

RACE AND RACISM

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BERNARD BOXILL

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KANT AND RACE

THOMAS E. HILL JR. AND BERNARD BOXILL

I. INTRODUCTION

Kant has been long recognized as one of the greatest philosophers of the West and recently his works have been increasingly influential. In the past it has been mainly his *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* that were the focus of attention, but the later writings are now being taken more and more seriously (by friend and foe). Understandably, the enhanced attention paid to Kant's later writing has evoked a response from non-Kantians. There has been more vigorous criticism from many quarters. Some old familiar objections turn up repeatedly, and many of these rest on misunderstanding. But scholars well aware of Kant's later writings also raise new concerns that reflect sensitivity to contemporary problems and perspectives.¹ Specifically, feminists and African American philosophers raise objections focused on Kant's writings on law, politics, history, and anthropology.

There are a number of charges, many of which fall under the general heading of 'Kant was a racist and sexist'. For example, anecdotes, quotations and stories reported from others, and comments on particular blacks and women, or groups of them, seem to reflect racist and sexist beliefs and attitudes on Kant's part. Perhaps more seriously, aspects of Kant's published, and unpublished, *philosophical* work, it has been argued, are

¹ Objections raise questions that should be distinguished, for example: (1) Is Kant's allegedly racist idea an empirical claim, a specific attitude, or a philosophical thesis? (2) Is it an idea that is itself racist (in some specified sense) or merely one that tends (e.g. in the wrong hands) to facilitate the growth of racist ideas and attitudes? (3) Are the specific objections and charges directed to ideas or the man, e.g. the man's motivation by racist attitudes, the man's having been culpably influenced by racist ideas, or the man's culpably endorsing racist ideas? (4) In so far as the objections are to Kant's philosophy, broadly construed, are they objections to his basic ideas (e.g. the central and more foundational claims in the three Critiques and the *Groundwork*) or to aspects of Kant's philosophy that are separable parts (independent or falsely believed to be derivative) or to merely particular illustrations presented re philosophical points (perhaps falsely believed to be apt examples)? For example, in the latter two categories: Kant's claims about property, revolution, women, and, arguably, race.

themselves racist, or at least apt to facilitate the growth of racist ideas and attitudes. Often these objections stem from more specific political and anthropological claims, for example, that women are to be mere 'passive citizens' without a vote and that some races are permanently inferior. But sometimes the problem is thought to lie deeper, for example, in Kant's rationalism in moral theory and his ideas of teleology and race in anthropology. One concern that may (for some) lie behind these objections is a suspicion that Kant, the man, was himself so racist and sexist that his works should not receive the respect and favourable attention that they currently receive. (The thought may be the dubious one that we should not concern ourselves with the good ideas of bad people. On the other hand, it may instead be that the faults of attitude and judgement that show up in one aspect of a thinker's work is likely to infect his work as a whole.) Apart from the concern with Kant, the man, however, there remain the important questions about the ideas presented in his philosophical and other works, many of which have been and continue to be influential.

We will focus on Kant and race, referring to similar issues regarding gender only for comparison. We acknowledge that Kant expressed various beliefs and attitudes that are aptly called racist, in that they falsely (and perhaps culpably) affirm belief in the inferiority of non-white races and so are liable to encourage policies and attitudes towards them that are unjust, contemptuous, and callous. His failings, we suggest, were not only faults of commission (what he said) but also faults of omission (what he did not say but should have).² We deny, however, some of the exaggerated charges of radical and deep racism put forward by some notable recent critics. Kant's basic critical philosophy and moral theory, we believe, is not infected with racism. On the contrary, the moral theory can serve as a reasonable framework for addressing contemporary racial problems, provided it is suitably supplemented with realistic awareness of the facts about racism and purged from association with certain false empirical beliefs and inessential derivative theses. Our position, then, is that, while it is important to notice and block the influence of aspects of Kant's writings that reflect or might encourage racism, the charges of racism do not reach Kant's deep theory or undermine its potential for guiding deliberation about the problems of race.

Our discussion will be divided as follows.

² Whether or not the 'fault' was one for which Kant was morally culpable, given what he might and should have known at the time, is not the question on which we will focus. Our concern is whether his expressed ideas were faulty in any of the several ways that we consider, e.g. expressing racist beliefs and attitudes or encouraging, by his opinions (and what he fails to say), racist beliefs and attitudes in others.

First, we examine various contentions made by Emmanuel Eze, who charges on the basis of an extensive review of Kant's less known writings that Kant's racism is extensive and deeply embedded in his basic philosophy. The texts that he cites are indeed troublesome and not to be ignored, but Eze's conclusions, we argue, extend considerably beyond what the cited texts actually warrant. There are two sorts of problem: (a) the texts do not in fact support the extreme form of racist beliefs that Eze attributes to Kant, e.g. that some races are not human; and (b) Eze's charge that Kant's racist beliefs are inseparable from his basic critical philosophy rests on serious interpretative mistakes.

Second, we take up an important, and potentially troublesome, version of the suspicion that Kant's moral philosophy (not just his anthropological remarks) reflects a deep prejudice against people who do not share Kant's European, Enlightenment, male, professorial values. The suspicion is that by inflating the value of reason, as he conceived it, Kant in effect denigrated those who chose a more spontaneous life of passion or relaxed enjoyment. Even if Kant had not expressed his unfortunate views about hereditary racial inferiority, there is an aspect of his moral philosophy that may be called into question on the ground that it expresses, or at least may encourage, a contemptuous attitude towards certain non-European peoples simply because their lifestyles differ radically from that of the white, male, European models that Kant admired. Kant's enthusiasm for 'the life of reason' arguably extended beyond what his commitment to reason as the source of moral judgements warranted. Striving for perfection, contributing to civilization and high culture, planning, competing, controlling impulse and emotion apparently had value for Kant far beyond what is required to satisfy the basic demands of duty (and even beyond what is defensible as 'imperfect duty'). They are part of 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. Setting aside all issues of hereditary racial tendencies, Kant is at least suspect for encouraging contemptuous attitudes towards any people who, being talented or not, chose life closer to the Tahitians (as he pictured them). This objection, we think, has considerable force and gives reason for contemporary Kantians to dissociate themselves from some of Kant's excesses in adulation of the life of reason.

Third, although the last point is significant, it should not be confused with a more general condemnation of Kant's rationalism. In particular, his insistence on the crucial role of reason in moral deliberation and finding solutions

to social problems is separable from the previous objection, and it seems quite right. Kant argued, rightly we think, that the development of deliberative reason is crucially important for groups, as well as individuals, to develop solutions to the problems of social justice. Although *more* than reason is required for moral living and decent communities, Kant seems right that people who tried to live as he (no doubt falsely) portrayed the Tahitians, without the use of reason and only for enjoyment, would be ill equipped to handle the social and moral problems inevitably presented by the hard realities of human life. Thus, while he arguably inflated the value of a lifestyle devoted to perfecting reason, his main message, the need for the use (and so adequate development of) deliberative reason, is still much needed.

Fourth, although (as just suggested) Kant's moral and political philosophy rightly emphasizes the need for the development and use of deliberative reason, he apparently did not fully recognize the powerful role that relatively intractable, gut-level, feelings about race (and other differences) play in human choices. He was keenly aware of ways in which self-serving desires tempt otherwise good people to 'make exceptions of themselves', and he acknowledged human frailty and self-deception. But his confidence that reason *can* overcome any assaults from our sensuous nature may have fostered over-confidence that rational arguments are sufficient and generally effective to resolve problems generated by feelings that lead to conflict. Although in theory, admittedly, Kant could acknowledge that divisive feelings, e.g. racial antagonisms, in fact colour our judgements and undermine the effectiveness of rational solutions, he did not seem to grasp the pervasiveness of the problem as an obstacle to progress through the use of rational arguments. This is not surprising, for, as we have seen, Kant apparently had prejudicial attitudes that influenced his own work without his awareness. This problem, we suggest, calls for supplementation of Kant's theory (as in principle he should approve) with a more thorough appreciation of the way racial feelings and beliefs actually function, i.e. realities of the sort to which African American philosophers such as Charles Mills so powerfully call our attention. Facing these problems with Kantian deliberative reason together with this fuller appreciation of the realities of racial consciousness, the solutions to which we must seriously turn our attention are ways of restructuring our social institutions and moral education to combat racism, not merely with rational arguments, but where it lives, underground, in gut-level antipathies and suspicions immune to overt assaults by rational moral argument.

II. EZE

In his essay 'The Color of Reason' Eze shows not only that Kant made comments that appear to reflect a racist attitude, but also that he had a carefully formulated racial theory that included the claim that the white race is superior to the other races. Indeed it is probably true, as Eze claims, that Kant gave 'the strongest, if not the only, sufficiently articulated theoretical philosophical justification of the superior/inferior classification of "races of man" of any European writer up to his time'.³ Further, as if in anticipation of a rejoinder from Kant's friends that his racist attitudes and his possibly racist racial theory throw no light on, and fail to call into question, his main philosophical theories, Eze claims to have demonstrated that Kant's 'racial theories . . . belong in an "intimate" way to his transcendental philosophy, or at least cannot be understood without the acknowledgment of the transcendental grounding that Kant explicitly provides them'.⁴ Eze succeeds in showing that Kant saw his racial theory as a serious philosophical project, that it was not an offhand, unreflective set of conjectures, and that it deserves philosophical attention. More particularly, he succeeds in showing that Kant thought his racial theory was an inherent part of his total philosophical system, and that he appealed to his general philosophical principles to derive and state it. As Eze says, one cannot understand Kant's racial theory without acknowledging the philosophical grounding that he tried to give it.

But these concessions do not imply that Kant's central philosophical principles are tainted with racism. Suppose we grant that his racial theory is racist. (Some argument is needed to establish this point. Kant's racial theory is not racist simply because it claims that there are superior and inferior races. Conceivably the evidence available to him supported that claim. A racial theory is racist only if it relies on a culpable neglect of evidence that could have disproved it, or expresses or encourages contempt or disregard for people because of the race they are alleged to belong to.) And suppose we grant that Kant appealed to his general philosophical principles to derive and state his racial theory. It would follow that these principles are tainted with racism only if they strictly entailed his racial theory. If Kant's racial theory depends on false factual assumptions, or if his attempt to derive it from his general philosophical principles is invalid, these principles need not be tainted with racism any more than genetic science is necessarily tainted with racism just because some racists try to use it to justify their views.

But although Kant's use of his general philosophical principles to derive

³ Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, 'The Color of Reason', in Eze (ed.), *Post Colonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 129.

⁴ *Ibid.* 130.

his racial theory does not prove that his general philosophical principles are tainted, it does raise the suspicion that they might be. Eze should therefore be commended for pointing out that Kant seems to have believed that his general philosophical principles supported his racial theory. He has suggested another critical way to test the soundness of these principles. They may be responsible for the possible racism of his racial theory, and if they are, then that should count against them. We argue, however, that Kant's general philosophical principles are not responsible for the possible racism in his racial theory. He may have appealed to them to derive his racial theory, but his derivation was invalid and seems to have relied on false factual assumptions.

Eze evidently thinks it very important to emphasize that Kant appealed to his transcendental philosophy and his theory of the a priori to formulate his racial theory. For example, he claims to have shown that for Kant 'racial differences and racial classifications are based a priori on the reason of the natural scientist';⁵ that Kant assumed that his 'classification of humans according to race and racial distinctions (skin color assumed as external proof and evidence) is based on an idea "inevitably inherited by Nature"—that is, a priori, transcendently grounded and immutable';⁶ that the 'so-called subhuman, primitive, and characterological inferiority of the American Indian, the African, or the Asian, is a biologically and metaphysically inherited (arche)type';⁷ and finally that Kant 'elevated' David Hume's 'literary and political speculations about the "Negro," and provided these speculations with "transcendental justifications"'.⁸ The import of these claims seems to be that Kant believed that the racial classification he offered was a necessary truth, based on reason alone, and neither derived from experience nor revisable in the light of experience. But it is hard to make sense of the claim that Kant believed that the racial classification he offered was a necessary truth. It is true that in a central sense, for Kant, a priori truths about the world are necessary truths; examples are the truths of mathematics. Surely Eze cannot mean that Kant believed that statements about racial classifications are necessarily true like statements of mathematics! And if he does mean this, he does not make the slightest attempt to prove it. Kant also argued that space, time, and the categories are a priori forms of any possible experience, meaning that they are presupposed by any possible experience. But here too Eze surely cannot be trying to tell us that Kant believed that racial difference and racial classification are presuppositions of any possible experience. Nor is it any more plausible to say that Kant believed that racial difference and racial classification are

⁵ *Ibid.* 122.

⁶ *Ibid.* 124.

⁷ *Ibid.* 125.

⁸ *Ibid.* 122.

presuppositions of any experience of human beings. Certainly he knew that some of his contemporaries denied that there were such things as races.

Kant distinguished 'constitutive' from 'regulative' principles. Constitutive principles are the principles of the possibility of the objects of experience and determine how in general they must be. Regulative principles are maxims about how we ought to think about the objects of experience (A509 B537). Among these principles is the systematic unity of nature and that causes must not be multiplied needlessly. Kant says that in using these principles we 'presuppose a transcendental principle whereby such a systematic unity is a priori assumed to be necessarily inherent in the objects' (A651 B679). The idea here is that the assumption that causes are not needlessly multiplied is a priori in the sense that it is not derived from experience. Rather it is an assumption we ought to employ when we deal with the objects of experience, supposing that we want to construct a reasonable and humanly comprehensible theory about these objects.

Probably Kant relied on such a principle when he constructed his racial theory. For example, it seems to be the ground of his preference for monogenesis—the theory that the races are descended from a common stock—over polygenesis—the theory that the races have different origins. In this way a principle Kant identified as a priori was implicated in his racial theory. But this certainly does not support Eze's contention that Kant believed that the racial classification he offered was a necessary truth. Even if it is an a priori truth that causes should not be multiplied unnecessarily, and even if this leads us initially to prefer monogenesis over polygenesis, in the end monogenesis may still have to be withdrawn in the light of experience. No matter how carefully we refrain from multiplying causes unnecessarily, the facts may still force us to prefer polygenesis over monogenesis. And even if this is not the case, and monogenesis remains the preferable theory, experience alone can settle whether there are races or whether the racial classification Kant offers is correct. Finally, suppose that we hypothesize that there are races, and that the correct racial classification has a certain form. These hypotheses may be described as a priori in the sense that they are not generalizations based on experience. But it does not follow that Kant would have supposed that they are fixed or 'metaphysical' or 'immutable', as Eze seems to believe. A hypothesis that is not a generalization based on experience may still be fully revisable in the light of experience; it may not be derived from experience, but it may be falsified by experience.

Eze claims that Kant critiques Linnaeus's work on the ground it was not 'transcendentally grounded'. To back up this claim he cites a passage from Kant's 'Physical Geography', which goes as follows:

One should call the system of nature created up to now more correctly an aggregate of nature, because a system presupposes the idea (*Idee*) of a whole out of which the manifold character of thing is being derived. We do not have as yet a system of nature. In the existing so-called system of this type, the objects are merely put beside each other and ordered in sequence one after another . . . True philosophy, however, has to follow the diversity and the manifoldness of matter through all time.⁹

We grant that this passage shows that Kant believed that science involved more than mere classification, and that it had to take the form of a derivation from fundamental assumptions. And it follows that if Kant believed that a science of race was possible, then he would have believed that it would have to take the form of a derivation from fundamental assumptions. But Eze makes no attempt to show that this required Kant to believe that the racial classification he offered was a priori and transcendentally grounded in the sense that it was based on reason alone and was not revisable in the light of experience. Instead he launches into a discussion of Kant's *Observations of the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, claiming that the book shows Kant's 'theoretic transcendental philosophical position at work'. But although he cites some passages in it that certainly seem to express racist attitudes, Eze says nothing to suggest that Kant believed that these passages were any more than empirical a posteriori claims that could be falsified by experience. Certainly he makes no attempt to show that Kant thought of them as necessarily true, or based on reason alone, or a condition of experience.

Eze claims at another point that, on Kant's terms, 'The black person . . . can accordingly be denied full humanity, since full and "true" humanity accrues only to the white European'.¹⁰ It is certainly true that Kant believed that whites were the most talented race. He writes, 'Humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of the whites. The yellow Indians do have a meager talent. The Negroes are far below them and at the lowest point are a part of the American peoples'.¹¹ But this is a far cry from claiming that non-whites lack dignity, in the sense that they lack the capacity to act morally. One does have to be highly talented to have the capacity to act morally and consequently to have dignity. Kant often insisted on this. Further, he made many claims that indicated specifically that he did not endorse the view that non-whites were incapable of moral action or were without dignity. For example, in the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant writes, concerning European settlement of lands inhabited by 'shepherds or hunters (like the Hottentots, the

⁹ Eze, *Post Colonial African Philosophy*, 120.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 121.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, selections from 'Physical Geography', in Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (ed.), *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 63.

Tungusi, or most of the American Indian nations) who depend for their sustenance on great open regions', that such settlement 'may not take place by force but only by contract, and indeed by a contract that does not take advantage of the ignorance of those inhabitants with respect to ceding their lands'.¹² It should be noted that only moral agents are capable of making contracts, and that Kant includes here the American Indians whom he had described as the least talented of the human races. He was clear, then, that even the race he believed to be the least talented was capable of moral action and had dignity. Similarly, in *Perpetual Peace* he denounces the 'appallingly great' 'injustice' of the European powers in their conquest of 'America, the negro countries, the Spice islands, and the Cape'; and blames them for inciting the Indian states to 'wars, famine, insurrection, treachery and the whole litany of evils which can afflict the human race'.¹³

Eze is on firmer ground when he claims that Kant believed that only Europeans have the capacity for self-perfection and are likely to contribute to the future progress of the human race.¹⁴ This puts him in a position to argue that Kant believed that only Europeans are properly human, since the capacity for self-perfection is part of what it means to be human. But even if Kant believed that only Europeans have the capacity for self-perfection and are likely to contribute to human progress, the question is whether he was led to believe this by any central principles of his philosophy.

As Eze correctly notes, Kant used his universal history in order to argue for a theory of human nature, and was moved to do so probably as a result of studying Rousseau's earlier effort to do the same thing.¹⁵ But Kant's universal history, and his theory of human nature, are very different from Rousseau's. Rousseau thought he had a theory that explained human wickedness. On his account, human beings are good when they come from the hand of nature, and most of them are wicked only because of the bad social conditions they are in. His conjectural history of human beings was the method he chose to justify that account. Starting from the assumption that human beings would be happy and good in a pre-social and solitary state of nature, he tried to show how they become wicked as they accidentally create and stumble into social conditions that make them wicked.¹⁶ Kant's con-

¹² Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), hereafter abbreviated *MM*, p. 159 (vi: 353). Parenthetical numbers in Kant's works refer to the standard Prussian Academy edition volume and pages.

¹³ Immanuel Kant, 'Perpetual Peace', in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 106.

¹⁴ Eze, 'The Color of Reason', 117.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 108-14.

¹⁶ See e.g. J.-J. Rousseau, 'Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men, or Second Discourse', in Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 111-222.

jectural history, on the other hand, was not an attempt to explain human wickedness, or to prove anything in particular about what human nature is when it comes unsullied from the hand of nature. Rather, it was an attempt to show what human nature has to be like, given that we have to interpret human history as mankind's long journey to the point where all human talents will be fully perfected.¹⁷ Accordingly, although Kant agrees with Rousseau that people are wicked and engaged in a worsening spiral of competition and war, he insisted that we have to find a way to interpret this as eventually leading to good, and that we have to assume a view of human nature that supports that interpretation. Thus Kant argues that the war and competition that Rousseau deplores sharpens and deepens our understanding of nature and of ourselves, and that this, together with our natural prudence, will one day lead and enable us to design the republican constitutions and the world federation that will guarantee the conditions for peaceful competition and the eventual flowering of all human talents. Further, he argues that we have to take human nature to include a capacity for action that leads to self-perfection or self-improvement.

As far as we can tell, Eze tries to connect this fanciful, but otherwise innocent-sounding story to Kant's racial theory and transcendental philosophy by arguing that the claim that human nature includes a capacity for self-perfection is an a priori claim. That is, it is not established by experience, from the data at one's disposal, but is brought to experience as an organizing principle, to help make sense of the data at one's disposal and to direct empirical research. This point must be granted. The next step, however, is invalid. Eze seems to suggest that if we take the claim that human nature includes a capacity for self-perfection as a priori and notice that non-European peoples are not perfecting themselves, at least in the European way, then we will be led to conclude that they lack the capacity for self-perfection, and we will also take that conclusion to be a priori. This seems to be the argument he uses to press his claim that Kant thought it an a priori truth that non-Europeans are not fully human. But it is, as we said, invalid. Even if Kant was convinced that non-Europeans were not perfecting themselves in the European way, he could without the slightest contradiction have rejected the claim that such peoples lack the capacity for self-perfection. That is, Kant's teleology may have led him to take it to be an a priori truth that human nature included a capacity for self-perfection, but there was nothing in it to lead him to conclude that non-Europeans lacked that capacity, even if some of them, like the Tahitians, were not involved in the war

¹⁷ See e.g. Immanuel Kant, 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose', 'Perpetual Peace', and 'Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History', in *Kant: Political Writings*.

and competition he thought of as necessary means to human perfection. It is perfectly possible for people to have capacities they fail to realize, because, for example, they fail to be in circumstances that provoke them to realize their capacities. Accordingly, even if Kant inferred that non-Europeans lacked the capacity for improvement, this was because he made factual assumptions that were not part of his central philosophical assumptions, or because his prejudice led him to draw unwarranted conclusions from his teleology.

Indeed it seems that if Kant had stuck to his central methodological principles, for example, that causes must not be multiplied unnecessarily, he would have been led to reject the idea that some peoples lack the capacity for self-perfection. To see this point, let us compare his theory of history with Rousseau's more streamlined account. Although Rousseau would have agreed with Kant that different physical conditions probably account for the different appearances of the races, he dispenses with the further and unnecessary assumption that these differences are correlated with differences in talent and motivation. And this, we may observe, is exactly what Kant should have argued if he had remained faithful to his principle not to multiply causes unnecessarily. Clearly, if we can explain apparent differences in talent and motivation in terms of social conditions, we can obviously cut back on the number of causes we have to appeal to in order to explain human history. Eze says that Kant described European history and imagined he was describing human history. But consider, for example, how Rousseau and Kant deal with European history. For Rousseau, it is a condition that human beings in Europe have stumbled into by accident. For reasons it would be tedious to repeat here in detail, Rousseau argued that the physical conditions of Europe led the people living there to devise certain social institutions that then inexorably, but without their understanding or intention, propelled them into the strife, competition, and 'progress' of Europe.¹⁸ Other peoples not in Europe have escaped Europe's fate, simply because of accident, or because the physical conditions they were in led them to devise different social institutions that did not involve them in the strife of competition, and consequently the development of talents found in Europe. Specifically, Rousseau avoided multiplying causes. He argued that if Europeans do indeed have a disposition to unsocial sociability and therefore to competitiveness, this is a result of the social institutions they were led to devise by the physical conditions of their continent. On his account, any other people in the same conditions would have devised the same institutions

¹⁸ Progress must be put in inverted commas here because Rousseau maintained that the progress of Europe was a moral disaster.

and would have developed the unsocial sociability and the competitiveness of Europeans. But Kant argued that European competitiveness is a result of innate European talent and unsocial sociability. We can only speculate that prejudice or gullibility led him to multiply causes needlessly and to violate his own philosophical principles. In any case, these principles cannot be blamed for his view that non-Europeans are less talented than Europeans and perhaps even lack the capacity for self-perfection.

III. THE TAHITIANS AND THE IDEAL OF REASON

Contemporary readers sensitive to persistent problems of Western bias towards Third World peoples will hardly be pleased by Kant's various references to South Sea Islanders.¹⁹ Europe in Kant's day knew of Tahiti and other 'exotic' places from the reports of travellers, who mostly saw what they wanted to see through European eyes. Tahiti was romanticized as an idyllic land of peace and plenty, endless enjoyment without responsibility. Only a few, such as Forster, reported a more complex, perhaps more realistic picture. Kant's reaction was to accept the usual romantic stereotype without the customary admiration that accompanied it. He accepted the idea of the Tahitians as people completely devoted to the life of ease and pleasure, with no need to develop their reason and talents to satisfy their basic natural needs and immediate desires. Rather than envying them for this, however, Kant disapproved. In his view, they neglected the distinctive human powers that give life meaning and value. If their idleness were never to change, the world would not be a worse place, he suggests, if Tahiti sank.

One can try to make excuses for Kant on grounds of non-culpable ignorance of empirical fact, but there is reason to suppose that he should have known better because he engaged in public controversy with Forster, who reported a different story of the Tahitians from his travels with Captain Cook. Kant was less interested in the empirical facts, it seems, than in the occasion the Tahitians seemed to provide for a moral sermon to his readers. Whether he was culpable or not, it is hard to deny that his disapproving attitude and ready acceptance of the common stereotype fit with and could have encouraged European tendencies towards self-righteous domination and interference with non-Western cultures. To say this, however, is not yet to make a deep charge against Kant's moral and political theories. Are his philosophical ideas at fault, or is his attitude about the Tahitians something

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), hereafter abbreviated *G*, pp. 32-3 (iv: 422-3), 38-9 (iv: 430).

separable? There is reason to suspect that the problem goes deeper than suggested so far—though still, we believe, not to the core of his ethical and political theories. Echoing familiar concerns sometimes expressed by feminist, African American, and various postmodern critics of the Enlightenment, an extreme version of the objection might go like this. Kant disapproves of the Tahitians because they fail to meet a parochial, historically conditioned, European and male biased Enlightenment ideal of reason. Their failure, the ground of the alleged worthlessness of their lives, is their not working to 'perfect' themselves as demanded by the categorical imperative, an absolute requirement of pure practical reason. Their enjoyment is counted for nothing because they are not fulfilling the end of reason, which is to control passion, maintain a pure 'good will', and to contribute as far as one can to mankind's cultural and moral perfection. They are not as productive, competitive, and combative as Europeans, and so do not contribute to the perfection of humanity as reason demands. Thus, it is charged, Kant tries to justify the moral and cultural superiority of Enlightenment Europeans and excuse the imperialistic extension of their values, all from local bias masked as pure reason.

Now, though there is an important kernel of truth in this objection, the extreme version as expressed here contains several exaggerations and oversights that should be mentioned. First, it should be remembered that Kant regards the duty to develop one's talents only as an imperfect duty of 'wide obligation'.²⁰ That is, the development of talents is supposed to be an end prescribed by reason, but the duty is indefinite, not saying how much or how or when one is to promote that end. Other ends, including the happiness of others and one's own, are also commended by reason, and there is no formula for all as to how to balance these pursuits. The duty is also relative to one's talents, so the mere failure to meet high 'objective' standards of culture are not, in principle, grounds for disapproval of anyone as morally inferior.²¹ For Kant moral disapproval of the Tahitians, for example, presupposes that they have talents. Further, the duty to perfect one's talents is only a 'duty to oneself'.²² That is, it is unenforceable by law and only the ethical responsibility of each agent to himself, not the business of distant strangers or even his neighbours. Kant may not always keep this in mind, but he does at points

²⁰ *MM* 152–5 (vi: 388–93).

²¹ When it is said that it is in itself a duty for a human being to make his end the perfection belonging to a human being as such (properly speaking, to humanity), this perfection must be put in what can result from his deeds, not in mere gifts for which he must be indebted to nature; for otherwise it would not be a duty. This duty can therefore consist only in *cultivating* one's faculties (or natural predispositions), the highest of which is understanding, the faculty of concepts and so too of those concepts that have to do with duty' (*MM* 150 (vi: 386–7); also see *G* 150 (iv: 423)).

²² *MM* 174–5 (vi: 418–20), 194–7 (vi: 444–7).

object to the meddlesomeness of anthropologists in other cultures and the unjust incursions of European settlers on the lands of others (e.g. the Hottentots, Tungusi, and American Indians).²³ Even the idea that idle persons' exclusive devotion to enjoyment is 'unworthy of their humanity' is, for Kant, not a *practical* judgement that should guide our treatment of them.²⁴ Because of our ignorance of motives, moral worth, ultimately, can only be judged by God, according to Kant; our duties of respect and beneficence make no reference to the worthiness of the recipient. The primary place of judgements of deficient 'moral worth' is when we sense our own shortcomings, by comparison with an ideal (not other people) and this leads us to commit ourselves to greater effort.²⁵ Another point to note is that not everything in Kant's objectionable attitude to the Tahitians stems from his idea of reason. For example, his thought that human beings can progress to the ideal of humanity only through 'unsocial sociability' (and so by competitiveness, hard work driven by self-interest, etc.) is an empirical claim, no doubt an overgeneralization and not itself a philosophical thesis.²⁶

All this said, there remains a serious objection. In brief, Kant does not merely call attention to the importance of deliberative reason for prudence and moral problem-solving, but, beyond this, he apparently endorses a particular rationalistic conception of the good life as a universal and necessary goal.²⁷ That is, the development of intellectual abilities, control of passions, conscious striving for determinate goals, critical thinking, etc. seem not merely recommended as prudentially advantageous and often useful for moral ends, but as valuable ends intrinsic to rational nature itself. Such a lifestyle, independent of its effect on happiness, accords with the *telos* of our nature as rational beings. Although other ends, such as the happiness of others, are also to be sought, morally good persons, Kant seems to think,

²³ *MM* 212 (vi: 466), 122 (vi: 353).

²⁴ See 'Kant's Anti-Moralistic Strain', in Thomas E. Hill Jr., *Dignity and Practical Reason in Kant's Moral Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); also Thomas E. Hill Jr., 'Kant on Wrongdoing, Desert, and Punishment', *Law and Philosophy*, 18 (1999), 407–41. Note this too detracts from another's honor—even if it is not a matter of public justice, and even if what is said is true—diminishes respect for humanity as such, and so as finally to cast a shadow of worthlessness over our race itself, making misanthropy (shying away from human beings) or contempt the prevalent cast of mind . . . ' (*MM* 212 (vi: 466)). Cynics will doubtless say 'our race' here refers exclusively to European whites, but such charges are more reflective of critical zeal than careful survey of relevant evidence.

²⁵ Regarding comparing ourselves to an ideal standard rather than to other people, see *MM* 187 (vi: 435–6).

²⁶ See *Kant: Political Writings*, 44–5 (from 'Idea of a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose', 1784), and Alan Wood's commentary, 'Unsociable Sociability: The Anthropological Basis of Kantian Ethics', *Philosophical Topics*, 19/1 (Spring 1991), 325–51.

²⁷ *MM* 151 (vi: 387), 154 (vi: 391–2); 194–5 (vi: 444–6), 180–1 (vi: 427–8).

regard the perfection of their own higher powers as neither a mere means nor an optional end. Those who do nothing towards this ideal perfection, then, are either culpably neglectful of duty, morally ignorant, or devoid of the 'higher' powers of mind and soul. Thus Kant seems to be committed to a value judgement beyond what can plausibly be claimed as a necessary requirement of reason, and it is a value judgement that would be understandably annoying to those who prefer a style of life that is less intellectually oriented, though neither foolish nor immoral. Kant's model, then, seems suspiciously that of a male, northern European, Enlightenment professor in a time more hopeful than ours of progress through discipline, rigorous thinking, and competition. If people in less powerful cultures do not share these values—or are so perceived—then the suggestion is that they must be inferior in morality, knowledge, or talent. This is a suggestion naturally resented by people whose values have been misunderstood, and it is one that can easily play into the hands of people already prepared to exploit them.

This objection is not just that Kant made misjudgements in applying his philosophical ideas, but neither is it a deep problem at the core of his moral and political theories. To see this, we need to distinguish the following: (1) Kant's basic moral theory, the fundamental moral principles and their grounding,²⁸ (2) the hypothetical imperative, a rational requirement to take the necessary means to one's ends (or abandon the ends),²⁹ (3) teleological claims about the end of humanity, or rational nature, in persons, the end towards which history is progressing, etc.³⁰ and (4) specific applications of the above made on the basis of empirical assumptions.³¹ Kant's basic moral theory holds that behind particular moral debates are certain formal general principles, the categorical imperative, that any fully rational autonomous person would accept. The hypothetical imperative requires us not only to be prudent, but to do what is necessary to achieve morally required ends. These together pose a significant 'demand of reason' at the core of Kant's theory. That, of course, is controversial enough, but it is separable from the objection under consideration. That problem depends crucially on Kant's teleological claims about the 'end' for which nature or God gave us reason, for Kant's moral ground for the duty to develop our powers of mind and soul is that these are means needed to contribute to the perfection of humanity—the end of rational nature in us. Kant's fundamental moral principles do

²⁸ See especially, *G* 29–66 (vi: 418–66), omitting Kant's examples.

²⁹ *G* 24–9 (vi: 413–19); Hill, *Dignity and Practical Reason*, 16–37, 124–31.

³⁰ e.g. *MM* 230 (vi: 488), 164 (vi: 405), 141 n. (vi: 376), 178–80 (vi: 424–6), 123–4 (vi: 354); *G* 8–10 (iv: 395–6), 32–3 (iv: 422–3), 38–9 (iv: 430).

³¹ *MM* 176–218 (vi: 421–74); *G* 32–3 (iv: 422–3), 38–9 (iv: 430).

not, indeed cannot, depend on teleological claims, but his examples of specific moral duties often do. Contemporary philosophers are understandably sceptical about Kant's teleology, especially the claims (a) that we should regard history as progressing to the flourishing of humankind in culture, politics, and morality as well as happiness consonant with virtue, and (b) that intellectual powers are wrong to neglect because they are gifts of nature. But the contested points here, it is important to see, are distinct from Kant's more fundamental moral theory.

In sum, then, we share with Kant's critics the suspicion that he exaggerated the value that a moral and rational person must place on 'reason' in so far as he prescribed as a universal and necessary value an intellectual lifestyle with features, in kind and degree, beyond what basic prudence and morality require. The point, however, should not be confused with a much more radical charge about Kant's endorsement of 'Enlightenment reason', namely that it represents nothing but the parochial values of a particular historical era and class, with nothing more to recommend it than its corrupt origin and its adaptability to evil imperialistic aims. Virtually everything in philosophy is controversial, but the objections to Kant's teleological claims, which few contemporary philosophers accept, are not grounds for dismissing his emphasis on reason in his basic moral and political theories, elements of which in fact are widely accepted among many of his critics as well as his defenders. The basic theory, for example, holds that it is a reasonable aim to seek a world of justice, peace, and mutual respect in which all people can pursue their own happiness, with the aid of others, under mutually acceptable constraints. It implies, further, that it is rationally required to take the necessary means, when available, to this moral end. This does not make *intellectual and cultural perfection* of individuals or the human species an end in itself. What is required is whatever use of reason can help to promote the morally better world just described.

So, do these basic points support a moral requirement for people to use reason and to develop intellectual powers more than Kant imagined the Tahitians did? As a general rule, this seems obviously implied, but Kant grants that what specifically is required in each context varies with the circumstances (such as one's talents, opportunities, and other legitimate ends). Development of reason, in general, is important to counteract oppressive superstitions, to structure social institutions that foster mutual cooperation and respect, and to develop the means and strategies to provide for the security and basic needs of all in a fair way. Granted, reason alone, especially not instrumental reason alone, is not *sufficient* to solve these problems, but that is not the issue here. The point is just that, even after we abandon Kant's inflated view of the necessity of intellectual life style, there remains a

plausible core to his insistence on the presumptive moral case for favouring the development and use of intellectual powers in the service of moral ends. To say this need not be a culturally biased disparagement of any group of people, though it implies that there are moral reasons not to devote oneself entirely to pleasure to the total neglect of one's talents (as Kant apparently imagined the Tahitians did). The minimal moral claim here is that one should develop one's powers of mind to serve moral ends and this (in Kant's official theory) is offered only as an indeterminate, unenforceable maxim for each person's moral consideration, to be applied by the responsible judgement of each according to his or her circumstances. If Kant had gone no further than this, it is hard to imagine how the claim could be construed as unduly disparaging except by those who hold the extreme relativistic view that it is necessarily disparaging to make any moral claim that challenges the preferred way of life of others. Although, as noted, the construal of Kant's minimal claim as unduly disparaging is hard to imagine, it must be admitted that the liability of philosophical ideas to distortion sometimes proves to be beyond imagination.

IV. DELIBERATIVE REASON AND VISCERAL RACISM

When we ask about the relevance of Kant's philosophical writings to contemporary problems of racism, there is more to consider than whether Kant himself had racist attitudes and beliefs and more even than whether his claims have implications likely to facilitate racism in others. There may be faults of omission as well as faults of commission. Or, to set aside assessment of personal blame, the point is that philosophical work, like any other, can by its omissions or incompleteness encourage its readers to rest content with deplorable attitudes not anticipated or strictly entailed by the content of the work. Such work stands in need of serious supplementation as well as more explicit clarification and warnings against appropriation for illegitimate purposes.

A natural worry of this kind about Kantian moral philosophy might be put as follows. Kant so emphasizes the role of reason in moral deliberation and motivation that he ignores, and encourages his readers to ignore, the hard reality that people are often moved by gut-level feelings that are impervious to rational argument. As has become horribly evident in the twentieth century, racial antagonisms are a paradigm of visceral attitudes that did not stem from reason and, it seems amply evident, are rarely extinguished by reason alone. Extolling rational arguments while ignoring the stubbornness of blind visceral racism has potentially disastrous

consequences. It encourages us to approach the deeply rooted problems of contemporary racism with the largely ineffective tool of rationalistic moral argument. Or, to change the metaphor, it is like treating a disease with the wrong medicine, even a non-medical treatment, like a lecture or a sermon. The problem in Kant's case, the objection might continue, is not a minor surface problem, readily remedied; for he repeatedly implies that the way to fight the immorality prompted by feelings and impulses is to focus the mind and will on the moral law, a principle of reason that makes no appeal to our sentiments.

Although the objection summarized here raises serious problems that should not be dismissed, we must be careful not to exaggerate. For example, Kant was obviously well aware that people often do terrible things from blind sentiments and impulses. Even when their immoral acts are coldly calculating, Kant thought, they are merely taking means perceived as necessary to achieve ends prompted by their non-rational inclinations.³² Because his project in the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* was, to a large extent, to combat 'sentimentalist' theories such as those of Hutcheson and Hume, it is understandable that he would emphasize his belief in the possibility and importance of pure rational motivation; but this does not mean that he denied, or disregarded, the evident fact that much of human behaviour, for better or worse, proceeds as if reason were silent or offered only prudential counsel. Admittedly, Kant writes as if the main obstacle to our making moral choices were merely *self-serving* inclinations³³ and our tendency to 'make exceptions of ourselves' to principles that, in general, we acknowledge as valid.³⁴ He was apparently not aware of the influence of

³² The coolness of a scoundrel, Kant says, makes him not only 'more dangerous but immediately abominable in our eyes than we would have taken him to be without it' (*G* 8 (iv: 394)). He follows merely 'hypothetical imperatives' to personal ends adopted on the basis of inclinations, contrary to 'categorical imperatives'. His principles are 'rules of skill' or 'technical precepts'. 'The precepts for a physician to make his man healthy in a well-grounded way, and for a poisoner to be sure of killing his, are of equal worth so far as each serves to bring about his purpose' (*G* 26 (iv: 415)).

³³ As Butler famously notes, we have 'particular passions' regarding many things, such as the good or ill of others, quite distinct from the second-level desire to be 'happy' or gratified by satisfying such first-order desires. Visceral racism commonly shows itself in such first-order desires to put down people of other races, to harm, dominate, or humiliate them. Contempt is felt for all who share certain group characteristics and, though the racist may enjoy oppressing them, the contempt precedes the enjoyment and partially explains it. The racist tendency to 'make exceptions' is thus often not initially and primarily a tendency to promote (perceived) self-interest but rather a disposition to exclude a despised 'other' group from the range of those to whom our moral consideration is owed.

³⁴ 'Now reason issues its precepts unremittingly, without promising anything to the inclinations. . . . But from this there arises a natural dialectic, that is, a propensity to rationalize against those strict laws of duty and to cast doubt upon their validity, or at least upon their purity and strictness, and where possible, to make them better suited to our wishes and inclinations . . .' (*G* 17-18 (iv: 405)); 'if we now attend to ourselves in any transgression of a duty, we find that we

deep visceral *racial* feelings, which are not simply self-regarding and may be as harmful to oneself as to others. Nevertheless, Kant can hardly be said to have been ignorant or indifferent to the fact that there are deep forces in human nature, evident throughout history, that work against our instituting practices that impartial reason would approve. For example, in the *Groundwork* (and elsewhere) Kant repeatedly expresses uncertainty that there ever existed a person with a purely good will.³⁵ In *The Metaphysics of Morals* he describes vividly characteristic temptations to vice,³⁶ acknowledges human frailty,³⁷ and allows that virtue is at best 'in progress' and 'considered objectively' an 'ideal' that is 'unattainable'.³⁸ In *Religion* he insists there is 'radical evil' in human nature, a innate tendency to subordinate the moral law to the pursuit of personal concerns, and in 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose' his metaphor is that human beings are made of 'crooked wood' that can never be made straight.³⁹

Kant was also aware, to some degree, that to fulfil our moral ends it is helpful (even if not absolutely necessary) to cultivate our feelings as well as our rational nature.⁴⁰ There is no inconsistency between this common-sense point, which Kant admits, and his insistence that in principle we must presume that we can overcome any inner obstacles to doing our duty and must hold ourselves responsible if we fail.⁴¹ But Kant understandably would be inclined to de-emphasize the admission, because a central theme of his was that acting from rational recognition of duty is possible and the distinctive mark of a morally good person. He apparently saw cultivation of feelings as a minor supplement to a moral agent's main tasks, not as a major project for the individual and not among the aims of the state.

Although the objection under consideration must be qualified by recognizing these aspects of Kant's writings, it nevertheless remains a serious problem that cannot be lightly dismissed. Admittedly Kant knew that blind impulses and feelings are obstacles to morality and some cultivation of

do not really will that our maxim should become a universal law, since that is impossible for us, but that the opposite of our maxim should indeed remain a universal law, only we take the liberty of making an exception to it for ourselves (or just for this once) to the advantage of inclination' (*G* 34-5 (iv. 424)).

³⁵ *G* 19-8 (iv: 407); *MM* 196 (vi: 447).

³⁶ *MM* 184-8, (vi: 432-3), 206-13.

³⁷ *MM* 166 (vi: 408), 196 (vi: 446); see also *Religion with the Limits of Reason Alone* and *G* 19 (iv: 406).

³⁸ *MM* 167-8 (vi: 410). In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant suggests that the ever-receding ideal of virtue towards which one must strive would take infinite time to approach, which is a reason, he proposes, for faith in immortality. See *Critique of Practical Reason*, 102-3 (v: 122-3).

³⁹ *Political Writings*, 46.

⁴⁰ *MM* 218 (vi: 473), 204-5 (vi: 456-7).

⁴¹ *Critique of Practical Reason*, 82-4 (v: 98-100).

feelings can be useful as a counterpoise to natural temptations, but it remains a fact that the main solution that he offers to moral and social problems is more extensive development and use of *reason*. He repeatedly suggests, for example, that merely holding the categorical imperative clearly before the mind, as a pure principle of reason, is all that we need to know and be moved to do what is right.⁴² His idea of moral education, while not entirely neglectful of habit, feeling, and physical well-being, is almost a paradigm of a rationalistic approach, with an emphasis on maxims, rules, and above all cultivation of the mind.⁴³ The moral 'catechism' sketched at the end of *The Metaphysics of Morals* presents the teacher as drawing forth moral knowledge from the pupil in a manner reminiscent of Socrates and the slave boy in Plato's *Meno*.⁴⁴ Moreover, although Kant's idea that our moral ends with regard to others is to promote their happiness, not their moral perfection, is a commendable antidote to moral imperialism, it tends to discourage, if not forbid, systematic moral efforts to eliminate visceral racism by attacking the institutions and practices that foster it. Kant seems all too content to think that it is not a social problem but rather the responsibility of each individual to fight his or her own bad feelings and attitudes without significant outside aid.⁴⁵ Unlike Rousseau, from whom he otherwise learned much, Kant did not acknowledge the need to restructure social institutions to help cultivate the social sentiments that promote and preserve institutions that moral reason approves. He seems, for example, not to have questioned seriously his commitment to a virtually absolute property right, prior (in a sense) to government and constraining what it may justly do.

But what is the lesson to draw here? Surely it is not that Kant was wrong to think that we need reasonable deliberation and dialogue to address racial problems. Rather, it is that such use of reason must be informed by an adequate understanding of the empirical facts about racism, its genesis, its stubbornness, its hiding-places, its interplay with other factors, and the most effective means to combat it. Racist attitudes, as we have argued, are incompatible with Kant's basic principle of respect for humanity in each person. Moreover, tolerating or ignoring racism is a policy that reasonable mutually respecting persons cannot will as universal law, or even parochial law. Given this, reasonable moral deliberation must direct us to discover and use the most effective permissible means to combat racist attitudes. If, as we

⁴² *G* 15-16 (iv: 403-4), etc.

⁴³ See Immanuel Kant, *Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), esp. 83-121.

⁴⁴ *MM* 222-8 (vi: 478-85).

⁴⁵ *MM* 150-2 (vi: 385-8).

believe, Rousseau was right in thinking that social institutions and practices tend to shape social attitudes and feelings, then we must turn our attention to those institutions and practices. For example, we must look for the seeds of racism, and the prospect of reducing it, in our economy, our courts and goals, our educational system, zoning laws, political processes, and so on. What in particular needs to be done is, of course, a complex and controversial matter to determine, and there is no denying that individual self-scrutiny of the sort Kant prescribes is also important. The main point, however, now seems quite clear: a basic Kantian deliberative perspective characterized by impartiality and mutual respect combined with a realistic awareness of the realities of racism would demand a more thorough, systematic, and perhaps radical assault on racism than Kant, the historical man himself, could have endorsed, or even imagined.

To accept this conclusion seems to require contemporary Kantians to reject the extreme idea that our moral end regarding others is (only) to promote their happiness, not their moral goodness. But even this is not clear, for Kant's claim that our moral end is not to promote the perfection of others occurs in the context of an outline of our *most fundamental* 'ends which are duties', not a discussion of the application of those principles to the problems of our times. One can grant that it should not be regarded as our *basic* moral duty to make others morally better while still arguing forcefully, from Kantian premisses, that we should structure social institutions as best we can to eliminate or reduce racism. We must oppose racist attitudes not in a moralistic, missionary spirit, with the aim to 'make others good' (implicitly 'like us'). We oppose them because, in innumerable ways, they stand as empirical obstacles to developing a world with more justice, peace, and mutual respect—the sort of world that Kant's basic theory requires us to seek.

Finally, we must face a more *radical* version of the objection that Kantians ignore the realities of visceral racism. One can imagine an impatient postmodern Thrasymachus making the complaint before storming away. Your solution fails, he might say, because it assumes that 'deliberative reason', which you say must prescribe solutions in the light of facts about racism, is itself uninfected by racist attitudes. You fail to draw the lesson of the 'facts' about racism that you admit must be taken seriously: that is, that in a racist culture there is no untainted power of deliberative reason. In other words, you are deceived, probably self-deceived, in thinking that you (your 'reason') can stand outside the racist perspectives that you aim to eliminate. Your man, Kant himself, was influenced by the racist attitudes and beliefs of his time, by your own admission. What makes you think that you, or your Kantian models of rational deliberation, can in the real

world escape the subtle, unrecognized influences of the visceral racism that you acknowledge is our key problem?

We set aside the philosophically irrelevant *ad hominem* accusation in this complaint that Kant and his defenders are biased. It does, however, contain a respectable philosophical objection to Kant's views. Kant believed that the really difficult part about acting rightly is having the moral strength to overcome contrary inclinations and desires and do what we know to be right, although we can always succeed in overcoming such inclinations and desires and do our duty if we try hard enough. On this he was perhaps mistaken, for it seems that sometimes we are literally overcome by inclination and desire and cannot do what we know to be right. But, so the objection goes, he was mistaken in a more fundamental way about how our inclinations and desires, or, more precisely, our emotions, passions, and attitudes, can interfere with our acting rightly. He thought that knowing what the right thing to do is relatively easy: 'it would be easy to show', he says,

how common human reason knows very well how to distinguish in every case that comes up what is good and what is evil, what is in conformity with duty or contrary to duty if, without in the least teaching it anything new, we only, as did Socrates, make it attentive to its own principle; and that there is, accordingly, no need of science and philosophy to know what one ought to do in order to be honest and good, and even wise and virtuous.⁴⁶

It may seem that this is mistaken, because there are cases where knowing what is in conformity with duty requires more sophisticated intellectual argumentation than is available to 'common human reason'. This may or may not be true. In any case, the objection now under consideration maintains that Kant's remark is mistaken for a different and perhaps more fundamental reason. It can allow that, suitably qualified, Kant's remark is right that 'common human reason' can always know what is in conformity with duty. The qualification is that to be able to know what is in conformity with duty common human reason must always have the morally relevant facts vividly before it. But, so the objection goes, emotions, passions, and attitudes often make it extremely difficult if not impossible for common human reason to have the morally relevant facts vividly before it. As Aristotle reminds us, the emotions, passions, and attitudes focus our attention on certain facts and distract our attention from other facts. The confident person tends to overlook facts that a fearful person notices; and an angry person tends to overlook facts that a happy person notices. In other words, emotions, passions, and attitudes tend to make certain facts vivid, and to make others obscure. Indeed they often make morally irrelevant facts vivid, and morally

⁴⁶ G 16 (iv: 404).

relevant facts obscure. But if common human reason must have the morally relevant facts vividly before it to know what is in conformity with duty, the emotions, passions, and attitudes can make it very difficult for common human reason to know what is in conformity with duty. We can see this in a case that Kant himself constructs: according to him, a person cannot will that his maxim not to assist others in need be made a law of nature because many cases could occur in which he would need the assistance of others. But this argument depends on the possibility of such cases being sufficiently vivid to the person in question, and we know that they will not be if he is very proud and self-confident. Generally, if the maxims we can will to be universal laws depend on the factual beliefs we have vividly before us, and the maxims we can will to be universal laws determine what we think is right, our emotions, passions, and attitudes can determine what we think is right. The problem is that if our emotions and passions can make morally irrelevant facts vivid, and morally relevant facts obscure, they can mislead us into thinking that what is right is wrong, and that what is wrong is right.

If this is correct, confident, complacent, well-positioned white people will not only find it difficult to do what they know to be right; they will find it still more difficult to know what is right, even when they sincerely claim that they are trying to do so. Indeed, such sincere people are likely to be particularly dangerous for, feeling their own sincerity, they will be unlikely to believe that they can be mistaken. We do not think that Kant was altogether unaware of this problem, for he frequently warned of the dangers of self-deception. His mistake seems to have been to suppose we can always overcome our self-deceptions, and bring the morally relevant facts vividly before us, by a sufficiently strenuous rational self-examination.

Still, the solution to this difficulty is not to abandon reliance on reason. On the contrary, we can only solve this difficulty if we rely even more on reason. It was reason that led us to appreciate that the emotions, passions, and attitudes can distort the results of reason's efforts to determine what is right; and it was reason that led us to see that rational self-examination alone may not always enable us to bring all the morally relevant facts vividly before us. Finally, it is reason that will enable us to solve the problem, which in general is to find some way to bring the morally relevant facts before common human reason. The first step, of course, is to listen to what others are saying. Reason will only lead us to the truth if we listen to what others are saying. But we are not repeating this fact made familiar by every defender of freedom of expression. Listening to others with different viewpoints, different emotions and attitudes, and consequently different blind spots is a beginning, but it is not enough. The confident and complacent do not listen sympathetically to those they feel to be their inferiors, even when they invite

these inferiors to speak. Somehow we must design institutions that will help us to listen to others sympathetically. Morally relevant facts that are obscure to us may be vivid to others, and if we listen to them sympathetically, these facts may become vivid to us too. Rousseau believed that institutions that reduced inequalities and dependencies would help us to listen to others sympathetically. We believe he was right, but that is not the point we want to press now. Our point is that only by rational reflection, together with adequate understanding of the social and psychological roots of racism can we design the institutions that will help us to listen to others sympathetically and consequently to know what is in conformity with duty.

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