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Interview with Pauline Kleingeld

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ENG **Abstract:** This is an interview with Pauline Kleingeld, conducted by Fiorella Tomassini. It addresses different questions about conducting research on Kant, the relevance of Kant's moral philosophy for contemporary debates, the importance of history of philosophy, and the place of women and other underrepresented groups in academia.
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FT: Was there a specific moment when you decided you wanted to specialize in Kant's philosophy? Can you identify the initial motivation that led you to work on Kant? After many years devoted to Kant scholarship — books, dozens of articles and book chapters— do you feel that these motivations and reasons have changed?

PK: Yes and no. Yes, looking back, there was a specific moment, namely when I decided to write my dissertation about Kant. My motivation was entirely dispassionate. At that point, my philosophical background was somewhat eclectic, with a focus on feminist theory and history of philosophy. What motivated my interest in philosophy were basic issues of moral theory: how to distinguish what's morally right from what's morally wrong, and how to support the answer to that question. But I had little background in that area. I decided to write a dissertation on Kant because I thought this would strengthen my philosophical background. And I decided to focus on his philosophy of history because this would enable me to deal with issues in epistemology, ethics, political theory, and anthropology, and to think about how they all hang together. Also, Kant's philosophy of history, and especially its role in his critical system, had not been widely studied, and I had some ideas about how to approach it. So I did not begin with any special passion for Kant's work or affinity with his moral theory.

Between deciding on the topic of my dissertation and actually starting the project, I went to Frankfurt am Main with a DAAD fellowship, to study philosophy with Jürgen Habermas. I did not want to get stuck in an eighteenth-century philosophical bubble; I wanted to maintain a bit of critical distance to Kant. I thought it would be useful to study with a great philosopher who worked on many of the philosophical questions I was interested in and who had some affinity with Kant but not too much. I learned a lot and met wonderful people. My time in Frankfurt has been a lasting inspiration. After three semesters, I went back to Leiden for the project on Kant's philosophy of history, and I really enjoyed the exegetical puzzles, the philosophical time travel, and especially dealing with the philosophical issues involved.

But no, I never decided to spend so many years as a Kant scholar. After I had turned my dissertation into a book, I decided to do something new. While working on Kant, I had noticed that there had been a late eighteenth-century German debate discussion of various conceptions of world citizenship. This discussion was covered by a thick layer of dust, since, from the perspective of later German nationalists, the authors involved had been on the wrong side of history. Looking into this debate meant that I could work in moral and political philosophy, which I had long wanted to do. It was exciting to find a broad range of cosmopolitan theories, much broader than what you could find in the discussion of cosmopolitanism that was emerging in the mid 1990s. I found myself working on very different authors: Christoph Martin Wieland, the leading German intellectual figure at the time, who started the discussion by drawing on ancient Stoic cosmopolitanism; Georg Forster, who had sailed around the world with Captain Cook, became an avid abolitionist, and clashed with Kant on issues of methodology related to race; Dietrich Hermann Hegewisch, who was inspired by Adam Smith and, anonymously, advocated a global free market; the early German Romantic Novalis; Fichte; and

Anacharsis Cloots, a Francophile Prussian baron turned high-ranking Jacobin who tried to establish a world republic by using social contract theory and the French army. And many authors who, in the end, did not make it into my book. I wanted to focus on philosophical arguments rather than historical details, so I limited the number of issues and authors. Once I started writing, however, it turned out that Kant had something interesting to say about every issue I wanted to discuss, so I reorganized the project. Half the book ended up being about Kant, but that was not my original plan.

After finishing *Kant and Cosmopolitanism*, I wanted to turn to the philosophical foundations of cosmopolitanism. I had some very vague ideas for developing a Kantian moral theory. But this was the time of experimental philosophy, and many influential authors argued that empirical work in psychology and neuroscience was bad news for Kantianism. If they were right, my new project would be doomed to fail. This is why I spent quite some time writing papers on the relation between empirical psychology and Kantian ethics, and on situationism in particular.

Then, when I finally turned to my Kantian project, I thought I'd take a quick look at Kant's own moral theory, for inspiration. But as I tried to understand it, I ran into all kinds of intriguing difficulties. I decided to focus on those instead, since they were simply too interesting, scholarly and philosophically.

So my reasons for turning to Kant were different in each case. But my main philosophical interest has not changed: it is still in the core issues of ethics and political philosophy.

At the moment, engaging with Kant's work in those areas is, for me, a way of thinking about these core issues. I'm finding that I read some of Kant's arguments differently than many other Kant scholars do, and this raises new questions about the strengths of Kant's arguments. For example, most recently, I have been working on Kant's views on philosophical method, and it seems to me, in light of what Kant says about the 'analytic' method, that we need to understand the argument of *Groundwork I* differently. If I am right about this, it raises new questions about the strengths and weaknesses of Kant's argument in that section, and about this method as a method of moral philosophy. I don't have the answers yet, but I find these kinds of questions exciting.

So even after all these years, Kant hasn't become boring. An important factor is also that I've been able to work with many wonderful PhDs and postdocs who work on related issues and who don't hesitate to raise good objections and ask difficult questions. Even though we all write our own papers, it doesn't feel like the solitary endeavor that it used to be.

Finally, I've always also done work other than Kant scholarship: not only in moral psychology but also on follow-up questions related to Kant's sexism and racism, the relation between love and justice in the family, and the Trolley Problem.

FT: You wrote your dissertation on Kant's philosophy of history, then you moved on to political philosophy and cosmopolitanism, and more recently to fundamental moral issues. How do you decide the direction of your research?

PK: As for how I determine which specific issues to pursue: I simply run into problems. Let me give some examples. I wanted to describe Kant's position on freedom of the will, and I had always assumed that Kant used an incompatibilist conception of freedom of the will. But I could not find any perfect quotations, so then I had to look into the matter. When writing *Kant and cosmopolitanism*, I noticed that all my cosmopolitan authors defended patriotism, which I thought was odd, so I had to figure out how they reconciled the two. I wanted to develop a Kantian solution to the Trolley Problem, since I thought it would be something of a scandal if Kantian moral theory couldn't come up with a solution. But given the direction in which I was thinking, I realized I first had to figure out under precisely which conditions you can be said to use someone 'merely as a means'. Almost all my papers are the result of my running into unforeseen problems and questions. I've almost never written a paper because I already knew what I wanted to say.

FT: Your paper "Kant's Second Thoughts on Race" was published in 2007, well before recent academic and public discussions on racism in Kant. Your position in this debate took a central place. What drew to the issue at the time? Was it simply one among many papers, or did you anticipate that a broader reckoning was on the horizon?

PK: This was another example of what I just mentioned. I was writing *Kant and Cosmopolitanism*, and I felt the book should include a discussion of 'race' and racism. You cannot simply assume that when eighteenth-century authors speak of 'all humans' as 'world citizens', they actually apply this to all humans and to all equally. I had already discussed this problem before, related to Kant's treatment of women. Several of the cosmopolitans I was discussing were very clearly abolitionists and anti-racists *avant la lettre*, and given what I knew about Kant's defense of cosmopolitan right and his scathing criticism of the behavior of European powers overseas in *Toward Perpetual Peace*, I initially thought that during his Critical period Kant belonged to this group.

I had briefly worked on this issue in the mid-1990s, when I was invited to comment on a paper by Charles Mills about Kant's racism, at a conference at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I disagreed with Mills on some points but admired his work and saw it as a call to action. When I first looked into it, it seemed to me that discussions of Kant's racism drew mostly on pre-Critical texts, notes with uncertain dates, and the Rink edition of Kant's *Physical Geography*. Moreover, Kant's main publication on race from the Critical period, 'Determination of the Concept of a Human Race', published in the same year as the *Groundwork*, makes no

mention of racial hierarchy, and his texts on cosmopolitan right clearly contradict pre-Critical comments. I therefore initially assumed that Kant had become more egalitarian about race when he developed his moral theory in the early 1780s.

Only when I was working on Georg Forster and read Kant's criticisms of him in 'On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy' (1788) did I realize that Kant still defended a racial hierarchy even after the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and that I had to do more research.

The first time I presented a paper on the topic, in Tübingen in 2004, I argued that Kant remained committed to his racial hierarchy throughout the Critical period. But soon after that conference I realized I couldn't find any suitable quotations from the mid and late 1790s. I went through lots and lots of materials, including the transcripts of his Anthropology lectures, and everywhere I saw the same chronological pattern of a change in Kant's position, a pattern that was also in line with a broader set of relevant changes in Kant's political philosophy around the same time. Hence the thesis of my 2007 article: Kant had had second thoughts on race and racial hierarchy, not at the beginning of the Critical period but in the mid 1790s. When Werner Stark's transcriptions of the Physical Geography lectures became available, they turned out to be consistent with that pattern, and this led to my essay on Kant's second thoughts on colonialism.

At the time, I hoped that Kant's views on race, racial hierarchy, and associated issues would become a mainstream topic in Kant scholarship. That did not happen overnight, of course, but I think we're there now. It is now widely recognized that Kant's views on gender and on race merit attention in their own right, and also that it is important to study them with an eye to developing Kantian theories today that, we may hope, *overcome* the flaws in Kant's theories. Before you can overcome the racist aspects in Kant's theory, you need to know what they are and where in the structure of the system they leave their marks. This is especially important given that Kant still defended the racial hierarchy and everything that was associated with it, including European colonialism, during the decade of the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. This does not become any less important if Kant later changed his mind.

FT: From your writing, one gets the sense that you see Kant's moral philosophy not as a museum piece, but as being relevant to contemporary issues. Which of Kant's ideas do you consider most relevant or useful today, and which do you think we can (or perhaps should) leave behind?

PK: Yes, you're right, I don't think Kant is a museum piece, if only because Kant interpretation has always been in flux. In different times, places, and circumstances Kant's readers ask different questions, find new angles from which to approach his moral philosophy, and develop new interpretations. As a result, the relevance of Kant's philosophy for contemporary issues also needs to be reconsidered again and again.

A good example is the resurgence of interest in the republican tradition of political philosophy, which has shed new light on Kant's political theory. He used to be read mainly as a liberal; now he is often read as a republican. This makes a big difference, not only to our interpretation but also to our assessment of the usefulness of his political theory for current philosophical purposes.

As for which ideas are most relevant or useful today, I like the way you phrase the question—because some of Kant's worst ideas are still very *relevant* today and should not be left behind in the sense of being ignored and forgotten. For example, as I mentioned earlier, Kant's views on gender and race are highly relevant to those developing Kantian theories today. We can't just ignore the odious passages. We need to identify which structural aspects of Kant's theory are shaped by these assumptions, in order to remodel the Kantian framework as necessary. The same is true for Kant's homophobia, his theory of national characters, his views as to who should have active citizenship, his conception of employment relations and economic power, and his all-too-Stoic account of moral emotions, by which I mean his rather cold attitude towards painful moral decisions, which is in full display in his paper 'On a Supposed Right to Lie from Love of Humanity' (1797). These are just a few examples.

As for ideas I see as positively fruitful, I'd mention some of the key ideas and arguments Kant is rightly famous for: the ideal of freedom, equality, and a political and ethical community under the rule of law; the idea that there are universal moral laws, such as the prohibition against using persons 'merely as means'; the idea of inviolable human dignity, and Kant's late expansion of these principles to the entire world (even though he never applied them appropriately to women); his principled criticisms of colonialism, at least in his works of the second half of the 1790s. These are just a few examples. This is not to say, of course, that Kant's articulation of these ideas is perfect as it is, but I see them as relevant and fruitful starting points for present-day theorizing.

FT: In today's climate of questioning the value of science and academia, especially the humanities, it seems important to ask: why should we devote resources (time, money, people) to the study of the history of philosophy?

PK: One good reason often mentioned is that the history of philosophy tells us much about ourselves. It reveals the historical background of our concepts and beliefs, which helps us understand them better and thereby helps us understand ourselves better. And often it presents us with alternative ways of thinking that may challenge or inspire us.

Second, the description of the history of philosophy is never 'finished'. It constantly changes. At the moment, there is increasing awareness that authors from marginalized groups have often been forgotten or misrepresented, and efforts are made to fill the gaps and correct the record. And as I mentioned earlier, sometimes even entire intellectual traditions and debates have faded into the background, such as the republican tradition of political theory or the late eighteenth-century German discussion of world citizenship.

Furthermore, work in the history of philosophy can be innovative for current theorizing by recovering and rekindling important arguments of the past. For example, both Wieland in the 1780s and Martha Nussbaum in the 1990s drew on ancient Cynic and Stoic cosmopolitanism to ignite a novel debate about the foundational nature of the moral community among human beings as such.

Finally, studying the history of philosophy matters because the work of historical figures is actively used by contemporary philosophers. Many Aristotelians read Aristotle, many Humeans read Hume, many Kantians read Kant, not simply because they are classics, but because they were excellent philosophers. They were good at crafting arguments, thinking through the internal coherence of their various philosophical commitments, responding to objections, and so on. This means that innovative work in the history of philosophy can yield innovative contemporary philosophy. In other words, if the interpretation of Aristotle changes in important ways, this can influence Aristotelianism today.

FT: When you were appointed in Leiden, you were the only female full professor of philosophy in the Netherlands. With ebbs and flows, things have certainly changed since then. What was your personal experience of this change? What has improved, what challenges remains, and what new obstacles do you see for underrepresented groups in academia?

PK: Yes, things have certainly changed, and the change has been great compared to the past—though the percentage of women in academic philosophy is still low.

As for my personal experience: I grew up in a time when it was still very common for people to say that girls and women couldn't play chess, couldn't do math, couldn't drive; that they were more caring and emotional than men, and less rational. I didn't believe those things, but many others did. During my BA and MA in Leiden, all my instructors were male, except one female sociology professor. At that time, only about 3% of full professors at Dutch universities were women. One famous theologian in my department argued in one of his books that women should obey men because eggs are passive and sperm are active, or something to that effect. With two friends, I wrote a refutation of his argument for a student magazine. These days, when I tell this story people start laughing, but it was not funny at the time, and it is just one example. Of course, I also had many more enlightened professors, and overall, I had a great time as a student. But it was definitely what you call a male-dominated environment.

So when I started out as an assistant professor of philosophy, at Washington University in St. Louis, I expected things would be quite difficult. And of course it was hard. I had to figure out how to present myself, how to gain uptake in discussions, and so on, and I was totally insecure. It was not uncommon for me to be the only woman in the room at a conference, or the only female speaker. But I read up on research in gender dynamics and feminist theory, and my feminist husband gave me helpful advice and inside information as to 'what a guy would do' in certain situations. I received all sorts of other help and support from family, friends, and colleagues. I found Kant scholars to be a friendly and welcoming group. My department at Washington University in St. Louis was supportive. I had female senior colleagues, and the department was genuinely committed to increasing gender diversity. Just before my first child was born, the university instituted a helpful maternity leave policy for tenure-track faculty. So I guess I arrived at the right time and the right place. My situation was better than that of women in other philosophy departments, and much better than that of women ten years older than me. It wasn't always easy, but it was significantly better than what I had expected, given the Dutch situation I had come from.

When I returned to the Netherlands, more than twenty years ago, I became a full ('ordinary') professor of philosophy with a permanent contract. And yes, for about five years I was the only woman in the entire country with that status, and I was the second female Dean in the history of the University of Leiden. Being 'a woman' became a sizeable part of my job. I served on all kinds of boards and committees—including about two dozen search committees in eleven years. I, too, found it important that there be a woman on those committees. Fortunately, the situation has improved a lot. Here in Groningen, I now have many female colleagues in philosophy, including at the full professor level, although compared to the number of men, the numbers are still relatively low, reflecting the situation in philosophy as a whole.

I see at least two challenges: first, diversifying diversity. The focus has been on gender, and this remains important, but the focus should be much broader. Second, the situation is still hard for junior women. I expected things to be difficult, and I was pleasantly surprised when things went well. Today, the horizon has fortunately moved quite a bit, and women rightly expect to be included and treated with respect. But this also makes it all the more shocking to have to deal with the sexism that still occurs.