem of difference.

In sum, I have argued that Kant’s test meets the criteria of being universal, justified, while not being vulnerable to the problem of difference. Hence, I have made the first step in an argument that a global feminist ethics, on a Kantian basis, is possible.

27 The golden rule is another universality test that uses the idea of reversibility of perspectives.
28 The problem of false generalizations can appear elsewhere, e.g., Kant did not regard women as having the same moral standing as men. But those false generalizations need to be corrected at the level where they appear. My point is that when it comes to the method itself, the false generalizations do not appear in Kant’s test in the same sense as they do in Hare’s method, or, for Okin using Rawls’ veil of ignorance as a critical device.
Objections

But, one might object, the problem of difference has been eliminated, rather than taken into account. The point could be put this way; this basis appeals only to the generalized and not to the concrete other, thus difference between individuals is totally neglected. My answer builds on the idea of a moral threshold: Kant’s test should be seen as specifying a moral threshold, i.e., this is the minimum requirement of morality. Above the threshold, one is free to treat persons differently. In other words, the appeal is to sameness at first, but then, after the threshold is met, there is considerable scope for taking difference, or the concrete other, into account. In short, there is considerable space or scope in the theory for taking the concrete other into account.29 But, the objector continues, you have completely eliminated difference at the level of theory construction. My answer to this is a ‘bullet biter strategy’; true, the idea was to eliminate difference at the level of theory construction, but this is not a ‘bad elimination’; difference can and will be taken into account after the moral threshold is met.

However, the objector continues, it is only a certain version of the problem of difference that has been eliminated or avoided, but at a deeper level, the problem of difference remains: all methods that rely on monological reasoning risk making or make false generalizations, since they are built on certain assumptions, assumptions that are claimed to be general, while in fact they are modeled on a certain type of agent, namely, a white western male. In other words, at this deeper level, the problem of difference certainly applies to Kant’s ethics.

One cannot sidestep this version of the problem of difference in the same way as has been described in the previous sections. But there might be a reply: Even though this version of the problem of difference applies, Kant’s test is less vulnerable to it than other universalistic theories since his test rests on fewer assumptions.30 Furthermore, it seems exaggerated and unreasonable to state that individuals are fundamentally different to the degree that it is an example of a false generalization to build on Kant’s thin notion of agency, e.g., the assumption that agents are interested in their own happiness.

But, building on few assumptions makes Kant’s test open to another problem, namely, the objection that it fails to rule out immoral maxims. John Stuart Mill argued, famously, that Kant failed to rule out ‘the most immoral rules of conduct’. If Mill is right, then this test cannot, obviously, function as the basis of a global feminist ethics. Consider Mill’s objection: “But when he begins to deduce from this precept any of the actual duties of morality, he fails, almost grotesquely, to show that there would be any contradiction, any logical (not to say physical) impossibility, in the adoption by all

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29 Contrast this to utilitarianism. Here, treating the other as concrete would be instrumental, or indirect, i.e., it is only right if it would maximize happiness. Thus, there is no scope for a direct recognition of the concrete other in utilitarianism.

30 T. M. Scanlon’s idea of ‘reasonable rejection’ and Susan Moller Okin’s modification of Rawls’ original position rest on a ‘would’ form, thus is more open to this version of the problem of difference. That is, the idea of reasonable requires more assumptions than the idea of rational, or possible.
rational beings of the most outrageously immoral rules of conduct. All he shows is that the consequences of their universal adoption would be such as no one would choose to incur.”\textsuperscript{31}

Can the universality test rule out ‘the most outrageous immoral rules of conduct’? One needs to consider some examples to see if Mill is right. To begin with, take the intuitively immoral maxims of deception and coercion. Deception can be ruled out by the universality test, since it has one presupposition that will be undermined if deception were to become a universal law, namely trust. But, when one considers coercion, the case is different. If I make it my maxim to coerce others when in sufficient power, this maxim does not have a presupposition that will be undermined if the maxim becomes a universal law. Therefore, a maxim of coercing others when in sufficient power can be conceived as acted upon in a world where this was a universal law, and thus passes the contradiction in conception test.

Derek Parfit has raised a similar objection. Imagine a white racist trying to decide if the following maxim is universalizable: ‘White people should coerce black people.’ Unfortunately, this maxim passes both the contradiction of conception and the contradiction in the will test: There is no contradiction in conception since the maxim does not have a presupposition that would be undermined if it were to become a universal law. And there is no contradiction in the will since it is not in conflict with Kant’s notion of agency.

A parallel problem arises for a feminist ethics, namely, “the problem of the sexist”, claiming; ‘Men should coerce women’. This objection shows that Kant’s test fails to rule out immoral rules of conduct and hence cannot be used as the basis for a global feminist ethics.

**The dilemma**

Does one need to, despite the three advantages described above, i.e., universal, objectively justified and solving the problem of difference, give up here? One might suspect that it is this very structure of Kant’s theory, i.e., the structure that made it possible to avoid the problem of difference that makes it so vulnerable to the problem of the racist and the sexist. Thus, a dilemma arises: Either one solves the problem of difference by appealing to the structural feature of Kant’s theory (few assumptions and the non-reversibility), but then the problem of the racist and the sexist arises, or one solves the problem of the racist and the sexist by using the idea of reversibility and more assumptions, but then the problem of difference arises.\textsuperscript{32}

In order to solve this dilemma, one needs to show that there is no necessary connection between a Kantian ethics and the failure to rule out these kinds of objections. That is, in order to find a Kantian basis for a global feminist ethics, one needs to show that there is a theory that keeps the structure of Kant’s theory, while solving the problem of the racist and the sexist.

\textsuperscript{31} John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism, liberty, and representative government.*, p. 5

\textsuperscript{32} See page 11, footnote 33.
The shift to Kantian ethics

A possible solution to the dilemma is to make a shift from Kant’s ethics to Kantian ethics. For instance, might Onora O’Neill’s universality test be able to meet the above challenge? O’Neill begins with Kant’s Categorical Imperative, more precisely the Formula of Universal Law, and constructs a different universality test out of it: What principles could potentially interacting agents agree upon? O’Neill explains that the idea of potentially interacting agents is implicit in the Formula of Universal Law; when you consider what maxims can be universal laws you are already considering a plurality of potentially interacting agents. The word ‘could’, instead of ‘would’, refers to what principles it could be possible for them to agree upon. This is crucial since it means that she keeps the structural feature of Kant’s test.

When O’Neill applies her test to maxims of coercion, violence, and victimizing, she argues that these principles could not be adopted by any plurality of potentially interacting agents: “Equally, a policy of coercion which seeks to destroy or undercut the agency and independence of at least some others for at least some time cannot be universally held. Those who are victims of coercion cannot (while victims) also act on the principles on which their coercers act. Equally, a principle of violence which damages the agency of some others cannot be universally acted on. Put quite generally, principles of action that hinge on victimizing some, so on destroying, paralysing, or undercutting their capacities for action for at least some time and in some ways, can be adopted by some but cannot be adopted as fundamental principles by any plurality.”

Now, it can be seen that the idea behind her universality test is the requirement that only principles that agents could agree upon pass the test. We have seen that it is only possible for agents to agree on principles that could be shared by all. Thus, the idea of her test is universality as possible agreement.

Can O’Neill’s test solve the problem of the sexist? Of course, by introducing the idea of plural agents and an agreement, one is able to claim that women would not agree to such a principle. But with an answer like that, one loses the formal advantages of a Kantian test. Thereby, one opens up for the problem of difference. Instead, one would like to show that they could not agree to such a principle.

Does O’Neill’s test succeed in doing that? In other words, does it succeed in ruling out immoral maxims by using a ‘could’ form? One needs to take a closer look at her test in order to answer this question. She writes: “No plurality can choose to live by principles that aim to destroy, undercut or erode the agency (of whatever determine shape) of some of its members. Those who become victims on action on such principles merely do not act on their oppressor’s principles; they

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34 T. M. Scanlon’s idea of ‘reasonable rejection’ rests on a ‘would’ form, thus is open to this problem. That is, the idea of reasonable requires much more assumptions than the idea of rational, or possible, and thus the philosopher risks making false generalizations as well as reasoning from her own perspective rather than the perspectives of the other agents. What is possible for them to agree upon does not require reasoning from the other agent’s perspective and rests on fewer assumptions about the other.
cannot do so. Victims cannot share the principles on which others destroy or limit their capacities to act on principles.35 The idea seems to be that one could not agree to principles that undercut agency, and thus oppression, coercion and victimizing are ruled out. What about the problem of the sexist? One interpretation is that women could not agree to share the principle proposed by the sexist, since they could not act on principles if their agency is undercut. But this interpretation requires a rather extreme view of coercion; surely one could still act on some principles even if one is coerced. Another interpretation is that the coerced could not act on the same principle as their coercers.

Many problems remain: It is unclear how the test is to be interpreted. And even if it might succeed, given a certain interpretation of the test, in solving the problem of the sexist, general problems remain; some immoral principles that are not based on undercutting agency pass the rest, e.g., a principle that reserve pleasurable experiences to men and some harmless or innocent principles that undercut agency does not pass the test. Hopefully, there is a way to develop O’Neill’s test into solving these kinds of problems and thus finding a more solid basis for a global feminist ethics. Still, the advantage remains; a Kantian ethics fares better than other universalistic theories when it comes to certain versions of the problem of difference, and if I am right, it can actually solve it.

Conclusion

I have made the first step in an argument that a global feminist ethics is possible. I began by showing that such an ethics must meet three requirements; universal and justified while taking the problem of difference into account. I argued that Kant’s universality test could meet the three requirements.

The more specific aim was to show that one universalistic theory was compatible with the problem of difference. The compatibility argument was made by highlighting the distinction between universalistic theories that use the idea of reversibility of perspectives and theories that do not. This distinction was shown to be crucial since the problem of difference rests on the practical difficulty and/or the principal impossibility of the reversibility of perspectives. The solution, then, to the problem of difference was to show that universalizing does not necessarily involve reversibility.36 This was done with reference to Kant’s universality test: This test does not use the idea of reversibility, thus it could avoid both the strong and weak claim of the cognitive version of the problem of difference. Hence, Kant’s theory, and thereby one universalistic theory, was shown to be compatible with the problem of difference.37

But, one problem with Kant’s test was that the maxim proposed by the sexist; ‘men should coerce women’ was universalizable. I viewed this difficulty as a specific instance of a following general problem; the very structural feature of Kant’s test that made it immune to the problem of

35 O’Neill, Constructions of reason: Explorations of Kant’s practical philosophy., p. 213.
36 Wlodek Rabinowicz pointed this out to me.
37 Another implication is that one does not need to choose between methods of Hare’s kind with the risk of false generalizations and an interactive universalism with its practical difficulties of attaining a domination-free discourse, since there is a different kind of universalism, that is, Kant’s version.
difference, was the very same structure that made it unable to rule out immoral maxims. I sketched a solution, namely, Onora O’Neill’s test of universality as possible agreement. This test kept the structural feature of Kant’s theory, thus being immune to the problem of difference, while it might be able to solve the problem of the sexist. The point was to try to show that a Kantian basis was not necessarily too thin to rule out immoral maxims. Hence, that a Kantian basis might still be used for a global feminist ethics.

If one could modify and develop O’Neill’s test into being successful in ruling out immoral maxims, and thus defend a Kantian basis for a global feminist ethics, then this means, ironically, that the solution would be taken from the severely criticized Western tradition of moral philosophy (“the master’s tools”). But, more importantly, it would show that a universal ethics is compatible with the problem of difference. Thus, that a global feminist ethics, in this respect, is possible.

Postscript
This paper is under construction. I have a few new suggestions on how to solve the dilemma: The first is to shift to another Kantian ethics (e.g. Christine Korsgaard) and state that the different formulations of the categorical imperative have different functions. Thereafter, I need to investigate whether this would be a thick enough basis for a global feminist ethics, e.g. the means-end formulation could serve as the basis for a right-based ethics. This means that I need to show that the other formulations do not rely on reversibility.

The second option is to stick to Kant’s ethics, but supplement it with a prior restriction (such as that the maxims should not be based on ‘false reasoning’) on maxims, that is, a restriction that is put in place before one tries to universalise maxims. Of course, then I need to show that this is not simply an ad hoc solution.

A different, but important, thing to note is that Kantian universalism fares better than the other two main universalistic accounts put forward in the feminist debate, namely, Martha C. Nussbaum’s capabilities approach and Susan Moller Okin’s use of Rawls’ veil of ignorance. The idea is this: Nussbaum’s account have difficulties with the deeper problem of difference since her proposal rests on more assumptions about the agent than Kant’s (he only states two necessary features of a rational agent), while Okin’s account relies on reversibility and thus have difficulties with the first formulation of the problem of difference. And, as we have seen, Kant does not.
References
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