



Was Kant a Racist? Can Critical Idealism Contribute to Combating Racism? With an Addendum: On South Sea Islanders in Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals by [Douglas R McGaughey](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).

**Revised 10 April 2018 with the addition of documentation of Kant’s explicit rejection of slavery as well as rejection of colonialism, the inhumane treatment of animals, and call for the protection of the environment (page 12 and two first footnotes).**

**Revised 20 January 2017 with the addition of a quote (page 17 below) from the *Metaphysics of Morals* (AA VI, 467-468): The statement here by Kant constitutes an *explicit rejection* not only of racism, ageism, sexism, power or weakness, status and prestige (e.g., aristocracy) as criteria for judging others, but it is also an *implicit rejection* of homophobia, nationalism, populism, and any other criteria for judging others, which are all based on merely empirical criteria of “theoretical reason” to the entire neglect of the capacities and moral significance of “practical reason.” Thanks to Birgit Recki who cited the second of the two paragraphs of this “Remark” from the MM for a very different but equally laudable purpose in her *Ästhetik der Sitten. Die Affinität von ästhetischem Gefühl und praktischer Vernunft bei Kant* (Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 2001): 255, n. 43.**

Was Kant a Racist?  
Can Critical Idealism Contribute to Combating Racism?

With an Addendum: On South Sea Islanders in  
*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*

Overview: In which Kant’s comments on race are discussed in light of his philosophy of history, critiques of theoretical and practical reason, and his biological reflections on “evolution.” Humanity is seen as the “ultimate end” of nature. Although this sounds anthropocentric and suggests the justification of the indiscriminate exploitation of nature, it is manifest not by means of a culture of “skill”, but by a culture that promotes the individual’s assumption of moral responsibility for her/his decisions and actions.

Philo: Our conversation on science brought us to affirm the complementarity between science (theoretical reason) and religion (practical reason). Yet, there are passages in Kant’s writings that suggest that he held to some deeply racist and highly offensive attitudes that seem to be anything but compatible with either enlightened science or religion. Allow me to read two passages from John T. Goldthwait’s translation of *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*:

“The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality, even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color.” (110-111)

“Father Labat reports that a Negro carpenter, whom he reproached for haughty treatment towards his wives answered: “You whites are indeed fools, for first you make great concessions to your wives, and afterward you complain when they drive you mad.” And it might be that there were something in this which perhaps deserved to be considered, but in short, this fellow was very black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid.” (111)

Additionally, in Friedrich Christian Starke’s edition of Kant’s *Menschenkunde oder philosophische Anthropologie* from 1831, Kant speaks of four “races” (*Menschenschläge*) as follows:

“1) The people of America are ineducable. They have no motivation; because they lack emotion and passion. They are not amorous and, therefore, are not fecund. They rarely speak, do not caress one another, they don’t plan ahead, and are lazy.

2) The Negro race, one could say, is exactly the opposite from the Americans; they are completely emotional and passionate, extremely lively, talk incessantly, and are vain. They are educable but only as servants (i.e., they accept training). They have much motivation, are also sensitive, fear snakes, and do many things out of honor.

3) Hindus have motivation, but they have a high degree of serenity, and they all look like philosophers. Nevertheless, they tend both to great rage and to love. They are educable to a high degree, but only in the arts, not in the sciences. They are incapable of abstraction. A great Hindu is one who has achieved much through deception and has lots of money. The Hindus have reached their potential; they will never achieve anything more even though they have begun to achieve much through education.

4) The White race possesses all motivations and talents ...“ (353)

He then proceeds to discuss characteristics of the Finns, French, Germans, Spaniards, English, Italians, Poles, and Russians. He concludes:

“An enlightened people is one where individuals think for themselves and don’t permit others to think for them. One actually discovers that in those nations in which Latin has a strong influence, one finds a great deal of culture (*Bildung*). This is the influence of the Romans. Here we’re talking especially of the French, Italians, English, and Spanish. The true indication of an enlightened people is when the public begins to pay attention to its common interests, and the best example of this is the French. However, Russians are surely disciplined, even to an extent

cultivated, but more in the sense of capacities than in university faculties. Because their concepts are not broadened, they hate all nations, with the exception of the British.” (358)

It seems to me, Irenaeus, that we cannot end our conversation without addressing what clearly are deeply disturbing observations about the various peoples of the world.

Irenaeus: I agree, Philo. I propose we approach this theme in three steps, with respect to: 1) the historical issues; 2) the theoretical issues; and 3) the biological issues raised. However, let my opinion be clear from the outset: We will find little reason even to believe, much less to be convinced, that Kant is a racist – even though it is impossible for us to prove or disprove that in his heart of hearts Kant was or was not a racist, which is a judgment impossible for us to make about anyone, even ourselves.

P: Whew, Irenaeus, you have taken on a challenging task here!

I: Yes, and more needs to be said. Three points should be cause for great caution. First, racism involves a set of judgments made on the most superficial appraisal of *mere appearances*, and this is wholly incompatible with Kant’s understanding of knowledge as concerned with *a priori* synthetic judgment that *necessarily* (not capriciously) must be *added to* appearances (i.e., not limited to the appearances themselves). Second, racism is a contradiction of the so-called “second formulation” of the categorical imperative: that we should treat all other human beings only as ends, never as mere means. Third, racism contradicts Kant’s second maxim of the understanding: that we should think from the perspective of the other. Even more tellingly, we will see that racism is incompatible with Kant’s understanding of biology, specifically, his defense of “monogenesis”: the assertion that all of humanity is one species. Finally, racism is incompatible with Kant’s claim of the status of humanity (not any particular race) as the ultimate end of nature, committed “by nature” to a cosmopolitan world of mutual cooperation.

P: Given our many conversations, Irenaeus, I am not surprised that you wish to contradict the obvious as Copernicus contradicts the movement of the sun. The passages I quote are obviously racist. Yet, if there is anything that I have learned from you about Kant, it is that comprehension is not grounded in the obvious.

I: Exactly, Philo! However, before we turn to the epistemological issues involved with the charge of Kant’s racism, let’s briefly look at the historical problems with the charge. To be sure, nothing can be decided on the basis of mere historical facts, as we have discussed previously. Our knowledge of the “facts” has as much to do with what we *add to* the facts as it does with the facts themselves – although the facts constitute an “exclusive club” that cannot be capriciously changed.

#### Historical Point I: A Kantian Philosophy of History

P: Just what historical facts do you have in mind, Irenaeus?

I: At the least, we need to consider two elements: 1) Kant’s so-called “Copernican Turn” to critical philosophy, usually associated with the project published as the *Critique of Pure Reason*

in 1781, which allows us to distinguish between the “pre-critical” and the “critical” Kant; and 2) the difference between Kant’s “anthropology” (based on “*Beobachtungen*” and “*Beobachtungslehre*”) and his “critical philosophy.”

P: By referring to Kant’s “Copernican Turn” in the context of his theory of knowledge I take it you have something else in mind than Kant’s “methodological skepticism” that seeks to identify epistemological necessities (certainties) in the midst of empirical ambiguities?

I: Yes! Regarding historical questions about the “Copernican Turn” in Kant, two elements are of interest here: 1) Kant’s own philosophy of history with its alpha (the emergence of a human capacity) and its omega (the establishment of culture – an international, cosmopolitan culture rather than some particular, superior culture! – that encourages the moral exercise of that creative capacity); and 2) the difference between Kant’s pre- and post-critical understanding of the philosophical task.

P: I didn’t know Kant had a philosophy of history? I thought that the first philosophy of history (as opposed to a theological, salvation history) framed by an alpha and omega was Hegel’s that is grounded in the theory of “double negation.” For him, the alpha point of history commences with the “first negation” of Absolute Oneness, into multiplicity that is governed by a negative dialectic of the “cunning of reason”. Reason 1) arranges the multiplicity into the physical conditions that allow for the emergence of consciousness, and 2) brings about the level of consciousness capable not merely of objective representation, but also the crucial step in humanity that is subjective, self-reflection. That, in turn, eventually enables the occurrence of the ultimate, “second negation”: of thinking Absolute Oneness in the midst of multiplicity (the Concept). Here is a philosophy of history that encompasses and surpasses Christianity’s meta-narrative of salvation in the notion of the God-man, Christ, which for Hegel serves only as a mere representation of what all consciousness is capable of and should achieve. Hegel’s philosophy of history does not ignore the God-man, but affirms it as the crucial “objective” step toward the awareness that the Absolute is uniquely united with consciousness. However, what is merely an “objective” narrative of salvation in Christianity as something that passively “happens to” believers thanks to an *exclusive* Christ event, becomes in Hegel’s “subjective” philosophy of history an *inclusive* model attainable universally by all human consciousness: the conscious realization of one’s own God-personhood with the grasp of the Concept. Here, in the final, philosophical stage of history, history finds its ultimate end when the One comes to understand itself.

I: Superb, Philo! Your succinct summary of the differences between Christianity’s salvation history and Hegel’s philosophy of history saves us much time. We can now sketch Kant’s philosophy of history much more quickly.

P: Again, I am surprised and intrigued to hear of a Kantian philosophy of history. Please proceed!

I: For a more complete treatment, I defer to “Part Five: History”, in Otfried Höffe’s *Kants Kritik der praktischen Vernunft. Eine Philosophie der Freiheit [Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason: A Philosophy of History]*. Here Höffe portrays Kant’s philosophy of history and

contrasts it with those of Schiller, Hegel, and Nietzsche. But we can still sketch the key elements of Kant's own philosophy of history here.

P: OK. Then just what is the alpha point of history for Kant?

I: Kant proposes that history begins with the emergence of a categorical capacity in the midst of the blind, mechanical character of natural events. He formulated this thesis in *Conjectures on the Beginnings of the History of the Human Race* (1786), five years after the *Critique of Pure Reason* and two years before the publication of the second *Critique of Practical Reason*. In the third antinomy of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (in "Solution of the Cosmological Idea of Totality in the Derivation of Cosmical Events from their Causes") with its discussion of the difference between an empirical and an intellectual concept, Kant identified the unique capacity of humanity as creative freedom, complementary to, yet independent of the blind, mechanical causality of nature.

P: Do creative freedom and nature stand against each other then, as two different kinds of causality?

I: Though these two kinds of causality may *appear* to be in conflict with one another, the fact that we only experience effects, and not causes themselves, not only makes it impossible for us to prove or disprove one or the other, but also makes it impossible for us to reduce one to the other. Additionally, the capacity of creative freedom to initiate a sequence of events (effects) that nature itself is incapable of initiating on its own is a *necessary, regulative* (i.e., assumed) *idea of reason*. Without that assumption, we cannot understand humanity as possessing either theoretical reason or practical reason. Both require humanity's *adding to the phenomena things that are not there* (in ways that nature on its own cannot) in order at all to understand phenomena (theoretical reason) or to act in the world (practical reason). Humanity is the species that establishes teleological goals for itself, and responds to phenomena more than merely instinctually; for that reason, our practical reason confronts us, we have repeatedly said, with assuming responsibility for our actions. Kant thus refers to the overwhelming effects of the *regulative idea* of freedom in the *Critique of Practical Reason* as the closest we can come to a *fact of reason* (unlike the other two ideas of pure reason: God and the soul, which are not manifest in appearances whatsoever).

P: So ... history begins where humanity first emerges with its unusual capacity for theoretical and practical reason. Let me guess, then: the omega of history is when the human species in fact exercises these capacities, morally responsibly, to their fullness.

I: A safe guess, Philo! In §83 of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant distinguishes between two forms of culture: that "of skill", and that "of promoting the will." The former is Rousseau's "second nature"; it consists of humanity's skill at the production of artifacts. The latter is neither Schopenhauer's "will" as "representational construction" of the world, nor Nietzsche's "will to power" as "the becoming of nature"; rather, it is the communal provision of the context for, and the encouragement of, the morally responsible exercise on the part of each individual of her/his capacities. The culture that "promotes the will" is then not a heteronomous culture that seeks to channel the individual within the parameters of an heteronomous, social or moral system; no, it is the culture that encourages the individual in her/his autonomous, self-legislation of moral

maxims to govern her/his life for her-/himself. Hence, we can describe a culture either in Rousseau's sense as a "culture of skill", or in Kant's sense as a "culture that promotes the will." To be sure, the latter culture is quite rare in our experience.

P: Which means that Kant's philosophy of history is not governed by any "cunning of reason" (*List der Vernunft*), in the Hegelian sense of a hidden hand guiding historical events or development.

I: Surely, Philo. Kant is not speaking of history as a process governed by a "meta-Idea" in search of conscious experience by means of its creation of the conditions necessary for this "meta-Idea" to be thought. For him, history is not merely in the service of a transcendental, meta-idea.

P: ... but you seem to wish to preserve some aspect of this notion of the "cunning of reason" in Kant?

I: Remarkably, Philo, you have heard what I have yet to say – a tribute to your transcendental capacities! Although Kant's understanding of history is not governed by a "meta-Idea," history is not merely random or capricious, either. Like nature, it has structural conditions that make it possible. The "cunning of reason" here is that the structure that makes categorical creativity possible (and whose emergence constitutes the alpha point of history) can never be eradicated as long as there is a human (or "rational") species, and that structure survives even those human follies that seek to undermine history (as in the pursuit of mere self-interest).

P: Oh, Irenaeus, this means that the "cunning of reason" is the ineradicably categorical within the midst of the hypothetical! You are not talking about reason as teleological, that is, as possessing its own ultimate goal of self-actualization. Rather, you are speaking of reason from the perspective of its origin (in contrast to Hegel's reason in search of its goal). Reason's "origin" is a set of capacities (as a set of originating conditions that make human experience in all of its variety and creativity possible).

I: Philo, you have grasped my point even more succinctly than I could have articulated it. For Kant, there is no single goal of history, no meta-Idea toward which history is aiming. Rather, history is its own origin that allows for the rich, creative diversity that is humanity and that is yet to be created by humanity. Unlike Hegel's meta-Idea, though, there is nothing inevitable about history's achievement, and history will never "come to an end" when a certain kind of consciousness emerges. Kant's cunning of reason is that indelible set of conditions that confirms history as a moral project despite all of the fragility, folly, and destructiveness of humanity's categorical capacities.

P: So Kant's discussion of "moral transformation" cannot be concerned with the establishment of a utopia because dystopia is always a possibility – given humanity's categorical capacities. History is open-ended because the cunning of reason is grounded in freedom, requiring both individual and collective understanding and effort. Every other form of the cunning reason would be a denial of creative freedom. Humanity is no more merely a natural,

mechanical toy than it is merely the product of a meta-intentionality that blindly guides nature and history to its own self-realization.

I: As a set of capacities that elevate humanity (rational beings) above nature, the cunning of reason can never be snuffed by humanity's non-rational silliness and destructiveness as long as there is a human species ...

P: ... because that silliness and destructiveness contain the "seed" (the transcendental capacities of theoretical and practical reason) for a new growth season of creative, moral responsibility. Astonishing! The cunning of reason is like (but by no means reducible to) the change of seasons and the promise of a new harvest. Yet, this is a cycle of germination, growth, and harvest that is the product of reason's categorical, not merely nature's hypothetical conditions. The cunning of reason, then, is dependent upon humanity's discovery of the conditions for its moral transformation ....

I: Again, absolutely correct, Philo! Kant's philosophy of history is dependent upon transformation with respect to 1) the individual's grasp of her/his autonomous, creative capacity and acceptance of moral responsibility for it; 2) society's grasp of the incredibly unusual capacity that makes humanity human (or, more accurately, makes it possible for us to become human); and 3) the cooperative interaction of the individual's actual, autonomous, moral effort and society's encouragement (but not by heteronomous imposition, but by a culture of will) of the individual's exercise of her/his moral capacity.

P: The likelihood of that constellation of circumstances occurring at any one time is quite remote, Irenaeus. Despite your disclaimer, it does sound wholly utopian.

I: Remote as it may be, it is the basis of a paradoxical hope at the core of Kant's philosophy of history. Because his philosophy of history is formulated in terms of capacities (irrespective of whether they are exercised or fulfilled) rather than consequences, Kant can be sanguine that history is always capable, in principle, of achieving its "ultimate goal." Of course, no particular historical epoch is ever going to completely fulfill that aim. That's not the point. Humanity (and, hence, history) is a dynamic *project*, not a guaranteed achievement of a particular (even if universal) goal. Given the autonomous nature of morality, the "moral improvement of humanity" is an open-ended process that always remains a yet to be realized teleological goal.

P: Irenaeus, I don't quite get it. True, hope is anchored in a capacity and no particular historical epoch can absolutely deny or confirm that hope, but how is that paradoxical?

I: You don't allow me to skim across any logical gaps, Philo! You are entirely correct; there is no paradox between the presence of a capacity, and the capacity not achieving its potential. The paradox lies more deeply in the nature of the capacity and of hope. The capacity of creative freedom is not unambiguous. Both its very use, and the procedure of its application, involves a struggle within the self. This struggle can block the application of the capacity at any point in the creative process. The reality of this struggle right at the core of the capacity indicates that hope is not some blind confidence that creative achievement is inevitable. Further, an individual is related to her/his community by means of another tension: unsocial sociality. To the extent that

the individual “fits into” her/his community, s/he is “social.” However, to the extent that the individual “stands out” by means of creative achievement or, more importantly, by means of autonomous morality, s/he is “unsocial.” Consequently, the individual’s creative freedom by no means guarantees that the efforts of the individual are going to enhance external harmony and well-being. Hope, then, is no Pollyannaish confidence in humanity’s creative potential. The nature of hope here concerns moral accountability for one’s creative efforts and not hope that the individual or society will achieve sensuous happiness. Both creative freedom and the nature of hope, then, suggest that their fulfillment is extremely ambiguous and not necessarily in service of the happiness and well-being of all.

P: Ah, I’m beginning to get the picture, Irenaeus. Given the ambiguity of “unsocial sociality,” the driving force of creative freedom can be experienced by the community as disruptive of its self-interest, not enhancing what it views as “improving” the community. Furthermore, because the application of creative freedom requires the individual to self-legislate moral principles independently of self-interest, fulfilling that capacity can lead to painful (even threatening) consequences for both the individual and the community.

I: Precisely. If not paradoxical, this is a strange notion of hope. It always leaves entirely open what counts as success, because the individual must overcome her/his own inertia, must wrestle with the alternative of distinguishing her-/himself or simply fitting into the community, and in the process must exercise her/his creative capacity under the guidance of a self-legislated moral maxim that may well appear not to be in the individual’s (or the community’s) self-interest. Hope here turns out to be anything but objectively empirical.

P: Oh, my, Irenaeus! It is difficult to find solace in this hope given that it is so unlikely and potentially even unsocial.

I: There would be no hope, Philo, were we not concerned with a *necessary* capacity. If we could lose the capacity to initiate a sequence of events that nature cannot initiate on its own, then and only then could there be no hope. But over the presence of this capacity we have no choice: *we cannot not act!* Kantian hope is invested in the ineradicability of that capacity. Put differently, it is anchored in human dignity, precisely because this creative potential is an inalienable feature of the individual “by nature,” not by choice or capricious gift.

P: How quickly you make me change my tune, Irenaeus. A moment ago, I found little solace in this Kantian hope. Now I see, no matter how bad the circumstances – short of liquidation of the species (of which we are capable) – that this hope, grounded in an ineradicable capacity, is always present and indelible so long as the human species (or some rational species) exists.

I: Yes. As we have mentioned before, Kant stated already in 1775 that our capacity for creative freedom gives us, in principle, the power to destroy the world. Humanity possesses incalculable, creative potential and is, at the same time, the most dangerous species on the planet. What this remarkable capacity needs for its realization is not simply the effort of the individual, but also the encouraging support of the community – regardless of what might be perceived as the immediate self-interest of either. Such a community encourages the development of creative



freedom and its responsible use, not just for the sake of the person but also for the sake of all. This is its guarantee of hope.

P: Now I have a better sense of what a “culture that promotes the will” means for Kant and of its place in a philosophy of history. Only humanity (or a rational species) possesses this capacity (at least to such an extraordinary degree).

I: Yet it must be cultivated and applied according to the rigors of both theoretical (i.e., understanding) and practical (i.e., moral) reason – all the while subjecting itself to self-legislated moral maxims beyond the mere pursuit of self-interest. Essential to its successful cultivation and application is the presence of a community that understands the paradoxical nature of this capacity and its hope – to the point that the community sustains the individual even when s/he appears to be exercising her/his creative potential contrary to the self-interests of the individual and/or community.

P: Such a community is as unusual as is the individual who recognizes the need for that community. Still, the rarity of both should not diminish our hope, because the capacity involved is ineradicable.

I: Agreed! This hope is not blind. It neither assumes that “everything will turn out for the good”, nor does it “embrace every idiosyncrasy” as an expression of theoretical and practical reason. Given the paradoxes, a genuine fulfillment of humanity’s potential will never be an enduring, “objectively empirical” state of affairs, any more than the most desperate circumstance is a proof of its impossibility of fulfillment. What we have is a historical optimism anchored in capacities, conjoined with a historical optimism dependent upon individuals and communities who are capable of becoming aware of this human dignity.

P: This is a precarious philosophy of history, Irenaeus.

I: It is appropriate that you employ the term “precarious,” Philo. Kant uses it in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and it is one of my favorite passages:

“Here ... we see philosophy put in fact in a precarious position, which is to be firm even though there is nothing in heaven or on earth from which it depends, or on which it is based. Here philosophy is to manifest its purity as sustainer of its own laws, not as herald of laws that an implanted sense or who knows what tutelary nature whispers to it, all of which — though they may always be better than nothing at all — can still never yield basic principles that reason dictates and that must have their source entirely and completely a priori and, as the same time, must have their commanding authority from this: that they expect nothing from the inclination of human beings but everything from the supremacy of the law and the respect owed to it or, failing this, condemn the human being to contempt for himself and inner abhorrence.” (AA IV: 25-26)

P: I’m glad I pushed that button, Irenaeus, because this discussion throws an entirely different light on just how precarious the human condition is.

I: Yes, and the precariousness of this philosophy of history, grounded in culture that promotes the will, is that it is not to be confused with any particular culture of skills, even if it is never independent from any culture of skills (of whatever kind). So *any judgment of cultural or racial superiority or inferiority on the basis of an evaluation of technical skill* (i.e., empirical, cultural artifacts or so-called ‘stages of development’) completely misses the point of Kant’s philosophy of history. Kant’s philosophy of history has *no* hint of triumphalism to it. It does not (and cannot) privilege one individual or one culture or race as superior over another.

P: What you are saying is that Kant’s position is that all of humanity stands under the same debt: to realize the potential of its capacity, to be or become human.

I: Yes, precisely. The notion that humanity was once “perfect” and has “fallen” from that state of perfection, or the notion that humanity will at some point achieve “perfection”, constitutes a dangerous distortion of self-understanding, self-expectation, and communal hubris that in fact denies our humanity. In the “Conflict with the Law Faculty,” the second conflict in *Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant rejected three options for understanding history: fall, progress, or indecisive stagnation. Human history is not a story of decline and fall, it is not a story of steady progress, and it is not a story of frustrating ambiguity with respect to “success” or “failure.” Human history is not dependent upon perceptible success or failure. Nonetheless, the inability to achieve perfection, given the limits that are the condition of any and all experience is, paradoxically, no damper on hope. We cannot not act, and the exercising of our capacity of autonomous freedom constitutes the pinnacle of life (what Kant calls the “end of nature” in the third *Critique*). That is the key to history. When we exercise our autonomous freedom in conformity with self-legislated principles (not to be confused for *self-created norms*) that are right because they are right and not because they serve our selfish interest, we experience the worthiness of a satisfaction incapable of being experienced by any other species – as far as we will ever be able to know. History finds its meaning in the sense of the responsible fulfillment of our capabilities, which is never merely individual nor unrelated to the material world. History requires respect for nature, the material conditions of experience, as well as respect for human dignity, the categorical conditions of experience. Practical reason (morality) is simultaneously radically individual and social.

#### Historical Point II: Humanity as Ultimate End of Nature and Cosmopolitanism

P: We now have a sense of Kant’s philosophy of history, with its negation of the privileging of any particular cultural stage of skill as morally superior over another (i.e., with its dismissal of any form of racism measurable in terms of culture as “skills”) and with its insight into the cunning of reason in terms of humanity’s capacities and not a teleological goal as well as its hope grounded in human dignity (regardless of race). What does the second historical issue you have proposed, Irenaeus, contribute to our wrestling with the question of Kant’s supposed racism: Kant’s development from pre-critical to critical philosophy?

I: There is one other aspect of Kant’s philosophy of history that we need to engage before we consider the significance of Kant’s Copernican Turn in his own development. This is the theme of cosmopolitanism in Kant’s philosophy of history. However, first, I want to comment on

what Kant saw as the significance of the ineradicable capacity of autonomous (creative) freedom. In his *Critique of Judgment* (§§ 82-84), Kant speaks of humanity as the “ultimate end” of nature, which makes us Lord over nature. As politically incorrect as this sounds today, Kant emphasizes that this status as “ultimate end” is with respect to humanity as “noumenon.” He means *possessing the capacity* of “a supersensible faculty (freedom) and even the law of ... [its] causality [i.e., the moral law] together with the object that it can set for itself [i.e., humanity as teleological unlike any other species] as the highest end (the highest good in the world” (*Critique of Judgment* AA V: 435). Humanity is the “ultimate end of nature” only because of the capacity we possess (as noumenon), and only to the extent that we possess this creative, autonomous capacity to establish teleological goals that nature otherwise could not accomplish on its own. This does not imply that we should exploit and oppress nature and one another at will. It does mean that we should act *within the self-imposed norms of moral maxims, which are right because they are right (not because they serve our mere self-interest), that we alone can self-legislate for ourselves*. In short, humanity is the ultimate end of nature not because it *must be* but because it *can be* a moral creature. In this sense, we hold a responsibility for nature, and for humanity, that nature itself, subject to the laws of nature rather than of creative freedom, cannot hold.

P: So ... humanity’s status as the ultimate end of nature is not because of a capacity of mere sovereignty or dominion, but a capacity of morality. One can be “politically subjugated” and yet be the finest exemplar of what it means to be the ultimate end of nature.

I: Precisely, Philo! ... and is this not another nail in the coffin of racism? Every human being, without exception, is in principle as noumenon (as a set of capacities), the ultimate end of nature. This view gives no individual, no group of individuals, a privileged advantage *over others, or over nature*. For Kant, where such judgments of privileged superiority surface, it is unequivocal confirmation that those who make such judgments are *not judging on the basis of the supersensible capacity that makes them the ultimate end of nature, but on the basis of mere sensible artifacts that are the product of “skills.”*

P: Thanks for this, Irenaeus! You whet my appetite for the second aspect of Kant’s philosophy of history (cosmopolitanism) in evaluating Kant’s purported racism.

I: Again, for a more adequate treatment of the theme of cosmopolitanism in Kant, you should examine for yourself his *On Perpetual Peace*, and Höffe’s analysis in *Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason: A Philosophy of Freedom* (particularly, I.4 and I.16-17). Höffe’s analysis is particularly valuable for our age of globalization. He underscores developments in international structures that Kant couldn’t have imagined in his day. Kant called for a league of nations (and not a world government) to address issues of cooperation and conflict between and among nations; he insisted that it was unrealistic to think that nation states would surrender national sovereignty to an international government. His insight over the reluctance on the part of nation states to surrender sovereignty to international bodies surely remains true. At the same time, nations have indeed come to surrender national sovereignty through multi-layered international structures by means of which they are able to protect their interests.

P: And of course, such a development would have been unimaginable in the monarchical and aristocratic world of Europe of Kant's epoch.

I: Nevertheless, Kant's engagement of the theme of cosmopolitanism is amazingly insightful for someone at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: He saw it as grounded in republican (i.e., representative) government; he rejected aristocratic privilege; he condemned colonialism and

slavery;<sup>1</sup> he called for the protection of the environment and the humane treatment of animals;<sup>2</sup> and he called for a league of nations for adjudicating international interests and ameliorating the plague of war between and among nations.

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<sup>1</sup> In the “Doctrine of Right” (*Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Rechtslehre*) of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant clearly rejects colonization and the stealing of property and resources from other peoples:

“... it can still be asked whether ... we should not be authorized to found colonies, by force if need be, in order to establish a civil union with them and bring these human beings (savages) into a rightful condition (as with the American Indians, the Hottentots, and the inhabitants of New Holland); or (which is not much better), to found colonies by fraudulent purchase of their land, and so become owners of their land, making use of our superiority [as a consequence of physical power or familiarity with the law; McGaughey] without regard for their first possession. Should we not be authorized to do this, especially since [sic.] nature itself (which abhors a vacuum) seems to demand it, and great expanses of land in other parts of the world, which are now splendidly populated, would have otherwise remained uninhabited by civilized people or, indeed, would have to remain forever uninhabited, so that the end of creation would have been frustrated? [Note: this is a rhetorical question!] But [sic.] it is easy to see through this veil of injustice ..., which would sanction any means to good ends. Such a way of acquiring land is therefore to be repudiated.” [The German word translated here by Mary Gregor as “repudiated” is “verwerflich,” which is far stronger and “should” be translated “reprehensible.”] (AA VI, 266)

However, the following statement is even more astonishing given the prevalent claim that Kant was a racist. Kant explicitly rejects slavery of all kinds. First the German, which is followed with Mary Gregor’s translation in the Cambridge edition:

"... ein Mensch [kann] sein eigener Herr, (sui iuris) aber nicht Eigentümer von sich selbst (sui dominus) (über sich nach Belieben disponiren zu können [z.B. Selbstmord; McGaughey]) geschweige denn [Eigentümer] von anderen Menschen sein ..., weil er der Menschheit in seiner eigenen Person verantwortlich ist ..." (AA VI, 270)

This is how Cambridge translates the passage:

“... someone can be his own master (sui iuris) but cannot be the owner of himself (sui dominus) cannot dispose of himself as he pleases [e.g., commit suicide; McGaughey] – still less can he dispose of others as he pleases – since [sic.] he is accountable to the humanity in his own person.”

Comment:

I take the German to be a clear rejection of the “ownership” (“Eigentümer” means “owner”) of other persons (e.g., slavery) whereas the English weakens the statement by translating Eigentümer as “own master” and substitutes “disposition over” for “owner” (“Eigentümer”) of others.

My translation, which echoes Kant’s theme that all duty, ultimately and directly, is duty owed to oneself given humanity’s extra-ordinary causal agency and owed indirectly to nature and animals, as a consequence – think inclusive language:

“... an individual [can] be sovereign over himself, (sui iuris) but not the owner of himself (sui dominus) (able to treat himself as he pleases [e.g., suicide; McGaughey] – still less can he be the owner of other people ... because he is responsible himself as a person.”

In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant calls for the end of serfdom – while recognizing that it will not end overnight. This is equally a rejection of slavery. A huge percentage of inhabitants of Prussia in Kant’s day were serfs, whose real status is articulated by the German word *Leibeigene*: material possessions of their “Lords” – *Religion* AA VI: 188\*.

P: Amazingly prescient, Irenaeus. Also, I see that all of those convictions are clearly grounded in “the transcendental capacities” of each individual. To the extent that one acknowledges the significance and power of the dignity of individuals, clear that they need to form communal structures to be able to be or become human, one is quintessentially “democratic.”

I: Yes, it is frequently overlooked that Kant is not just concerned with the “knowing” and “morally responsible” individual, but also with community – the culture that promotes the will. This even extends to political structures, national and international, that are concerned with the material governance of those *external affairs* that make it possible for the individual and our species to exercise their highest *internal capacities* as the ultimate end of nature. All of these elements combine to constitute Kant’s profound philosophy of history as cosmopolitan.

P: I sense there is much more to be said about this cosmopolitan vision, but it’s already enough to suggest that Kant was no Eurocentric proponent of “rational” Enlightenment as “justification” for European imperialism and domination over the colonial world.

I: He certainly wasn’t! This is Höffe’s summary of what Kant said about colonialism:

“The new cosmopolitanism consists of qualified, legal cooperation: Whether individuals, groups, corporations, or states – everyone has the right to seek admittance everywhere, but no one has the right to be admitted. Above all, it is impermissible to murder, enslave, or loot the newcomers just as it is impermissible for the newcomers to subjugate, exploit, or enslave the local inhabitants. Kant’s sharp account of the colonial politics of his age is politically relevant today. According to Kant’s criterion (regardless whether they come from South, Middle, and North America to Africa and Asia, including Australia), as good as all justifications for colonization are clearly illegal. Kant literally and succinctly declares as if chiseled in stone: ‘they [the justifications for colonization] treat natives as worthless’ ([*On Perpetual Peace*] VIII 358).” (Höffe, *Kants Kritik der praktischen Vernunft: Eine Philosophie der Freiheit*, 258)

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<sup>2</sup> See the “Doctrine of Virtue” of the *Metaphysics of Morals* AA VI, 443 (Cambridge: CUP, 1998: 192-193): “A propensity to wanton destruction of what is beautiful in inanimate nature (*spiritus destructionis*) is opposed to a human being’s duty to himself, for it weakens or uproots that feeling in him which, though not of itself moral, is still a mood [*Stimmung*: mood is preferable to “disposition;” McGaughey] of sensibility that greatly promotes morality or at least prepares the way for it:\* the mood, namely, to love something (e.g., beautiful crystal formations, the indescribable beauty of plants) even apart from any intention to use it.

With regard to the animate but non-rational part of creation, violent and cruel treatment of animals is far more intimately opposed to a human being’s duty to himself, and he has a duty to refrain from this; for it dulls his shared feeling of their suffering and so weakens and gradually uproots a natural capacity [*Anlage*: capacity is preferable to “predisposition;” McGaughey] that is serviceable to morality in one’s relations with other men. The human being is authorized to kill animals quickly (without pain) and to put them to work that does strain them beyond their capacities [*Vermögen*: capacities is preferable to “capabilities;” McGaughey] (such work as he himself must submit to) [Kant’s parenthetical comment]. But [*sic.*] agonizing physical experiments for the sake of mere speculation, when the end could also be achieved without these, are to be abhorred. – Even gratitude for the long service of an old horse or dog (just as if they were members of the household) belongs indirectly to a human being’s duty with regard to these animals, considered as a direct duty, however, it is always only a duty of the human being to himself.”

(\*see Kant’s discussion of “free” and “dependent” (*anhängende*: dependent rather than “adherent” of the Cambridge edition, McGaughey) beauty and beauty as symbol of the moral in the *Critique of Judgment*, §16 and §59)

P: Well, that's a different view than what is usually associated with the Enlightenment!

I: Indeed. To properly situate Kant within the age of "European Enlightenment," let me refer to Höffe's discussion in this same text (I.1 "Enlightenment"). Höffe reminds us that Kant was a critic of the French Enlightenment and that his *What is Enlightenment?* is as much a critique of the French Encyclopedists and materialists as it was a defense of *moral* enlightenment.

P: So the negative judgement with respect to colonialism and the centrality of cosmopolitanism in Kant's philosophy of history are further reasons to seriously question the charge that he was a racist.

I: Yes, and not only because of the "democratic spirit" both implicit and explicit in his notion of humanity as the ultimate end of nature but also because of his deep abhorrence of war and the harm it does to the innocent. The imperial use of warfare to serve the self-interest of a nation over other nations was anathema to him. He did, however, affirm the right of a nation to defend itself against outside aggression, as much as he condemned the unprovoked use of aggression against other nations. So, as Höffe continually reminds us, Kant is no utopian idealist.

### Historical Point III: Pre-Critical to Critical Thought

P: Having now acquired a sense of the implications of Kant's philosophy of history anchored in human dignity and "humanity as a communal project," I look forward to the implications of the third set of historical issues in Kant's work: his own historical development referred to as a shift from "pre-critical" to "critical" thought.

I: Here, Philo, I propose that we engage two themes: 1) the meaning of "critique" and critical thinking for Kant; and 2) the question of locating the passages that opened our discussion today – do they belong in Kant's so-called "pre-critical" or "critical" phase?

P: I'm eager to hear your reflections, Irenaeus.

I: A popular way of conceiving "critique" and "critical thinking" is that it is concerned with distinguishing truth from falsehoods, for example: that it is true that the human species is an evolutionary product out of primates; and false that the human species is a consequence of an intentional act of creation by a deity at a specific moment in time. Critical thinking requires a careful (i.e., reflective) explanatory construction that pieces together empirical evidence (some of which, though not directly accessible, must be accepted as a "reasonable" leap to account for the empirical evidence that we do have). Here, critical thinking is what is required to distinguish fact from fiction. It might also require a heavy dosage of skepticism with respect to "accepted" explanations in order to see their falsehood and to entertain an alternative: Galileo's pendulum is a fine example. According to Aristotle's "accepted" explanation of Galileo's day, a pendulum seeks a position of rest. All of our observations suggest that this is the case. However, Galileo's skepticism, fueled by boredom in the Pisa cathedral, by contrast imagined the swaying chandelier as a representation of perpetual motion *if* one assumed a vacuum with no resistance.

P: Your example of the emergence of humanity (Evolution versus Special Creation) is intriguing, Irenaeus. Both accounts of human origin base their “explanatory” accounts on an analogy from human experience. “Special Creation” (now called “Intelligent Design”) proposes that God creates analogously to the way human beings create: with a clear idea in mind before commencing the sequences necessary for the external creation of what was thought in advance in the mind. If we have a false idea or a confused idea, we will be unsuccessful. But “obviously” God can’t have false or confused ideas; so God’s creations must be perfect. A species is a quintessential example of divine creation: God first thought the idea of the human species to perfectly distinguish it from other species, then God “externalized” his idea by creating particular human beings, the original pair. In Stoicism this is the two-staged account of creation based on a “thought-“ (λόγος ἐνδιάθετος) and a “spoken-” logos (λόγος προφορικός) (See “Die Sprache als Ausdrucksform des Logos” in Max Pohlenz, *Die Stoa. Geschichte einer geistigen Bewegung*, 7. Edition (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck& Ruprecht, 1992): 39). Darwin, in contrast, bases his account of the emergence of species from other species on the basis of an analogy to the human selective breeding of particular characteristics in domestic animals. What humanity does quickly in domestic breeding of animals over a few generations of a species, nature does over millennia under the assumption of an “infinite” amount of time and the uniformity of natural causality. Here’s the key point: critical thinking in this popular sense doesn’t give us the certainty it claims to achieve. *It gives us analogies and assumptions.*

I: You’ve made my task easier again, Philo, by reminding us that the popular notion of critical thinking (which seeks to distinguish fact from fiction) does not accomplish what it claims for itself. Whereas it seems to ground its claims in facts, they are in fact (!) grounded in analogies and assumptions that, in turn, are capable of doubt. There is much more to be said about this popular notion of critical thinking, but for our purposes this point is sufficient. Empirical knowledge claims, no matter how “critical” our judgment, cannot establish factual certainties because our judgments are always based on appearances and we never have direct access to things-in-themselves.

P: This is the Rorty rabbit we’ve discussed before, Irenaeus: The best of our critical knowledge is a communally agreed upon construction of the way we take “reality” to be.

I: And with this notion of social construction, Philo, we have not yet arrived at critical thought in the Kantian sense of Critical Idealism. As counter intuitive as it might appear, Kant’s critical philosophy starts with skepticism and proceeds to certainties – a procedure he calls methodological skepticism. These necessary certainties, however, are *not* empirical certainties, but “transcendental” ones: not available to the senses, they are also not capricious or arbitrary. Critical thinking in Kant’s sense carefully teases out those elements of consciousness that are *necessary* for us to experience the empirical appearances as we do and to make the assumptions with respect to empirical phenomena that we must. Precisely these necessities lead us to the necessity of laws: both physical and moral. As such, the “transcendental turn” of *Kant’s critical philosophy is not merely about a mental construction, but about the only access we can have to lawful order in experience.*

P: You have said, Irenaeus, that this “transcendental” turn is not a blind embracing of Platonic Rationalism, and that Kant takes a position “in the middle”, between Empiricism and



Rationalism. He rejects the idea that we have direct access either to an objective world in itself or to a subjective metaphysics beyond our experience. Both options have frequently been claimed as the origin of our experience of order. Kant does not reject them out of certainty that their respective orders are false; rather, he simply (but profoundly) notes that both claims involve speculative assertions that go beyond the limits of our rational capacities. Critical thinking rigorously seeks to remain “within the boundaries of mere reason”. By this Kant does not mean, in the sense of an objective genitive, that reason is absolutely sovereign over all phenomena and can adjudicate the truth of phenomena within reason. Rather, the boundaries of mere reason express a subjective genitive: reason is limited, and *when it forgets its limits it almost always subverts itself* in ways that cripple the capacities that we necessarily must possess in order to experience the world as we do.

I: Exactly; and the best illustration of *the power of reason within its limits* is our ability to use mathematics to deny sense phenomena in order to arrive at “truth.” This is the significance of the Copernican Turn in the natural sciences, as we’ve seen. The Copernican Turn is not important because it denies Christian doctrine but because it denies the senses while it gives us a kind of certitude. We are the only species that can grasp the mathematical laws that govern physical phenomena. Unlike other kinds of causal explanation where the invisible order is seen either a) as capricious (animism or magic), or b) as dependent upon particularities, transcendental consciousness is able if ever so slowly to identify the totality of interrelated laws that govern physical phenomena. It cumulatively gathers insight, including insight into its oversights, as Bernard Lonergan (*Insight*) has suggested. And as Ernst Cassirer pointed out in chapter 2 of his *Essay on Man*, the Copernican Revolution displaced humanity from the center of the physical universe, but simultaneously placed us squarely in the center of the epistemological universe.

P: So the transcendental turn of critical thinking in Kant, given that we don’t have access to the things-themselves but only to phenomena, is to the careful identification of the systematic order of capacities and processes that consciousness must *add to* phenomena in *a priori* synthetic judgment in order to understand phenomena.

I: Yes, and this constitutes a revolution in understanding. All understanding commences with empirical appearances, but it is not the appearances themselves that determine understanding. Understanding is established by what we must *add to* the appearances.

P: Ah! So the comment in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* that “this fellow was very black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid,” would then be a crass contradiction of Kant’s critical philosophy; it is a judgment based exclusively on appearances.

I: Yes! But hold on, before we turn to epistemological considerations of Kant’s purported racism, an historical issue here is whether and to what extent the pronouncements on various races in Kant’s writing is part of his so-called “pre-critical” phase or “critical” phase – if it was even he who made them! Kant’s Copernican Turn is attributed to his first critique, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). The quotation from *Observations* was published in 1764, seventeen years prior to the publication marking his “critical turn.” Even if we were inclined to regard the

statement in *Observations* as Kant's own racist judgment, we would be negligent were we not to make two observations: 1) the statement you quote doesn't in fact come from Kant, but from "Father Labat", just as the first statement comes not from Kant, but from Hume; and 2) both statements must be evaluated in terms of Kant's critical revolution which, as we have seen, rejects conclusions drawn on the basis of mere appearances or speculative causes.

P: OK, but surely Starke's publication in 1831 of Kant's *Menschenkund: Oder philosophische Anthropologie* is based on lectures that Kant delivered during his teaching career. This is the central text that Emanuel Eze ("The Color of Reason: The Idea of 'Race' in Kant's Anthropology") uses to claim, in common with Earl W. Count, "... that Immanuel Kant produced the most profound raciological thought of the eighteenth century.' This scholarly forgetfulness of Kant's racial theories, or his raciology, I [Eze] suggest, is attributable to the overwhelming desire to see Kant only as a 'pure' philosopher, preoccupied only with 'pure' culture- and color-blind philosophical themes in the sanctum sanctorum of the traditions of Western philosophy." (103) Eze writes: "Strictly speaking, Kant's anthropology and geography offer the strongest, if not the only, sufficiently articulated *theoretical philosophical* justification of the superior/inferior classification of 'races of men' of any European writer up to his time." (129)

I: This, of course, makes the historical question more challenging. Several observations here are not insignificant: 1) the comments on race are on pages 352-358 of a set of lectures devoted to "living well" or "life wisdom" (part of what Kant calls *Beobachtungslehre* or teaching based on description, not completely arbitrary but also not based on theoretical and practical reason – it is teaching with respect to what Kant calls "territories," not the "domains" of theoretical and practical reason, which we will discuss below), and the lectures are centrally focused on morality, not on racial differences; 2) the passage on "racial classification" (pages 353-358) follows his explicit identification that such classifications are "speculation", *against which* he defends "monogenesis" (that claim that all human beings come from a common origin), a point we will return to in our discussion of Kant's understanding of biology; 3) the material that you quoted right at the beginning of our discussion does not come from Kant directly, but is the reporting of others; 4) and the discussion of *Menschenschläge* (races) occurs in a footnote, not in the actual lecture notes themselves. This latter point does not mean that they were not included in the lectures, but it does raise a question of their status. At the very least, racial classification was not the central point of the lecture.

P: Are you proposing that this offensive, racist material is not directly from Kant? Or that it could all come from his "pre-critical" period? Or that in any case it is clearly speculative and contradicts his biological thesis of monogenesis?

I: Yes, Philo, it definitely contradicts his own stated thesis! But more is at stake than Kant's defense of monogenesis, and we will turn to that in a while. Here I want to add an observation about the "footnote" status of this material in Starke. In Kant's writings from the later so-called "critical" period, the footnotes are where we get his clearest statements on an issue. This is particularly the case once his writings became subject to censorship by the government (as with *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*). He assumed, obviously correctly, that his censors would not bother to read the footnotes, so he used them to address ambiguities with

respect to his meaning that might be raised in the body of his manuscript. Yet the contrast between our present footnote in Starke and the footnotes of the “critical” period couldn’t be greater. Here in Starke, Kant presents descriptive reports of various peoples and, as we have said, it is not entirely clear *whose* reports are presented (besides Father Labat and Hume). Because Kant never left Königsberg and its environs, these observations are certainly not firsthand. The most obviously racist material is definitely not from Kant himself. Assuming he made this material available to students (of which Starke was one), we can say nothing about why he did so; as in any class, it could just as easily have been to allow him to critique it as support it. At the least, the footnote status here raises more doubts than it does epistemological certainties. Such uncertainty is a clear indication that the claim does not belong to the “necessary knowledge” (universal to all) that one achieves with Critical Idealism.

P: Clearly, then, Irenaeus, we can’t be sure at all whether or not these racist statements are Kant’s or, even if he did provide them (taking them from others, as you have shown), of what use they were for his lectures – Starke doesn’t tell us, and they form a very small part at the end of a long volume of lectures, and then appear as a footnote. That, at the very least, should make us cautious about how we interpret them. Still, it leaves questions open, so that it seems to me that the first of your two historical theses (Kant’s philosophy of history) provides the far stronger basis for concluding that this racist material has nothing to do with ontological claims about the differences and hierarchy of races.

I: Yes, because Kant’s philosophy of history is grounded in universal human dignity that comes with autonomous, creative freedom. The ultimate goal of nature is the emergence of this capacity with its concomitant moral responsibility, one that, finally, makes individuals and communities part of a creative project not focused on artifacts as a consequence of skills but on ever renewed moral effort. As universal, it is true of every human being irrespective of cultural, historical, physiological or other differences we might have. It therefore stands precisely against any idea of some state of material and moral perfection or superiority of one group or race over another.

Here is a passage that comes from Kant himself and confirms that it is not understanding based on external appearances (theoretical reason) but the internal capacity of autonomous, creative freedom with its moral responsibility that are the basis for respect for all. It is from the “Doctrine of Virtue” from the *Metaphysics of Morals* AA VI 467-468:

“Remark: Given the title to what has just been discussed [“On Vices that Violate the Duty of Respect Owed to Other Persons], it is clear that what has been said here does not so much extol virtues as, more importantly, condemns their contrary. However, this lies in the concept of respect [Achtung] that we are obliged to demonstrate toward others, which is only a negative duty. – I am not [!] obliged to venerate others, positively [!], by demonstrating my esteem for them (merely observable as people). The only respect to which I am obligated by nature is that which comes from the law as absolute (reverere legem) [i.e., the moral law because it alone is “absolute” and “unconditional”], and this, not to esteem others generally (reverentia adversus hominem) or to render some particular obligation to them, is the universal and unconditional duty owed to other persons, which can be expected from everyone as the original respect [Achtung] owed to all.

“Other forms of respect, which need demonstration, that is, with respect to human nature [Beschaffenheit der Menschen] or the individual’s particular circumstances, namely, age, sex, genealogy [Abstammung], strengths or weaknesses, or even the individual’s status and prestige [Standes und ... Würde mean “status and prestige” because “Würde” in the sense of human dignity from Section II of the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals is absolute, not capricious], which in part are due to capricious dispositions, have no place and require no classification in the presentation of the first principles of the doctrine of virtue because here one is concerned only with the pure principles of reason.” (McGaughey translation)

This position is clearly present already nine years before the *Metaphysics of Morals* in the discussion of “respect” (*Achtung*) in Part I, Book 1, Chapter III (“The Incentives of Pure Practical Reason”) of the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

P: This is a remarkable contrast to those clearly racist passages that don’t originate from Kant. This definitely adds strength to your second thesis, which questions the location of the offending material as representative of Kant’s “pre-critical” rather than “critical” period even though there are themes that constitute a degree of continuity (e.g., *a priori* synthetic judgment and creative freedom) across any division of “pre-critical” and “critical” in Kant’s corpus. At the same time, the status of these texts is clearly ambiguous and even allows for some doubt that Kant himself actually defended any of this in light of this statement from the *Metaphysics of Morals*. For that very reason, rather than proving Kant’s racism with any certitude, they should instead serve as the impetus to engage in his own “methodological skepticism”.

#### Theoretical Issues

I: Well, with that methodological skepticism we can turn from historical issues to theoretical issues with respect to Kant’s purported racism. Kant’s famous passage from *Critique of Pure Reason* B 75 (see also B 167) offers the appropriate framework: “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind. The understanding can intuit nothing, the senses can think nothing. Only through their unison can knowledge arise.”

P: This aphorism may be clear to you, Irenaeus, but I always stumble with the notion of “intuition” here. It sounds to me like a confused attempt to privilege rationality (concepts) over feeling (intuitions) while concluding that we both think and feel.

I: This is another example of the metaphorical interference we have discussed before, Philo. Whereas intuitions are here contrasted with concepts, intuitions are not feelings. Rather, by intuitions Kant simply means sense perception. We can reformulate his aphorism thus: “Concepts without sense perception are empty, sense perception without concepts are blind. The understanding can sense nothing, the senses can think nothing.”

P: Ah, that’s really helpful, Irenaeus! So Kant is ‘only’ saying here that phenomena require concepts that must be added to them if they are to be understood. How obvious; but then how misleading the metaphor “intuition!”

I: Indeed, Philo. Now, as far as we know, there is no other species that processes phenomena with consciously selected (rather than merely instinctual) concepts comparable to humanity. Here we see something else that Höffe emphasizes (in Chapter 22 of *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason: A Philosophy of Freedom*): When it comes to instincts, humanity is at a great disadvantage compared to all other species because we have to develop our capacity to process phenomena through concepts. In short, we can't do without education. We need to acquire concepts – and, Cassirer would add, symbols – in order to understand and to act in the world the way that we do. Further, most critically, as Kant tells us (in “Introduction: VI. On the Combination of the Feeling of Pleasure with the Concept of the Purposiveness of Nature” of the *Critique of Judgment*), all concepts, no matter how determinative they might appear to us, were originally “reflecting judgments.” We find his discussion of “determining” and “reflecting” judgment in “Introduction: IV. On the Power of Judgment as an *a priori* Legislative Faculty” in this third *Critique*. A “determining judgment” is one in which we possess the concept to classify the phenomena we are perceiving (e.g., the concept “table” for all phenomena that I perceive to be a table). A “reflecting judgment” is one in which we experience the phenomena for which we do not yet possess a concept. By privileging reflecting over determining judgment, Kant dismisses Platonic Rationalism's “recollecting” theory of learning (*anamnesis*): that understanding is “remembering” the concept that we have forgotten (assuming concepts are always and already “there”). According to Kant, concepts have to be acquired; this is the chief aim of education.

P: Don't remind me, Irenaeus! How many hours have I spent memorizing vocabulary and morphological paradigms to learn a foreign language or lists of terms for a science exam!

I: As necessary as such memorizing is, your frustration confirms that this is the least effective pedagogical strategy. Unfortunately, we cannot escape the need for memorization. Yet, far more effective is to combine the concepts with their phenomena because, as Kant's aphorism says, “Concepts without sense perception are empty ....”

P: Yes, this is where “hands-on learning” has an advantage. At least for me, learning is far more rapid when I have an immediate, concrete application for what I am learning. The mere memorizing of abstract concepts is extremely frustrating even if it brings its own rewards when successful.

I: Sadly, we don't have time to pursue the pedagogical implications of Kant's aphorism, Philo. It does remind us, however, that Kant is no dualist; his transcendental consciousness is not some free-floating monstrosity independent of the physical world. Rather, transcendental consciousness (with its concepts and other structural elements) is *inseparable from appearances*. At the same time, understanding requires both appearances and concepts. To be sure, concepts constitute a system and never occur in isolation; but the “system” is not a Rationalist system of concepts independent of the world. Let me repeat what is crucial in Kant's aphorism: appearances alone do not bring understanding, and concepts alone do not bring understanding. Understanding requires both, and concepts are something that each individual must *add to the appearances*.

P: OK, but now how does this address his purported racism, Irenaeus?

I: Succinctly, Philo: “you can’t judge by appearances alone!” Every individual, regardless of physical or mental limitations, “judges.” Judgment is a creative process that each individual must do for her-/himself. It requires the application of a schema of imperceptible concepts (*something not in the phenomena*) in order to *classify (to understand) phenomena*. Crucially, though, not every “conceptual scheme” is adequate. We cannot simply generate any “reality” we wish with our conceptual schemes.

P: That’s an incredibly delicate issue, Irenaeus. How do we escape capricious construction of conceptual schemes to account for appearances when we have no access to an eternal conceptual Logos independent of and prior to all experience (as Platonic Rationalism would require), *and* (as Empiricism would demand) we have no access to the things-themselves behind the appearances? Don’t we have to appeal to one or the other option in order to avoid profound relativism?

I: As odd as it may sound at first, this is the issue at the heart of the theoretical question of Kant’s purported racism. If all we can do is come up with conceptual constructions for appearances, then there is no foundation for knowledge claims or for moral principles to govern our decisions/actions, much less, for condemning racism.

P: How do we work our way through this labyrinth, Irenaeus?

I: In the introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*, “II. On the Domain of Philosophy in General,” Kant distinguishes among the three regions of experience: field, territory, and domain. In all three regions, we experience and understand appearances with clarity and distinctness. The regions are distinguished, then, not by means of clarity and distinctness, but by means of the presence (or absence) of legislated lawfulness of the appearances.

P: Help, Irenaeus, this is a bit too abstract ...!

I: In a “field” of appearances, we have clarity and distinctness in the phenomena, but no lawful, causal order; an example is a dream. A “territory” has clarity and distinctness in the phenomena, and *the promise of* a causal order, but it is a causal order not yet discerned by us. Here skepticism reigns, because there is enough coherence or order to the phenomena that we can “make sense” of it, though we cannot give a lawful account of it. This is where most of our waking experience takes place – within territories, either because we don’t have the capacity to determine the law that governs something (like singular events), or because we don’t need any certainty of a law to be able to conduct our affairs (experience is enough), or because we haven’t yet had the opportunity to carefully investigate the phenomena for its lawfulness. However, as a dramatic contrast to “fields” and “territories,” Kant also speaks of our experience of two “domains” in which appearances *are* governed by laws: one is governed by physical laws, and the other by moral laws.

P: Ah, so dreams give us immediate experience of what a world of appearances without lawfulness would be like, but the absence of lawfulness is why they are of little value for everyday experience, and why we have no moral accountability for them. What *is of value* for everyday life and actions are laws (physical and moral): domains.

I: Precisely. A law is neither reducible to particular appearances (because a law is universal and not an appearance), nor is it a capricious construction of subjectivity (then we would be concerned with a “field,” not a “domain”).

P: We’re back to what you’ve called “the heart of the theoretical issue of Kant’s purported racism,” Irenaeus. I’m presuming that we’re not dreaming that Kant is accused of racism. So how do we establish that his apparent judgments with respect to race are not capricious judgments of territory but lawful judgments of domain?

I: What is at stake is Kant’s Copernican Turn: While there is no understanding without appearances, understanding can (and does) contradict the appearances by means of laws and *necessary conditions of possibility*.

P: We are taking a rather circuitous route in trying to get to what makes Kant’s thinking incompatible with racism here, Irenaeus ...

I: We’re getting there, Philo, bear with me. What makes one “conceptual scheme” superior to another is not its confirmation by appearances (because appearances can’t confirm the conceptual scheme given that we don’t have access to the things-themselves of the appearances); rather, it is that the conceptual scheme is a “totality” of laws and necessary conditions of possibility that account for our actual experience of these domains.

P: So ... the difference is that a “territory” does not conform to a coherent totality of laws *and* necessary conditions of possibility, whereas a “domain” does.

I: ... a totality of laws or conditions of possibility that we are incapable of proving or disproving, but whose *necessity* is the touchstone of their veracity.

P: Is your point regarding Kant’s purported racism that it doesn’t come close to satisfying the criteria of knowledge appropriate for either the domain of understanding or morality?

I: You have hit the nail on the head, Philo! Racism is the consequence of a speculative conceptual scheme stimulated by particular appearances. Neither the speculative conceptual scheme nor the appearances can ground a racist judgment because neither are sufficient for either understanding or moral action. Following the logic of Kant’s position, we would have to conclude that racism, at best, rests on mere speculation or, at most, on a fanciful dream.

P: The charge of racism against Kant, then, collapses epistemologically into a superficial judgment of appearances and a capricious, incoherent scheme of concepts. All of which is anathema to Kant.

I: Yes, and a more detailed discussion of the epistemological absurdity of the charge can be found in Ronald Judy’s “Kant and the Negro.” This leaves just the biological issues surrounding the charge of racism yet to be examined, Philo.

#### Biological Issues

P: Really, Irenaeus? Kant had an interest in “biology”? I thought that he was a philosopher!

I: The “Philosophy Faculty” of Kant’s age was responsible for everything not taught by the Faculties of Theology, Law, and Medicine. Kant, in addition to philosophy, taught physics, geology, and biology (or at least addressed them rigorously). Already in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant refers to the system of conceptual schemes as the “epigenesis” of pure reason (B 167). This evokes a biological discussion in a two volume work by Johann Nicolas Tetens (1777), *Philosophische Versuche über die menschliche Natur und ihre Entwicklung* (*Philosophical Investigations of Human Nature and its Development*), that Johann Georg Hamann reports was on his desk as he wrote the first critique.

P: Amazing! Not only was Kant author of a philosophy of history, a proleptic formulation of the League of Nations, a pedagogy, and a defense of democratic republics and cosmopolitanism ... but also, now we learn, of Kant the biologist!

I: Jon M. Mikkelsen has just published a new resource of Kantian writings on biology and the issue of racism (*Kant and the Concept of Race: Late Eighteenth-Century Writings*). For our purposes, though, the key is Kant’s discussion of “evolution,” “preformation” and “epigenesis” in the *Critique of Judgment* (§§ 80-81).

P: What? There was a discussion of evolution in biology before Darwin?

I: Yes, and Darwin himself, if I remember correctly, in later editions of the *Origin of the Species* acknowledges some thirty predecessors. However, as similar as the terminology and even the themes are, Kant had no notion of “species variation” so crucial to Darwin’s theory, and Kant does not discuss evolution in terms of the emergence of new species from existing species.

P: What does evolution mean for Kant, then?

I: It is a corollary of “preformation”, or the notion that the individual is “preformed” prior to its biological development to be the species and individual that s/he is. Evolution is the descriptive label for the actual development (or unfolding) of the individual on the basis of always and already determined characteristics. The 18<sup>th</sup> century notion of preformation is a very primitive formulation of what we know today as the double helix of DNA.

P: What role does epigenesis play in the process?

I: Epigenesis literally means “on top of” development. It refers to that dimension of the individual’s development that is “above” or “in addition to” its pre-formed (i.e., programmed), materialistic nature. The term is appropriate for talking about *a priori* synthetic judgment given that *a priori* synthetic judgment is “above” or “in addition to” what is perceptible in the senses.

P: ... are we talking about the effect of the environment on the development of the individual?



I: Indeed, Philo! What we call the “nature-nurture” thesis was alive and well in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The basis of our existence is given to us by nature (i.e., “preformed”), but we are more than nature – at the least, with respect to the influence that the external environment has upon us; but also, as we know from Kant’s epistemology and moral theory, with respect to our ability to add things that are not there in physical phenomena in order to understand and to act responsibly. The collective term for all of these non-physical influences is epigenesis.

P: What does this have to do with the issue of racism in Kant’s writings?

I: There are two themes here that are important for us, Philo: 1) Kant’s defense of what is called “monogenesis” and 2) Kant’s way of accounting for the empirical differences between and among the peoples of this world.

P: What does “monogenesis” mean, Irenaeus?

I: For Kant it means that all human beings come from the same origin.

P: Does he mean that we all come from Adam and Eve?

I: That would be an impossible historical claim for Kant to make. At best “Adam and Eve” are a metaphor for human origins. Here is what Kant writes:

“Should one assume that there are many human races and that they are from many tribes? If that were the case, then God must have created many original human beings, and for each race a special original pair; but we have no reason for this assumption. If we plant a kind of flower (or crop) in different soils in different ways, we get different kinds of flowers and crops. In a similar manner, the earth could have been populated from a single human tribe and accidental causes could have changed human beings. All human beings, through copulation, are fecund with all other races. This makes it plausible that they all come from one stock.” (*Menschenkunde: Oder Philosophische Anthropologie*, 352)

P: Implicitly, then, Kant is saying here that the differences among human races are epigenetic, not by “preformation”, and in that sense, not essential in nature.

I: Precisely, Philo! Just as plants develop differently in different environments, so too, human beings have developed differently in different environments. Kant had no way of knowing the mechanisms for that environmental interaction (such as evolutionary selection and DNA), any more than he could have known, in 1775, what technology would be created that fulfills his recognition that humanity’s extraordinary capacity to initiate a sequence of events that nature cannot cause on its own does, in principle, give us the power to destroy the earth (nuclear weapons and environmental degradation).

P: So monogenesis unites us all as human beings with the same capacities and potential, while epigenesis is what produces secondary racial differences.

I: Not quite, Philo! Kant did not attribute all differences among races to be the product of environmental differences (e.g., dark skin because of different degrees of sun light). Rather, the preformation of human races is shaped, in addition, by what he called “Keimen” (seeds) that are inherited physical characteristics necessary for the continuation of the class (“at least for the first epochs of their sexual reproduction” [*Determination of the Concept of a Human Race* (1785), Academy Edition VIII: 098]. Kant speaks of “four races” on the basis of skin color (*Ibid.*, “2. On the Basis of Color One Can Take There to be Four Different Classes of Humanity” – VIII: 093), and this classification is justified because skin color is *necessarily* inherited by birth (*Ibid.*, AA VIII: 094; see as well *Ibid.*, Section 6, AA VIII: 099f), not acquired through interaction with the environment. Light skinned person’s offspring do not acquire dark skin when they live in tropical environment, and dark skinned person’s offspring do not acquire light skin when they live in a northern environment. In short, skin color is what characterizes race for Kant, and he explicitly says “no other physical characteristic is necessarily inherited.” In short, Kant writes: “The notion of a race contains, first, the notion of a common stock (phylum); second, necessarily inherited physical characteristics that distinguish the classical differences of the descendents of the stock from other stocks. One can classify the classes of a species by means of the latter [inherited, physical characteristics], which, then, because of the first claim, namely the unity of the stock, must be named by no means types but only races. The class of whites is not to be distinguished from blacks in the human species as a special type; and there are no different types of human beings. If so, the unity of the [ultimate] stock [i.e., monogenesis], out of which they could arise, would be denied ... The concept of a race, therefore, is: the class difference of animals from one and the same stock to the extent that it is inherited without exception” (*Ibid.*, AA VIII: 99-100).

P: Oh, my, Irenaeus! This notion of “Keimen” (seeds) appears to anticipate Mendel’s genetics at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Kant is proposing that the human species is one stock that inherits a wide spectrum of physical characteristics, but only those physical characteristics that are *necessarily* (not accidentally) inherited can serve as the basis for speaking of race.

I: Yes, Philo! Kant is giving an account of the material (i.e., biological) conditions that make it possible for us to distinguish among races. However, skin color has nothing to do with the determination of character, that is, the imperceptible, transcendental capacities of autonomous freedom, the capacity for *a priori* synthetic judgment, the pure intuition of space and time, and the categories of the understanding, not to speak of aesthetic judgment of beauty and the sublime, and the highest capacities of practical (i.e., moral) reason.

Let me now summarize the critical points: 1) because the capacity of autonomous freedom that gives each individual her/his dignity (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Section II) is a capacity that allows us to initiate a sequence of events that nature could never accomplish on its own; 2) because it is a capacity “above” nature (*Metaphysik Mrongovius*, 896-900); and 3) because it is a capacity that cannot be lost (*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, German 841n, English 70-71, 84-85, 145) – for all of these reasons, no matter what the seeds that lead to skin color difference or the epigenetic dynamics of species development are, autonomous creativity and moral development (true culture as the culture that “promotes the will”) are what is important, *not appearances or the differences in cultures of skill*. Most importantly, the passage that I just quoted above from *Menschenkunde* (352) comes *immediately before the*

*footnote* that you quoted at the beginning of today's conversation, Philo! It completely contradicts what the footnote appears to present as evidence of Kant's racism, and he must have been aware of that. Kant's view on monogenesis, seeds, and epigenesis should give us pause not to immediately rush to racist conclusions regarding the presence of this offensive material in the footnote.

P: Irenaeus, you have not only given me reason to pause, but you also have given me reason to think that the charge of racism against Kant is at best shallow, and at most profoundly misinformed. Ironically, it exemplifies a judgment on the basis of appearances alone that any victim of racism would rightly protest against.

I: In the end, Philo, it is less important what Kant actually thought than what we (each of us as individuals) think. Kant's Critical Idealism, unquestionably, provides us with an understanding of the universal dignity of humanity and, hence, with the challenge for us each to be or become human by assuming responsibility for our creative capacity (and, as a corollary, the right to resist those who seek to diminish or crush it). The value of Critical Idealism does not lie in Kant having worked out everything for us. To see it that way is quite contrary to the very nature of the methodological skepticism and reflecting judgment Kant so passionately stood for. Each of us has to learn for ourselves the limits and potential of our status as the ultimate end of nature, and we are all dependent upon that invisible culture that promotes the will to pursue incessantly, moral improvement.

P: Your point is well taken, Irenaeus. The value of Kant's project is dependent not upon him but upon us.

All Saints Humanity Day  
Tübingen  
1 November 2016

ADDENDUM:  
ON SOUTH SEA ISLANDERS IN THE  
*GROUNDWORK OF THE METAPHYSICS OF MORALS*

At the risk of being dismissed as a knee-jerk defender of everything that Kant has written, I offer the following comments with respect to Kant's reference to "South Sea Islanders" in Section II of the *Groundwork*:

- 1) As with any author, one always has the option of engaging in a blindly "malevolent" or a blindly "benevolent" reading of the text. In *What is Called Thinking?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968: 77), Heidegger describe these two options as: a) deciding in advance that an author has nothing valuable to say so that the reader focuses on and emphasizes all of the text's weaknesses; or b) deciding in advance that an author has something valuable to say so that the reader exaggerates the value of the text. I would prefer to avoid both options.

- 2) Kant warns against all too readily succumbing to “subreption:” the exaggerating the ontological status of “appearances” (i.e., the phenomena) at the neglect of the significance of the *a priori* synthetic elements that one must add to the phenomena in order to understand them.
- 3) The phenomena: “... [An individual] finds in himself [*sic.*] a talent that by means of some cultivation could make him a human being useful for all sorts of purposes. However, he finds himself in comfortable circumstances and prefers to give himself up to pleasure than to trouble himself with enlarging and improving his fortunate natural predispositions [*Naturanlagen*: “natural capacities”]. But [*sic.*] he still asks himself whether his maxim of neglecting his natural gifts, besides being consistent with his propensity [*Hange*: “inclination”] to amusement, is also consistent with what one calls duty. He now sees that a nature could indeed always subsist with such a universal law, although (as with the South Sea Islanders) the human being should let his talents ruse and be concerned with devoting his life merely to idleness, amusement, procreation – in a word, top enjoyment; only he cannot possibly will that this become a universal law or be put in us as such by means of natural instinct. For, as a rational being he necessarily wills that all the capacities in him be developed, since they serve him and are given to him for all sorts of possible purposes.” *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* AA IV, 422-423 (Cambridge: CUP, 2010: 32-33).
- 4) The critical (not empirical) issue: We are concerned with a duty to cultivate one’s talents that is owed both to ourselves and to others because not to do so would mean the contradiction of a “natural” capacity, that is, our autonomous freedom “above” but never separated from nature.
- 5) The tempting subreption: Particularly in a post-colonial world, though, our offense at the generalization with respect to South Sea Islanders is appropriately right, absolutely! Were we to write today, we should prefer not to use a stereotype as an example. A careful reading, however, makes clear that Kant’s example is primarily concerned with the indolent, self-consumed, materially comfortable rich who choose to neglect their talents out of hedonism. Is it a reflection of our implicit classist prejudices that we readily accept that the indolent rich have talents that could be developed without drawing the conclusion from Kant’s example that the indolent rich are somehow not human? Most importantly, the references to the indolent rich and the South Sea Islanders makes no claim that neither possess the capacity of autonomous freedom and respect for the moral law that would allow us to judge merely on the basis of our perception of them that they either did not possess talents that could be developed or somehow were not human. On the contrary, Kant is not claiming that the neglect of talents is some kind of indication that there are no talents that could be cultivated or that the indolent rich and South Sea Islanders are incapable of discovering their humanity and personality for themselves.
- 6) The point: Kant is employing stereotypes, to be sure, both of the indolent rich and the South Sea Islanders, but that does not mean that he is **necessarily** engaging in a classist or racist judgment that questions the humanity of persons merely because they can be

classified as members of particular group solely on the basis of appearances. **Necessity** can only apply to conditions of possibility, and, for one to apply a judgment of the absence of **talent cultivation** to an individual or group, one must simultaneously affirm that the individual or group **necessarily** possesses the capacity that they could and should exercise, particularly if it is a capacity that involved a duty to oneself and to others (as in this case) because the denial of such a duty would be a contradiction of a core, human capacity and cripple one's morally responsible contribution to one's community.

- 7) Kant acknowledges and affirms that there are differences among “cultures of skills” (*Geschichtlichkeit*) (*Critique of Judgment* AA V, 431-432 (Cambridge: CUP, 2001: 299), and he continues in this respect to soundly criticize the inequalities, oppression, exploitation, and “inevitably” of war that results from a mere focus on culture defined solely in terms of skills (*ibid.*, AA V, 432-433 [CUP: 299-300])). Hence, he calls for the cultivation of the far more important, invisible “commonweal” (*Reich*) of ends that acknowledges the invisible order of human dignity, physical laws, and moral laws that constitutes a “culture” capable of encouraging the appropriate creative, moral responsibility of individuals – without being a community wagging its finger in one's face or a community providing all kinds of excuses that encourage the ignoring the invisible “commonweal” of ends and moral responsibility. In short, Kant does not surreptitiously take the “culture of skill” of a group as an indication of the complete absence of the commonweal of ends or “culture that promotes the will.” On the contrary, the very conditions and capacities that universally (!) make possible the development of the “culture of skill” also make possible, universally (!), the morally responsible “culture that promotes the creative will.”

### WAS KANT A RACIST? FURTHER READING

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