

How to Deal with Kant's Racism— In and Out of the Classroom

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Abstract: The question of how we should engage with a philosopher's racial thought is of particular importance when considering Kant, who can be viewed as particularly representative of Enlightenment philosophy. In this article I argue that we should take a stance of deep acknowledgment when considering Kant's work both inside and outside the classroom. Taking a stance of deep acknowledgment should be understood as 1) taking Kant's racial thought to be reflective of his moral character, 2) Kant being accountable for his racial thought and 3) being willing to consider the possibility that Kant's racial thought is consistent with and inextricable from his moral philosophy. Alternative forms of engaging with Kant's racial work have either moral or pedagogical failings, which range from simply teaching the history of philosophy uncritically to outright deception. A stance of deep acknowledgement will allow philosophers to understand how Kant's racial thought interacts with his moral philosophy and allow instructors to teach philosophy in a historically contextualized approach so as to not alienate students whose demographic was disparaged by Kant.

1. Introduction

As one of the most influential philosophers of the twenty-first century, Immanuel Kant has enjoyed much attention in the last few decades. His moral philosophy has been the subject of much secondary literature and has even become a staple in most introductory philosophy classes. His racial philosophy, while less popular, has also received more attention in the last few decades. Thanks to philosophers like Charles Mills, Emmanuel Eze and Lucius Outlaw, Kant's racial philosophy has slowly been exposed to the limelight. Their work has sparked debate as to how we should interpret the Kant's racial philosophy and what relationship, if any, it has with his moral philosophy.

One might initially wonder what importance Kant's racial thought can have on his broader moral philosophy. If one is unfamiliar with Kant's racial thought, one might even wonder what of value Kant has to say on the topic. In the center of this debate are Kant's lectures on geography and anthropology—and he lectured on them *a lot*. To be exact, he lectured on these topics for forty years, from 1756 until 1796. Kant offered seventy-two courses in “Anthropology” and/or “Physical Geography” while only twenty-eight in moral philosophy.¹ He considered these two fields *twin* sciences, geography studying the bodily and external aspects of man, and anthropology studying the psychological and internal aspects of man.² It is in these extensive lectures that one finds much of Kant's racial thought which gives us *prima facie* reason to look into what broader implications his racial thought might have.

In what follows I want to enter this debate by taking up one of philosophy's more infamous and recurring questions, namely “What attitude should one take towards a philosopher's bigoted statements?” While this piece shall focus on Kant and his racial thought in particular, this issue is by no means exclusive to Kant, or philosophy for that matter.³ In some sense though, Kant's racial thought might actually be the best representation of Enlightenment Age thinking since he began writing exactly when religious and philosophic opposition to slavery began emerging.

I begin by giving a quick survey of Kant's racial thought and writings, which may be useful to those unfamiliar with the literature. I then go on to consider a number of attitudes one can have in regard to this literature, pointing out their moral and pedagogical flaws and drawbacks both in and outside the classroom. Ultimately, I argue that the attitude one should adopt is one of *deep acknowledgement*, in which one concedes that 1) Kant's racial thought is reflective of his character, 2) Kant is accountable for his racist writings and 3) one must consider the possibility that Kant's racial thought is not only consistent with, but affects the central tenets of his moral philosophy in significant ways and as a result, one might need to revise one's interpretation of his moral philosophy.

2. Kant's Racial Thoughts

Let's begin by visiting Kant's 1775 essay “On the Different Human Races,” which argues for the immutability and permanence of race. In it he argues against thinkers like Voltaire who held the (now) widely discredited view of polygenism. I suspect that this is partially because Kant was a Christian and therefore committed to the competing view of monogenism. Kant tells us that

all human beings everywhere belong to one and the same natural species. . . . [F]rom this unity of the natural species, which is tantamount to the unity of its common, effective power of generation, we can adduce only a single natural explanation, namely, that all human beings belong to a single lineal stem stock.⁴

So far, so good, but this picture quickly gets complicated with the introduction of race. Although "Negroes and whites are certainly not different kinds of human beings (since they belong to one line of descent), they [do comprise] two different races."⁵ This ultimately results in the division of human species into four different races, "1) the race of *whites*; 2) the *Negro* race; 3) the *Hunnish* race (Mongolish or Kalmuckish); and 4) The Hinduish, or *Hindustanish*, race."⁶ These races result from germs/seeds or *Keime* within different populations that develop in certain ways according to their respective geography. Once a germ has developed through a few generations with stable climate, it is fixed and cannot change.⁷

At this point Kant's theory looks like a form of "pseudo-race science" that attempts to break up humans into different biological groups. If this were the case, Kant's views on race could be dismissed as false race science that might have no bearing on his moral philosophy. Unfortunately though, being a member in one of Kant's races does not just tell one their geographical ancestry—it also determines one's personhood and moral worth. Kant's racial hierarchy is based on each race's *innate talent*. Eze explains this well:

Talent is that which, by "nature," guarantees for the "white" in Kant's racial rational and moral order, the highest position above all creatures, followed by the "yellow," the "black," and then the "red." Skin color for Kant is evidence of superior, inferior, or no "gift" of "talent," or the capacity to realize reason and rational-moral perfectibility through education.⁸

In the *Physische Geographie* Kant makes this explicit when he tells us that "Humanity exists in its greatest perfection in the white race. The yellow Indians have a smaller amount of talent. The Negroes are lower, and the lowest are a part of the American peoples."⁹

This racial hierarchy exposes itself throughout other parts of Kant's work. For instance, as early as 1764, Kant seemingly agrees with David Hume's views on African people in the *Observations*:

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 praise-worthy quality, even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world.¹⁰

One might want to insist that Kant here is simply entertaining Hume's pernicious views, but unfortunately Kant continues the previous passage by giving us the following life advice, "So fundamental is the difference between [the black and white] races of man . . . it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color" so that "a clear proof that what [a Negro] said was stupid" was that "this fellow was quite black from head to foot."¹¹ Kant's advice does not end here however, for when it comes to whipping blacks Kant advises that we "use a split bamboo cane instead of whip, so that the 'negro' will suffer a great deal of pains (because of the negro's thick skin, he would not be racked with sufficient agonies through a whip) but without dying."¹²

From these horrible and racially charged comments it is clear that Kant does not consider all humans equal. But what exactly makes nonwhites inferior? The answer seems to be rationality, or better yet, *incomplete* rationality. Speaking of the nonwhite races, we see that Kant thinks they are all deficient in their rationality in one form or another. For instance, citing again from the *Physische Geographie*, he tells us:

The race of the American cannot be educated. It has no motivating force, for it lacks affect and passion. They are not in love, thus they are also not afraid. They hardly speak, do not caress each other, care about nothing and are lazy.¹³

Kant is a little more hopeful concerning blacks however, as they can be "trained" (presumably via corporal punishment):

The race of the Negroes, one could say, is completely the opposite of the Americans; they are full of affect and passion, very lively, talkative and vain. They can be educated but only as servants (slaves), that they allow themselves to be trained. They have many motivating forces, are also sensitive, are afraid of blows and do much out of a sense of honor.¹⁴

As for the Hindus, well they approximate full white personhood the most, but still come up short in regard to learning science. The Hindus

do have motivating forces but they have a strong degree for passivity [*Gelassenheit*] and all look like philosophers. Nevertheless they incline greatly towards anger and love. They thus can be educated to the highest degree but only in the arts and not in the sciences. They can never achieve the level of abstract concepts. A great Hindustani man is one who has gone far into the art of deception and has much money. The Hindus always stay the way they are, they can never advance, although they began their education much earlier.¹⁵

Ultimately, the only race that is capable of full rationality and cultural progress for Kant are whites. Kant tell us that "The white race possesses *all* motivating forces and talents *in itself*; therefore we must examine it somewhat more closely."¹⁶

Having surveyed Kant's racial thought, let's start looking at potential attitudes one might have in regard to it. We will go in order of which

attitudes are most to least problematic, where problematic is taken to mean as having both moral and pedagogical failures.

3. *Incompatibility with Moral Philosophy/ Character, Denial*

The first attitude one can adopt towards Kant's racial thought is to deny it reflects on his character. One might exclaim, "Sure, Kant wrote some wacky things, but the man is not a racist!" More specifically, this attitude might consist of denying that Kant was a racist because his moral philosophy, which secures the dignity of all persons, is incompatible with racism. There simply is no conceptual space in Kant's moral philosophy for him to be a racist. One who argues for this attitude might point to Kant's contributions to human rights or point to his distinction between *persons* and *objects* and the high regard he gives to the former. What this attitude essentially argues is that all racist writings and passages should give way to Kant's moral philosophy. It might be unreasonable to expect a philosopher to be consistent in all their writings and never slip up—as a result, we should consider Kant's racial writings as "mistakes" or "aberrations" that must yield to his moral philosophy. Moreover, in regard to Kant's character, it is his moral philosophy, not his racial thought that one must take into account.

There are two problems with this attitude. To begin, as was mentioned in the beginning of this paper, Kant lectured extensively on anthropology and geography, more than on moral philosophy. As a result, it is unclear why we should consider his racial thought as "aberrations" that do not fit nicely with his moral theories. Also, do we have a principled reason for not considering the opposite the case, that his moral theories are aberrations that do not fit nicely with racial thought? Why, exactly, should his racial writings give way to his moral writings and not vice-versa?

Secondly, to point to Kant's moral writings and insist that Kant couldn't have been bigoted because he thought all human deserve respect misses the point. The point is that Kant presumably did not consider people outside his European community to be humans. It is quite possible that when Kant claimed that "all humans deserve dignity," all he meant by humans were rich land owning European males.¹⁷ Kant never traveled very far outside his hometown of Königsberg and this might have influenced who counts as human in his eyes.¹⁸

This attitude is further undermined when one considers that many egalitarian thinkers in the United States still condoned (or actively participated in) racism. For instance, among the U.S. founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson is probably the most infamous for both proclaiming the equality of all peoples in the Declaration of Independence, and

yet owning several plantations worked by hundreds of slaves. Among abolitionists, many renounced the importation of slavery on the grounds that Africans would “darken America.” Benajmin Franklin, an early abolitionist in U.S. history, opposed the importation of slaves and went as far as asking “why increase the Sons of Africa, by Planting them in America, where we have so fair an Opportunity, by excluding all Blacks and Tawneys, of increasing the lovely White and Red?”¹⁹ So if one might rightly think of these famous “egalitarian” thinkers as racist, one can do the same with Kant.

Ultimately, the problem with this attitude is that it is blind to the literature we have on Kant’s racial theories. It is a brute and implausible denial of Kant’s racism. If Kant’s racial thought was limited to a few off-hand and casual racial comments, then one might be able to argue that Kant was at least not a belligerent racist. But as mentioned before, Kant’s racism was so systematic (perhaps the *most* systematic racism before scientific racism would go into full force during the mid-1800s) to the point that it would heavily influence Friedrich Blumenbach, often viewed as the inventor of the biological notion of race.²⁰

Finally, consider the objection that whether or not Kant’s racist thought reflects on his character is, while regrettable, ultimately irrelevant. What a philosopher and thinker should focus on, the objection goes, is ultimately whether said racism affects his moral philosophy, not his moral character. To this objection I have two replies. The first is namely that we should discourage thinking that Kant’s moral character is irrelevant to his moral philosophy on the grounds that it can result in a misleading silence. If one sees Kant’s personal character as irrelevant to his actual theory, then one will not be motivated to present it in class. However, this lack of motivation has pedagogical implications, mainly that students may incorrectly come to believe that Kant was not a racist. As I argue in later sections, this can in turn set the grounds for much disappointment and a deep sense of betrayal for the student once Kant’s character is discovered outside the classroom.

Secondly, and more importantly, we should never take as true the maxim “the author is dead.”²¹ Instead, we should follow Nietzsche’s advice and interpret an author’s work as autobiographical memoirs which are influenced by their personal values and desires.²² Knowing that Kant’s character was that of a racist is not irrelevant to his moral philosophy, but instead informs it. Of course, I am not arguing that we should, in a sense, hold Kant’s moral philosophy “hostage” due to his racism, nor that we should take Kant’s racism as the deciding factor as to whether his philosophy has any value. Instead, I am insisting that as readers we can look at an author’s character as a clue to point us in the right direction in how they might have wanted their work to be

interpreted. It is in this way that an author's character can make their way to the central tenets of their thought.

4. *Historical Apologism*

Another attitude one can adopt is to choose to acknowledge Kant's racism as reflective of his character, to no longer deny it, but to insist that we can essentially forgive Kant for his racism and not hold him accountable.²³ This attitude mainly consists of arguing that Kant, like everyone else during his setting, was simply a "product of his time." He was, in a sense, fated to develop these pernicious racial ideas. After all, all Kant and many others knew about nonwhite peoples was through rather misleading travel brochures—how could he not buy into the stereotypes?²⁴ To hold him accountable for his racial thought is to do him a disservice, to commit the error of decontextualizing a brilliant thinker and man. His racial philosophy should thus be thought of as simple biographical details and should simply be ignored.

This attitude fails for a number of reasons. To begin with, we sometimes *do* expect philosophers to go above and beyond their historical circumstances. We do expect more of these thinkers, especially these moral philosophers, than the average person. One of the promises of Enlightenment-age philosophy is that with enough "reflective distance" one can think oneself out of one's historical circumstance. Of course, it is an open question whether we are justified in having higher moral standards of moral philosophers than other people, and it is also an open question just how possible it is to "think oneself out of one's historical circumstances." But Kant himself seems to promise this when he writes that:

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is *self-incurred* if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of Enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere aude!* [Dare to be wise!] Have courage to use your *own* understanding!²⁵

To object here in similar fashion to the previous section that whether or not Kant is accountable for his racism is irrelevant to his moral philosophy also runs into problems. Objecting like this condones a type of moral mediocrity, even when that moral mediocrity is in direct tension with the agent's own philosophy. This counts as both a moral and pedagogical failure in that it not only fails to uphold moral standards when it comes to our favorite philosophers, but also conveys to students that failing in this way is acceptable in the field of philosophy.

It also does little to point out that Kant's resources were limited to stereotyping travel brochures, since Kant himself acknowledged that these brochures were unreliable!

Kant was an avid reader of travel reports of all kinds, written by explorers, traders, missionaries, settlers, and others involved in direct contacts with distant peoples; and at that time such reports were still a principal source of knowledge in Europe about many of them. He warned repeatedly on the unreliability of such sources, but rely on them he did.²⁶

The nail in the coffin for this attitude is the fact that some people during Kant's time explicitly denounced his bigoted views. They, unlike Kant, managed to not simply be "products of their time." For instance, one can consider the work of Georg Forster, an ethnologist and, unlike Kant, an actual traveler. In his *Werke*, he "ends his discussion of Kant's race theory with an impassioned moral appeal to all whites, writing that if they consider themselves so superior to the Africans they should provide them with education and development instead of relegating them to the animal kingdom and destroying them and their power of thought."²⁷ The theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher also opposed Kant's racial thought and called his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* "a collection of trivialities" that was full of stereotypes.²⁸

5. Sanitization, "Cherry-Picking"

Another attitude one might take is that of acknowledging Kant's racism as reflective of his character and holding him accountable to it. But in acknowledging Kant's regrettable racial thought, one should try to filter it out of his moral philosophy. One should attempt to, in a sense, *sanitize* Kant's writings. This approach says that moral philosophers have some good ideas and some bad ideas, and we should not let the bad ideas ruin the good ideas. We should not let a few bad apples ruin the whole bunch, but instead, isolate them and acknowledge them as bad apples.

One might want to insist in calling this sanitized theory *Neo-Kantianism* or *Kantian-inspired thought*. I suppose someone could do this. Continuing to argue otherwise would seem to devolve into an argument of names and semantics. But I do believe that continuing to call it Neo-Kantianism or Kantian-inspired thought has the disadvantage of misleading new philosophers into thinking that Kant actually believed all humans were equal. It is misleading at best, and a deceiving misnomer at worst.

Another problem with this attitude is that it assumes that we have a principled way of separating the central claims from the peripheral claims. The defender of Kant might think that we actually do in this case, namely by designating a priori knowledge as central and a pos-

teriori knowledge as peripheral to Kant's theory. But why should we accept this? It assumes that a priori knowledge is more central than a posterior knowledge and should be privileged. It is unclear if Kant himself thought this, and if he didn't we are back to the first problem and begin to wonder why we should even call the sanitized version Kant's theory. A posteriori knowledge seems at least as important as a priori knowledge if it is the deciding criteria on who counts as a right-bearing citizen in the state.

More importantly though one is assuming that one can sanitize some ideas without affecting the whole philosophy. One assumes that Kant's moral philosophy and racial philosophy are not intricately bound together in such a way that one can delete certain ideas without affecting others. It does not acknowledge the possibility that Kant's racial thought is consistent with his moral philosophy, bound up with it, and deeply affecting it. By not considering this possibility, this stance is uncritical and effectively ignores the large literature which already draws connections between Kant's moral philosophy and his racial theory.

Sanitization is effectively a form of uncritically "cherry-picking" what will count as Kant's philosophy. But if truth matters to us as philosophers, then we should have a commitment to reporting the historical facts in their completeness and not omitting parts. As mentioned earlier, omitting Kant's racial thought has the drawback of at least misleading (and potentially deceiving) new philosophy students. But to us as philosophers who are already invested in the field, omitting Kant's racial philosophy is less about deluding ourselves, and more about undermining our values.

6. *Deep Acknowledgment*

This finally brings me to what I consider to be the correct attitude in regard to Kant's racism, namely an attitude of *deep acknowledgment*. What I mean by *deep acknowledgment* is a recognition of Kant's racial theory in a way that 1) it reflects on Kant's character, 2) Kant is held accountable for it and 3) one considers the possibility that it is not only consistent with, but also affects his traditional moral philosophy in significant ways so that one must revise their interpretation of Kant's moral theory. Notice that it is 3) which has been lacking from all previous attitudes thus far. It is because of this that deep acknowledgment focuses on how Kant's racial theory might have affected his notion of cosmopolitan right, human dignity, and personhood. In this sense, this attitude is *deep*, unlike the previous attitudes, which could be thought of as *superficial* for not being willing to revise traditional interpretations of Kant.

This attitude has already been taken up by a few philosophers, most notably Mills. Mills for instance, goes on to revise conventional interpretations of Kant's personhood. Trying to make sense of Kant's racial thought, Mills argues that Kant not only developed the notion of personhood, but simultaneously developed the notion of subpersonhood (*Untermenschen*).²⁹ To Mills, it is no coincidence that the theme of white people's rationality and non-white people's irrationality runs throughout Kant's work. Rationality is what gives one their personhood and therefore their dignity. Irrationality is what makes nonwhites lack dignity. Rationality and irrationality, personhood and non-personhood are ultimately two sides of the same coin, each simultaneously defining the other. Here personhood is synonymous with white males while women while subpersonhood defines nonwhites and women.

One might reply to Mills of course, that Kant's idea of the *untermenschen* is not central to his moral philosophy. To this, I have already pointed to the seeming arbitrariness in deciding what counts as central and peripheral in the previous section. However, a further point can be made that although Kant's racist remarks do not make many debuts in his moral philosophy, they still affect his moral philosophy in that the idea of the *untermenschen* should be read into his moral philosophy. This would be the best way to make sense of Kant's works as a whole. Mills writes that reading in the notion of the *untermenschen* is ultimately

a reconstruction of the normative logic of racial and gender subordination in his thought, which is certainly not openly proclaimed in the articulation of his conceptual apparatus. . . . Nonetheless, I would claim that it is the best way of making sense of the actual (as against officially represented) logic of his writings, taken as a whole, and accommodates the sexist and racist declarations in a way less strained than the orthodox reading. Note that the orthodox reading has to explain how it is, that, if (by hypothesis) women and nonwhites are supposed to be full persons, Kant is nonetheless able to say the kinds of things he says about them.³⁰

It is in reading in the notion of the *untermenschen* that Mills makes Kant's racial theory consistent with his moral philosophy—the *untermenschen* serves as a conceptual bridge between Kant's moral racial thought. Furthermore, if one concedes that the idea of the *untermenschen* is playing a role in Kant's thought, then one quickly sees how Kant's racial philosophy is inextricable from his moral philosophy. This is namely because it is in his racial theory that we see who the *untermenschen* are and how they contrast with full personhood.

We can also look to the work of Eze to see how this approach might look. As mentioned earlier Eze elaborated on Kant's idea of racial "talent" which ultimately created a hierarchy with white people on top. In his essay, "The Color of Reason" he builds on these themes by noting

that "Kant's racial theories, which he reached through a concern with geography, belong in an intimate way to Kant's transcendental philosophy."³¹ By doing this Eze is acknowledging that Kant's racial theories are deeply and intricately intertwined with the rest of his thought.

Regarding the quote we have already seen in section 2, in which Kant discusses Hume's challenge "to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents," Eze argues:

Although Kant cites Hume as the confirming authority for his view of the black, a careful reading shows that Kant, as with Linnaeus' system, considerably elaborated upon Hume by philosophically elevating Hume's literary and political speculations about "the Negro" and providing these speculations with transcendental justifications. For example, when Hume argues that "the Negro" was "naturally" inferior to "the White," ~ he does not attempt a transcendental grounding of either "nature" or "human nature," while Kant does. "Human nature," for Kant, constitutes the unchanging patterns of specie-classes so that racial differences and racial classifications are based a priori on the reason (*Vernunft*) of the natural scientist.³²

According to Eze, race for Kant is transcendental due to the fact that it derives from a universal, permanent, and fixed germinating seed (*Keim*). It is in this way that the *race scientist* can now a priori that a black person or Native American will have no talent before even having met the person.

Treating race as a transcendental in in this way, also allows Eze to make a conceptual bridge between Kant's racial and moral philosophy. It also allows him to conclude that for Kant, reason, what many Enlightenment thinkers consider to be humanity's essence and is so central to Kant's view of moral status, has a particular color, "It is clear that what Kant settled upon as the 'essence' of humanity, that which one ought to become in order to deserve human dignity, sounds very much like Kant himself: 'white,' European, and male."³³

Notice that in giving these accounts of how deep acknowledgement may look like, I am not arguing that one *must* arrive at the conclusion that Kant's racial thought and moral theory interact in interesting, and perhaps inextricable, ways. What I am arguing is at once more modest and suggestive than that. It is more modest in that I am only asserting that one must *consider* this possibility. However, my argument is also more suggestive, in that if one fails to consider this possibility then one has not merely suffered an exegetic failure. One has also suffered moral and pedagogical failures. I have already mentioned many of these moral and pedagogical failures in previous sections. I would here add one more moral failure in choosing to not take this attitude.

As mentioned in the previous section, the attitude of sanitization fails in part because it does not consider the possibility detailed in 3) of deep acknowledgment and is therefore uncritical. I insist now that

being uncritical in this fashion is not only an epistemic failure, but a moral failure as well. In attempting to see how Kant's racial philosophy and moral philosophy are related, one will need to create a conceptual bridge between the two since there is a *prima-facie* tension between the two. If this conceptual bridge however, played a large role in the rationalization of subjugating nonwhite people, which in Kant's case it did, then one is essentially being deaf to the sufferings of millions over centuries. One should not be proud of this moral deafness.

Now what advantages does this attitude have though? To begin, it is more respectful to non-whites and especially non-white undergraduate students who are being introduced to philosophy for the first time. Recall that the previous attitude of sanitization (and perhaps all previous attitudes mentioned) might, rightly, be taken as a form of deception by some students. Mills touches on this topic when writes on how Western philosophy ignores past issues of race in favor of "liberalism's proclamation of universal human equality." When a student of color, who has not been treated equally in Western society, engages philosophy they might justifiably think, "'There the white folks go again.' They know that what is in the books is largely mythical as a *general* statement of principle."³⁴ In a provocative statement, Mills goes as far to say that to those of us who have experienced oppression (racial or otherwise):

There is a feeling, not to put too fine a point on it, that when you get right down to it, a lot of philosophy is just white guys jerking off. . . . The impatience or indifference that I have sometimes detected in black students seems to derive in part from their sense that there is something strange in spending a whole course describing the logic of different moral ideals, for example, without ever mentioning that *all of them* were systematically violated for blacks.³⁵

In regard to students again, it also avoids the feeling of being betrayed, when one does finally learn of Kant's racism (and trust me, if the student sticks around philosophy enough, they *will* find out). This feeling of betrayal is the same feeling that some may have when they learn of Heidegger Nazi affiliations. In an article in *The New Yorker*, Joshua Rothmans describes a deep sense of betrayal when hearing Peter Trawny speak about Heidegger's "Black Notebooks." He writes:

It's also impossible to set aside Heidegger's sins—and they cannot help but reduce the ardency with which his readers relate to him. . . . The black notebooks, however seriously you take them, are a betrayal of that ardency. . . . Even if his philosophy isn't contaminated by Nazism, our relationship with him is.³⁶

An objection here might be that one shouldn't delve too much into the historical specifics when in a philosophy classroom. After all, we are concerned with philosophy not history in our classrooms, and focusing too much on history might derail us from what's *truly important* to us, namely the philosophy.

But this seems wrong because it's unwarranted to think of Kant's racial thought as just history, and not part of his philosophy as well. It also assumes that Kant's moral philosophy is what is truly important to all in the classroom, but I suspect what is important to each person when reading Kant will vary wildly depending on that person's interests, background, context etc. If one insists that focusing on Kant's racial thought is still (too) historical, then it is not at all clear why this is bad for pedagogy in and of itself. A moderate sense of historicism may help incoming students see the significance of certain ideas by contextualizing them.

Continuing with the idea of respect, this attitude has the advantage of conferring respect to people outside of philosophy. I mentioned earlier how the attitude of sanitization risks being morally deaf to the sufferings of others and I would now like to link this to what Habermas has to say about the politics of memory. When discussing Germany's "Historians' Debate" (the *Historikerstreit*) and whether it was time for Germany to "move on" from its Nazi past, Habermas tells us:

There is the obligation incumbent upon us in Germany . . . to keep alive, without distortion, and not only in an intellectual form, the memory of the sufferings of those who were murdered by German hands. . . . [I]f we were to brush aside this Benjaminian legacy, our fellow Jewish citizens and the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of all those who were murdered would feel themselves unable to breathe in our country.³⁷

Deep acknowledgement, unlike superficial acknowledgement, respects those who were marginalized by Kant's racial thought by elaborating on its full historical significance.

This attitude also avoids the error of undermining our value to truth and reporting the historical facts. If we conceive of Kant's racial thought as essential to understanding his moral philosophy, well, his racial thought is much less likely to be omitted and forgotten in classrooms.

Finally, a deep acknowledgment of Kant's philosophy might not only help us better understand how philosophy of race developed in Western traditions, but it might also give us insight into Kant's mistakes so that we do not repeat them again. The simple fact that Kant's moral philosophy is not necessarily inconsistent with white supremacy (as Mills, Eze and others have shown) should bother us as philosophers who care about human rights. If we are to have a truly egalitarian moral philosophy, then we must be explicit in articulating that our philosophy is in no way compatible with racial, gender, ethnic, religious or hierarchies of any sort. We cannot leave it to implicature.

7. *Pedagogical Suggestions*

So, what exactly would deep acknowledgment look like in the classroom? My suggestion is that we, as instructors, implement an attitude of deep acknowledgment in both undergraduate ethics classes, which discuss Kant, as well as upper-division courses. In particular I urge instructors to not wait until a student asks or confronts them about Kant's racism, but to instead "frontload" on Kant's racism. That is, we should mention Kant's racist thought at the outset, being sure to give content warnings to the students as well as mentioning that Kant's racism is reflective of his character, morally inexcusable, and potentially consistent with his moral philosophy. In this way, philosophy students who continue onto graduate school will already be well-versed with Kant's racism and will be given the freedom to develop their own personal response to it.

Some instructors might have worries about introducing Kant's racism in introductory or even upper-division courses. The worry might be that in unveiling Kant's racism to first-time philosophy students, they students will dismiss all of Kant's philosophy. After all, who really wants to study a racist/sexist/bigot in class? I am both unsympathetic and sympathetic to this worry.

I am unsympathetic if the instructor's worry is motivated by the simple idea that one of their favorite philosophers, Immanuel Kant, perhaps a philosopher they have devoted a large portion of their career to, will no longer receive the same amount of fanfare. I am unsympathetic because this worry, for these reasons, do not strike me as particularly moral reasons. They are instead concerns of *image*—concerns about the prestige of one's field or whether one's publications on Kant will be read. Moral and pedagogical concerns ultimately outweigh these image concerns.

However, if this concern is motivated by the notion that we as instructors should be enthusiastic about our field, and we should attempt to impart this enthusiasm to our students, then I am sympathetic. Of course, as instructors our primary goal should be for our students to learn and it is much easier to teach students who are motivated and invested in the class. Unveiling Kant's racism might affect students' motivation to engage with Kant's philosophy and therefore adversely affect their learning. Elizabeth Barkley, author of *Student Engagement Techniques* and the recipient of multiple teaching awards, has argued something similar in her book. Regarding student motivation, Barkley says,

[M]uch of what researchers have found can be organized within an *expectancy × value* model. This model holds that the effort that people are willing to expend on a task is the product of the degree to which they expect to be able to perform the task successfully (expectancy) and the degree to which

they value the rewards as well as the opportunity to engage in performing the task itself (value).³⁸

As instructors, we can redefine and reconfigure the *value* of studying Kant: instead of emphasizing the value of studying Kant in spite of his racism, we emphasize the value of studying Kant's actual racism itself. If we tell students that studying Kant is valuable despite his racism, then that will be a hard sell on our part. In making this sell, we construe Kant's racism as separate and foreign from his moral philosophy. However, as the attitude of deep acknowledgment helps us see, it is possible that a conceptual bridge can make Kant's racism and moral philosophy consistent and inextricable from each other.

Construing of Kant's racism like this will give it new value, namely the value of being able to give a possible answer to the question "Just how were Western institutions simultaneously able to proclaim the equality of all, yet also able to systematically subjugate whole groups of people?" When it comes to theorists like Kant, the answer might come in a sort of conceptual bridge that diffuses the apparent tension. Construing of Kant's racism this way not only gives it historical value, since, as mentioned, his racism had far reaching influences on Blumenbach, but philosophical value as well. Understanding potential answers to the question is a focus for many philosophers of race, critical race theorists, feminist philosophers, and really, anyone who suspects Western peoples have not lived up to their Enlightenment ideals.³⁹

Notes

1. Eze, "The Color of Reason," 107.

2. Ibid., 104.

3. In philosophy, Heidegger's affiliation with the Nazi party is sometimes discussed and brought up every few years. However, other philosophers with racially pernicious views also come to mind. Take for instance, Hegel's suggestions that Africans have no history and were morally improved by being enslaved (*Introduction to the Philosophy of History*), or John Stuart Mill's assertion that "Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians [i.e., Native Americans], provided the end be their improvement" (*On Liberty and Other Writings*, 13) or, finally, Rousseau's claim that "Both metallurgy and agriculture were unknown to the savages of America, who have always therefore remained savages" (*Discourse on Inequality*, 116)—which is false. Outside of philosophy many renowned thinkers held racist views, among them being one of our founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson, who characterized Native Americans as "merciless Indian Savages" in the Declaration of Independence (Drinnon, *Facing West*, 332). Finally, when it comes to Western science, Thomas McCarthy tells us that many of the ideas of Charles Darwin "on women and race for instance- that Darwin's defenders often attribute to the misuse of his thought by ideologues unschooled in biology can already be found in Darwin" (McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development*, 75).

4. Kant, "On the Different Human Races," 46.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 47.

7. Ibid., 49–54.

8. Eze, “The Color of Reason,” 119.

9. Quoted by Neugebauer from Kant’s *Physische Geographie* in “The Racism of Kant and Hegel,” 264. Notice that the “American peoples” do not fit nicely into the four races Kant outlines in “On the Different Human Races.” This might be due to our own current intuitions and prejudices as to how races are divided. Nonetheless, Kant does say that the “Americans appear to be a Hunnish race that is still not fully acclimated” (“On the Different Human Races,” 46). It’s also possible that Kant’s racial divisions merely shifted, as is common with racial categories, from 1775, when he initially divided humanity into four races, to 1802, when he mentions that the American peoples have the least talent.

10. Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, 111–13.

11. Ibid.

12. Quoted by Neugebauer from Kant’s *Physische Geographie* in “The Racism of Kant and Hegel,” 264.

13. Quoted by Starke in Kant’s *Philosophische Anthropologie: Nach handschriften Vorlesungen* from Kant’s *Physische Geographie*, 353. Translated by Emmanuel Eze.

14. Ibid. Translated by Emmanuel Eze.

15. Ibid., 353–54. Translated by Emmanuel Eze.

16. Ibid., 353. Translated by Emmanuel Eze.

17. David Livingstone Smith comments on this when he tells us that ethnocentrism might lead one to define “human” narrowly, as members of one’s own community. He writes “The most extravagant expression of ethnocentrism is the belief that the members of one’s own culture are the only true human beings. . . . Franz Boas, who is credited as the founder of modern cultural anthropology, observed that, ‘Among many primitive people, the only individuals dignified by the term *human beings* are members of the tribe.’ . . . A quick survey of Native American tribal names drives the point home. Many Native American tribes (including the Inuit, Tanaina, Chipewyan, Navajo, Kutchin, Innu, Klamath, Apache, Mandan, Comanche, Ute, Hurrok, and Cheyenne) refer to themselves as ‘the human beings’ (as do contemporary Germans—the word *Deutsch* comes from an Indo-European root meaning ‘human beings’)” Smith, *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others*, 58. Boas, “Individual, Family, Population and Race,” 161.

18. Hannah Arendt seems to interpret Kant’s lack of travel in a somewhat positive light when she writes, “How serious Kant was about the enlargement of his own mentality is indicated by the fact that he introduced and taught a course in physical geography at the university. He was also an eager reader of all sorts of travel reports, and he—who never left Königsberg—knew his way around in both London and Italy; he said he had no time to travel precisely because he wanted to know so much about so many countries” (*Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 44).

19. Benjamin Franklin, *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind* (1751), quoted in Jordan, *White over Black*, 143.

20. For Kant’s influence and correspondence with Blumenbach, see Zammito, “Policing Polygeneticism in Germany, 1775” and Bernasconi, “Kant on Blumenbach’s Polyyps.”

21. This idea is taken from Roland Barthes in his essay, "The Death of the Author," in which he argues that an author's intentions are unrelated to their work. The writer and creation are essentially isolated from each other.

22. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §6. See also Earle, "Philosophy as Autobiography."

23. Here, I am understanding "not being held accountable" broadly as there being one or more excusing factors, which when considered should make us refrain from attributing the vice in question to the agent. Of course, Kant is no longer alive, so to not hold Kant accountable for his racism amounts to not attributing the racism to the historical figure and legacy.

24. Kant was a big fan of using travel brochures to inform his racial theory. See note 18.

25. Kant, *An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment?,"* 1.

26. McCarthy, *Race, Empire and the Idea of Human Development* Press, 49. Elsewhere, in a rather audacious statement, Kant attempts to rationalize his pontificating about anthropology without travel, "A large city like Königsberg on the river Pregel, the capital of the state, where the representative National assembly of the government resides, a city with a university (for the cultivation of science), a city also favored by its location for maritime commerce, and which, by way of rivers, has the advantages of commerce both with the interior of the country as well as with neighboring countries of different languages and customs, can well be taken as an appropriate place for enlarging one's knowledge of peoples as well as of the world at large, where such knowledge can be acquired even without travel" (Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, 4n).

27. Kleingeld, *Kant and Cosmopolitanism*, 103, referring to Forster, "Noch etwas über die Menscherassen," 8:155.

28. "Rezension," in his *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, at 1.2:365–366, trans. Chad Wellmon, 196–97.

29. Mills, "Kant's *Untermenschen*."

30. Ibid.

31. Eze, "The Color of Reason," 130.

32. Ibid., 122.

33. Eze, "The Color of Reason," 130.

34. Mills, *Blackness Visible*, 4.

35. Ibid.

36. Rothman, "Is Heidegger Contaminated by Nazism?"

37. Habermas, "On the Public Use of History," 233.

38. Barkley, *Student Engagement Techniques*, 11.

39. I suspect it is this question of how humans are able to dehumanize others that is driving much of the current literature on dehumanization. David Livingstone Smith has written extensively on the idea of dehumanization. See his *Less Than Human*. See also Raimond Gaita's "Racism: The Denial of a Common Humanity." Also see Kate Manne's "Humanism: A Critique."

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