

## Appeasing Suffering: A Confrontation with Our Kantian Imperfections

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To read past authors in light of contemporary popular concerns always comes with a certain risk of succumbing to anachronism, and of putting our own words into theirs. Therefore, to successfully build a bridge between our philosophical-political heritage and modern-day priorities requires offering a particularly thorough and well-balanced assessment of an author's voice. In the literature, Kant's thought is no stranger to the temptation of making it more palatable to today's readers, so the stakes are higher in analysing what could be deemed as not so obvious Kantian concerns. Nuria Sánchez Madrid's new book, *Kant on Social Suffering* (Cambridge University Press, 2025), lies at the heart of these perils and faces them head on, offering us both a stimulating reading of the philosopher's understanding of the notion suffering, and also the impetuous to reconsider the full consistency of his system of thought.

This book is the latest number of the series "Elements in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant", whose goal is to put forth a collection of works that addresses some of the most pressing debates that we can find in today's scholarship. Being brought to us by the hand of Sánchez Madrid, who has been consistently working on how Kant deals with different forms of social injustice, the book presents itself as an opportunity to grasp the manifold layers and interpretations surrounding issues of oppression and discrimination in Kant's reasoning. It is structured in four major sections, besides the Introduction and the Conclusion, each of which deals with a specific point of contention within this realm of analysis. From the elementary notion of human dignity, that underpins the entire book, we then move to three correlated topics that are explicitly addressed by Kant: his perspective toward animals and the mentally ill; the implementation of poverty relief measures, and the place of women in his scheme of thought.

Our reading begins with a brief Introduction, in which Sánchez Madrid addresses how Kant, long portrayed as a thinker preoccupied with purely abstract moral laws rather than our concrete human reality, often pervaded by misery, can nevertheless furnish a set of concepts that can illuminate the phenomenon of social suffering. In a certain sense, the author adopts a "nonideal" reading of Kant: instead of remaining on the level of a perfectly rational republic of ends, she asks what Kant's moral and political theory says about, and to, the imperfect, stratified world we actually inhabit. In this sense, we are clarified on what is the goal of this reflection: «[...] this Element aims to shed light on Kant's analyses of obstacles to the full development of the rational and moral potential embedded within every human being» (p. 1). Therefore, we can say we depart from a standstill, one in which we are dealing with barriers that, to a certain extent, remain cast aside in Kant's work. In fact, the author is clear in identifying this as an inconsistency in Kant's thought – one with which we fully agree – that pertains to the explicit and reiterated exclusion of certain individuals from our collective moral development. We dare saying that the heart of the book can be summarised in the following lines:

"In contrast with this contemporary account of social suffering, Kant views women, dependent workers, animals and those suffering from mental illness as unable to actively contribute to the commonwealth. Put differently, he does not consider the material benefits ensuing from the mentioned beings valuable enough to take them into account as co-legislators. This entails a blatant inconsistency with his republican account of the state and his moral theory, especially with the Formula of Humanity as an end in itself (G 4: 429)" (p. 3).

Deeming Kant inconsistent (even if partially) is, indeed, a bold statement, but one that Sánchez Madrid is nonetheless able to substantiate throughout her book. She is also careful in immediately filling us in some crucial conceptual matters, namely, what is understood by the term that coins the title, *social suffering*, which is seen as: "[...] a violation of the basic rights and dignity of the human being" (p. 1). This rather broad definition, fundamental as it is, demands our attention, and we find that it might actually lead us to some interesting

future points of discussion. Firstly, it relies on two other complicated terms that require their own conceptual scrutiny (*rights* and *dignity*), which is in itself a somewhat debatable choice, since a concept rooted in disputed ideas is prone to entice more doubts. Simultaneously, and perhaps even more puzzlingly, from a Kantian point of view, it entails the need to turn it into an absolute priority, which constitutes a shift in perspective: understood in this light, social suffering jeopardizes two key elements in our path to moral development, then, ending it (or at least diminishing it) must be taken as an essential step in our moral progress, and still, it is not a notion that Kant held particularly dear.

Additionally, as Sánchez Madrid immediately points out, “[...] in Kant’s view, the emotions do not provide a reliable path to virtue” (p. 1), and if there is an intrinsic element to any kind of suffering, it most certainly is the strong emotion it brings to both the subject affected by it and even the bystanders that witness it. In this respect, considering the scope of the book, we believe it was a sound option not to overbear the concept of *social suffering* with such a volatile dimension for now. To pick up the work of Judith Shklar, with whom Sánchez Madrid hints at some interesting parallels, emotions carry with them the weight of subjectivity behind which reside several senses of injustice, and this could open the door to a somewhat blinding individualism in a Kantian scheme that presents itself as being conceived for the whole. Even still, we believe that this point calls for further research, particularly by pairing the sentimental side of social suffering with Kant’s understanding of the role of Hope as a link between the noumenal and the phenomenal worlds, as this is a fundamental component of overcoming our inevitable shortcomings, and even more so for those who face the most struggles.

With these foundations, we then move to the first substantive chapter of the book, ‘Kant’s Approach to Human Dignity: At the Crossroads of Religion, Morals and Anthropology’, which is developed through three main subsections. Here, Sánchez Madrid demonstrates how Kant’s approach to human suffering is in fact strict and severe, since for the Prussian philosopher, in the path to virtue, no amount of pain is truly unbearable for a patient and resilient subject. Daunting as this stance might seem to the contemporary reader, the author couples it with a clarification, justifying Kant’s posture with the influence of religion, in the guise of which Jesus Christ is presented as the perfect example of one who endures suffering. By doing so, Sánchez Madrid then argues how the creation of comparisons, primarily with Christ, and later on with our social peers, ends up breeding detrimental moral vices (an idea that Kant had picked up from Rousseau), leading us then to develop our virtue through a constant struggle against external obstacles and inner temptations.

The first subsection picks up on this last point and engages with contemporary debates about whether Kantian dignity represents basic human rights or results from fulfilling the moral law. Following Oliver Sensen’s interpretation, Sánchez Madrid argues that Kant addresses dignity, not as a universal metaphysical dimension, but as an outcome of a conduct that strives to meet moral autonomy requirements. We find that the author’s support for this interpretation becomes essential for bringing coherence to Kant’s thought, in light of the initial definition of social suffering, as it allows for not deeming those who fail to meet these moral autonomy requirements worthy of dignity. As Sánchez Madrid argues, Kant’s account requires that subjects previously learn to live (therefore, taking a cautious approach to the faculty of *imagination*), in order to build a strong foundation for moral behaviour, and then be deserving of dignity, as this is the only way through which one can expect others to respect him.

However, this account clearly points to the extreme difficulties the most vulnerable would have to attain said dignity, a point to which the author begins to give voice in the subsequent subsection, that reveals how Kant’s universal moral autonomy account treats human emotions differently, namely along gender lines (for instance, weeping in solidarity with another’s mourning is rebuked as ‘feminine’ or ‘effeminate’ in men, while the masculine character should limit itself to displaying a ‘powerless sympathy’), and even class biases: those accustomed to economic prosperity show less moral character development, as privileged subjects appear less capable of impartially assessing setbacks due to being unaccustomed to considering others’ misfortune or examining their own relative fortune. Curiously, and despite gendered views, Sánchez Madrid argues that Kant doesn’t necessarily see women as reprehensible, on the contrary, in terms of dealing and overcoming suffering, the philosopher notes they’ve been educated to assume misfortune with patience, a posture seen as commendable. The point, however, is not fully pursued by Sánchez Madrid, opting instead for addressing the dangers of misanthropy tied with imagination. It would have been perhaps interesting to recuperate this “laudatory” remark later on, while analysing the suffering of women, as it seems to present itself as a point in favour of the inclusion of women in the path to self-improvement.

The final subsection of this chapter examines how the responses to the suffering of others, especially through sympathy, meet the requirements for respect for humanity. Moral development involves assumed suffering, as progress often demands renouncing satisfaction of human inclinations. Nonetheless, Sánchez Madrid shows us how despite the necessity of sacrifice, Kant acknowledges the helpful effect of “kindly participation in the fate of other people” (OFBS 2: 215), while at the same time detecting an inconsistency in sympathy’s emotional dynamics, one that leads to a melancholic compassion focusing on individual misfortune while neglecting collective destruction. The chapter concludes with Kant’s recommendation to visit prisons, hospitals, and slums, to nurture practical judgment, and, most significantly, by examining Kant’s subtle but crucial distinction between *Mitgefühl* and *Mitleidenschaft*, two words that entail the notion of compassion and sympathy, but that carry different assertions of it, since *Mitgefühl* implies placing ourselves in another person’s shoes, at the level of such a recognition that we become morally co-responsible; while *Mitleidenschaft* relies on mere receptivity to the feeling of others.

In the following chapter, ‘Enlarging the Framework of Suffering: How to Treat Animals and the Mentally Ill?’, Sánchez Madrid turns her attention to two groups that are frequently omitted from Kantian moral calculations:

nonhuman animals and persons whose rational capacities are compromised, most notably the mentally ill, a dichotomy that, expected as it might have been in Kant's time, is in itself telling of a degree of abject exclusion. The chapter opens with a clear statement of purpose: although Kant is often portrayed as a strictly anthropocentric thinker whose moral law applies only to fully rational agents, his own writings contain the seeds of a broader ethical concern. Sánchez Madrid's aim is to excavate those seeds, reinterpret them in a contemporary context, and show how they can be used to expand the Kantian conception of social suffering, since they both deserve consideration within Kant's moral framework based on different rationales: animals for their instrumental contribution to human culture, and the mentally ill for their inalienable humanity, despite their inability to achieve epistemic and moral development.

On the first subsection of this chapter, Sánchez Madrid analyses Kant's practical philosophy regarding duties toward "[...] the animate but nonrational part of the creation" (DV § 17, 6: 443). In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant rejects direct duties toward animals, who lack moral standing, but admits animals perform a helpful service, so the attachment humans should consecrate to animals follows the dynamics of social sympathy as an *indirect duty*. Sánchez Madrid highlights that Kant doesn't make animals proper society members, however, the distant kinship between humans and animals underpins the remark that a "hard-heartedness towards animals is not in accordance with the law of reason" (Eth-Vigil 27: 710). The author then argues that the correct reasoning views human relation to animals as an indirect duty with regard to beings other than humans that help us, ultimately remaining a duty to oneself. Consequently, in a Kantian light, treating animals with cruelty can lead to cruelty toward ourselves and humans in general, demonstrating the analogous role non-rational beings fulfil in his moral theory. The commitment to human moral perfection isn't indifferent to interactions with animals, whose suffering humans have a duty to prevent and diminish. In essence, Sánchez Madrid convincingly argues that because human minds can empathize with animal pain, they're committed to the lifelong maintenance of animals they've profited from, and even if bonds are mostly pragmatic and instrumental, humans should exert tutelary responsibility toward animals.

Astonishingly, nonetheless, the path to the recognition of animal suffering might present itself as the most straightforward. On the second subsection, Sánchez Madrid notes the reasons for Kant's more sympathetic stance toward non-rational animals than the humans who are deemed mentally ill. The author is quick to remind us how in 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany people with mental disorders didn't elicit compassion, as institutions viewed them as loathsome burdens that the community had to take care of. Kant was not a big exception to this rule, since he views philosophers as better equipped than physicians for inspecting the disturbed mind, particularly regarding early-stage mental disorders – an ironic stance nonetheless, since, as we will see in the last chapter, Kant failed in dealing with a young, disturbed woman that asked for help. Sánchez Madrid goes over the philosopher's mature exploration of cognitive faculties, dividing defects into melancholia and mental derangement. When it comes to the suffering of these people, Sánchez Madrid demonstrated how Kant's approach shows very limited compassion and tends to even blame individuals for their conditions. Even still, they should not be left to their own devices, as the commonwealth is appointed with a social responsibility toward them, however, Kant affirms that these individuals should retreat from society to enter hospitals and asylums, and dissuades marrying into families with mental disorder antecedents, emphasizing hereditary elements he considers as the "most profound degradation of humanity" (Anth § 52, 7: 214).

In the subsequent chapter, 'Poverty Relief and Social Suffering', Sánchez Madrid addresses Kant's complex view of poverty, which is embedded in two aspects: highlighting the passivity of poor individuals and thereby making them social burdens; and presenting them as victims of forgotten or denied injustices. The author's interpretation requires, then, analysing both the suspicion of laziness underpinning poverty and the victimhood resulting from public injustices.

This chapter's first subsection focuses on whether Kant views poverty as damaging the subjects' confidence in their own ability. On this matter, a key passage from *Theory and Practice* suggests that a human being "[...] can be considered happy [...] provided he is aware that, if he does not reach the same level as others, the fault lies only in himself" (TP, 8: 293–294), so despite hurdles from economic inequality, Kant believes that "[...] anyone can work his way up from [the] passive condition to an active one" (DR § 46, 6: 315). However, Sánchez Madrid emphasises how he neither inquiries into which means would best assist subjects, nor how to aid the struggle for social recognition. In our reading, the reasons for individual success or failure remain puzzling. Tellingly, the author directs our attention to the fact that Kant does address the State's reaction toward increasing poverty as a social crisis, clearly neglecting the individual poverty experience. As established in the following passage from the *Doctrine of Right*: "[t]he general will of the people has united itself into a society which is to maintain itself perpetually" (DR 6: 325–326), and to do so the lawgiver is entitled to force the wealthy to partake in guaranteeing the basic maintenance of those incapable of attaining economic autonomy. Therefore, poverty relief is to be enacted through taxes or public foundations, but mainly because the philosopher considers it too much of a demeaning situation. It then becomes essential to highlight Sánchez Madrid's reading that "Kant's awareness of the material conditions needed to exercise and concretize freedom does not demonstrate a discourse sympathetic with the demands that poor people might raise" (p. 39). In fact, one could argue that Kant's primal concern is to prevent this State care from becoming perpetual, as that would stifle the self-respect while also burdening the self-sufficient citizenry.

In the second subsection Sánchez Madrid switches perspectives and addresses Kant's call to the responsibility of active citizens in alleviating the situation of economically vulnerable members. Kant discusses aspects of economic inequality by directly addressing the personal responsibility of individual subjects, thus awakening awareness of complicity in historical injustices that their governments may have committed. The *Lecture on Ethics Vigilantius* demonstrates an interdependence structure underpinning Kant's view of the duty

to others, dismissing the indifference to the suffering and needs of others as a maxim, Sánchez Madrid uses as textual evidence that Kant grounds universal moral obligations on human vulnerability, seeking systems able to safeguard citizens from potential misfortunes. Kant states that potentially beneficent people should not boast about donations, as their action responds to the “injustice of the government” (DV § 31, 6: 454). This public injustice is assumed to have benefited the ancestors of the presently wealthy class while, harming those of the now poor. Furthermore, the *Lecture on Ethics Collins* addresses the *instinct of benevolence*, understood as a feeling inserted by Providence to aid the fulfilment of moral action, but as Sánchez Madrid shows, it is not to easily paired with Kant’s attention to historical injustices, as he ends up concerning himself with the destructive impact that the instinct of benevolence might have on property rights, thus dissuading from acting systematically from benevolence merely.

The final substantive chapter, ‘Kant on the Social Suffering of Women’, addresses Kant’s treatment of women’s social suffering within a patriarchal society. Sánchez Madrid fully acknowledges Kant’s unsympathetic attitudes toward the advancement of women, reducing them to passive commonwealth elements, and does so while taking into account two cases, to illuminate how, despite his reticence, women end up by providing informative examples for reflecting on suffering: the questions posed by a woman likely suffering from a mental illness seeking therapeutic guidance with Kant; and the moral *versus* penal judgment of unwed mothers.

In the first subsection the author examines Kant’s correspondence with Maria von Herbert, who reached out to him for guidance in regaining her reason to live following a failed relationship that dissolved due to a lie regarding the existence of a previous lover. In desperate circumstances, Von Herbert implores Kant for practical advice, and Kant attempts to act as a *moral physician*, promulgating a doctrine regarding the importance of distinguishing reticence from dishonesty in practical behaviour. According to Kant, Von Herbert’s former relationship involved lying about her lover, a transgression which “subverts the dignity of man in our own person and attacks the root of our thinking” (Letter to Maria von Herbert 1792, Corr 11: 332), and which leads Kant to side with the beloved man who lost trust after the young woman demonstrated herself incapable of virtue. After the first letter, Von Herbert continued sending others to Kant, who left them unanswered. We found Sánchez Madrid option in favour of presenting us this failed correspondence particularly interesting, not only because it highlights the material conditions playing a role in respecting human dignity, but also because it clearly reveals the limitations of Kant’s moral framework for addressing actual human suffering.

In the second subsection, the author focuses on how Kant deals with infanticides perpetrated by single mothers, that represent a quandary for penal justice where “public justice arising from the state becomes an *injustice* from the perspective of the justice arising from the people” (DR 6: 337). The dilemma involves the judges’ inability to take the concept of honour that is denied to unwed women as an illusion, but rather as a moral condition all women should meet under threat of social exclusion, so much so that Kant highlights the impact of shame on the decision to murder newborns who won’t be recognized by the commonwealth. In this context, we can say, as Sánchez Madrid, that Kant takes the mother’s side, but he also doesn’t fully argue for lenience in these infanticide cases, instead, he recommends institutions and founding homes to protect the children begotten outside wedlock. In particular, he references unmarried people of both sexes as key element in finding a solution, placing some responsibility on male bachelors as likely culprits of seduction and consequent social vilification of unwed women. But again, Kant doesn’t provide a social suffering account based on the unmarried mothers’ direct experience, despite his commonwealth view providing support to unfortunate individuals who’ve fallen into social dishonour, appealing to their inalienable humanity.

In essence, Sánchez Madrid concludes how the book addressed Kant’s elusive social suffering account, requiring interpreters to read between the lines, which she masterfully does. The author provides robust fundamentals for the claim that Kant doesn’t ignore the experience of social suffering, while never assuming that he undertakes a thorough survey of social and political structures hindering moral and civil human development, in fact, none of the mentioned social failures relinquishes the agency of subjects who undergo them. Kant’s demands on individual subjects don’t address the often-detrimental effects that social status, gender, or race might have on societal advancement, struggling to detect situations of intolerable oppression, but contemporary interpreters do face a promising research horizon by studying how domination may underpin social interaction among alleged equals from a Kantian perspective.

In this guise, Kant’s doctrine of dignity, his indirect duties, and his political theory together constitute a coherent, albeit incomplete, toolkit for addressing social suffering. Sánchez Madrid reiterates that the nonideal reading she employs is essential: Kant’s ideas acquire practical relevance only when they are measured against actual hierarchies and dependencies rather than against an imagined perfect republic. Therefore, we can safely say that *Kant on Social Suffering* not only provides us with a solid overview of these topics, and the work that has been done on them, but that it can also guide us through, at least, three avenues of further research: developing concrete and balanced policy proposals, for instance grounded in the notion of Kantian beneficence, testing the extension of Kant’s universal law to those who tend to be excluded, and elaborating Kantian indirect duties, for example, in the context of contemporary animal rights movements.

Overall, Sánchez Madrid did a remarkable job in building a book that proceeds so clearly and methodically, while encompassing a substantial review of both the primary and the secondary literature. In fact, her attentive and broad view of the Kantian sources allow her to establish a theoretical grounding in human dignity that expands the moral horizon of the discussion and puts to the test the very consistency of Kant’s thought by making it face the elements it tried to overlook. By encompassing animals and the mentally ill, applying the Kantian duty to the problem of poverty, and finally interrogating Kant’s gendered blind spots, Sánchez

Madrid draws a unifying conclusion that positions Kant as a surprisingly fertile source for contemporary debates on social suffering. Kant's moral pedagogy tends to diminish the existence of structural flaws in the commonwealth, as public injustices are often concealed as personal failures, and this book presents itself as a prime example of how progressive political theory must take on the challenge of reimagining societies, reconsidering the value ascribed to the suffering of others, and our responsibility for it. While Kant's autonomy ideal neglects suffering caused by social structures, some writings might inspire rephrasing its mitigation as a civil commitment for the State and the citizenry. Essentially, Sánchez Madrid has put forth the challenge of reformulating aspects of Kant's thought to render them consistent with our humanity, all that remains in rolling up our sleeves and accept the call.