

Kant, Agency and Islam

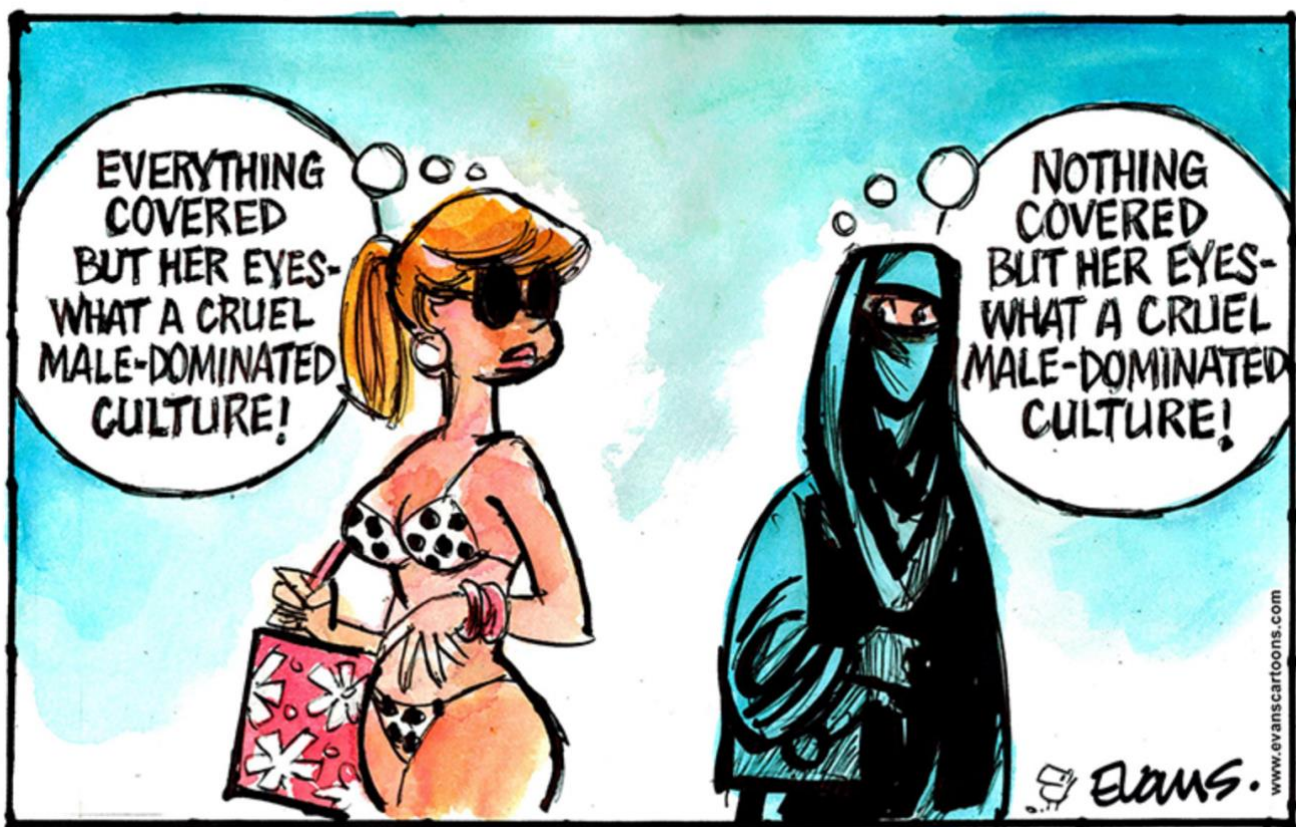
Introduction

There is a great deal of debate about what exactly a religion and worldviews approach means in the classroom. One of the strengths of the debate is that it reveals there is diversity and an ongoing robust dialogue among practitioners and researchers about how to 'do' worldviews and what it looks like in the classroom. The principle of 'worldviews starts with people' is easy for teachers to follow. Taking an individual as a starting point means their worldview, perspective and experience within a tradition or culture can be explored in a way that naturally brings context into the picture. These might be the political, cultural and/ or historical contexts in which individuals interpret and encounter beliefs, practices and habit. This approach enables teachers to explore key ideas from multiple historical, cultural and political perspectives.

In this resource we start with two Muslim women: Saba Mahmood and Lila Abu-Lughod, and explore their views around agency, specifically, the agency of women. We then apply the questions raised by these case studies to explore wider questions about agency and Islam, to the work of Kant. Neither of our two case studies represent what all Muslims think about agency or even what all Muslim women think about agency. However their ideas do reflect current decolonial thinking, in raising questions about how Western ideas are used to make judgements about people who live in other times and other places. Using the work of these two women allows us to understand how other cultural and political perspectives can help us ask new questions about philosophy, in this case, in applying these questions to a giant of Western philosophy: Kant.

STARTER ACTIVITY

Show this cartoon. Talk about the idea of looking at the world through one's own lens or way of seeing.



Agency in Kant's Moral Philosophy

What makes humans different from other creatures? For Kant the ability of humans to be rational and be autonomous is what sets us apart from other animals. We can choose how we behave; we can make decisions based on reason rather than desire or instinct. The ability of humans to make moral choices that have consequences means that agency is a central part of how humans decide how to act.

Kant saw two types of agency; theoretical and practical. These are two distinct but interconnected concepts that relate to different aspects of human cognition and action. While theoretical agency is concerned with understanding and explaining the world, practical agency is concerned with guiding our actions and determining our moral duties.

Theoretical agency, also known as theoretical reason or understanding, refers to the capacity of human beings to engage in theoretical or speculative thinking. It involves the ability to reason, conceptualize, and understand the world through concepts and categories. Theoretical agency allows us to acquire knowledge about the world and make theoretical judgments about it.

Practical agency, also known as practical reason or understanding, refers to the capacity of human beings to engage in practical or moral reasoning and action. It involves the ability to deliberate, make choices, and act in accordance with moral principles. Practical agency allows us to determine what we ought to do and to act in a way that is morally right.

Agency is important in Kant's moral philosophy because it is the means by which we make rational sense of the world, and the thinking that guides our moral actions.

ACTIVITIES

a) Who is Kant?

Worldviews starts with people. Put Kant into his cultural, geographical and historical context for students. Give this brief biography (below). Suggested activities to process this info:

- Give a blank three-frame storyboard. Ask students to identify three key events in Kant's life that they think were formational for him. Draw and write about them. Invite others to circulate the class and see if they can tell which events are being depicted in others' work
- Give a small printed copy of Kant (get picture online), ask students to draw think bubbles around his head, and summarise key aspects of his philosophical worldview
- Look at images of Königsberg online, both historical and today. Note that although today we describe Kant as a German philosopher, Königsberg was part of the Prussian empire and today is within Russian borders. Ask students to find out why he is considered German.
- This episode of 'In Our Time' on Kant's 'Copernician Revolution' provides a good introduction to how much Kant's thinking changed Western philosophy, and why philosophy students are still learning it: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000wlf4>

Biography

Immanuel Kant was a philosopher who is considered one of the most important figures in Western philosophy. He was born on April 22, 1724, in Königsberg, Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia). Kant came from a modest background, and his parents were devout Pietists who instilled in him a strong sense of religious faith.

Pietism was a movement that emerged from German Lutherism (Protestantism) in the late 17th Century. They felt that the church was becoming stale and personal, devotional religious faith was receding. They emphasises the centrality of a personal relationship with God, seeking a spiritual dimension in everyday life. They tried to apply Christian principles to their lives, developing a deep spirituality and commitment to social reform.

Kant began his education at the University of Königsberg, where he studied philosophy, mathematics, and physics. He was influenced by the works of philosophers such as René Descartes, David Hume, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. After completing his studies, Kant worked as a private tutor and lecturer, teaching a wide range of subjects. For more information on how Descartes, Hume and Rousseau influences Kant, see below.

In 1770, Kant was appointed as a professor of logic and metaphysics at the University of Königsberg, a position he held for the rest of his life and where he developed his most significant philosophical ideas. Kant's philosophy aimed to reconcile the rationalist and empiricist traditions, seeking to establish a foundation for knowledge that was both objective and grounded in human experience.

One of Kant's most influential works is "Critique of Pure Reason," published in 1781. In this work, he argued that knowledge is not solely derived from experience but also depends on the mind's innate ability to grapple with concepts. Kant introduced the concept of "transcendental idealism," which posits that the mind actively constructs reality through its own conceptual structures and intuition. We derive information from the outside world, but we shape this information in order to make sense of it. We are not receiving pure, external reality, but neither are we completely unable to know about the world unless through reason.

Kant's philosophy extended to ethics and aesthetics. In his work "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals" (1785), he developed the concept of the "categorical imperative," a moral principle that requires individuals to act according to moral rules that can be universally applied. Kant argued that moral actions should be guided by reason rather than personal desires or consequences.

In addition to his philosophical works, Kant also wrote on subjects such as anthropology, religion, and political philosophy. He emphasized the importance of individual autonomy and the need for a just society based on the rule of law.

Kant's ideas had a profound impact on subsequent philosophical thought, influencing the next generation of European thinkers, and many beyond. His emphasis on reason, morality, and the autonomy of the individual continues to be influential in contemporary philosophy. Immanuel Kant died on February 12, 1804, in Königsberg.

Influences

Kant was influenced by Descartes' ideas of doubt and scepticism. Although Kant often critiqued them, they were foundational in his work. Descartes employed a methodology of doubt in order to establish whether a claim could be said to be true or reliable. Descartes' famous line, '*cogito ergo sum*' (I think therefore I am), means we cannot know anything for sure, except that we are thinking. Kant was influenced by this idea, and built on it to argue that we know the world through our own thinking and reasoning, but also through experience. This is Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason'.

David Hume took a similarly radical position of doubt to Descartes. Hume argues that we think we know what is happening and why, but our sense of reality is based on habit and the assumption of regularity or predictability. In fact we cannot really know with certainty if one event causes another, we just conjecture it does. Kant built on this to argue that we must accept some conjecture that a follows b in order to make sense of the world. This is partly derived from experience, but also our ability to rationalise. Kant acknowledged that we can only know how the world appears to us, not how it really is. However we can detect *a priori* structures and principles, due to our innate powers of rationality.

The influence of Rousseau can be seen in Kant's moral and political philosophy. Rousseau argued that humans have an ability to live autonomous lives, determining their own direction. This can be seen as a basis in all Kant's work, such as the idea that all humans have equal value because we all have the capacity for reason and autonomy. Kant argued that a moral society is one based on the rule of law, because this, ideally, treats everyone equally in the eyes of the law. Status, wealth or belonging to a certain group should not affect someone's treatment. Rousseau described a 'social contract' where society is made of individuals willingly entering into an agreement, to obey the law, and in turn enjoy the protection of the law.

b) What is 'Theoretical Agency'?

Ask student to think of a time when they worked something out by thinking about it. What did they need their brains to be able to do?

Watch this clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJCRzgAPwE4> (This is from Channel 4's 'Secret life of Children', this clip is called 'learning to lie').

Discuss with students:

- The older children have reached a developmental milestone, they can now work out how best to frame a lie to keep them out of trouble. What does a human need to know in order to be able to lie? What mental processes are used?
- Do students think this ability is innate, or something we need to be taught?

Kant thinks only humans show 'theoretical agency'. Do students agree?

c) A Priori Reasoning

Kant suggests that one dimension of theoretical reasoning is the ability to make 'a priori' judgments, meaning we can work something out without physically experiencing it, just by thinking about it. For example, we can work out a sum in our heads. We don't need to have 5 oranges and 3 apples to know $5 + 3 = 8$. We are able to formulate ideas about what is reliable and certain without relying on empirical evidence (evidence in the physical world).

Share the following claims with students- can they decide if they are true or false using just reasoning?

- All wives are married
- All finches are birds
- If today is Thursday it is not Monday
- All vixens are female
- The universe is not infinite
- Triangles have three sides

See if students can come up with their own statement that can be proved true or false using just reasoning.

d) What is 'Practical Agency'?

For Kant, the capacity to act autonomously based on our reasoning- not to just follow or wander- to decide, and then to act, is uniquely human. Kant includes in this decision-making process the ability to make **moral** decisions. To do this, we are guided by rationality and the universal moral law.

The moral law is visible to all humans, whoever they are. Practical agency is when we recognise and follow the moral law. For example, we decide to treat others as means not ends, or we decide not to do something because we would not like it done to us. Our sense of moral duty compels us when we make decisions. For Kant, this is a dimension of human autonomy; someone could decide not to take the moral path, because they are autonomous thinkers and actors.

Show these moral decisions to students, are these moral laws they choose to live by? Are there times when they decide to avoid these actions?

- Promises should always be kept
- People should be treated as valuable in their own right and never used
- We should put other peoples' needs before our own
- If we have what someone needs, we should share it
- We should refrain from taking an action if we would not like someone else doing it

After some discussion of these moral principles, ask students if the very fact they are *able* to discuss, demonstrates that we do have practical agency?

Can students give a moral principle they live by?

e) Assumptions in Kant

Ask students to discuss if Kant is making an assumption in claiming that all people can act out of complete agency?

Firstly, can students identify groups that have less agency in British society? Why is this?

Secondly, ask students if they agree that humans are encultured beings, meaning we know ourselves through a culture, a language and a set of norms? Even if someone is of mixed or complicated heritage, are humans still encultured? Is it possible to be human and not have a culture, language and norms? Does this have an impact on how free we are to act with autonomy?

Discuss these examples, and decide how autonomous humans are:

- Samirah wants to be vegan, but her family and culture do not see this as valid. There is no vegan food at her house, family members feel she is rejecting their cooking, and some relatives even laugh at her. However Samirah feels strongly that for environmental and animal welfare reasons, she wants to eat a plant-based diet.
- Josh knows his colleague is being bullied at work. His colleague is female, the bullying is carried out by a group of young men who make sexual comments, and then laugh whenever she says anything. Josh sees the boss, who is male, laughing along with and taking no action to protect his colleague. Josh worked very hard to get this job and does not want to lose it, but he also hates to see his colleague experiencing this behaviour.

Agency and the Categorical Imperative in Kant

Kant argues that human agency is rooted in our ability to act as rational beings and in accordance with universal moral principles. Kant perceived universal moral laws and principles which apply to everyone, describing this as the 'categorical imperative'. These moral laws are true for all people in all contexts, they are not subjective, but universal. These laws tell all people what is right and wrong in a situation, and they have been arrived at through reason and can be followed by all humans, who are all rational actors.

The idea of a categorical imperative is a fundamental principle of moral reasoning in Kant's ethical philosophy. It is a universal moral law that applies to all rational beings, regardless of their personal desires or circumstances. The categorical imperative guides individuals in determining their moral duties and provides a framework for making ethical decisions.

Kant formulates the categorical imperative in different ways, but the most well-known formulation is: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."

This formulation requires individuals to consider whether the principle (maxim) guiding their action can be consistently applied as a universal law that everyone should follow. If an action cannot be willed as a universal law, then it is morally unacceptable. For example, if an action treats others as a 'means to an end', rather an 'end in themselves', it should not become a universal law.

The categorical imperative derives from Kant's view of the inherent dignity and autonomy of all rational beings. Individuals should not be told what to do, they are capable of working it out for themselves.

Humans have the ability to act in an immoral way, because we have agency. However, we do not have the ability to decide what is good or bad because whether something is wrong or right is decided by universal laws that are outside our control. Freedom does not mean that we can decide what is good or bad. For Kant freedom, the capacity to demonstrate our agency, means that we can decide to act morally or immorally but what is moral or immoral has already been decided.

ACTIVITIES

a) Are there universal moral principles?

Ask student if they agree with Kant that there are universal moral principles, or is Kant *assuming* this to be the case?

Show an international news website, such as BBC News, the 'world' tab. Scroll through this website, pausing at any stories that catch students' attention.

Do they see patterns in behaviour around the world? Do countries seem to face the same problems? Do all problems around the world need the same solutions or context-specific solutions? Can students draw any conclusions through looking at the international news of universal moral principles?

Ask students where they think Kant got the idea from that there are universal moral principles. Is this an idea that shows respect for all humans, or an idea that reflects a paternalistic attitude that he can state what all humans think? Allocate responses into these columns:

Kant shows respect for all humans	Kant shows a paternalistic attitude
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Responses:

All humans are capable of moral thinking	A moral sense is innate to all humans, whatever language and culture
All humans are the same and a German philosopher can know what they are like	Because Kant has a sense of moral principles, other cultures must as well
Moral principles are recognizable to other humans from other groups	One group's moral principles are not better than another's - they are all equal

Students might note that Kant does not think humans can *determine* what is and is not moral, only *detect*. This implies the moral law derives from an external source, such as God or an ultimate reality. Add this point to the above columns, does this belief show Kant's respect for all humans as equal, or a paternalistic attitude that he knows best?

b) What is the Categorical Imperative?

The Categorical Imperative is Kant's universal moral principle. Break down the word for students; 'categorical' means something is true without exceptions, definitively, and an 'imperative' is something we have to follow.

The Categorical Imperative is found in the formulation "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." Can students state this in their own words?

Another is 'treat others as ends in themselves, not means to an end'. Can students state this in their own words?

Discuss whether it makes sense to apply a moral rule to all humans; simple, clear principles about treating others with respect. Do students think if we all lived by this the world would be more peaceful and fair?

Do students know of 'Categorical Imperatives' in other religions, philosophies or worldviews, such as ahimsa in Hindu Dharma or sewa in Sikhi?

Do students think Kant knows about other religions, philosophies or worldviews in the way a student of RE does in 21st Century Britain?

Kant used his 'theoretical reasoning' to arrive at the idea that all humans must live by moral principles. If instead he had travelled the world and discovered that in fact, there was a universal moral pattern in all cultures, would this make this thinking more reliable for students? Do students think theoretical reasoning is a reliable way to make sense of the world, or should we try to find physical evidence for our claims?

For Kant the universal moral laws is outside human control- we do not create it, but we can detect it. Do students think cultures create their own moral laws, or do they exist outside/ beyond human culture? Are moral laws something we have discovered, like we discovered gravity, or do we create them ourselves?

Kant, Agency and Islam

Islamic theology and Kantian moral philosophy have aspects in common. Both are concerned with individuals and communities living a good and moral life. In Islam there is a concept of 'ijtihad'; the process of independent reasoning and interpretation of Islamic law (Sharia). It is the effort made by qualified scholars to derive legal rulings from the primary sources of Islamic law, namely the Quran and the Hadith (sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad).

The term "ijtihad" means "striving" or "exerting effort" in Arabic. It involves the application of reasoning, logic, and scholarly expertise to derive legal rulings in areas where there is no explicit guidance in the primary sources or where existing interpretations may not adequately address contemporary issues. Ijtihad allows for the adaptation and development of Islamic law to address new circumstances and challenges. It enables scholars to provide legal guidance and rulings in areas that were not explicitly addressed by the Prophet Muhammad. Historically, ijtihad was more prevalent during the early centuries of Islam when scholars had greater freedom to engage in independent reasoning. However, over time, the practice of ijtihad became more restricted, and the authority of established legal schools gained prominence, and a tendency to discourage new forms of ijtihad.

The Islamic sense in which humans can use their learning and reasoning to make reliable moral decisions is aligned with Kant's sense of humans as rational actors. However there is also a difference between a Kantian view of human agency and an Islamic theological view. Ijtihad does not permit the conclusion that there is no God, or that the Qur'an and Hadith are irrelevant as sources of decision-making. Ijtihad allows interpretation and exploration of

Islamic law, but all truth stems from the Qur'an and, to a lesser extent, the Hadith. A ruling not based on these is not, by definition, reliable.

While Kant believed in God, remaining a member of the Lutheran church his whole life, his work on the categorical imperative does not depend on faith. Kant presented the categorical imperative as relevant for all people, because based on reason and the view of all humans as inherently valuable and autonomous. This stands regardless of someone's faith in God or not. In this sense Kant does not represent an orthodox Christian outlook towards God in the 18th Century.

a) Ijtihad and Agency

Define 'ijtihad' so students understand the word. The word comes from the same root as 'jihad', meaning 'struggle'. The root is j- h- d in Arabic. Ijtihad refers to mental struggle or exertion, as opposed to spiritual or physical struggle.

Read these quotes from the 20th Century philosopher Bertrand Russel about Thomas Aquinas. Firstly, Russell describes what Aquinas attempts to do, which is 'an intimate blending of religion and reasoning, of moral aspiration with logical admiration of what is timeless' (p. 57).

Although Aquinas is described as a philosopher, Russell, declares he is not, arguing, "There is little of the true philosophic spirit in Aquinas. He does not, like the Platonic Socrates, set out to follow wherever the argument may lead. He is not engaged in an enquiry, the result of which it is impossible to know in advance. Before he begins to philosophize, he already knows the truth; it is declared in the Catholic faith." (p. 453).

Reference: Russell, B. (1946) *History of Western Philosophy*

What is Russell saying about Aquinas?

Can students link this to the idea of Islamic reasoning?

Which statement do students most align with? (Or give their own statement)

Ijtihad is not 'true' philosophy because the truth is a foregone conclusion: it is the Islamic faith

Ijtihad is 'true;' philosophy because humans have complete free will and can draw any conclusion they like

Ijtihad is 'true' philosophy because God allows humans to think freely, so their autonomy is assured.

b) Examples of Ijtihad

This resource presents students with two feminist Islamic thinkers. Are these examples of independent reasoning in Islam?

Teach about the two groups below, the '5 Percenters' and the Ahmadiyya Muslims. Ask students to discuss if these are examples of independent reasoning in Islam?

The Five Percenters, also known as the Nation of Gods and Earths, is an Islamic movement that emerged in the United States during the 1960s. Founded by Clarence 13X, a former member of the Nation of Islam, the movement emphasizes the empowerment and enlightenment of African Americans through knowledge of self and the understanding of their divine nature.

Ahmadiyya Islam is a religious movement within Islam that originated in the late 19th century in British India. It was founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who claimed to be the Promised Messiah and Mahdi, a figure expected by Muslims to appear in the end times.

Ahmadiyya Muslims believe that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was the divinely appointed reformer who

<p>The name "Five Percenters" refers to the belief that only 5% of the population possess true knowledge and understanding, while the remaining 85% are ignorant and easily manipulated, and the remaining 10% are the ruling elite who deceive and control the majority. This concept is derived from the teachings of the Nation of Islam, but the Five Percenters diverge from traditional Islamic beliefs in several ways.</p> <p>The movement rejects the notion of a supreme being or a traditional God, instead emphasizing the idea that each individual is God and possesses the power to shape their own reality. They believe that the black man is the original man and the father of civilization, and that knowledge of self is the key to liberation from oppression.</p> <p>The Five Percenters also place a strong emphasis on education. This provides a framework for understanding the universe and one's place within it.</p> <p>The movement has faced criticism for its controversial beliefs. The Five Percenters are a unique Islamic movement that combines elements of traditional Islam with a focus on self-empowerment, knowledge, and the liberation of African Americans.</p>	<p>came to revive the true teachings of Islam. They emphasize the peaceful and inclusive nature of Islam, promoting the concept of "Love for All, Hatred for None." Ahmadiyya Islam places a strong emphasis on education, morality, and service to humanity. They actively engage in humanitarian efforts, promoting interfaith dialogue, and advocating for peace and justice.</p> <p>Ahmadiyya Muslims believe in the continuation of prophethood in a metaphorical sense. They do not claim that Ahmad was a prophet, as Muhammad is the last prophet. However they are often portrayed as making this claim, and are persecuted all over the Islamic world. Some mainstream Islamic scholars consider Ahmadiyya Muslims to be non-Muslim, due to their belief in the prophethood of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad.</p> <p>Despite these challenges, Ahmadiyya Islam has spread to various parts of the world and has established a global community. They have built mosques, schools, and hospitals, and actively participate in social and charitable activities.</p>
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Kant, Agency and Women in Islam

Kant's moral philosophy is based on the idea that individuals have agency and the moral laws that govern agency are universal. What can be said about individuals who do not possess full agency over their lives? Are they able to fulfil the categorical imperative and obey universal moral laws? If they are not able to make free decisions about their own lives, can they still be said to be rational actors with agency?

Women in all cultures and throughout history experience reduced agency, or less agency than men. Women in some cultures and eras have extremely narrow margins in which to exercise their agency, others have more. This is true of women in different Islamic cultures and times, including the contemporary world. Considering the position of women in tradition societies, Islamic or otherwise, and the changing role of women in more liberal but still patriarchal societies, do we need to re-assess Kant's thinking about human freedom, autonomy and rationality so it includes women? We will consider whether Kant's understanding of autonomy needs modification with reference to two Muslim female thinkers: Saba Mahmood and Lila Abu-Lughod.

Saba Mahmood

Saba Mahmood is one of the most important woman writers and thinkers of the early 21st Century. She was born in Pakistan in 1961 and moved to America, attending American universities and becoming a highly influential anthropologist, exploring the relationship between culture, religion and society.

Her work is mostly focused on Islam but she asks wider questions about the influence of Western ideas on a view of the world, including an Islamic view. She also explores the place of religion in modern society. Mahmood drew her

ideas from a wide range of disciplinary fields, including feminism, philosophy, gender studies, anthropology and politics to develop her ideas.

Agency and Islam

Mahmood argues that 'religion' as understood and defined in the West is only one way of understanding religion. The Western view of 'religion' is as something private, belonging to the home or the personal sphere and different to the public, shared social spheres. On this view, religion is part of the family and the domestic. The public realm is non-religious. Therefore in the West politics, the media, education, and parliament are seen as secular, or that religion does not have a place in these areas.

Mahmood contrasts this view with a different way of understanding 'religion' and its role in society. To do this she explores an example from Egypt called the 'Mosque movement' or the 'Piety movement'. Mahmood explores Muslim women in Egypt who were part of a mass movement. These women joined together in mosques to talk about what it meant to be a Muslim woman. They were angry and disappointed that the traditional roles of women in modern Egyptian society did not allow them to be 'proper Muslim women', they wanted to live in a way that they saw as authentically female and Muslim. To Western eyes this example can seem contradictory. These women entered a traditionally male-only space, the mosque, for self-education and empowerment. Yet their exploration, discussions and learning led them to seek a traditional gendered role. Using this example Mahmood shows an idea of agency that is different to the Western view. It does not prioritise the rights of the individual over everything else, like their family, religious traditions or tradition. Additionally, agency can be employed to freely choose to occupy a particular given role.

Kant and the Piety movement

What can be said regarding this example of agency in light of Kant's thinking? On one hand the agency of the Muslim women in the Egyptian Piety movement is clear. These women are clearly thinking for themselves and making decisions about their own lives. However their choices are not informed by the universal principles of the Categorical Imperative. The women might well believe that their actions should become a universal law, but they are accepting a role for themselves where they are means to an end, rather than ends in themselves. Traditional women's roles, not limited to Islamic societies, are to manage the domestic sphere, including childcare, freeing their husbands to work. On a societal scale, women's caring responsibilities free all males from domestic labour. Traditionally women do not choose a caring role, it is imposed upon them as women, whether they want it or not.

Mahmood's use of this example shows how Western, and male, Kant's notion of autonomy is. Firstly it presupposes an individual always thinks as an individual and does not take their community into account. Secondly, it assumes the individual in question is permitted autonomy by society. Mahmood further reminds us that ideas of right and wrong are not universal, but depend on context and culture.

Questions for Discussion

- Is the ability of individuals to exert their freewill universal?
- If Muslim women wish to be modest and submit to their husbands should we respect this choice as their agency?
- Does the interpretation of a 'good' Muslim woman in the Piety Movement mean that the Categorical imperative is not universal at all but an ethical principle that only applies to Western men?
- To what extent are the women of the Piety movement exercising agency?

Lila Abu-Lughod

Lila Abu-Lughod is a Palestinian American Professor, her studies are also centred around women and Islam and a lot of her work is based on several years living in rural areas of Egypt with local families.

Lila Abhu- Lughod suggests that to understand how people live their lives we need to take into account the many factors that influence those lives; no life is lived in abstract. To understand human lives we need to understand the contexts and the different forces that impact on them, economic, gender, faith, ideology, family, nationality, international politics, culture and colonial histories. She claims that to understand something like agency we need first to acknowledge its complexity and that agency cannot be defined or understood in isolation from the communities in which it is exercised.

In the opening to *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* she quotes from a middle-aged woman, Zaynab, who lives in a rural village in Egypt. When Lila tells Zaynab that people in the West think that Muslim women are oppressed by their religion Zaynab laughs and says that many things oppress her; from government corruption, the security police and unemployment, a husband that has to work away from home, but certainly not her religion. Abu-Lughod uses this story to illustrate how Western eyes are so intent on seeing Islam as repressive that when we look at a woman like Zaynab we see someone with no autonomy when in reality Zaynab believes that she takes decisions and exercises free will every day.

The question of agency for women in Islam, especially in the Middle East is complicated for several reasons.

1. Women in the Middle East do exercise agency in the way that people in the West do but looking through a Western lens means agency is not recognized it because of Western prejudices. Abu-Lughod believes that Muslim women in the Middle East do exercise agency, it just doesn't look the same as the agency recognized in the West.
2. Abu-Lughod believes that the question of Muslim women's agency has become weaponized. In *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* she argues that westerners use the accusation that Muslim women don't have agency or rights as a way of asserting the moral superiority of the Western world over Islam and Muslims.

ACTIVITIES

a) Islamic Women's Agency

Give cut out figures of Egyptian women- ask pupils to choose two. Stick them in their books and add speech bubbles to explain why they are joining the mosque movement, using the information above.

Watch this TED talk of Samina Ali on the hijab, Islam and women's dress:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5bDhMP9lQ>

Discuss if this changes students' sense of Islamic women's agency

Return to idea of right and wrong being cultural or universal- in light of Mahmood's work.

b) Who is Lila Abu -Lughod?

Lila Abu-Lughod is an anthropologist known for her work on gender, Islam, and the Middle East. She was born on October 3, 1952, in the United States. Abu-Lughod comes from a family of academics, her father is Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, a well-known Palestinian scholar and activist.

Abu-Lughod completed her undergraduate studies at Carleton College in Minnesota, in Sociology and Anthropology. She pursued her graduate studies at Harvard University, obtain her Ph.D. in Anthropology in 1984.

Abu-Lughod has held professorships at prestigious institutions; Columbia, Pennsylvania and Princeton Universities. Throughout her career, Abu-Lughod has received numerous awards and honours for her contributions to anthropology and Middle Eastern studies.

Abu-Lughod's research focuses on issues of gender, power, and representation in the context of the Middle East and Muslim societies. She has conducted extensive fieldwork in Egypt, Morocco, and other parts of the Arab world, exploring topics such as women's activism, veiling, and the politics of cultural representation.

One of Abu-Lughod's most influential works is her book "Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society" (1986). In this ethnographic study, she examines the lives of Bedouin women in a community in Egypt's Western Desert, exploring the complex ways in which they negotiate their identities and express their emotions through poetry.

Abu-Lughod has also written extensively on the representation of Muslim women in Western media and the politics of cultural imperialism. Her book "Do Muslim Women Need Saving?" (2013) critically examines Western discourses that portray Muslim women as oppressed and in need of rescue, challenging simplistic and Orientalist narratives.

Lila Abu-Lughod's work has had a significant impact on the fields of anthropology, gender studies, and Middle Eastern studies. Her nuanced and insightful analyses challenge stereotypes and provide a deeper understanding of the complexities of gender, culture, and power in Muslim societies.

c) Who is Saba Mahmood?

Saba Mahmood is an influential anthropologist known for her groundbreaking work on religion, secularism, and gender in the context of the Middle East. She was born in Lahore, Pakistan, in 1962. Mahmood's upbringing and experiences as a Muslim woman in Pakistan greatly influenced her academic interests and research.

Mahmood studied Political Science at Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad, Pakistan. She left Pakistan, earning a Master's in International Relations from Sussex in the UK and a Ph.D. in Anthropology from Stanford, USA. Mahmood was a professor of Anthropology at the Universities of California, Berkeley and Chicago.

Mahmood's research focused on the intersections of religion, secularism, and gender, particularly in the context of the Middle East. She conducted extensive fieldwork in Egypt, exploring the practices and experiences of women in the Islamic revivalist movement known as the Mosque or Piety Movement. Her ethnographic work challenged prevailing assumptions about the agency and subjectivity of Muslim women, offering a nuanced understanding of their religious practices and political engagements.

One of Mahmood's most influential works is her book "The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject" (2005). In this book, she critically examines the experiences of women in the Islamic Movement in Egypt, challenging Western feminist assumptions and offering a complex analysis of the relationship between piety, agency, and subjectivity.

Mahmood's work has had a profound impact on the fields of anthropology, gender studies, and Middle Eastern studies. Her scholarship challenged simplistic and Orientalist narratives about Muslim women and offered a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of religious subjectivity and political engagement. Mahmood's work also contributed to broader debates about secularism, feminism, and the politics of representation.

Saba Mahmood died on March 10, 2018, at the age of 55. Her contributions to academia continues to be highly regarded, and her work remains influential in shaping contemporary discussions on religion, gender, and politics.

Questions for Discussion

- Is Lila Abu-Lughod right when she argues that Muslim women's rights have become weaponized as a form of Western moral superiority? Could the denial of women's agency within Islamic societies be a type of Islamophobic view?
- To what extent can Abu-Lughod's defence of Islamic agency be seen as a deflection of a legitimate criticism that women in Islam have reduced agency compared to men?
- Kant's idea of the categorical imperative is absolutist; it applies in all times and all places. Kant was not a relativist, he did not believe that what was right or wrong changed in relation to the situation or culture. Are universalist or absolutist moral principles ever reasonable; or is all morality relative?
- Is agency over one's life essentially the same, whatever the culture, time or place?