

Abstract

In this article, we will argue that the interpretation that Kant was a racist is not based on the main arguments of Kant's race theory nor on normative discrimination. Furthermore, this interpretation usually relies upon a literal reading of Kant's notorious statements, which may not always be suitable. To support these arguments, we will lay out Kant's theory of race in the first chapter, emphasizing the goals and intentions he explicitly stated, and conclude that the central arguments of his theory are non-discriminatory and non-racist. In the second part of the paper, we will present a non-racist reading of some of Kant's most frequently cited statements. While we do not dispute that Kant's comments about certain races sound extremely discriminatory, we will argue that we should consider the historical and philosophical context, philological analysis, and arguments surrounding the statement in question when interpreting Kant's words. Our goal is not to prove conclusively that Kant was not a racist, but to demonstrate that it is possible to interpret Kant's thoughts on race in a non-racist key, consistent with his normative theories.

For several decades, Kant scholars have been continuously attempting to clarify the relationship between Kant's race theory, which is often characterized as discriminatory, and his egalitarian moral and political theories.¹ Although a considerable number of authors have set out to resolve this contradiction, the prevailing view among them is that Kant was a racist. There have been various interpretations of Kant's position, which can be roughly divided into two main lines. According to the first, Kant's "racist" views, although explicitly expressed and therefore unquestionable, do not represent a central part of his philosophi-

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cal doctrine and thus do not threaten his moral and political philosophy, nor the critical project as a whole (cf. Hill, Boxill 2000, Louden 2000, Fleischacker 2023). Pauline Kleingeld provides an even milder interpretation in her texts, claiming that Kant abandoned his racist views in the 1790s, rendering his race theory compatible with cosmopolitan public law and moral theory in general (cf. Kleingeld 2007, 2014).² According to the second, sharper line of interpretation, Kant's claims about the superiority of one race over all others give us the right to label him as one of the founders of modern racism, as well as to conclude that his moral theory does not have universal validity (cf. Eze 1997, Mills 2005, Bernasconi 2002, Larrimore 1999). Racism usually involves the idea that some races are inferior to others *in a morally relevant sense*, and that members of such races are (or should be) treated less favorably. Another significant feature of racism is that it presupposes systemic and continuous racial discrimination. That is why theorists who embrace this interpretation seek to show that Kant's discriminatory statements are fundamentally connected to the rest of his philosophical system, and that they have a systemic character.

In this paper, we will not advocate any of the aforementioned interpretations of Kant's position. Instead, we will provide a non-racist interpretation of Kant's view of races. In the first chapter, we will lay out the most relevant aspects of his theory of race, emphasizing the *goals* and *intentions* he explicitly stated while presenting this theory. We will conclude that the accusation of racism is at odds with the fundamental arguments of Kant's race theory, which is non-discriminatory and non-racist in nature. In the second part of the paper, we will provide a non-racist reading of some of Kant's most controversial statements. While we do not deny that Kant's remarks about certain races sound extremely discriminatory, we argue that the prevailing interpretation fails to take into account whether they were made as part of a descriptive, empirical theory (scientific or philosophical-historical) or a normative (ethical or legal) theory. We believe that the accusation of racism is only founded in the second case, and that in all other cases, Kant's problematic statements should be interpreted as empirical claims that can be true or false depending on the facts upon which they rest. Our intention, however, is not to exonerate Kant, but to appeal for a non-literal reading of his disreputable statements, which would take into account wider historical and philosophical context, philological analysis, and other relevant facts when interpreting his words.

² Lu-Adler claims that Kleingeld strongly influenced narrative-shaping and that "even when there is no explicit reference to Kleingeld's 2007 paper, the redemptive narrative it set in motion is sometimes repeated with resounding confidence" (Lu-Adler 2022a: 3).

1. Kant's theory of race

Kant presented his theory of race in three essays that were published over a period of thirteen years (1775-1788). At the very beginning of the first of the three essays, titled *On the Different Races of Human Beings*, Kant writes about the unity of the human species and claims that “all human beings on the wide earth belong to one and the same natural species because they consistently beget fertile children with one another, no matter what great differences may otherwise be encountered in their shape” (2: 430).³ Moreover, he emphasizes that all human beings “belong to a single phylum, from which, notwithstanding their differences, they originated, or at least could have originated” (2: 430). In other words, Kant believed that all humans not only belong to the same species but also form one large family because they originated from the same phylum. He explicitly maintains this position throughout his entire career, as is clearly visible in his later articles from 1785 (cf. 8: 99) and 1788 (cf. 8: 169). We think it is crucial to highlight this fact because, regardless of all of the empirical differences between members of different races, Kant unequivocally and continuously maintained the idea of monogenism, which posits a single origin of humanity. We believe that this idea is non-discriminatory and non-racist and that it does not support the interpretation of Kant as a racist.⁴

After establishing that all human beings belong to the same phylum, Kant sought to explain the obvious empirical differences between them as reported by travelers of his day. Kant opens his work *Determination of a Concept of a Human Race* with the observation that “there is much talk about the different human races” (8: 91), but that there is no unequivocal definition of this concept because people attribute different meanings to it. He then explicitly states that his “intention at present is merely precisely to determine this concept of a race,

³ All Kant's works are cited according to the English translations provided by *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* of Kant's *Gesammelte Schriften*, Royal Prussian (later German) Academy of Sciences (Berlin: Reimer, subsequently Walter de Gruyter, 1902-).

⁴ Historically, polygenism has been used to advance racial inequality, more frequently than monogenism. For example, in the eighteenth century, when the debate between authors who advocated monogenism and those who advocated polygenism was present, the point of view of polygenism was defended by Voltaire and David Hume, who made racist remarks in some of their texts. Although polygenism was often used to promote racism, two centuries earlier (for example in Vanini, Paracelsus, and Bruno) it was used to explain the obvious differences between the “descendants of Adam” – Europeans, and Native Americans and Africans (cf. Smith 2015: 92-114). Therefore, even when not used as a theoretical justification of racism, slavery (as in Locke's case), and colonialism, the basic premise of polygenism is that there is an ontological difference between people of different “races.” Monogenism, by contrast, always affirms the fundamental unity of all people, regardless of all the contingent differences between them. This, of course, does not mean that monogenism necessarily excludes racism; rather, it makes it less probable.

provided there are any in the human species” (8: 91).⁵ In his first treatise on races published in 1775, Kant describes race as follows:

Among the subspecies, i.e., the hereditary differences of the animals which belong to a single phylum, those which persistently preserve themselves in all transplantings (transpositions to other regions) over prolonged generations among themselves and which also always beget half-breed young in the mixing with other variations of the same phylum are called *races* (2: 430).

Although he developed his view of races in more detail in his subsequent articles on this topic (1785 and 1788), it is evident in his first essay that Kant believed *heredity which persists through generations* to be a key feature of race. He further asserted that the only hereditary characteristic that should distinguish different races of human beings is the *color of the skin*. Not only will skin color always be hereditary, but “it also will preserve itself undiminished in every region of the earth in all generations within the same class if the human species has become sufficiently strong” (8: 98). Thus, skin color is an unfailingly hereditary physical characteristic that allows us to speak of different human races.

So, the concept of race contains two components: “first, the concept of a common phylum, second *necessarily hereditary* characters of the classificatory difference among the latter’s descendants” (8: 100). It is crucial for Kant to emphasize this because the common phyletic origin allows us to divide people only into races, not kinds. Members of the white and black race belong to the same kind of human beings, but they are “still two *different races* because each of the two perpetuates itself in all regions and both necessarily beget half-breed children or *blends* (mulattoes) with one another” (2: 431). We believe that Kant’s claim that “there are no *different kinds of human beings*” (8: 100, cf. 2: 431) underlines his belief in the essential unity of humankind, whereas the division of people into races is an attempt to theoretically explain the obvious empirical hereditary differences between them.

In a paper from 1775, Kant claims that the human species is divided into four principal subspecies, the so-called races. “They are 1) the race of the *whites*, 2) the *Negro race*, 3) the *Hunnish* (Mongolian or Kalmuckian) race, 4) the Hindu or *Hindustani race*” (2: 432). Ten years later, in the work *Determination of a Concept of a Human Race*, Kant asserts, but now using slightly different wording, that there are four races of human beings. “We know with certainty of no other hereditary differences of skin color than those of the *whites*, the *yellow Indians*, the *Negroes*, and the *copper-red Americans*” (8: 93). If we accept Kant’s assumption that all races belong to one phylum, the following questions arise:

⁵ Three years later, in *On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy*, Kant again says that he wants to attempt to define the concept of race, but this time in a polemical tone, addressing the opposing views of Georg Forster (cf. 8: 163-164, 8: 168).

First, how and why did the distinct races develop? Second, on what basis can we say with certainty that there are exactly four of them?

Regarding the first question, Kant believed that all people on planet Earth descended from the same germ, and that their differences, like that in skin color, were due to the influence of different climates (cf. 2: 434).

The human being was destined for all climates and for every soil; consequently, various germs and natural predispositions had to lie ready in him to be on occasion either unfolded or restrained, so that he would become suited to his place in the world and over the course of the generations would appear to be as it were native to and made for that place (2: 436).

Kant believed that the *air* and the *sun* had the most profound influence on the development of germs and predispositions, leading to the establishment of individual races. People⁶ who have been living in the glacial zone for many generations, for example, “had to gradually degenerate into a smaller stature because in the latter [...] the circulation of the blood occurs in a shorter time, thus the pulse becomes faster and the warmth of the blood increases” (2: 436). This is one of the many examples that Kant offers, which show how the predispositions that exist in every human being develop through generations in response to climatic conditions, resulting in the creation of diverse hereditary physical characteristics and different races.

As for the second question, Kant does not claim that there can necessarily be only four races of the human species. He believes this is merely a plausible assumption because what he requires “for the character of a race, namely the generation of half-breeds, has been made out only in those and has been sufficiently established in no other class of human beings” (8: 101). He explicitly states in several places that defining the concept of race was *the only intention* he had when writing essays dedicated to this subject, especially the first two from 1775 and 1785 (cf. 8: 91, 8: 100). Everything else, such as the explanation of the origin and number of existing races, represents “only a subsidiary work, which one can treat as one wishes” (8: 91), and “can be accepted or rejected” (8: 100).⁷

⁶ It is rarely noted that Kant’s descriptions often refer to members of different populations or nations rather than only members of different races (cf. 2: 437).

⁷ Kant’s commentators are mostly interested in hypotheses that can be revised in light of opposing empirical data, which was not philosophically important for Kant. The fact that Kant’s interest in “race theory” was very limited is supported by his refusal to write an extensive work on race when Leipzig publisher Breitkopf offered him to do so. In reply to the offer he wrote: “since the history of nature is not my study but *only my hobby* and my principal aim with respect to it is *to use it* to correct and extend our knowledge of mankind. [...] I could indeed contribute something to a general section of the history of nature, namely *some general ideas rather than their detailed application*” (as cited in: Geismann 2022: 28).

While announcing the course in which he planned to speak about various human races, Kant stresses that the lectures “will be more of a useful entertainment than a laborious business” (2: 429). Thirteen years later, in the essay *On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy*, Kant stated that the conception of race he presented so far is “merely an idea of the way in which the greatest degree of manifoldness in the generation can be united by reason with the greatest unity of phyletic origin. Whether there really is such an affinity in the human species must be decided through the observations” (8: 164). Based on this, we see that it was important for Kant to emphasize that the claims he made within his race theory were not normative, but rather plausible hypotheses about the origin and emergence of races. Nevertheless, we should not conclude from this that Kant’s theory of race is merely an empirical description. In his text *On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy*, Kant explicitly states that he does not intend to provide a description of nature, but rather to describe a possible *natural history*⁸, which can never have the status of knowledge but “only point to fragments or shaky hypotheses” (8: 162). He explains that

natural history would only consist in tracing back, as far as the analogy permits, the connection between certain present-day conditions of the things in nature and their causes in earlier times according to laws of efficient causality, which we do not make up but derive from the powers of nature as it presents itself to us now (8: 162).

The accusation of racism, in our opinion, does not fit well with Kant’s repeated strong reservations regarding the validity of his controversial statements. Someone who intends to discriminate and desires to convince readers of the inferiority of any race would certainly never express doubts about the validity of his views. The same is true of the empirical examples Kant uses to illustrate his philosophical views – he constantly warned that all available travel reports, which were his main source of information about different populations, were unreliable (cf. McCarthy 2009: 49).

2. *A non-racist reading of Kant’s controversial statements*

In the following chapters, we will briefly analyze some of Kant’s most frequently cited contentious statements in a non-racist key. Many important objections to Kant’s theory and arguments that support the accusation of racism, such as Kant’s opinion about race mixing, will have to be considered elsewhere.

⁸ This is one of the points of disagreement with Georg Forster who, according to Kant, “finds it awkward to establish a *principle* in advance which is supposed to guide the investigator of nature even *in searching* and observing, and especially a principle that would orient observation toward a *natural history* to be furthered by this procedure, in contrast to a mere *description of nature*” (8: 161).

2.1 Racial hierarchy

In his oral lecture on Physical Geography Kant purportedly said:

In the torrid zones, humans mature more quickly in all aspects than in the temperate zones, but they fail to reach the same degree of perfection. Humanity has its highest degree of perfection in the white race. The yellow Indians have a somewhat lesser talent. The Negroes are much lower, and lowest of all is part of the American races (9: 316).⁹

Werner Stark provided arguments for why this statement is not an endorsement of racial hierarchy. Firstly, Stark points out that in Rink's edition of *Physical Geography*, the term "white race" is probably an oversight or a printing error, as "the whites" better integrate with the text (other races are in plural). Furthermore, "the whites" refers to different nations or populations, not races (cf. Stark 2011b: 89). Secondly, by analyzing fragments from various travel literature Kant had read and passages from the notes for his Physical Geography course, Stark concluded that there is a striking similarity between the two. This suggests that in his lectures Kant actually presented reports from travelogues and that this statement does not reflect his personal belief in white supremacy.

These quotations from contemporary travel descriptions verify that the final phrase of the paragraph under discussion ('and lowest of all is part of the American races') is to be understood primarily as a reflection of travel literature. [...] We can neither presume nor insinuate any pejorative intention (Stark 2011b: 91).

After studying all of the now available material from Kant's course on Physical Geography (most of which are student notes – a "literary genre of their own" [Stark 2011a: 73]), Stark concluded that "Kant saw himself, probably from the early periods of the course, as no more than a reporter of the research of others" (Stark 2011a: 78). We believe that this conclusion renders referring to course materials to substantiate the accusation of racism highly problematic, as we cannot separate Kant's beliefs from the opinions of others.

⁹ Although this is not the only quote cited to support the thesis that Kant allegedly argued for racial hierarchy, it is often seen as the most explicit example of that thesis, which is why we chose to analyze it. It can be rightly objected that even in Kant's published works, such as *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* and *On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy*, there are statements supporting the view that he advocated racial hierarchy, and that the thesis about racial hierarchy is not refuted by questioning the authenticity of the cited quote. Although this is certainly true, our intention in this paper is not to prove that Kant did not support racial hierarchy at any point, but rather to show that specific frequently cited quotes can be interpreted in a non-racist key. In the case of this quote, it is important to point out that notes from Kant's lectures cannot serve as reliable evidence of his views.

Thirdly, Stark argues that “talent” (as an indicator of the “perfection” of a population, by means of which racial hierarchy is introduced¹⁰) refers directly to different degrees of the development of arts and sciences in a certain population. Different levels of development, however, “cannot be regarded as naturally innate qualities or characteristics of humans” (Stark 2011b: 94). In his Lectures on Anthropology from the same period (1775-1776) Kant claimed that the advancement of talents can only result from education: “talent is the degree of the powers of mind, whereby something can be produced, when instruction precedes” (25: 556).

Aside from its questionable authenticity, we believe that the notorious passage should be understood as an empirical claim with no normative implications and that it cannot serve as proof of Kant’s racism.¹¹ The development of talents is closely connected to the evolution of culture, civilization, and education in a given society, and the level of that development varies from one population to the next. Kant did compare different populations based on the degree of their development, but that does not mean that he promoted racial hierarchy.¹² Racial hierarchy implies fundamental inequalities that could justify the worse treatment of “the lower” races – using them just as means and not at the same time as an end in themselves. As we believe that Kant would not endorse this, we agree with Stark’s conclusion that “it is at least very doubtful whether Kant actually did maintain that there is a natural rank order of different human populations in an oral lecture [...]. In all probability, the formulation was ultimately made more pointed and intensified in tone by Friedrich Theodor Rink” (Stark 2011b: 96).

2.2 Discrimination based on inferior intellectual abilities

The argument that Kant discriminated against different races on account of their alleged inferior intellectual abilities is often illustrated by a passage from the essay *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*: “There might be something here worth considering, except for the fact that this scoundrel

¹⁰ Stark had shown that the term *Vollkommenheit* (perfection) along with the term *Mensch* (human being) in all types of lecture notes from Physical Geography is used only once in the relevant context – in the passage under discussion. “This at least shows that the expression “humanity [...] in its greatest perfection” is extremely conspicuous within the framework of a course on Physical Geography by Kant” (Stark 2011a: 93).

¹¹ Although Marwah is critical of Kant’s race theory, he grants that “geography simply registers data about the natural, physical world. Kant’s contention that ‘the nations of the southern hemisphere are on the lowest level of humanity’ (9: 230) are, then, reprehensible, but descriptive rather than substantive” (Marwah 2022: 8-9).

¹² Boxill points out that Kant never used the term “racial hierarchy,” even though he did “rank the races.” “Higher ranking” race does not have any kind of authority over any “lower ranking” race, which would be the case had Kant actually promoted racial hierarchy (cf. Boxill 2017: 46).

was completely black from head to foot, a distinct proof that what he said was stupid” (2: 225).

In assessing the implications of this offensive statement, we will follow Geismann’s philological explanations and suggest that the literal reading of this passage may not be suitable. First, Geismann claims that the word “scoundrel” (*Kerl*) should have been translated with value-neutral terms such as “fellow,” “bloke,” or “chap,” as “[t]o translate Kant’s expression in this way, gives the text already a whiff of ‘racism’” (Geismann 2022: 44n289). Secondly, the word *dumm* (which would be more adequately translated as “dumb” or “silly” than “stupid”) originally referred to those who were born deaf and, consequently, typically did not know how to talk. As they were unable to educate themselves, these people appeared as “tick” or “dumb.” Kant stresses a similar point elsewhere: “people born deaf, who for this very reason must remain mute (without speech), can never arrive at anything more than an *analogue* of reason” (7: 155).

Against the backdrop of these explanations, the statement seems to reflect Kant’s belief that, as a result of various empirical conditions, black people lacked opportunities to develop their predispositions (much like deaf persons could not be educated throughout history) in the given historical moment. This, however, does not mean that the whole race is predisposed to be inferior in any way, as “being stupid” cannot be innate, let alone an “unfailingly hereditary” (racial) trait. Precisely because Kant believed that all human beings are fundamentally equal – all have common descent, equal moral value, and the same essential human predispositions (cf. 8: 99; 6: 26-29) – he attempted to explain the causes of the apparent differences between populations by means of various empirical conditions. He claimed that populations’ adaptation to environmental conditions in a given geographical area resulted not only in racial traits (skin color) but also in adjustments of the entire organism. This is how physical and physiological differences between populations came to be, as well as “the inner predispositions,” one of which is the controversial “drive to activity” (cf. 8: 174).¹³ Kant also thought that these empirical conditions affect populations’ way of life (such as whether they are nomadic or agrarian, cf. 8: 119) and that this in turn influences whether they live in a state of nature or the type of government they have. He also thought that human beings are lazy

¹³ This type of explanation was a commonplace in Kant’s time: “Since its early days in ancient ethnography, climate theory had also been connected to the theory of ‘extremes’: it identified in the North the deprived life of hunters in extreme cold, in the heat of the South a life of laziness and comfort, and only in the middle the possibility for a balance of climate and character” (Eberl 2019: 397). Kant’s explanation of human behavior is in line with this type of reasoning (cf. 2: 438). Moreover, Kant’s theory of race, which holds that the formation of different races was decisively influenced by specific climatic factors, is in line with Kant’s early reflection on the constitution of the entire universe and the beings found in it in the writing *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*.

by nature (cf. 25: 690; 8: 21) and that nature and necessity must push them to develop their talents and establish the republican constitution, “for it is only in such a constitution that the greatest development of natural tendencies can take place” (5: 432). These differences, however, only show what *nature* makes of human beings, not what rational beings can make of themselves (cf. 7: 119). In other words, empirical conditions cannot decisively impair persons’ development because development is the result of freedom.¹⁴

2.3 *Discrimination against “worthless existence”*

Although we believe that Kant was not a racist, we do think that many of his assertions were disreputable. Not only are they based on false empirical data, but the very wording of these statements conjures up strong associations with racism and provokes intense indignation in contemporary readers. Behind this phrasing lies Kant’s manner of objective, emotionally detached observer (cf. McCarthy 2009: 64), a philosopher who promotes his ideas, and in doing so, does not seem to care about the wellbeing of the people he writes about.¹⁵ Kant’s empirical descriptions of race differences are often disturbing because he regards people as merely another object in the world requiring adequate explanation or as an empirical example to corroborate his claims. Contemporary readers are appalled by Kant’s matter-of-factly discussions of slavery (cf. Kleingeld 2014:

¹⁴Undoubtedly, in the earlier phase of his work, Kant had a distinctly uncritical attitude towards testimonies; he shared the general prejudices of his time and the attitudes of his intellectual role models (in the examined quote, Kant takes over Hume’s views). His mature works reflect a greater criticism of the testimonies, including criticism of slavery and colonialism in his legal writings. In this sense, we share Kleingeld’s belief that Kant’s views should be interpreted diachronically – but not her claim that Kant radically changed his views. We believe that the change was gradual, a result of the development of his ideas (cf. Govedarica, Smajević Roljić 2024). In response to the objection that the analysis presented in this chapter failed to mitigate Kant’s statement, it should be noted that this was not our goal. Our intention was simply to show that the literal reading of this statement may not adequately convey the true meaning of Kant’s words.

¹⁵Here is one illustration: “Like all the inhabitants of the torrid zones, the Moors have a thick skin, and for this reason when they are punished they are whipped not with sticks but with split canes, so that the blood may find a way out and not suppurate under the thick skin” (9: 313, as cited in Geismann 2022: 58). Eze (and others who used Christian Neugebauer’s “translation”) distorts this statement in the following way: “in his writings about how to flog the African servant or slave into submission, Kant “advises us to use a split bamboo cane instead of a 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” (Eze 1997: 215). Fleischacker rightly reacts to this: “In fact, Kant is not “advising” anything here, nor even expressing approval of the mode of punishment he describes (let alone recommending it because of the pain it causes). He merely takes it as evidence that Black people have thick skins. The way he makes the point is certainly callous, but to turn it into *advice* for how to punish Black people is dishonest” (Fleischacker 2023: 5n10).

47, 51)¹⁶, and affronted by his theorizing about race “from the standpoint of a philosophical investigator of nature” rather than “concerned moral expert” (Lu-Adler 2022b: 10, 19). We believe that Kant’s manner is the consequence of his severe rationalism, criticized numerous times and in various contexts. One of the most frequently cited passages illustrating this line of criticism of Kant’s “racism” is the following:

Does the author really mean that if the happy inhabitants of Tahiti, never visited by more cultured nations, had been destined to live for thousands of centuries in their tranquil indolence, one could give a satisfying answer to the question why they exist at all, and whether it would not have been just as good to have this island populated with happy sheep and cattle as with human beings who are happy merely enjoying themselves? (8: 65)

Hill and Boxill claim that this and similar statements are based on excessive emphasis on the role of reason in the sort of life best suited for human beings, which in turn denigrates those who chose different lifestyles. The problem here is

a controversial conception of the good life that Kant, unfortunately, seems ready to prescribe universally, not merely as a permitted lifestyle but as the only alternative to a worthless existence. The Tahitians, as he imagined them, symbolized for Kant this worthless alternative to the busy, productive, reason-dominated lifestyle that he apparently admired (Hill, Boxill 2000: 450).

It is of course true that Kant viewed reason-dominated life as far better suited for human beings than a life dominated by inclinations, passions, or habits. Because we are not only sensible beings, but also beings endowed with reason, Kant argued that we have a duty to ourselves to pursue our own perfection (cf. 6: 386-387)¹⁷ and that determination of the will by means of reason is the

¹⁶ “The Mandinka are the very most desirable among all Negroes up to the Gambia river, because they are the most hardworking ones. These are the ones that one prefers to seek for slaves, because these can tolerate labour in the greatest heat that no human being [Mensch] can endure” (as cited in: Kleingeld 2014: 47). Geismann argues against Kleingeld’s claim that Kant here made an implicit difference between human being and slave: “The text indeed says ‘kein Mensch’ (‘no human’); but this means in such contexts just ‘nobody’ and has to be taken purely metaphorically” (Geismann 2022: 53). Although this and similar statements are disturbing, Kant’s intention was only to report on what he believed were facts. The facts Kant reports about here, in Boxill’s opinion, refer to “fact about which black people are most profitably enslaved and not a claim that they are rightfully enslaved” (Boxill 2017: 46).

¹⁷ According to the anonymous reviewer, the thesis about the discrimination of Tahitians is supported by the fact that Kant sees their lifestyle as a violation of duty rather than a deviation from a way of life he recommends. However, it is not clear why the statement that people violate their duty to themselves by not developing their talents would be seen as discrimination. Kant criticized unenlightened members of any society on the same basis, therefore it is unclear why

only way to assign life the greatest worth (cf. 5: 434-436). However, Kant never claimed that pleasure and happiness are irrelevant (cf. 5: 93), that a person is less valuable, and that his¹⁸ lifestyle is not deserving of respect, “provided he does not infringe upon that freedom of others to strive for a like end which can coexist with the freedom of everyone in accordance with a possible universal law” (8: 290). Kant’s conception of a good life is the consequence of the main tenets of his ethics and legal philosophy, but these same ideas demand independent development of individuals and societies, as well as forbid slavery and colonization, interference in other peoples’ conception of happiness and perfection, and the type of government they have. These prohibitions necessitate mutual toleration.

Kant mentions Tahitians several times in various works with the same intention – to contrast their way of life to the lifestyle worthy of beings endowed with reason. The empirical example provided by Tahitians was undoubtedly important for Kant¹⁹ as it allowed him to more clearly emphasize the value of the way of life he promoted by comparing it to their presumed lifestyle. It should be stressed, however, that it is precisely because Kant believed that Tahitians had *equal value* as every other human being, as well as *the same essential human predispositions*, that he criticized them for insufficiently using their potential by living the way they did.

Bearing this in mind, Kant’s comment about Tahitians may seem harsh, but so does his remark about civilized Europeans who have been turned into dumb domesticated animals by their guardians (cf. 8: 35). Kant’s intention in both cases is the same – to chastise people, regardless of their race or nation, who do not use their reason adequately, as animals endowed with reason and will should. The assertion is also offensive because Kant’s beliefs about Tahitians were false and he could be accused of a lack of objectivity in choosing his sources of information – instead of accepting widespread prejudice about Tahitians’ lifestyle, he could have trusted a more balanced account reported by few sources (cf. Hill, Boxill 2000: 459). Even if we were to claim that Kant embraced reports that he found useful, because he had no other way to determine which one was more genuine, that does not prove discriminatory intentions.

such criticism of Tahitians would represent discrimination and not an unjustified generalization (which is obviously the case).

¹⁸We agree with Kleingeld that gender-neutral language should not be used when interpreting Kant’s works (cf. Kleingeld 1993).

¹⁹The fact that Kant uses this example several times with the same point in mind indicates its importance (cf. 8: 21, 4: 423; 5: 378; 15: 785).

2.4 Kant's alleged support for European imperialism

As indirect proof of Kant's "racist" beliefs, commentators usually cite his support for European imperialism, seemingly evident in the following statement: "[...] one will discover a regular course of improvement of state constitutions in our part of the world (which will probably someday give laws to all the others)" (8: 29).

It should be noted that Kant did argue elsewhere that all civil unions were historically established by violent means (cf. 6: 340), but that this mere fact cannot call into question the legitimacy of the existing constitution. He also claimed that the evolution of the existing constitution, as well as the freedom and civil rights of the people, is sometimes the result of a revolution. These realistic viewpoints Kant sometimes put forward suggest that he could have accepted the constitution of a state established through colonial usurpation. However, it is one thing to say that Kant acknowledged the reality of these events, and quite another to claim that he would advocate them. Although Kant is famous for his affirmative comments about the French Revolution, he was always categorically against the right to rebellion. His reasons were purely legal, which is why he never recommended revolution as an acceptable means of improving the existing constitution. Similarly, for legal and moral reasons, Kant would never advocate paternalism, interventionism, or colonization.²⁰ If the final end of historical progress is the full development of all predispositions in humanity, and its necessary stage is the establishment of the perfect state and cosmopolitan constitution, then freedom in the external use of choice is the only morally permissible means of achieving this end. Just as the moral progress of an individual cannot be induced externally or coercively (it must be the result of his own freedom), the perfect state constitution must come about as the result of citizens' autonomy. Moreover, just as examples of virtuous people's moral conduct can be useful for a person's moral development (cf. 5: 154), so can the examples of good juridical laws serve as a model for a people to articulate their public rights.

We would argue that Kant's prediction was mostly accurate and that he imagined exactly what is happening today, such as states being obliged to respect human rights and uphold the rule of law. Just as no one would argue that states are being discriminated against when they are expected to adhere to certain democratic standards (or when the term *developing countries* is used), Kant's

²⁰It is important to stress that Forster promoted both polygenism and paternalism. He believed that his thesis that black people were a different kind of human beings would have an educational effect, so he called for a reform of colonialism "in a way which would put the 'white' in the place of a 'father' of the 'black race' to 'ennoble' it. [...] Unlike today's readers, Forster does not question Kant's criticism of colonialism and the treatment of black people, but he does not believe that Kant's theoretical reasoning – based on the monogenetic thesis of a common origin of humankind – can play a useful role in explaining the necessity of reform" (Eberl 2019: 404).

hope that legal norms protecting equal freedom and rights of citizens would be implemented all over the world should not be regarded as an endorsement of European imperialism (cf. Geismann 2022: 43). Kant's assessment that Europe "will probably someday give laws to all the others" is based on empirical data about the types of state constitutions and people living in a state of nature all over the world, in comparison to which Europe's legislation was closer to the ideas of state and international public law. Given that the aim of historical development is a cosmopolitan constitution, Kant assumed that all states would eventually have to accept certain basic republican standards (cf. 8: 349), which were at that moment in history implemented to a greater extent in Europe than in the rest of the world. We, therefore, think that the passage in question is simply an empirical prediction that does not endorse colonial practice or slavery, let alone the fundamental inferiority of any population. The realization of this prediction entirely depends on human actions, which is why it could be completely wrong (cf. 4: 83).²¹

Conclusion

In this article, we argued that the interpretation that Kant was a racist is not based on fundamental arguments of Kant's race theory nor on normative discrimination. This interpretation typically relies upon the literal reading of Kant's disreputable statements and, as such, disregards the intended meaning of particular remarks, the wider context of the work in question, and the surrounding text. In addition, we believe that Kant's statements are judged by contemporary standards of political correctness, which is why we also argue that the accusation of racism is anachronistic (cf. Eberl 2019: 386). Discrimination and racism have a broad semantic range and it would be hard to find a modern philosopher whose works satisfy the requirements of political correctness. Bearing in mind that Kant did not shy away from promoting both enlightened theories and retrograde views (for example, his thoughts on women), we assume that he would have explicitly and elaborately promoted the fundamental superiority of the white race – if he had actually believed in it. Fleischacker similarly highlights this fact:

²¹ It is worth mentioning another controversial empirical prediction made by Kant: that Native Americans would die out (cf. 25: 840). Kant's point here is that if something does not change radically – and that change must be the result of free (moral) actions of human beings – then the "dying out" of the entire race will be the natural consequence of the present conditions. In this passage, he also criticizes Europeans because he believed that their actions had caused all of the events leading to the predicted outcome.

Kant never mentions race, nor suggests that the ‘persons’ who have absolute worth in his theory might include anything less than all human beings, in any of his moral writings. (The omission is a curious one if he really thought that only white people count as ends-in-themselves - he was certainly not averse to expressing racist views!). Nor are any of the moral themes that follow from his epistemological arguments remotely racist. Nor again do the most prominent later readers of Kant’s moral philosophy associate it with racism. Even the avid racists among Kant’s followers - Schopenhauer, for instance, or the proto-Nazi ideologues, H. S. Chamberlain and Otto Weininger - do not cite Kant to support their racism (Fleischacker 2023: 24-25).

It is important to note that even the most “avid racist” among Kant’s followers did not think of him as a proponent of racist ideas, which supports our claim that contemporary interpretations of his statements are anachronistic.

A disturbing consequence of the revision or severe criticism of philosophical works by historically inappropriate standards is that when we claim that someone was a racist, we are only a step away from censorship or prejudicial interpretations of his work.²² The accusation of racism often results in the banishment of the authors and works deemed unacceptable, as illustrated in the following advice: “It may be that the most radical thing we can do with Kant is to set him aside – to stop turning back to the same blinkered sources we have reached to for centuries to navigate our moral and political worlds” (Marwah 2022: 17).

Because we believe that this type of criticism is not beneficial to the eradication of contemporary ubiquitous cruelty and injustice, we endeavored to show that it is possible to interpret Kant’s words in a non-racist way, consistent with his normative theories. Our interpretation is supported by Kant’s texts, the historical context of his era, and some interpretations of Kant scholars. While we did not intend to prove conclusively that Kant was not a racist, we wanted to demonstrate that the evidence supporting the accusation of racism is open to interpretation. We hope that the few arguments we have put forward will provoke more balanced and impartial analyses, as well as contribute to the removal of the general stigma and preconception that Kant’s theory of race, as well as his person, faces today. The greatest philosophers in history were simply people who shared many prejudices and false beliefs of their time, but if we only look for this in their work our future will surely not be any better than it is today, as radical criticism of Kant’s works result in more or less grievous misinterpretations of his theories, and often nourish intolerance. Better advice for contemporary readers is to employ the powerful normative potential of Kant’s philosophical system for decisive combat against discrimination which, judging by the increase in all forms of violence, is yet to come.

²²To avoid misunderstanding, we are not talking here about authors who explicitly promoted racist ideas, ideologies of violence, discrimination, or intolerance.

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