Doing Philosophy as a (Kantian) Pariah

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Pariahs

Hannah Arendt usefully describes those of us—women and minorities—who are fighting our way into public spaces we historically have been excluded from and who consciously strive to own our status, as "pariahs" or outcasts in these spaces, including by trying to make the door wider for others. In this essay, I speak to some of the complexities of pariahhood as a professional condition today and argue in an Arendtian spirit that it is something we should center and explore rather than hide as we develop our philosophical thinking—especially when we do public-facing philosophy.[1] I explain how Kant's systematic philosophy appeals to me and my own contingent foundations, how the workings of my philosophical mind are likely informed by my lived phenomenology. Centering pariahhood today—when simply doing philosophy as a pariah, let alone with a focus on the lives of pariahs, is yet again under violent attack—is, I propose, especially important. Thinking through the relationship between our philosophical practices and our contingent foundations will allow us to ground ourselves more firmly and help us to more wisely value, hold on to, and own who we are and what we are all about. It might also contribute to the betterment of our philosophical practice as a whole.

The Curious Case of Kantian Pariahs

I am walking in Kantian landscapes of the philosophy of the isms (racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc.) made possible by such intellectual giants as Hannah Arendt (1906–1975), Onora O'Neill (1941–), Angela Davis (1944–), Barbara Herman (1945–), Adrian Piper (1948–), Charles Mills (1951–2021), and Pauline Kleingeld (1962–).[2] This incredible experience is humbling, exciting, and deeply fulfilling, all at once. Like these giants, who made me philosophically possible—and perhaps some of you reading this—I experience Kant's philosophy as fundamentally empowering for thinking about human morality as well as issues of oppression. And many of us women and minority philosophers do so even though Kant was undeniably racist, sexist, and heterosexist: He is guilty of saying horrible things about not only others but also us, those we love, and even, in my view, himself.[3]

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[1] The contrasting concept for Arendt is that a "parvenu," someone who represents the historically excluded groups, who are let in, and who strive for acceptance by the powerful—what we sometimes call the "token" (gay, Black, disabled etc.) friend. We may see her *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* (trans. R. and C. Winston, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) as offering an analysis of a parvenu, of someone who desperately tries to fit in and be accepted rather taking on the struggle of learning how to own her pariah existence. Perhaps we can also identify a third category in the profession of philosophy, namely scholars who have pariah identities–women and minorities–but whose research interests do not include addressing any pariah topics directly. Speaking to complexities regarding this third group's lived phenomenology would obviously take me too far beyond the interests of this essay, but more importantly, it is probably a job only they can do well.

[2] For an entrance into their work, see, for example: Arendt's (1943) "We Refugees," in (2007) *The Jewish Writings*, ed. J. Kohn and R. H. Feldman (Schocken Books), pp. 264–274; O'Neill's (1996) "Women's rights: whose obligations?" in (2000) *Bounds of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 97–114; Davis' (1981) *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House), Herman's (1993). "Could It Be Worth Thinking about Kant on Marriage?", in L. M. Antony and C. E. Witt (eds.), *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity* (Cambridge: Westview Press), pp. 53–72; Piper's (1991) "Kantian Rationality and Xenophobia" in (ed.) R. M. Schott, *Feminist Interpretations of Immanuel Kant* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press); Mills' (1997) *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press); and Kleingeld's (1993) "The Problematic Status of Gender-Neutral Language in the History of Philosophy: The Case of Kant" *The Philosophical Forum* 25 (2): pp. 134–150) and (2007) "Kant's Second Thoughts on Race" (*The Philosophical Quarterly* 57: pp. 573–592.)

[3] I explore this topic in my *Sex, Love, and Gender: A Kantian Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

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It is thus a little puzzling that so many of us women or minority thinkers go to Kant's works to find resources to do what we can philosophically to both understand our lives and histories and work toward a better future. Characteristically, as we do, we also attempt to hold both Kant and the Kantian tradition to account for their bad isms. Sometimes we do this by using Kant's ideas to maintain that both he and later Kant-inspired thinkers could and should have done better, before doing what we can to transform the Kantian tradition into a better version of itself. Relatedly, although we each defend different Kantian positions and ways of doing Kantian philosophy, I experience my fellow pariahs, both historical and contemporary, as embodying Kant's encouragement to Sapere Aude!—to take on the challenge of daring to become wiser.

But Why Kant, Anyway?

Speaking only for myself, I do Kantian philosophy from the point of view of someone who identifies as a LGBTQIA+ woman and who experiences each person's innate right to freedom as existentially fundamental and trustworthy. And I believe Kant is right that hope for a better future is intimately connected to respecting and realizing human dignity.

Exactly why I experience this Kantian philosophical grounding as existentially critical and trustworthy is a lot less clear to me. Do you know why I do? And what would you say about yourself in these regards?

Although I do not know the answer to why I find core tenets of Kant's philosophy existentially critical and trustworthy, my current judgment is that our choices regarding philosophical starting point, philosophical foundation, and general approach to doing philosophy are fundamentally contingent insofar as they depend on what kind of person we are, the kinds of (philosophical) minds we have, the historical societies we find ourselves in, and our social location in those societies. Despite our penchant for experiencing and understanding our own philosophical approach as obvious or necessary, it is, in part, an expression of who we are (philosophically), how we are in the world, and the particular historical conditions we grew up and live in. Thus, it may be useful for us, at this point in historical time, to think through these kinds of issues, on our own and together to the extent we can do so safely. I believe that becoming more self-aware in these regards may be healthy for our profession and for each and all of us who are unified in our desire to transform our inherited philosophical practice. In our different ways, we are all looking for ways to make our profession more philosophically creative and deeply fun, more vigorous and less dogmatic, less oppressive and suffocating, and much more philosophically inclusive and effective in our efforts to fight oppression and create free societies. And I believe becoming more reflective about our contingent starting points and needs can support these efforts; they can help us become more emotionally flexible and open. I also believe that doing philosophy in this way is a contribution to society at large—a counterweight to the destructive forces and a loyal friend to those fighting the good fight—and I believe it might aid each of us as we seek to become wiser about what we are doing.

Doing Philosophy in Our Different Ways Together

Therefore, I hold that we should each do philosophy—Kantian or not—in the ways we find best, strive to become appreciative of our different ways of doing it, and then trust that our philosophical practice as a whole becomes better and wiser as a result of our diverse efforts. I also believe our philosophical practice as a whole is better if no one way dominates. I know first-personally the temptation of wanting everyone to do philosophy *my* way—as I'm sure you do too—but I also believe that transforming our inherited academic practices involves learning to be around this temptation in better ways than those that continue to dominate

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in our philosophical tradition. It is, in my view, a significant problem that in our inherited academic philosophical practices and institutions, socioeconomic power and fame tend to simply track and encourage the practice of obtaining publications, citations, and disciples. One result of this is that philosophical thinking has become too dogmatic; too directed at pleasing those who are like us or who are currently powerful, popular, or trendy; and not as creative, deep, or powerful as it could be. And for those of us who inherit theories with much social power, as Kantians do, it is especially important to think through why we are drawn to these theories and to let others help keep us honest as we develop them. But regardless of starting point, we can help each other become wiser about why we do philosophy in the ways we do.

For example, some think, including you perhaps, that given how bad the world actually is, it is naive or a waste of time to keep working with ideal, systematic (Kantian) theory in the ways I do, ways that focus on the ideal (on how society ought to be) and the systematicity of the theory (how the philosophical principles of the theory fit together as a whole). For me, in contrast, developing ideal and systematic theory feels necessary. My current hypothesis is that systematic philosophical theories of various kinds—Kant's is not the only one I really like—because it best fits how my philosophical mind works. And one reason for this is that my mind looks for the principles with the greatest explanatory power, that are consistent with what I have good reasons to believe, and that can be unified into one coherent set. And I trust that discovering an incoherent set—my own or those of others—is an important source of correction for how I am faring.

What about my draw to ideal theory? One reason ideal theory is part of my philosophical work could simply be that it follows from my natural temperament. Regardless of how gloomy things look, I find it most meaningful to seek ways to make our world and our societies better. In Kant's theory of the "natural temperaments" (or what we might call "personalities") I'm "sanguine" (optimistic and easygoing)—and not "melancholic" (reflective and careful), "choleric" (dramatic) or "phlegmatic" (always moving slowly).[4] This also means, Kant thinks, that if your natural temperament is, say, phlegmatic, you probably don't naturally like, let alone love, my way of doing philosophy; your intuitions are likely to find me superficial, scary, or just annoyingly joyful. Also, without struggling with the question of which directions are better (which ideal theory gives us), I find it difficult to describe my current reality with sufficient precision. For others, the main or most important philosophical work is done not through ideal theory but rather the narrative, through the use of real-world examples, through grounding in the empirical sciences, etc. For yet others, the primary aim of philosophy must be to explore the history, limitations, self-deceptions internal to particular existing theories or philosophical traditions, while others strive to improve these theories (Kantianism, virtue theory, Stoicism, etc.). And so on. In other words, unless you happen to share some of my contingent traits, such as my sanguine temperament, you're likely to find my way of doing philosophy a little annoying, uncomfortable, or naive without perhaps knowing exactly why. Indeed, I found Kant extremely annoying the first times I read him; in fact, I still don't think I really like him. Kant has so many prejudices; his kindness is wanting; he is not curious and vulnerable in the open-minded ways I love; he's too arrogant; and he is not very fun, belly-ticklingly witty, let alone belly-laughingly funny or delightfully playful. I could go on! And I am quite certain he would not like me either. And yet here I am. And I find in his systematic works

[4] For Kant, each of these temperaments come with their natural advantages and disadvantages with regard to the general challenge of developing moral character, let alone becoming wise. For more on my take on this aspect of Kant, see *Sex, Love, and Gender*.

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an extremely reliable philosophical friend whose ideas I can work with. And here you are too.

What I am confident about, then, is that I work with Kant's philosophy not because I think it is the only good theory. Or because I think my systematic, historically informed and engaged way of doing philosophy appeals to everyone. Or because I think Kant's, or any Kantian's, writings are without their serious shortcomings, failures, and prejudices. I don't, in other words, work in the Kantian framework because I always trust Kant-the-man. Or other scholars who also identify as Kantian. Or the Kantian philosophical tradition. Or myself. Rather, I experience myself as building on Kant's systematic philosophical framework of freedom because I find this approach to be best for me. I experience this way of doing philosophy as existentially trustworthy, including now when the destructive forces are yet again on the rise and winning.

On the Need to Transform Our Inherited Philosophical Tradition

Although many of us who come to academic philosophy as women or minority thinkers find ourselves drawn to systematic theory, we also find the general, systematic moral theories currently available in the philosophical canon going back to ancient Greece inadequate for theorizing our lives. A main problem is that current theories fail to account for contingency, including the perspectives of women and minority thinkers, in such a way that they become useful and transformative for our particular, inherited historical societies. Further, based on our experiences with the dominant philosophical scholarly practices, we find them in need of transformation so as to live up to their own ideals of academic freedom by providing solid, reliable academic homes for each and all regardless of our origins, identities, and backgrounds. Hence, the prominent available theories are not experienced as inviting us to partake in the shared human, philosophical project of envisioning and providing hope for a better, freer world.

Thus, for example, although I admire, learn from, and engage with the powerful and exciting classical, (early) modern, systemic, influential, and canonical theories of justice—those of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant are my all-time favorites—in my teaching and works, I also know that they do not have all the resources I need to understand central complexities of justice. Hence, I also seek out, explore, work with, and teach the brilliant and critical ideas of women or minority thinkers traditionally excluded from this philosophical canon as I rework Kantian theory. In my view, many philosophers—especially younger ones—who experience the world from privileged points of view—cis, straight, White,[5] men—also want to make our inherited profession more diverse. Like us, they want this not only because excluding women and minorities is wrong and unfair but also because doing so limits how good the philosophy can be. And hence they too have started to read and learn from the works of pariah thinkers. In my view, this is one way to contribute to the transformation of not only our tradition but also our contemporary, systematic theories. At the moment, we see very many different ways of trying to do this and the jury is out, for now, on which particular kind(s) of approach(es) will be most successful at doing this necessary work of transformation. This is not to say that all approaches are equally good. In my judgment, insofar as we inherit privilege and we are unwilling to take on the full unruly and thorny complexity of that inheritance, we tend to think we can simply add some texts to our syllabi when we delve into applied topics and all is well. If we (the privileged) do—if we, say add some Angela Davis or Charles Mills to our syllabi—we can keep teaching and doing research on the

[5] I capitalize both White and Black with reference to racialization so as to make it explicit that I'm referring to the Black/White racialization internal to European colonialization.

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canonical texts like before. There is nothing, really, to learn from Davis or Mills beyond letting them help us do Kantian philosophy without Kant's prejudices; no deep learning or listening is necessary. In my view, if overcoming the challenges of the bad isms was this easy insofar as we inherit privilege, the problems would have been solved a long time ago.

Different Burdens, Shared Struggle

In recent years, Sarah Broadie and Bruce Rosenstock (in conversation) have helped me realize that it may be productive for us to try to understand that there are different kinds of heaviness associated with different kinds of oppressed lives. One way I have explored these aspects of my lived phenomenology—the way being me feels and is in the world—is with the help of W. E. B. Du Bois's theories of double consciousness and of being a problem as well as Simone de Beauvoir's theory of women being the "other" or "second" sex. Du Bois says that as a Black person in the US in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, he always experiences himself both on his own terms *and* from the point of view of the White world, or with a "double consciousness" (Du Bois [1903] 1988, 364–65). He also describes how the White world always relates to him as "a problem" who is, at best, to be shown pity (363). Beauvoir ([1949] 2011) similarly argues that women are aware of themselves as the "other" or "second" sex—as an object whose purpose is to please men and whose delicate nature makes them unable to take care of themselves—in contrast to men as *the*, the main, or the *first* sex, whose aim is to set and pursue ends of their own and manage the world (their families, society, public institutions). Insofar as women assert themselves as subjects with lives of their own to live, the oppressive social forces will treat them as a problem that can only be solved by putting them in their place or else destroying them.[6]

Leaning on the theories of Du Bois and Beauvoir yet transforming them so that they can help me think through my lived phenomenology as an LGBTQIA+ woman, I cannot remember a time when just being my sexual, gendered self has not been a problem and, at best, deserving of pity. Although I was the center of much admiration in my childhood, the fact of tomboy, nonconforming Helga was also always perceived as a problem for those around me—from family embarrassment that I wasn't cute, sweet, and nice like the other girls to worries about how someone like me would fare in the world—and for myself in that I couldn't figure myself out (with no guidance and inspiring role models around). Commonly too, letting me in was, I judge, often experienced as an act of pity. Once I did start to figure myself out, I encountered the serious problem of how to be me in the world safely. I always knew that simply and confidently presenting my own sexual, gendered self to the world was always also dangerous; indeed, it still is even in those parts of the world where we queers now do have role models for being LGBTQIA+ and there are rights to protect us legally. To live and to flourish, I had to learn to manage and negotiate the whole world with regard to my LGBTQIA+ self: to relate to how the world sees me and to try to find, first, safe, and then, flourishing ways to be me within it. And given my identity as an LGBTQIA+ woman, this problem is likely never to go away in the world—a fact that requires me to continuously manage it and yet live in ways consistent with a hope for a better future. I also had to learn that I should strive for things other than pity in my relations with others, including straight others, that the experience of being let in or letting others into one's innermost circles reciprocally should be experienced as an honor and an incredible gift. And that these relationships should never proceed as a ("dirty") secret to be hidden away from the world—a common LGBTQIA+ experience in our relations with

[6] I explore these and other themes related to Kant and intersectionality in "A Kantian Account of Intersectionality." In (2024) *Dignity, Freedom and Justice*, edited by Reiko Gotoh, pp. 147–168. Singapore: Springer.

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people who present in cis, straight ways to the world and to themselves: they are just exploring fun, fluid experiences, after all, when they engage with us.

The above also means, as Broadie and Rosenstock also helped me see, that women and minority thinkers who live subjected to racism plausibly experience a different—importantly: not a more or less, but just a different—kind of heaviness than LGBTQIA+ thinkers. This type of heaviness has a lot to do with not only one's own oppression but also that of previous generations. For example, like women, Jewish persons around the world, Black persons in the United States, or people racialized as "Oriental"[7] feel the heaviness not only of their own oppression but also that of their parents (mothers), their grandparents (grandmothers), and so on for generations. Cisism and heterosexism, in contrast, do not track families generationally; members of the LGBTQIA+ community "pop up" arbitrarily in all kinds of families all over the planet. Thus their landlessness. Rather than intergenerational heaviness, the LGBTQIA+ identity is instead distinguished by a heavy sense of being all alone and lonely, of starting from being unknown and unknowable to self and others, and of the dangers being all around oneself. Indeed, even members of your own family, your local community, or your religious or public authority could be the ones who oppress, abandon, or kill you because you are you and because of the ways in which you love and want to be loved and experience the beautiful, the sublime, yourself, and the world as utterly amazing. I believe that this aspect of LGBTQIA+ lives may be shared with disabled persons—and, so, we and our inherited families also share this complexity surrounding related failures. When parents are unable to love their LGBTQIA+ or disabled children, they fail to protect their children from violence perpetrated not only by others by also by themselves. Conversely, these LGBTQIA+ and disabled children are threatened by not only the world outside the home but also people in the home, and these children start with a profound experience of being unlovable, and the parents experience themselves as profoundly incapable of parental love.

The point of this reflection is, of course, not to encourage us to start developing a taxology of various kinds of privilege and oppression; that would be exactly the wrong inference to draw. Rather, my proposal is that learning to think through and feel these different aspects of ourselves—these patterns of our lived phenomenology—may be one resource we can use to understand ourselves better and fare in wiser ways, as human beings and as scholars. Relatedly, one reason that I experience the right to freedom and each person's dignity as existentially important, I hypothesize, is related to this deep sense of being alone: I want and can only trust a theory that is experienced as a friend by anyone whose reality involves such a fundamental sense of loneliness. Relatedly, it is also not unlikely that those who do not know the LGBTQIA+ experience first-personally will find this emphasis on each person (rather than on, say, community) a little strange, at least at first and before they remember where I write from and also need my writings to reach.

Families, Cultures, and Countries

Let me include one more reflection on my contingent starting point that I believe is determining for questions of how I experience life's complexity—namely, the effects of our first years in multifaceted and complicated families, cultures, and states. Let me try to tell this story in this way: The fact that I am today a professor of philosophy is probably statistically impossible. After all, I did not grow up particularly privileged nor in the world of academia. Norway (my country of origin) only became an independent country—after seceding from Sweden—in 1905, and the country was extremely hard hit by World War II.

[7] I'm using this phrase in recognition of Edward Said's groundbreaking work here, such as his (1978) *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books).

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Parts of my family were severely affected by the Nazi occupation, leaving us with unruly—debilitating and exhausting—intergenerational trauma.[8] Only after Norway discovered oil in the 1960s did it become a relatively wealthy country—a wealth that, in part thanks to the efforts of strong women's and labor movements, was channeled into building a public infrastructure (a "welfare state"), including institutions of public healthcare, public education, affordable private housing, etc. Hence, I belong to the first generation of Norwegians who had access to free public education (up to and including a master's degree)—which I took advantage of to the fullest. Also, without Canada providing me with the academic and financial resources I needed to get my PhD there, in Toronto, my judgment is that I would not be a professor of philosophy today.

Growing up in a mountainous fjord country in the north of Europe post-1970 meant that I spent an incredible amount of time—from childhood onward—hiking, skiing, and swimming in cold water. These activities are among the most reliable, sublime experiences of my life, and they are internally connected to what I—seriously jokingly—call my deeply heathen self. And to make matters more complex, the core activities on Osterøy, the island where I grew up, were sports, especially soccer, and playing and dancing to music, including folk music, of course. These activities involve a way of being in the world that those in its more "cultured" or "modern" corners, including Europe and much Kant scholarship, tend to think of as "raw," "uncivilized," and "barbaric"—as having little to negative value. Indeed, many of thinkers in our tradition think that my deep, "uncivilized" love of nature makes me uncultured or raw or natural or animalistic in ways they deemed problematic of Indigenous populations. Although I travel the world with white privilege, these aspects of me refers to the bits of me that are not "White" (with a capital W) despite my pale skin color and birthplace. And it is one of the aspects of me that I value the deepest; it has made available and does open up some of the most important and valuable aspects—and best, most important moments and experiences—of my life.[9]

My ways, then, are not the ways of Oxbridge, Harvard, the Sorbonne, or Tübingen, which makes my presence—my scholarly work (research: books, articles, etc.) and person (conference presentations, etc.)—in these places easily experienced as a little uncomfortable or interesting for the wrong reasons. For all of us. After all, for the elite, there is nothing much to learn from someone like me, while I don't find it tempting or right to simply conform to "the rules of Rome." To make matters more complex, since graduating from the University of Toronto (2006), I have lived in the United States—the current global superpower. Living and writing comes with the temptation to write as though what happens here is the most important thing on planet Earth or as if it has universal validity. And I have now lived in North America for over two decades, and as very many immigrants can relate to, there is a sense in which I both have two homes and yet do not belong anywhere.

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[8] I have not written much about this, but for a public philosophy piece, see https://publicseminar.org/2024/02/traumatized-heroes/

[9] This influence of modernity, in my view, is also clearly seen in Norway's history: the "cultured" (elite) parts of Norway historically strived to realize the ideals of "cultured" Europe and it is constitutive of their related, arrogant and dehumanizing treatment of the rural areas of Norway (outside of the main cities, including Osterøy, of course) and, much worse, the Indigenous Sámi people. Also, World War II showed us that these "raw nature" bits of Norwegian geographical-cultural inheritance can, as the Nazis did so successfully, turned into their own perversion. Also, in *Sex, Love, and Gender* and later work on Kant's and Arendt's theories of evil, I propose that there might be an internal connection between modern totalitarian forces and modernity's alienation of, lowering of, and attack on animality. I suggest that exploring this may help us understand totalitarian, numbing evil beyond Kant's and Arendt's own analyses, including central features of European colonialization, such as the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade and many states' violent attack on Indigenous populations.

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The above is intended to illustrate the importance of the particularities of one's lived phenomenology. Oppressions are different and the experiences of oppression are different, even as the struggle against oppression is shared. This perhaps signals that it's especially important for those writing as and about pariahs to seek out, listen to, and learn from those whose experiences of the world as oppressive are different than their own, including so that although we learn from each other, we also realize that our experiences are at best generalizable (to groups with our identities); they are not universalizable. This hasn't always been part of the practice of thinkers—canonical and pariah alike. When I started to read philosophical works, by both canonical and pariah thinkers, to understand my life and the world better with their help, I found the task difficult. This is because when I read books of philosophy, including those by pariahs, to understand my life better, none of them had exactly what I needed and none of them were only good, including free from prejudice. In contrast to Kant, of course, many pariahs were not in a position to pass for someone they were not, or they did not want to,[10] but regardless, their works also contain serious prejudices, which made the option of reading the good ones unavailable. Also, Pariahs tend to be less upset with works of philosophy that are good at addressing their own oppressed identities than they are those of others; indeed, most of us tend to be less upset with works of philosophy that dehumanize only the identities of others. Moreover, almost without fail, most canonical and pariah thinkers I engage in my life and works did not speak up for LGBTQIA+ rights; several of them took active part in the dehumanization of LGBTQIA+ persons like me; many of them ignored LGBTQIA+ lives by simply writing about "men" and "women" in cis, straight ways; and, of course, this was the oppressive water they and we have all been swimming in. And prominent thinkers in feminist philosophy and the philosophy of race assume that their analyses can simply be applied to other minorities, such as LGBTQIA+ and disabled persons, which I believe is plainly wrong.

LGBTQIA+ Folk: An Originary, Landless People

Whether we need to leave or keep trying to transform our inherited tradition, I believe it is important to think through why and how we do what we do—and that we allow ourselves to let our lived phenomenology guide us in our efforts to become wiser in our pursuits. Now, many of the thinkers who are working to transform the Kantian tradition—including the people mentioned at the beginning of this essay—focus on patterns of oppression, like race and gender. This means that these aspects have received significant attention both in Kant and oppression studies. In my work to date, I have wanted to intervene both in terms of drawing more attention to LGBTQIA+ lives. Also, as noted above, perhaps because of my natural temperament, I regard it as important that we not only speak to the badness and sadness of the lives that are currently oppressed—and, correspondingly, of the hardship of being a philosopher of the isms. It is also important that we celebrate our differences, our contingencies, and the wonderfulness of the identities that women and minorities strive to honor and value. It is thus important that we not only seek to identify and give voice to the wisdom we find in those who are able to live such lives well but also let their incredible work give us strength and joy in what we are doing. Let me illustrate some of this first by way of a fellow Norwegian scholar's work, namely Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad.[11]

Pirelli Benestad proposes that to be trans is to be transgifted; it is to belong to an originary people ("urfolk" in Norwegian) without land. Borrowing from Pirelli Benestad, we can say

[10] For more on these aspects of Kant's life that are very difficult to square plausibly with reading him as simply a straight guy, see *Sex, Love, and Gender*.

[11] For more on Pirelli Benestad's account, see, for example: https://youtu.be/H6blufLgo_U?si=BuCSzNhAgVfI-8V5

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that LGBTQIA+ persons also belong to an originary people who have a distinctive gift to offer the world: a unique and incredible perspective and way of living that is beautiful in itself and also enables others to live more fully if they are willing to learn from it. LGBTQIA+ people have no place on the planet that we experience as historically "our land"; for instance, if our families or local communities disown us, we have no obvious place to go. Any person originary and landless, in Pirelli Benestad's sense, and operating from a minimally realist perspective can recognize that restricting a particular geographical area to a specific historical memory and imagination of what a good life is, is incompatible with recognizing each person's right to freedom and treating each person as having dignity. After all, although some geographies are likely to foster certain kinds of cultures—the cultures of snowy places are likely to be quite different from those developed in tropical places or deserts, for example—as the individuals making these places their homes change, so will the cultures.[12]

That LGBTQIA+ identities are not inherited may be one reason members of this group know deeply that a better future cannot be one in which we live only with "our" people. This fact, I think, is internally connected to the distinctive wisdom this particular people can offer to the world. On the one hand, these identities and orientations are at the heart of what we personally experience as some of the best of us, of who we are. Speaking for myself only, like philosophy, my LGBTQIA+ identity concerns what makes me feel the most alive, what makes my life amazing, and what makes me feel beautiful and wonderful on my own and together with my loved ones. Correspondingly, even though being a philosopher of the isms frequently puts me in precarious and even dangerous positions, it also saves my life and makes it feel incredible on a daily basis. Like Pirelli Benestad, I believe that in creating a better future for humankind, each and every one of the oppressed—or "chosen"—peoples have a distinctive contribution that only they can make. And I believe Pirelli Benestad is correct that the distinctive LGBTQIA+ contribution might be precisely that we are inherently landless and also, as I expand on below, characteristically start from a lonely point of view.

Learning to live and love life wisely under these existential conditions involves knowing that "my" people will only do better if we take on certain challenges. These include learning to deeply value who we are and to protect ourselves well and wisely from oppressors. They also include, when opportunities allow, working with ourselves and others (other oppressed groups and friends and allies) to transform our inherited cultures into ones better suited to the fact that with each new human being, as Arendt emphasizes in a Kantian spirit, there is absolutely a new beginning ("natality").[13] Creating a good home somewhere and as who we are without simply being able to rely on our given families or the culture or the place on the planet we happened to be born is a project that we inherently face. Some of what LGBTQIA+ persons and cultures have to offer may, in other words, be grounded in precisely these existential facts of our lives. And conversely, as Asalah Aranki helped me realize, insofar as we must flee our lands due to violence and oppression, a distinctive gift that can only be given by those who live where we arrive and who know their land is to facilitate the process of learning how to live in the new, unfamiliar, particular land in all its complex majesty. To receive help to learn to hike mountains, to move across deserts, to sail oceans, to wander forests, to manage cityscapes, to learn to live with and feel the new land is to receive the gift of learning how to create a home in a new land. For the many who try

[12] I started exploring these topics in "A Love Letter Across the Ocean to Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad" in *Blikk* (March 20, 2023): https://www.blikk.no/esben-esther-pirelli-benestad-helga-varden-meninger/a-love-letter-across-the-ocean-to-esben-esther-pirelli-benestad/231603.

[13] See for example, pp. 9, 247 in Arendt's *The Human Condition.* (1958) 1998. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

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to find ways to resist and work against many states' horrific dehumanization of immigrants and refugees, this might be a useful philosophical resource to develop further.

Transforming the Kantian Philosophical Tradition

An obvious challenge for those of us who work on legal and political philosophy from within the Kantian tradition—anyone who is trying to transform this particular academic home into a better one—concerns the fact that on all minimally plausible interpretations, Kant was unable to deal well with his many dehumanizing prejudices, what Anna J. Cooper called "the darling isms" ([1892]1998, 131).[14] This failure happened, paradoxically, *despite* the fact he revolutionized moral philosophy by reenvisioning both an ethics in which the dignity of each human being is foundational and a legal-political philosophy in which each person's right to freedom is fundamental. It is undeniable—as the scholarship opened up by Kantians listed at the beginning of this essay have demonstrated—that Kant was, for example, racist, sexist, and heterosexist. Instead of recognizing and taking on these destructive pathologies, he—as Hannah Arendt thinks we academics are liable to do—developed theories (of human nature, history, and anthropology) to "justify" them.[15] Hence, for example, Kant sought to justify his sexism by developing a theory according to which men "naturally" had better reasoning powers than women; his racism by presenting a certain theory of the historical development of the human species; and his heterosexism by means of a specific teleological interpretation of human nature. And it was not until women and minorities—the pariahs of philosophy—managed to fight their way into academic philosophy in general and Kant studies in particular that these problematic aspects of Kant's writings started to be addressed. Today it seems fair to say that there is a growing, rich literature discussing these aspects of his writings—a literature that is still primarily pioneered by women and minority thinkers. And yet, most of these pariah Kantians, especially if they work on pariah topics, probably also recognize themselves and find comfort in Cooper's Eyrean inspired description of her intellectual efforts as "unbowed though bloody" (Cooper [1930] 1998, 237). And some of them, like Angela Davis and Adrian Piper, were forced to or found it necessary to (temporarily or permanently) leave the profession of philosophy to survive and protect themselves against the destructive, oppressive forces.[16]

My Transformation of Kantian Theory

Although some philosophers of the isms believe that the only way to transform Kantian philosophy, to move it forward, is to use the tools of philosophy—Kantian and otherwise—to dismantle it, this is not a path philosophically and existentially available to me given my contingent starting point. Nor is my path forward paved by the thinking of Nietzsche or Foucault, even if my reflections here most certainly have a distinctly Nietzschean or Foucauldian flavor to them. And though I do it (from somewhat to very) differently than some of the incredible Kant-inspired women and minority thinkers who came before me, I want and need to reenvision Kantian philosophy by maintaining its systematic strengths and overcoming its limitations. And, as emphasized above, engaging with these problems of inclusion—of excluded thinkers and excluded lives—do not leave the Kantian canonical

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[14] Cooper, Anna J. (1892) 1998. "Has America a Race Problem? If So, How Can It Best Be Solved?" In *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, edited by Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan, pp. 121–133. London: Rowman and Littlefield.

[15] Arendt, Hannah. 1964. Zur Person interview. "Hannah Arendt (1964) – What Remains? (Full Interview with Günter Gaus)." Philosophy Overdose. Uploaded August 21, 2021. YouTube video, 1:12:15. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVSRJC4KAiE.

[16] For Angela Davis's experiences, see George Yancy's conversation with her in *African American Philosophers: 17 Conversations* (pp. 13–30, ed. Yancy, Routledge 1998); for Adrian Piper's, see her (2024) *Escape to Berlin: A Travel Memoir/Fuga A Berlino: Memorie de viaggio* (Milano: PAC Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea).

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theory intact: like the others who do this work, my work also strives to make space for new ways of doing philosophy.

My engagement with the darling isms has involved rethinking and centering certain ideas of Kant and the Kantian tradition, often without really knowing exactly why I chose or started with these ideas. Let me try to illustrate some of this by showing it is plausible to think that both my lived phenomenology made it necessary for me to find a new way of doing the philosophy of sex, love, and gender *and* how I found in Kant's philosophy resources with which to do so. Developing these resources, in turn, led me to reenvision Kant's theory of human nature; center Kant's proposal that practical philosophy—philosophy that explores what we ought to do, what the good laws are like, emotional healthy ways of living, etc.—is wisdom; engage Kant's proposal that how truthfulness is the first virtue; explore Kant's distinction between what he calls "material" and "formal" wrongdoing; develop Kant's reflections on the puzzles of the German word "allgemein" (common to all); and rethink Kant's ideas on "anarchy," "despotism," "barbarism," and "republic" so as to develop "pocket" and "strain" theories of historical injustice. Throughout this work, from the beginning, there is the thread of attention to the importance systemic justice, both of which, I believe, are hard to explain except by appeal to the fact without the public educational institutions of Norway and Canada, I don't think I could have been a professor of philosophy today.

Some Illustrations of My Transformation of the Kantian Tradition

To start, I suspect that it is because I am an LGBTQIA+ woman that early on I found much feminist and race theory impossible to use for some of my existentially important purposes and found an ally in Kant's systematic works instead. The problem for me was that these theories do not contain the philosophical moves I needed to make sense of my own life as well as other LGBTQIA+ lives as I understood them. One major problem was that the existing theories presumed a kind of oppression that tracks families in generations, and though this spoke to my life as a woman, it did not speak to my life as an LGBTQIA+ person. As emphasized in *Sex, Love, and Gender*, I believe it is my LGBTQIA+ identity that makes it impossible for me to simply use much social construction or theory—such as that of Judith Butler or Sally Haslanger—or existentialist theories à la Beauvoir to understand sex, love, and gender.[17] These theories presuppose either that we are constructed all the way down *or* that LGBTQIA+ identities are ultimately a matter of choice (one's own or that of the socially powerful). This is also why the historically more prominent alternatives—whether rationalist or empiricist—were also not an option for me; they presuppose some (rational or material) essence that also cannot, in my view, capture LGBTQIA+ lives, including my own, in a philosophically minimally satisfying way. And, hence, in *Sex, Love, and Gender*, I developed a third (Kantian) alternative to construction/choice vs. essences, one that allowed me to speak to central features of LGBTQIA+ lived phenomenologies, including their existential aspects. These judgments are also central to how I currently theorize identities and intersectionality as part of reenvisioning our earthly homes, academic or not.[18]

Central to this work has been exploring and developing Kant's ideas on human nature (on what he calls the "predisposition to the good" and the "propensity to evil" and our various

[17] See, for example, Butler's classic (1990/2006) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge) and Sally Haslanger's (2012) *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (New York: Oxford University Press).

[18] For a public philosophy rendering of some of these arguments, see my (2024) "Gender Is Determined by Experience, Not Biology or Choice." *Institute for Arts & Ideas*, April 16. https://iai.tv/articles/gender-is-decided-by-experience-not-biology-or-choice-auid-3143?_auid=2020.

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thought capacities). These resources have enabled me to speak to the importance of our embodied, social, aesthetic, and multifaceted thinking selves as well as to our temptation to do wrong, including our deep draw to do wrong in the name of, or under the guise of, the good. More recently, I have also connected this work to Kant's distinction between two senses of the German word "allgemein" ("common to all")[19]—namely general and universal—as it helps me capture how not only Kant but all of us (and not only Kantians) have a liability to universalize what is merely general (such as gender or straightness). Kant's ideas about the highest good (the meaning of life)—namely to pursue happiness within the boundaries of morality—have also become increasingly important in my thinking as it helps me capture some of the challenges of doing the right thing even though doing so will most certainly not make us happy.[20]

Kant's argument regarding the importance of truthfulness has also always struck me at an existential level—and Kant's argument regarding lying to the murderer at the door, was the subject of one of the first articles I wrote.[21] Indeed, my current judgment is that recognizing the importance of truthfulness early on is part of the story of why I am alive today, let alone find, as I do, life amazing and wondrous. I came into the world in a way that the world judges to be bad in all kinds of ways; learning to trust truthfulness as a guide to how to proceed was existentially important, maybe even necessary. Also relatedly, in my view, deeply important idea for me in my scholarship has been Kant's distinction between material and formal wrongdoing. Again, I suspect that a major reason for this is that it helps me theorize that there is not always a morally good, let alone wise, way out of all of life's difficult situations—and that truthfulness is constitutive of learning how to live with this. This idea has been important for me to theorize central aspects of my family's life and inherited trauma (from World War II) as well as my own (LGBTQIA+) life beyond my family.[22] Being truthful, as Kant emphasizes in his reflections on this, is not always to tell anyone what they want to know, but it is the standard I need to hold myself to as I evaluate how I am doing. Another related idea here, for me, has been to challenge the idea that once we move from ideal theory to actual historical societies, we need to give up the notion that we find ourselves either in the state of nature or in civil society. In *Sex, Love, and Gender*, I therefore propose that in actual, historical societies we can find "pockets" of injustice that we can use Kant's ideas of "barbarism" (pure violence), "despotism" (law-regulated, unjustifiable violence), "anarchy" (pure freedom without access to legal protection) to explore—an idea I have since developed into the theory of "strains" of injustice. Truthful descriptions of reality are, in my view, impossible if we do not develop these kinds of resources—whether we do it with Kantian theory or not.

Finally, given where the research above has taken me over the years, in hindsight it is not surprising that with time, Kant's proposal that practical philosophy is wisdom (and not morality, truth, or virtue alone) and requires us to "know our hearts" made me stop and think. And then rethink Kantian theory. On the one hand, these alternative roads for understanding what practical philosophy is—such as identifying the highest good (the meaning of life) with the pursuit of morality, truth, or virtue—have not provided

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[19] See, for example, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. (6: 216).

[20] For a public writing on this, see 2025. "Nick Cave, Dolly Parton, and Sojourner Truth Walk into a Bar…" *Con-Textos Kantianos. International Journal of Philosophy* 21: pp.1-3.

[21] (2010) "Kant and Lying to the Murderer at the Door… One More Time: Kant's Legal Philosophy and Lies to Murderers and Nazis." *The Journal of Social Philosophy* 41 (4): pp. 403–421. See also (2021) "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy." In *The Cambridge Kant Lexicon*, edited by Julian Wuerth, pp. 691–695. Cambridge University Press.

[22] For a public philosophy reflection on this complexity, see 2024. "Traumatized Heroes: Living with Wrongdoing." *Public Seminar*, February 21, 2024.

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existentially reliable paths for me. As long as I can remember, following those roads has often gotten me into serious trouble. After all, I'm much too vulnerable and too easily sold out by more powerful people; if I ask, as many women have done publicly in our intellectual history from at least Sojourner Truth onward, am I not a woman too(?),[23] then I'm easily and quickly experienced as a burden to have around. On the other hand, these alternative (morality, truth, virtue) interpretation of what practical philosophy is strike me as wrong and provide insufficient resources for grounding myself in life. I love earthly life—at its best, I judge it to be magnificent—and I know that insofar as I live life well, I will meet fierce resistance (given who I am) and great loves come with great losses. Wisdom seems like the only concept that can hold this complexity in a reliable way for me.

Throughout my work, when I write on issues concerning LGBTQIA+ life or women, I try to make sure that I write to and from this point of view in a way that invites others in, yet is not written for the privileged (straight, men's) eye. I have found that exploring these resources in Kant's writings in ways that he most certainly did not do has been constitutive of doing philosophy in a way consistent both with morally and emotionally owning my work and with hope for a better future—a world where human dignity and rights to freedom are realized.[24] Having said all of this, it is also the case that without access to public education—in Norway and then in Canada—I don't think I could have been a professor of philosophy today. Hence, my MA thesis was on John Rawls and distributive justice, solving this problem of systemic justice was why I wanted to do a Ph.D., and distributive justice was the topic of my first published paper after graduate school, and it is a constant element throughout all my work.[25]

Doing Kantian philosophy in these unconventional ways has most certainly also solidified my position as a pariah in professional philosophy; that's the prize all pariahs pay. And since I do this with Kant, non-Kantians often don't like my work. I sometimes joke that my works are perfect objects of hate: Traditional Kantians hate them because feminist philosophy and the philosophy of sex, love, and gender isn't "real" or "serious" Kantian philosophy, and feminist philosophers and philosophers of sex, love, and gender hate them because they're Kantian. Hence, no particular kind of philosophical audience—the ones filled with Kantians, feminist philosophers, philosophers of sex love and gender, or any kind of philosophers—or philosophical practice has been reliably welcoming of my way of doing philosophy over the years. And the same is true of my experience in the academy and out in the world more generally where I have presented my work: I can never predict who will become a supportive colleague (in the profession, in other disciplines, and among university administrators or other professionals), and each time someone does, I experience it as rather miraculous. It is miraculous not only in the sense that it is totally unexpected and inexplicable, but also because I experience it as incredible and wonderful. In all these audiences and institutions there have been or are individuals who have found my very unconventional way of doing philosophy exciting and hence decide to support it. For example, they write letters of recommendation for the very many fellowships and other scholarly opportunities I (of course) never receive, or they engage my work in the best scholarly spirit and thus enable me to become myself to the best of my ability. Individuals from all philosophical traditions have helped me develop Kantian philosophical resources in ways that, on the one hand, help theorize the lives of women and LBGTQIA+ people and, on the other, are true to myself. They give me hope that a better future is not impossible.

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[23] For more on Sojourner Truth and her famous "Aren't I a Woman?" speech, see https://www.thesojournertruthproject.com.

[24] All of these themes are naturally at the heart of *Sex, Love, and Gender*.

[25] 2006. "Kant and Dependency Relations: Kant on the State's Right to Redistribute Resources to Protect the Rights of Dependents." *Dialogue – Canadian Philosophical Review* 45 (2): pp. 257-284.

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And I hope they know that each time I try to do something new and difficult, I wrap their love around me—and feel gratitude toward each of them for all they did that was good, which is some of what I will one day wrap around me as I let go of this life.

Existential Trust, One More Time

I hope the above gives some indication why I judge that my Kantian philosophical foundation is grounded in my own, contingent starting point as an LGBTQIA+ woman and a first-generation academic living in a country other than that of her origin. This is the point of view from which I know intimately the values of solitude and loneliness, the challenges of being a pariah, and the existential importance of truthfulness and kindness and of building support for and among women, minority thinkers, their friends, and their allies. I also hope that I communicated some reasons why I regard it as important to think about our contingent philosophical starting points—for ourselves as (pariah) philosophers as well as for our profession. To put this point in a distinctly North American way, philosophy might be therapeutic, but philosophers also need therapy. Or as we strive to get to know the abyss of our hearts, as Kant in *The Metaphysics of Morals* proposes anyone committed to practical philosophy as wisdom is (6: 441), it is useful to have someone trustworthy to hold one's hand as we turn on the lights in the abyss and look around. And as Ashli Anda recently helped me see, contrary to what Plato and much of our philosophical practice recommends, I don't think our aim should be to leave the cave completely (through perfect, pure conceptual reasoning). Instead, we should find our way around our different abysses and integrate them into our (fuller) life in a way that enables us to move forward in better ways. And to do this, I do not think we can simply use philosophy as we find it in the canon; we need to let pariah philosophical voices in and we need to become wiser about who we are, how we got there, and how we can do better. Hence, engaging only Nietzsche or Foucault is also not enough, in my judgment, though I absolutely do see that given how self-deceived we are—as philosophers and as cultures—at this point, engaging only the pariah voices for a while is a possible, necessary, and deeply healing cleanse for some.

Importantly too, developing good philosophical moral theories is a shared, rather unpredictable, project that transcends historical time. Although freedom thinkers who went before us left their ideas for us so that we can engage them and do our best with them, none of them were perfect. And as Frederick Douglass emphasizes when he reflects upon his last (peaceful, death bed) meeting with his slaver, we are each "flung, by powers that did not ask our consent, upon a mighty current of life, which we could neither resist nor control" (Douglass 1882, 535).[26] We are each born unwittingly into moments of deep, patterned injustices we did or do not choose; nonetheless, we do choose, and we are responsible for, how we proceed in the context of those injustices. It is not the case, however, that we are currently inheriting roadmaps or ample philosophical resources for how to do this better, let alone well. Thus, we can only strive to do our very best to become wiser about these projects—on our own and together—and hope, again, that those coming after us will also take what is good, (rightly) criticize us and hold us accountable for what we failed to do well, forgive us when necessary and possible, and know that we (or our better selves) would listen and be grateful to them if they then proceed in better, wiser ways. To do this, I think we should give up on the current, dominant aim, namely to attract followers or disciples, and instead try to make good philosophical resources available so that those coming after us

[26] Douglass, Frederick. 1882. *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass.* San Francisco: Park Publishing. Google Books. https://books.google.ca/books?id=fFTcLFXId-wC.

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can use them as part of their process of learning to think for themselves—on their own and together (also with us)—as they strive to make the world a better place.[27]

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