

Race and the Copernican Turn

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The Enlightenment is said to be an era of moral equality, but the historical evidence suggests that few men, and even fewer women, were ever actually equal. The racism and sexism evident throughout much of modern philosophy has been ignored or dismissed as unfortunate but are, in fact, relevant to central philosophical claims of the period. Despite the hope that such offensive attitudes are simply a product of their authors' personal biases, good reasons exist to believe that modern racist attitudes are as much an outgrowth of the epistemic difficulties those philosophers encountered and are, consequently, grounded in core philosophical doctrines. The Cartesian turn inward toward ideas of the mind creates a situation in which epistemic objectivity is necessarily grounded in a radical subjectivism. As a result, philosophers such as Hume and Kant find it necessary to grant epistemic authority only to those who reason according to proper methodologies, which, in turn, has consequences for moral agency. The result is that, by the end of the Enlightenment, rationality and personhood are no longer the possession of every human being.

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The Age of Enlightenment is also known as an Age of Equality. It is the era in which we find the first assertions of the equality of men. It is also the era in which some of the very same philosophers who argue for the universality of moral rights explicitly deny women's equality and disparage non-Whites. Well known are the principle ideas of the Enlightenment: all men (literally, men) are born equal; objective truth is obtainable; man is capable of perfecting himself through the use of reason; the path to knowledge requires freeing oneself from ignorance and superstition. This list may not be complete, but it should be familiar. What is missing, however, is an explicit statement of how narrowly these ideas apply. For example, Thomas Jefferson, the very same person who found men's equality to be self-evident, himself owned slaves. Of course, this hypocritical stance is not unique to Jefferson; in fact, it is the rule rather than the exception. Throughout the Enlightenment, many of the people who are central

in arguing the moral and political equality of men are the very same people who explicitly denigrate women and non-Whites, denying them rights and denying them the status of persons. The most egregious example is Kant, who champions the ultimate worth of each rational agent and who nevertheless speaks of “the fair sex” and of “negroes” in less than glowing terms. This repeated and pervasive disconnect is anything but accidental.

Of course, feminist philosophers have for decades been raising concerns about Enlightenment philosophical concepts. Genevieve Lloyd (1984) points out that during this period reason comes to be not simply “a distinguishing feature of human nature, but . . . an achievement — a skill to be learned, a distinctively methodical way of thinking, sharply differentiated from other kinds of thought.” She goes on to add that “something happened here which proved crucial for the development of stereotypes of maleness and femaleness” (p. 39). Something also happened which proved crucial for the development of stereotypes of race. This “something” is the modern epistemological turn inward. As reason comes to be understood as a faculty dependent only upon itself, as epistemological justifications come to be dependent solely on internal ideas and cognitive structures, the threat of subjectivism looms large. The domain of reason comes to be circumscribed so tightly as to exclude anyone conceived to be different in epistemically relevant ways. And, unfortunately, skin color (as well as having female body parts) comes to be an epistemically relevant feature, albeit inferentially. The connection between the rise of racism and the Enlightenment’s pursuit of universal knowledge and moral equality is not accidental — and between them lies the modern concept of reason.

The significance of race is surely tied to the attitudes and biases of the philosophers who develop the concept, but this significance also arises out of theoretical concerns with the subjectivism inherent in the Copernican turn. Descartes originates this turn by transforming the focus of philosophy away from the world and toward the inner realm of the mind. Kant then completes the turn and formally establishes that knowledge can be had only through very human ways of cognizing. Because this shift is well understood, I begin with merely a brief overview of its Cartesian origins and the ways in which Humean and Kantian conceptions of reason respond to its subjectivist implications. These responses hold the key to understanding why racist remarks during that time are not simply incidental to core philosophical theses. What Hume and Kant understand is that if reason can rely on nothing outside of itself, then it is either capable of justifying its own processes or it is not. Each grabs an opposite horn of this dilemma: Hume largely denies the authority of reason while Kant asserts it with a vengeance. However, with respect to race, each ends up in a similar place, defending the superiority of Whites. This happens as each makes epistemic and moral moves intended to ground objective knowledge in the subjectivity of internal ideas, but these moves also serve as a theoretical basis for their racist

attitudes. As it turns out, the theoretical ground Kant offers for his understanding of race is far more developed than is Hume's, but Hume's attitude stems equally from his core philosophical beliefs. In the end, the racist remarks of both these philosophers are tied to central philosophical doctrines developed in response to the threat of subjectivism. Even if Kant's attitude toward race is on more solid theoretical ground than is Hume's, both philosophers diminish the capacity of non-Whites to achieve epistemic and moral standing.

To make the case, I begin with an overview of the paradox created when modern philosophers place the ground of objective knowledge within a subjective realm of ideas. Specifically, I consider the responses of Hume and Kant to this paradox, arguing that the way each cuts off the threat of subjectivism provides the conditions necessary for a theoretical ground of racism. Given these epistemic concerns, I then discuss their relevance to Hume's discussion of a standard of taste. Even though his empiricism cannot establish the necessity of a racial hierarchy, he nevertheless seeks to establish a universal standard accessible only to certain sorts of people (most notably, those who are White and European). Kant, on the other hand, can and does allow for the necessary inferiority of non-Whites and non-males, arguing quite explicitly that skin color and body parts affect one's capacity to act according to principles. Finally, I consider the quite serious moral implications of the Enlightenment's epistemological concerns, namely the ways in which the concept of humanity is decoupled from the concepts of rationality and personhood. The unfortunate outcome is that the Copernican turn originated by Descartes and completed by Kant narrows the domain of personhood and restricts the application of so-called universal moral concepts such as equality and justice only to those who reason in the right sort of way.

Modernism's Subjective Paradox

During the Enlightenment, rationality comes to be an acquired skill, one that requires following a specific procedure for obtaining knowledge. To follow this procedure means that one is capable of freeing oneself from bias, prejudice, and unfounded belief, thereby assuring objective knowledge, particularly with respect to the natural world. As the spotlight of epistemology turns inward, reason requires a detachment from material and emotional aspects of the world and a rigorous commitment to understanding the logical structure of the world. The result is that individual minds become autonomous arbiters of truth, provided they follow a method that dissects and analyzes internal operations of mind according to certain rules. With the notable exception of Hume, whom I will discuss shortly, philosophers of the modern era assert thoroughly authoritative, procedural accounts of rationality as not simply a luxury but as a necessity. Why? Because at the heart of modern philosophy lies a paradox in which the path to

knowledge of the world is through an exclusive focus on the ideas in one's own mind: radical objectivity comes to be intelligible and accessible only through radical subjectivity (see Taylor, 1989, pp. 175–176). And because the origin of all knowledge is suddenly subjective, philosophers must explain how human beings come to be devoid of subjectivity. As Wittgenstein (1958, §293) was to highlight a couple of centuries later, when we each look inward toward the ideas in our own minds, we need some assurance that each of us is starting with the same ideas and procedures for relating and connecting those ideas; otherwise, we lack any basis for objective knowledge. While Wittgenstein externalizes this assurance through practices and language-games, the moderns take the individual knowing subject to have precedence in the generation of knowledge. If subjects cannot be counted on to be identical to one another in all relevant respects, then we lose any guarantee of objective knowledge. What counts as a “relevant respect” is an open question, but we all know that, contrary to their oft stated position, Enlightenment philosophers do take material conditions like skin color or body parts to be relevant to one's ability to achieve rationality.

This story of modern reason has been told and retold, as has the story of how such procedurally governed concept invokes “images of domination, oppression, repression, patriarchy, sterility, violence, totality, totalitarianism, and even terror” (Bernstein, 1986, p. 187). As postmodernists, feminists, and other critics of the Enlightenment have repeatedly argued, the Enlightenment is not all sunshine and light. The story, however, that is less well told is how this transformation in our understanding of reason motivates an exclusive — and exclusionary — account of reason. In other words, we recognize what Enlightenment reason is and we understand the destruction it wreaks for many; what is often overlooked, however, is how the very development of the modern concept demands marginalization, at least if the objectivity of knowledge is to be sufficiently defended. The question is, why?

The emphasis on subjectivity comes with a radical, if artificially conceived, skepticism. What makes Cartesian skepticism so transformative is the insistence on doubting reason itself. Aristotle may ask for a level of precision appropriate to the area of inquiry, but Descartes asks for certainty: pure, simple, and beyond all doubt whatsoever. As Étienne Gilson (1930) summarizes,

From the point of view of medieval philosophy, someone who plays the role of the *indisciplinatus* takes pride in insisting on the same degree of certainty in every discipline, no matter how inappropriate. In a word, he [Descartes] no longer recognizes an intermediary between the true and the false; his philosophy radically eliminates the notion of “the probable.” (p. 235)¹

The result is a quest for certainty that adopts an all-or-nothing approach which in turn diminishes any way of thinking that fails to achieve this peculiar kind of certainty. For Stephen Toulmin (2001), Descartes' exclusive emphasis on “the

¹Translation mine.

rigor of theoretical arguments . . . [and] the need for technical terminology based on abstractions” (p. 32) causes reason to become unbalanced. Yet Descartes needs this exclusive emphasis. Alternative procedures would undermine the confidence we can have in *our* ways of reasoning. The result is not simply that Cartesian rationality shuts down the possibility of alternative ways of thinking but that it must do so. The light of reason, which guides all our reflections, “cannot in any way be open to doubt” (Descartes, 1641/1984, p. 27).

By contrast, Greek rationality was always able to remain largely unthreatened by conceptual diversity since whatever account of the world one wanted to come up, it ultimately had to face the tribunal of an ontologically real and independent reality. The same is not at all true for the moderns. As the connection between the realm of inner ideas and the realm of objects in the world becomes more tenuous, the need for cognition to have a strictly logical order becomes more evident because we have only our own wits upon which to depend. The subjectivist implications of this leaves philosophers with two obvious choices: give up the authority of reason (i.e., Hume) or assert it with a vengeance (i.e., Kant). Hume and Kant both discern the tension between asserting infallible access to internal ideas and the necessity of grounding those ideas in a world beyond the ideas themselves. Both understand that the loss of metaphysics puts the veracity of our representations into doubt. But each responds in a different manner, and each response entails a narrowing of epistemology and value theory in ways that ultimately reflect on race. Epistemologically, Hume is entirely honest about the implications of Cartesianism for an empiricist: reason must be less an authoritative faculty and more a natural instinct. Aesthetically, Hume is less honest. When it comes to matters of taste, he seeks universal principles that are unattainable for some. Kant, on the other hand, accepts the force of Hume’s empirical arguments, but he also understands that if experience worked along Humean lines, we would have little hope of ever surmounting the problem of explaining how the world hangs together in some orderly and objective way. Thus, Hume must be leaving out something important. The authority of reason must have an *a priori* source, both epistemically and morally.

By the time Hume arrives on the scene, representational epistemologies have precious little to re-present. He recognizes that a commitment to sensation and reflection as the only sources of knowledge means that the connection between our ideas and an external world is essentially unknowable. He recognizes that even though philosophers attempt to distinguish fleeting perceptions from objects with continued existence, the attempt to do so is “only a palliative remedy” (1738/1978, p. 211). For Hume, we can never establish that our sensory impressions are grounded in stable, external objects for “it follows that we may observe a conjunction or a relation of cause and effect between different perceptions, but can never observe it between perceptions and objects” (1738/1978, p. 212). The order among our

ideas must come from internal operations of our minds. In fact, more than any other Enlightenment philosopher, Hume understands that we can't get outside the system and see what the world is like independently of what we think it is like. And this lack of outside constraint on cognition means that our justifications of epistemic norms must actually presuppose those very norms.

Again, all this is familiar and appears entirely disconnected from any sort of racist observation. Quite to the contrary, it may very well seem that a philosophical theory based on empirical principles allows for more openness to difference. After all, cognitive principles are for Hume (1738/1978) merely probabilistic: "reason must be consider'd as a kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect; but such-a-one as by the irruption of other causes, and by the inconstancy of our mental powers, may frequently be prevented. By this means all knowledge degenerates into probability" (p. 180). He further explains that reason can offer only subjective assurances: "'Tis not solely in poetry and music, we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy. . . . When I give the preference to one set of arguments above another, I do nothing but decide from my feeling concerning the superiority of their influence" (1738/1978, p. 103). Not exactly the authoritativeness Descartes had in mind when he introduced a methodological account of reason. And not exactly the words one would expect from someone who denies civilization among non-Whites. What is left out in these remarks, however, is a further commitment to the uniformity and regularity of reason and taste, which guides us through the world of experience. Even though the only assurance we can have of the universality of reason is through empirical observation, it is an assurance on which Hume ultimately relies. It is also an assurance that uneasily grounds his observations concerning race. For now, I turn to Kant.

Given the strong and thoroughgoing skepticism Hume expresses concerning the nature of reason, it is little wonder that Kant awakens from his dogmatic slumber. However, rather than reject Hume's conclusions outright, he acknowledges this powerful motivation for skepticism, then attempts to overcome it. He may consider it a scandal that metaphysics is dead, but he also understands the epistemological shift in which the governing principles of the world are henceforth to be found only within reason itself. Ultimately, what he objects to are not Hume's arguments concerning the nature of empirical knowledge but the incompleteness of these arguments in providing a satisfactory explanation for the regularity of experience. As a result, Kant seeks to reestablish the authority of reason through the discovery of a priori principles of cognition. But in removing contingency, he also lays the seeds for a much more virulent form of racism than could ever be established through empirical arguments grounded in taste or sentiment.

To reestablish the epistemic authority of reason, Kant builds an a priori foundation for Hume's a posteriori edifice. What Hume misses, says Kant, is the importance of

a transcendental structure for experience. Consider the A-Deduction of the first *Critique* (which begins at 1781/1929, p. A120). In it we are told that perceptions are appearances conjoined with consciousness and that these perceptions are atomistically isolated, requiring cognitive activity to bring them together into a “object of knowledge.” We are told that it is impossible for us to produce a connection of impressions “were it not that there exists a subjective ground which leads the mind to reinstate a preceding perception alongside the subsequent perception to which it has passed, and so to form whole series of perceptions” (Kant, 1781/1929, p. A121). In other words, the connection among perceptions follows subjective principles. Nothing in this tale of mental activity thus far distinguishes the Kantian from the Humean story. In fact, Kant’s summary reflects Hume’s claim that “there is a principle of connexion between the different thoughts or ideas of the mind, and that in their appearance to the memory or imagination, they introduce each other with a certain degree of method and regularity” (Hume, 1748/1975, p. 23). By the end of the argument, however, Kant makes a quite non-Humean declaration: the principles that allow for the connection among ideas cannot all be subjective. Where Hume offers, at best, universality through empirical observation, Kant (1781/1929) claims that we must “also [have] an objective ground which makes it impossible that appearances should be apprehended by the imagination otherwise than under the condition of a possible synthetic unity of this apprehension” (p. A121). Stated plainly: reason itself provides a necessary structure for how the world hangs together, and this necessity allows for the possibility of objective experience because it is, well, necessary. Since reason must operate according to this structure, Kant thereby dissolves the threat of subjectivism and Humean skepticism, at least in theory.

Epistemologically, this result may appear quite comforting. We need not worry that experience will be cohesive and regular because the nature of cognition itself guarantees a systematic unity. We can rest assured that nature operates according to regular principles that we can discover; after all, these principles stem from reason itself. Nevertheless, such epistemological contentment is gained at the expense of alternative conceptual schemes, a result that philosophers have, over the past century, been quite eager to point out. Less noticeable are the moral implications of such a narrow and methodological conception of reason. These implications have been, and still are, anything but comforting for those who fail to reason in the “right way.”

When it comes to morality, Hume and Kant both accept the division between reason and some variation of sentiment or desire. And they both recognize that conforming the will to moral principle is quite different from knowing the difference between right and wrong. That is, becoming moral is as much of an achievement as is becoming rational. Of course, the significance each accords these distinctions is quite different. Still, Kant and Hume do agree on one thing:

any connection between moral law and will must be shown to be necessary. Says Hume (1738/1978),

'Tis one thing to know virtue, and another to conform the will to it. In order, therefore, to prove, that the measures of right and wrong are eternal laws, obligatory on every rational mind, 'tis not sufficient to shew the relations upon which they are founded: We must also point out the connexion betwixt the relation and the will; and must prove that this connexion is so necessary, that in every well-disposed mind, it must take place and have its influence; tho' the difference betwixt these minds be in other respects immense and infinite. (p. 465)

Of course, Hume rejects the possibility of such a necessary connection while Kant embraces it. In the case of Hume, passions are not conformable to reason, so morality becomes a matter not of intellect but of taste, the very same taste which lies at the heart of some key remarks on race. Reason is to be distinguished from taste insofar as “the former conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood: the latter gives sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue” (Hume, 1738/1978, p. 294). Hence, morality and taste stand in opposition to reason; morality is “more properly felt than judged of” (p. 470). And in a line that must have made Kant absolutely cringe, “reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will” (p. 413).

Kant, by contrast, insists that reason does guide us toward the satisfaction of our desire, if only unreliably. That is, he stands with Hume insofar as emotions can be heteronomous influences on action (see Kant, 1785/1996, p. 51). Yet Kant simply cannot accept Hume's skepticism toward the power of reason. The heteronomy of emotion should be no obstacle to reason in its a priori function, for reason must be the motive toward an action of the will if that action is to have moral worth. Reason acts freely only when it excludes desires as relevant considerations for choice and operates solely according to principle. In making this move to radicalize autonomy, Kant asserts the authority of reason to act independently of desires, which, in turn, eliminates subjectivity from the realm of morality. Unlike Hume, he need not assume everyone shares the same sentiments. Because moral motivation can never stem from sentiment or desire but must come instead from the necessity of acting according to a law that reason gives itself, Kant can establish an objective ground for a morality based solely on principle.

In articulating regular and uniform principles, Hume and Kant eliminate the subjectivity of emotion, desire, and perception in their value theory as much as they do in their epistemology. They, like all good Enlightenment philosophers, have faith in reason's ability to provide objective knowledge of the world. Yet the tensions of this faith are quite evident in their work. They are, after all, fully aware of the need, both epistemically and morally, to articulate explicitly the connection between mind and world, as well as the connection between reason, emotion, and will. Because secret springs and principles escape empirical notice,

Hume is reduced to denying the power of reason, claiming that, in the end, only a fool or a madman would deny experience to be an indispensable guide to human life. Somewhat magically, “regular conjunction has been universally acknowledged among mankind, and has never been the subject of dispute” (Hume, 1748/1975, p. 88). Conversely, Kant accepts that secret springs and principles cannot be had empirically, but he maintains that we still have recourse to regulative principles, of the kind that can be had a priori. These are indeed capable of providing necessity, unity, and purposiveness. Whether empirically or transcendently, Enlightenment philosophers share a desire to seek universal principles, and they do this, at least in part, to overcome the difficulties inherent in a subjectively grounded representationalism. For those who can reason correctly, objective knowledge can be had.

The difficulty, of course, is that not everyone can reason correctly. Kant’s moral theory, for example, requires acting according to rational principle. An obvious question, albeit one that has not been obvious until very recently, is: Who is indeed capable of such severely principled action? The answer Kant (1764/1960) gives is quite specific: he “hardly believe[s] that the fair sex is capable of principles” and adds that “these are also extremely rare in the male” (p. 81). By all appearances, the ability to act according to principles is a rather uncommon trait. It is not universally achievable. Yet anyone who knows anything about Kantian ethics understands the enormous importance of acting from principles. Without this, genuine moral worth is impossible. After all, morality is all about reason and about laws that we autonomously give ourselves. The result is that when we start to take seriously these philosophers’ comments on race, it seems that rationality (and taste) become a whole lot less achievable and a whole lot less universal than Enlightenment dogma would have us believe. The need to limit the proper methodology for cognition may not require the exclusion of those who appear different, but the manner in which the concept is constructed, combined with the obvious prejudice of many key Enlightenment thinkers, practically guarantees such exclusion. The result is the imposition of limitations on rationality and moral equality that actually offer something far, far less than the universalism promised by Enlightenment thinkers. I turn first to Hume and consider the epistemic anxieties evident in his comments on race. In the following section, I address Kant and reflect on how his critical response to subjectivist threats provides a foundation for his racial theory.

Hume on the Standard of Race

What has left many contemporary philosophers confused, or even incredulous, is the oppression and exclusion that go hand in hand with Enlightenment moral concepts such as equality, justice, and freedom. How is it that philosophers who

defend these concepts can own slaves or make disparaging remarks about non-Whites?² Whether or not various Enlightenment philosophers are genuinely racist is a matter of much discussion and debate.³ What is not a matter of debate is that Hume and Kant both make some especially reprehensible statements about non-Whites (and about women). However much we contemporary philosophers might wish to minimize and diminish the significance of these remarks, their comments are deliberate and grounded in their theoretical responses to the threat of subjectivism. In other words, the racist overtones of their works are far from ancillary.

When it comes to the topic of race, Hume has less to say than Kant. Yet what Hume has to say is no less objectionable. The most infamous of passages in Hume's (1758) work is the following:

I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. (p. 125)⁴

Whether or not this sort of comment is indicative of a deeper racist attitude, it is far from an unreflective remark. As John Immerwahr points out, Hume edits this remark quite deliberately to direct his attack more narrowly against Blacks. In the edited version, he writes: "I am apt to suspect the negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation" (Hume, 1757/1964a, p. 252). In this latter version, Hume may be more charitable toward the three or four remaining kinds of men, but we can take him at his word with respect to Blacks; otherwise, he would not have precised his comment in the way he did. As objectionable as this passage is, however, nothing foundational to Humean philosophy hangs on this one comment. Nothing specific to his response to subjectivism is implicated. Still, this is not the only reference Hume makes to non-Whites. In Hume's other famously racist passage, that concerning the lack of aesthetic appreciation for wine, his attitude stems from much deeper roots and from a clear worry that there must be a single standard of taste.

²Beyond the remarks of Hume and Kant discussed here, Berkeley owned slaves, and Locke invested in the slave trade. Bernasconi points out that the word "power" in *The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* is written in Locke's hand. The result is a document that reads, "Every Freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and Authority over his Negro slaves" (Bernasconi, 2003, p. 14).

³See, for example, Bernasconi, 2001, 2002, 2003; Eze, 1997, 2000; Hill and Boxill, 2001; Immerwahr, 1992; Kleingeld, 2007; Larrimore, 2008; Lind, 1994; Loudon, 2000; Mills, 2002, 2005; Reiss, 2005; and Zack, 2002.

⁴This remark is often dismissed since it is merely a footnote and not part of the main text. However, Immerwahr (1992), Eze (2000), and Zack (2002) argue that it is far from being an offhand remark. Immerwahr makes a scholarly argument for the deliberateness of this remark; Eze believes it is quite carefully placed and grounded in Hume's theory of human nature; and Zack argues that it implies an essentialism concerning racial divisions.

Compared to other philosophers of his day, Hume is noticeably less insistent upon universalizable principles. Still, he is not entirely insensitive to their power to overcome subjectivity and, hence, to their worth. The clearest expression of Hume's concern for universality comes in his aesthetics, where he offers an explicit appeal to a universal standard as a means of subverting subjectivity in matters of taste. Hume (1757/1964b) believes that "certain qualities in objects . . . are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings" (p. 273). Yet to know which qualities fit with which feelings, we must consider the responses that fall under the heading of "delicacy of taste." Says Hume (1757/1964b),

Where the organs are so fine, as to allow nothing to escape them; and at the same time so exact, as to perceive every ingredient in the composition: This we call delicacy of taste. . . . Here then the general rules of beauty are of use. . . . And if the same qualities, in a continued composition, and in a smaller degree, affect not the organs with a sensible delight or uneasiness, we exclude the person from all pretensions to this delicacy. (p. 273)

Intriguingly, he does not adopt his normal skeptical stance in this circumstance. In the epistemological case, he is content to reject the authority of reason in favor of "a species of natural instinct" (which turns out by lucky chance to be universal). In matters of taste, he asserts general rules that, it seems, not everyone has the ability to discern. "Naturally," non-Whites emerge as less capable in aesthetic judgments.

A Laplander or Negro has no notion of the relish of wine. And though there are few or no instances of a like deficiency in the mind, where a person has never felt or is wholly incapable of a sentiment or passion that belongs to his species; yet we find the same observation to take place in a less degree. . . . It is readily allowed, that other beings may possess many senses of which we can have no conception; because the ideas of them have never been introduced to us in the only manner by which an idea can have access to the mind, to wit, by the actual feeling and sensation. (Hume, 1748/1975, p. 20)

Hume does charitably admit that it is possible that others have senses we do not, but given the entirety of his view, it seems unlikely that he would find a white European male deficient in the same way as the Negro, who lacks civilization.

Now, the philosophical problem here is not so much Hume's racist remarks, although they are deeply problematic; rather, the problem is that he is not allowed the universality of taste against which he judges the Laplander and Negro lacking. He needs this universality of taste if he is to avoid taste becoming merely a subjective judgment, but the only means empiricists have for establishing such universality of taste is observation and reflection. And herein lies the difficulty. Marcia Lind (1994) notices in both Hume's aesthetics and ethics, an illegitimate assumption (one I believe is also evident in his epistemology): the assumption of an underlying similarity of all people. In the moral case, he needs to establish

some uniformity of human action and volition in the face of seeming “caprice and inconstancy,” but as with induction, Hume (1748/1975) maintains “the conjunction between motives and voluntary actions is . . . regular and uniform . . . [and] has been universally acknowledged among mankind” (p. 88). Echoing his remarks from “Of the Standard of Taste,” Hume (1748/1975) says in the first *Enquiry*, “it is universally acknowledged that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same in its principles and operations” (p. 83). Thus, in both the epistemic and moral cases, Hume assumes that cognition operates along the same lines regardless of who the cognizer is, as long as the cognizer is White and male.

The issue for Lind, however, is something different, namely, that Hume fails to establish a uniformity among humans as a matter of fact. Instead, he simply states his claim. But, says Lind (1994), “distortions” do exist in our perceptions and judgments, so the universality of taste (and of judgment) can only be had by “artificially constructing agreement among critics by limiting who was party to the agreement” (p. 57). That is, on the basis of an unsupported generalization, Hume limits who can be considered to possess delicacy of taste, and we should note that “exposure to ‘superior’ beauties is not just *any* sort of education, with any sort of range, but a *classical* education” (p. 57). Clearly, not everyone has access to a classical education, especially in the eighteenth century. Although Lind herself argues that Hume’s wider moral theory can overcome this limitation (p. 62), objectivity in matters of taste is clearly obtained by excluding those who do not share the right biases. To legitimize *his* judgment as correct, a critic

must preserve his mind free from all prejudice, and allow nothing to enter into his consideration but the very object which is submitted to his examination. We may observe, that every work of art, in order to produce its due effect on the mind, must be surveyed in a certain point of view, and cannot be fully relished by persons, whose situation, real or imaginary, is not conformable to that which is required by the performance. (Hume, 1757/1964b, p. 276)

Aesthetically, there is a difference between right and wrong, and the only way to “get it right” is to focus on the object from the correct point of view.

Despite the passing nature of his remarks, Hume is indeed reflective in his disparagement of the abilities of non-Whites. Even while asserting that human perception and cognition is governed by a uniform standard, especially when it comes to delicacy of taste, he also maintains that the appropriate application of this standard lies beyond the capacity of some. Now, Hume might be defended insofar as he does not explicitly state non-Whites fail to achieve rationality, but recall that reason is distinguished from taste insofar as “the latter gives sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue” (Hume, 1748/1975, p. 294). Non-Whites may (or may not) be sufficiently able to determine matters of truth and falsehood, but because they are lacking in taste, they will, by implication, also be lacking in virtue. Even though Humean empiricism cannot support the

assumption of uniformity of rational principles and moral sentiments, that does not diminish the fact that Hume uses this assumption to disparage those who are different. Nor does it help Hume that the assumption of uniform and regular principles is not ad hoc; not only is it a central aspect of his wider philosophical views, it is also specifically used to assert the superiority of non-Whites. Hume may not (or may) exhibit a sufficiently theoretical racism, but his racist remarks are not philosophically accidental. Kant, on the other hand, appears to have a theory which is seriously, intrinsically racist.

Kant on the Purposiveness of Race

Whatever their differences in value theory, Kant shares Hume's sense that aesthetic judgments are universal and that they are closely linked to moral judgment. In the aesthetic case, Kant (1790/1987) states:

Taste is basically an ability to judge the [way in which] moral ideas are made sensible . . . ; the pleasure that taste declares valid for mankind as such and not just for each person's private feeling must indeed derive from this [link] and from the resulting increase in our receptivity for the feeling that arises from moral ideas. Plainly, then, the propaedeutic that will truly establish our taste consists in developing our moral ideas and in cultivating [*Kultur*] moral feeling. (p. 356)

Correct judgments on matters of taste are not only universally valid but also grounded in correct moral belief. One possible implication of this is that failures in judgments of taste may very well be indicative of failures in moral reasoning as well. And moral failures are not to be taken lightly for Kant. Where Hume claims non-Whites exhibit failures of taste, Kant ups the ante. His approach to race, and to the inequalities among the various races, goes deeper than mere aesthetic judgments. Kant is theoretically committed to an epistemological and moral essentialism that diminishes the personhood of non-Whites and non-males.

That Kant is an essentialist about race is not a new argument, but it is a controversial one. Interpreters of Kant disagree on the significance of his racial remarks for his critical work. Philosophers like Emmanuel Eze (1997) and Charles Mills (2002, 2005) argue that Kant's core philosophical doctrines are infected by his racist anthropology. Philosophers like Thomas Hill and Bernard Boxill (2001) argue that while the racism is unfortunate, it can be safely set aside, leaving Kant's epistemology and morality intact. My own sympathies lie with the former interpretation, and my concern is that this essentialism underpins an unsustainable moral hierarchy within deontology. My argument echoes one originated by Eze (1997), who asserts that "what Kant settled upon as the 'essence' of humanity, that which one ought to become in order to deserve human dignity, sounds very much like Kant himself: 'white,' European, and male" (p. 130). What Hill

and Boxill (2001) find lacking in this view is that Eze “says nothing to suggest that Kant believed that these [racist] passages were any more than empirical a posteriori claims that could be falsified by experience” (p. 455). Instead, they argue that the racist bits of Kant are not central to his core philosophical views. More to the point, they hold that we cannot support the conclusion that Kant denies the humanity of non-Whites. Now, Kant does accept Buffon’s rule and allows that “all human beings anywhere on earth belong to the same natural genus because they always produce fertile children with one another even if we find great dissimilarities in their form” (Kant, 1777/2000, p. 9). This, however, does not entail that his racist passages are merely empirically falsifiable claims. While Hill and Boxill maintain that Kant’s remarks do not imply that “non-whites lack dignity, in the sense that they lack the capacity to act morally” (2001, p. 455), the highly structural and architectonic nature of all of Kant’s work makes their position highly unlikely. Whether or not Eze makes the case, a case can be made that Kant’s racism and sexism go far deeper than simply empirical observations. Robert Bernasconi agrees. He finds suspect the strategy of segregating the “basic” aspects of Kant’s theory from the “separable” parts and to jettison what is not necessarily connected to the theory (2003, p. 16). When we more fully examine Kant’s work on race, it becomes more difficult to deny that what he actually says is grounded in core aspects of his critical theory.

Unlike Hume, whose objectionable remarks appear (but only appear) to be made in passing, Kant writes elaborately on the topic of race.⁵ Kant is surely the staunchest defender of individual rights and moral dignity in the philosophical tradition; however, he is also one of the most offensive of all Enlightenment philosophers in his attitudes toward both non-Whites and non-males. Put differently, he makes plenty of objectionable, yet empirically falsifiable, claims. In a particularly odious remark, he states that the difference between races is so “fundamental” that it “appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour” and that being “quite black from head to foot” is “clear proof that what he said was stupid [*dumm*]” (Kant, 1764/1960, pp. 111, 113). In addition, he explicitly says, without “any prejudice on behalf of the presumptuously greater perfection of one color,” that Whites more closely resemble the original stem stock from which all humans descend (Kant, 1775/2013a p. 54). Later he adds that “humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of whites” (Kant 1804/1997, p. 62). These are anything but mere empirically determined remarks. This perfection — this epistemic, moral, and aesthetic racial superiority — emerges from a unifying concept that goes far beyond what can be empirically discovered. It arises out of a specifically *purposive* unity, a concept that lies at the heart of Kant’s critical theory.

The argument for purposiveness in racial hierarchy begins innocently enough with Kant acknowledging the humanness of all humans insofar as the mark of species membership is the ability to produce offspring. Over time, the “special seeds

⁵See Eze, 1997; Mills, 2005; and Kleingeld, 2007.

or natural dispositions” all humans originally possessed came to be developed differently in different peoples. The reason for the divergence is innocent enough: we are forced by our climate or environment to adapt to different conditions in order to survive. More specifically, race emerges from living in climates in which conditions such as air and sun alter the “original seeds” humans once shared. This view may sound somewhat simplistic, but it does not sound inherently racist. Continuing on, within the original lineal stem stock of humans are “seeds” which are “*purposively suited for the first general populating <of the earth> . . .*” (Kant, 1788/2013b, p. 181).⁶ Original humans contain all possible endowments, but nature, in its purposive wisdom, sees fit to adapt these natural dispositions over time (1788/2013b, pp. 178–181). The ostensive reason for this change is to better adapt us to survival, but there is more to it than that: “Any possible change with the potential for replicating itself must instead have already been present in the reproductive power so that chance development appropriate to the circumstances might take place according to a previously determined plan” (Kant, 1777/2000, p. 14). A central task of Kant’s anthropology is to discover, through observation, which traits persist over generations, but as Mark Larrimore (2008) notes, “classification of human varieties is never innocent” (p. 342). Kant’s “scientific” discussion of race quickly transitions into considerations of dissimilarities and deviations that ultimately undermine the personhood and moral dignity of non-Whites — and all because these differences are purposive.⁷

Given the centrality of purposiveness to Kant’s critical work, it is important to understand the role played by this concept. In the section on Transcendental Dialectic in his first *Critique*, Kant (1781/1929) makes perhaps his strongest statement of the necessity of purposive unity as a regulative concept:

The law of reason which requires us to seek for this unity, is a necessary law, since without it we should have no reason at all, and without reason no coherent employment of the understanding, and in the absence of this no sufficient criterion of empirical truth. (p. A651/B679)⁸

Purposive unity saves us from Humean skepticism for it offers an assurance that all the individual pieces of experience will fit together into a coherent whole. It guarantees that nature will indeed conform to our faculties. When we find systematic unity in experience we rejoice “as if it were a lucky chance favoring our design,” but it is far from simple luck — it is something that we must assume, else we should have no reason at all (Kant, 1790/2001, p. 184). Furthermore, in the absence of this unity, we lack any assurance of a connection between

⁶See again Kant, 1777/2000, p. 9.

⁷He does much the same with non-males, but Kant’s view on women is a subject for a different paper. For more on this see Heikes, 2010, pp. 53–68, and see Woolwine and Dadlez, 2015.

⁸Also see Kant, 1781/1929, pp. A815–16/B843–44.

the realms of nature and freedom. In fact, Kant (1788/2013b) argues that a purposive unity is essential to nature and freedom:

Nature must consequently also be capable of being regarded in such a way that in the conformity to law of its form it at least harmonizes with the possibility of the ends to be effectuated in it according to the laws of freedom. — There must, therefore, be a ground of the unity of the surpsensible that lies at the basis of nature, with what the concept of freedom contains in a practical way, and although the concept of this ground neither theoretically nor practically attains to a knowledge of it, and so has no peculiar realm of its own, still it renders possible the transition from the mode of thought according to the principles of the one to that according to the principles of the other. (p. 176)

While purposive unity assures that the laws of nature will conform to the systematic unity of the necessary conditions for thought, it also explains how nature effects the ends of freedom and of morality. This is because the purposiveness of material nature is ultimately determined by our moral nature (see Kant, 1790/2001, p. xxvii). Purposiveness speaks to the worth of humans — but not all humans turn out to have equal worth.

Purposiveness is the glue that holds together Kant's architectonic, but it also undergirds the Kantian distinction among races. In his 1788 article, "On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy," Kant (1788/2013b) reiterates a point he makes more notably in the first *Critique*: "Where <experience> comes to an end and we have to begin with material forces we have personally invented <that operate> according to unheard of laws incapable of proof, we are already beyond natural science" (p. 189). Albeit stated in slightly different language, Kant (1781/1929) is asking, "what and how much can the understanding and reason know apart from all experience?" (p. xvii). The answer given in the first *Critique* is rather straightforward: experience requires a presumption that there is a knowable, unified order to the world and this presumed unity must be a priori. The point is one oft repeated in Kant: metaphysical explanations must supplement merely physical-mechanical ones. In other words, the way we make up for the deficiencies and limitations of merely naturalistic explanations is through an appeal to ultimate purposes that can be determined by a priori reason. When he makes this point in his writings on race, however, the claim becomes sinister: humans may all be human, but we are subject to metaphysical explanation that ultimately shows some of us to be less than persons.

Because not everything about nature can be explained using natural methods, Kant (1788/2013b) attempts, "in a little essay on the human races to demonstrate a similar warrant, indeed, a need, to proceed from a teleological principle where theory forsakes us" (p. 173). The argument of this "little essay," "On the Different Human Races," is that race must be more than just an accidental feature of mere appearance. Kant is always more concerned with the structure lying beneath appearances than with the appearances themselves. According to him, "it is

easily without doubt certain that nothing purposive would ever be found <in nature> by means of purely empirical groping about without a guiding principle that might direct one's search: for *to observe* just means to engage experience methodically" (Kant, 1777/2000, p. 174). Yet the mere fact of variation among human races is not his predominate interest. His predominate interest is why this variation exists. What is the underlying metaphysical cause? And there is a metaphysical cause. After all, determinate principles are a precondition for the possibility of observation. Kant (1777/2000) attempts "to examine the entire human genus as it can be found all over the earth and to specify purposive causes to account for the appearance of deviations in those cases where natural causes are not readily discernable" (p. 14). The study of racial variations, then, has the normative goal of obtaining a greater understanding of "purposiveness [*Zweckmäßigkeit*] and fitness [*Angemessenheit*]" (Kant, 1788/2013b, p. 178). What Kant "discovers" is that variations within the human species are not a matter of chance. In the case of race, once nature has modified a group of people, these traits infallibly reproduce over generations. And the purposive unity of nature assures this will have a metaphysical ground. Empirical generalizations, even ones concerning skin color, are indicative of a transcendental teleology, one that favors Whites over non-Whites.⁹

The significance of Kant's insistence upon underlying purposes is this: where Hume notes not "a single example in which a Negro has shown talents," Kant (1764/1960, p. 111) takes such so-called evidence as something far more than a mere empirical observation. As a result, he is confident in claiming that Africans are incapable of "the feeling of the beauty and worth of human nature" (Kant, 1764/1960, p. 51), not simply accidentally but as a matter of metaphysical necessity. Yet, that Africans lack a feeling for the worth of human nature is no small claim since this very worth is linked to moral dignity. For Kant (1764/1960) "true virtue can be grafted only upon principles . . . [that are] the consciousness of a feeling that lives in every human breast. . . . [It] is the feeling of the beauty and dignity of human nature" (p. 60). Hill and Boxill tell us that Kant does not deny the humanity of non-Whites, but here Kant himself tells us that a certain feeling lives in every human breast — just not in the breast of Africans. Are we not being told that a significant moral component comes into play as races are separated by the transformation of original possibilities?

Going back to Buffon's rule, Kant never explicitly denies the humanity of non-Whites, but humanity is not what confers dignity. As Eze (1997) explains, our "developmental expression of rational-moral 'character'" is what undergirds our freedom and our dignity and is what distinguishes humans from animals (p. 120). He adds that "if non-white peoples lack 'true' rational character . . . and

⁹Zack (2002) deals more empirically with the issue of skin color in Kant, but even she recognizes that although Kant essentialized skin color, "he knew something weightier than skin color would have to be at work in order to sustain the kinds of differences implied by racial taxonomy" (p. 22).

therefore lack ‘true’ feeling and moral sense, then they do not have ‘true’ worth, or dignity” (p. 121). This is a conclusion that, upon reflection, is difficult to refute, despite Hill and Boxill’s attempts to save Kant from himself. Aside from the issues I have already discussed, the difficulty of separating the so-called essential from non-essential aspects of Kant’s writing is that he takes moral character to be a distinctive constitution or peculiar property of the will, and he says that the will “is to make use of gifts of nature” such as talents of mind or qualities of temperament (Kant, 1785/1996, p. 49). What this means, according to Allan Gibbard (1990), is that Kant “insists that morally good character is the place to start” (p. 310n). Felicitas Munzel (1999) adds that “character” may not imply acting according to habituated dispositions that appropriately respond to and influence inclination, but it can be “a moral task definitive of our vocation as members of humanity” (p. 2). Only moral beings possess dignity, and morality requires the capacity to act autonomously according to principles. But when it comes to non-Whites and non-males, Kant often disparages their ability to properly make use of “natural gifts,” to have feelings of beauty and dignity, and to act according to principles. As a result, it is, at best, unclear whether non-Whites or women are even capable of developing the right sort of moral character.

The shift in Kant’s thinking, and it is a subtle one, is to link moral worth not to humanity but to rationality. Dignity requires principles. What gives one moral standing is being able to act autonomously, meaning solely according to principles one gives oneself. That is, what makes one a person (in the technical sense of that term) deserving of respect is the ability to rationally formulate moral principles, which is a rare quality in non-Whites and non-males. Humans who are perceived to be incapable of principles, as are non-males and non-Whites, hardly appear capable of acquiring moral standing. Thus, even though Kant’s moral theory provides a decidedly strong account of equality and dignity, his account does not allow those lacking in the right sort of reason to count as moral agents.

Perhaps surprisingly, women are lacking in reason much more explicitly than non-Whites for they lack the capacity for a “deep understanding” (i.e., one based on principles). Concerning women, Kant (1764/1960) says,

Deep meditation and a long-sustained reflection are noble but difficult, and do not well befit a person in whom unconstrained charms should show nothing else than a beautiful nature. Laborious learning or painful pondering, even if a woman should greatly succeed in it, destroy the merits that are proper to her sex, and because of her rarity they can make of her an object of cold admiration. (p. 78)

In the end, a woman’s philosophy “is not to reason, but to sense” (p. 79). The exclusion is straightforward: the real worth of a human being is found in reasoning according to principles, and women sense rather than reason according to principles. In the case of Blacks, Kant surely views their reasoning as inferior, but the denial of principled reasoning is less direct. As with women, Blacks have, at best, a lesser moral standing. Why? Because to lack the ability to act according

to principle is to fall short morally; to fall short morally is to lack in dignity; to lack in dignity is to fail to be someone to whom we can be directly morally obligated or to fail to be someone whom we must treat as an end-in-itself. When one acts according to sensation, the action cannot be truly moral since morality is about acting autonomously according to laws one gives oneself and doing so from the a priori motivation of duty. Because women lack duty, compulsion, obligation, they must, by logical inference, lack moral standing. So, too, with non-Whites. To repeat Eze (1997), “If non-white peoples lack ‘true’ rational character . . . and therefore lack ‘true’ feeling and moral sense, then they do not have ‘true’ worth, or dignity” (p. 121). He concludes that for Kant, “European humanity is the humanity *par excellence*” (p. 121). Perhaps more accurately: male European humanity is the standard.

Now, when it comes to the actual moral characterization of non-males and non-Whites, Kant at least allows European women some measure of virtue, albeit only a “beautiful virtue,” which is of a different sort than a man’s “noble virtue” (1764/1960, p. 81). When it comes to non-Whites, such a charitable interpretation is not as readily available. In the *Observations*, Kant (1764/1960) says, “The mental characters of people are most discernible by whatever in them is moral, on which account we will yet take under consideration their different feelings in respect to the sublime and beautiful . . .” (pp. 99–100). Immediately following he adds in an unusual and short lived display of sensitivity, “In each folk the finest part contains praiseworthy character of all kinds” (p. 100).¹⁰ Such a sympathetic observation is undercut, however, when he goes on to add that “The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling” (Kant, 1764/1960, p. 110). Women may not be capable of feeling with respect to the sublime, but at least they are capable of feeling with respect to the beautiful. Africans cannot even achieve that. In addition, Kant (1788/2013b) explains that even those non-Whites who migrate to Europe get no benefit from doing so for “those exiled into <northern lands> . . . have in their descendants never wanted to serve as a stock useful to settled farmers or craftsmen” (pp. 186–187). Taking this passage, Kleingeld (2007) argues that Kant is linking his physical race theory to a “moral characterization” of races:

His claim that the different races do not change, once they have differentiated out from the *Stammgattung*, is given a teleological interpretation, *viz* in terms of purposive design; and he connects this claim with the assumption that some races are not just different, but inferior. . . . What is important in the present context, however, is that Kant’s comment about the “Indians” (“Gypsies”) and “Negroes” makes clear that his assumption that the non-white races have inferior mental capacities (including capacities for agency) plays a crucial role. (p. 581)

¹⁰In discussing Kant’s version of cosmopolitanism, Mendieta (2009) argues that Kant cannot allow that other races have an excellence or that other cultures are capable of contributing to human accomplishments (p. 248).

Kant may say that he has no prejudice when it comes to identifying the greater perfection of one color skin over others, but this claim is somewhat incredulous given the sum of his writings on race. According to Eze (1997), “Kant’s position manifests an inarticulate subscription to a system of thought which assumes that what is different, especially that which is ‘black,’ is bad, evil, inferior, or a moral negation of ‘white,’ light, and goodness” (p. 117). He adds that Kant uncritically assumes that “the particularity of European existence is *the* empirical as well as ideal model of . . . *universal* humanity, so that others are more or less human or civilized . . . as they approximate the European ideal” (p. 117). In other words, Kant’s racial theory is not simply hierarchical but also contains within it both moral and aesthetic judgments.

Eze is correct in stating that Kant associates beauty with the good. In a completely different, non-racial context, A.C. Genova (1970) considers the way in which the *Critique of Judgment* bridges the gap between the realms of nature and of freedom and asserts that Kant’s “analysis is that beauty becomes the symbol of the good, and sublimity of moral dignity” (p. 465). When the connection of beauty with the good is linked to Kant’s remarks on race, his prejudice against non-Whites appears even more dramatic. For Kant (1788/2013b), Pacific islanders can be distinguished from Negroes “partly because of their skin color . . . partly because of their head and beard hair, which, contrary to the attributes of the Negro, can be combed out to a presentable length” (p. 188). “Beauty,” which clearly reflects a classical ideal, can be approximated by the Pacific Islander, who is thereby “more presentable.” And this is not the only occasion when Kant makes this sort of claim. Elsewhere he states, “The inhabitant of the temperate parts of the world . . . has a more beautiful body, works harder, is more jocular, more controlled in his passions, more intelligent than any other race of people in the world” (Kant, 1804/1997, p. 64). The beauty that Whites achieve far more readily is indicative of superior moral properties. Of course, we should remember that standards of taste are, for Hume as well as for Kant (1790/1987), declared “*valid for mankind as such and not just for each person’s private feeling*” (p. 356). Nevertheless, the standards of aesthetic and moral evaluation that European thinkers such as Kant use, somehow explicitly favor Whites over every other identified racial group. Within Kant’s work specifically, the standard is not ancillary or merely empirical but is a central aspect of his architectonic. In other words, the superiority of Whites is part of a purposive nature. This purposiveness is regulative, necessary, and integral to both the theoretical and practical philosophy.

Regardless of what sort of defense one constructs, Kant’s own words speak against him again and again and again, although this does not stop even his critics from offering some defense on his behalf. Kleingeld (2007) maintains that Kant’s moral principles are formulated in a race neutral manner, even though they are ultimately infected with his racist attitudes (p. 584). But even if we can allow that Kantian morality is itself race neutral, his larger architectonic is not

because the purposiveness of nature demands the heritable differences among humans signify a moral difference. And this insight does come out in Kleingeld. She admits that even though Kant's "own *definition* of race as such is formulated merely in terms of heritable differences in physical appearance, he nevertheless connects his understanding of race with a hierarchical account according to which the races *also* vary greatly in their capacities for agency and their powers of intellect" (p. 574). The hesitancy I have with even this admission is that it does not take seriously enough how philosophically insistent Kant is about requiring these heritable differences to mark essential, metaphysical differences. Truly remarkable in all this is how the same philosopher who insists that rational beings have intrinsic worth is the very same philosopher who finds a man's skin color to be indicative of his "stupidity" and who agrees with Hume that "negroes and in general all other species of [non-white] men . . . to be naturally inferior to whites." Evidently, "negroes and in general all other species of non-white men," lack some sort of moral standing; otherwise, they could not be "inferior."

Modern Reason and Moral Personhood

The Enlightenment is indeed an Age of Equality, albeit only for a narrowly specified domain of European men capable of the appropriate sort of objectivity within cognition. Whether such narrowness should have been visible to philosophers of that time is an open question. What is no longer an open question is whether such a perspective is truly universal. Toulmin (1972) explains that in "philosophical epistemology, especially since Kant, the existence of some fundamental and unchanging framework of concepts and principles, which forms the universal and compulsory skeleton for all more technical and empirical 'world-pictures,' has widely been taken for granted" (p. 413). Yet to recognize alternative ways of reasoning immediately raises questions of cultural relativism or subjectivism, which is precisely what Hume understood in his remarks on taste. And it is precisely why he was unwilling to allow non-Whites a delicacy of taste. Hume and Kant both understand the dilemma: recognize as legitimate different methods of reasoning (e.g., of Africans, of women, and so on) or to exclude from the domain of reason these different ways of things, these alternative conceptual schemes. Both these philosophers also understand the necessity of compulsory skeletons for cutting of cultural relativism and salvaging the objectivity of knowledge. Their task becomes to restrict rationality — and consequently to restrict personhood — only to those who could properly *achieve* it. The result is that some humans fail to count as persons possessing dignity. But this means that concepts dependent upon these skeletons — for instance, justice, freedom, dignity, autonomy — cannot allow for a diversity within rational methodologies, at least not without different grounds provided by a less narrow and exclusive account of reason.

This is the problem for modern thinkers: both epistemically and morally, the tools of modernism demand privileging of a particular point of view. The conception of a procedural rationality that makes invisible perspective and bias is the ground for Enlightenment moral concepts, and as a result, personhood comes to be “universally conferred” only upon those who are seen as conforming to the prescribed methods and standards for cognition. Difference, subjectivity, emotion, particularity, narrative — these all become difficult to see during the Enlightenment. And this, in turn, has detrimental consequences for those who fall outside the domain of reason. Lynda Lange (1998) points out that Europeans of this time perceived indigenous peoples in the Americas in an entirely self-referential way:

they literally did not perceive the “other” as “other,” but rather as deficient examples of “the same. . . . Spanish selfreferentiality [sic] was so strong that even the dazzling evidence of urban development among the Aztecs and Incans that was superior to what the Spanish would have known in Europe failed to suggest to them that these peoples might be best thought of as simply different from them, rather than inferior to them.” (p. 135)

As rationality comes to be associated with a particular methodology, people who seem not to conform to this method lack the full status of moral persons.

Thus, while all humans may be human, not all are persons — and the reason goes directly back to the threat of subjectivism created with Descartes’ origination of the Copernican turn. Hume and Kant become key players in the subtle and effective decoupling of personhood from humanity, a decoupling which largely goes unnoticed because modern philosophers still presume humans are rational animals. However harsh Kant’s notion of morality can sound, he always understands that in our actions toward non-persons (i.e., animals, small children, those suffering dementia) we are still bound by some duties, even if these duties are indirect. Of course, that is the rub. Personhood, with its ties to rationality, lies at the heart of deontological ethics, and moral concepts such as equality, liberty, and justice apply to all persons — but only to persons in the technical sense of that term. Duties cannot be directly owed to those incapable of formulating and acting according to principles. As a result, Kant cannot assure that we are morally required to treat all humans equally. All he can offer is the equal treatment of persons, that is, rational agents who are autonomous lawgivers to themselves and other rational beings. Even in the strictest case of Kantian ethics, universality fails to be truly universal.

For all their talk of objectivity, universality, and equality, Enlightenment philosophers quietly mask a shift toward narrow, uniform, methodological understandings of reason. The domain of the rational comes to be demarcated by a particular, scientifically determined model of investigation which does not and cannot allow for differing methods. Richard Rorty (1979) sees this clearly

for he tells us that “Once consciousness and reason are separated out . . . , then personhood can be seen for what I claim it is — a matter of decision rather than knowledge, an acceptance of another being into fellowship rather than a recognition of a common essence” (p. 38). Anything that falls outside of the model established by standards of fellowship is dismissed, ignored, and made invisible. “Person,” says Mills (2002), “is really a technical term of art, referring to a status whose attainment requires more than simple humanity” (p. 8). By the time of Kant, personhood is clearly not attributed to all humans, only to humans of the right sort, but, of course, what constitutes a “person of the right sort” is never adequately or explicitly articulated. The definition of “person” must be reverse engineered from what we are told about the failures of women and non-Whites to achieve rationality.

When the concept of personhood becomes linked to a modern account of reason, the status of “person” comes to be unattainable for many. The Enlightenment concept of reason makes rationality an achievement of which non-Whites and non-males are largely incapable. But the arguments for this are, within the framework of modernism, much stronger than many contemporary philosophers care to admit. It is much easier for us to dismiss the racism of the mighty dead than it is to acknowledge how deeply held and theoretically defensible are their beliefs. Racism itself may not be essential to modernist thinking, but neither is it accidental. Given the threat of subjectivism, allowing for differing points of view, ways of thinking, or conceptual schemes would undermine the objectivity of any knowledge claims, including those of the new science. In cutting off this threat, philosophers also cut off the capacity for fully rational cognitive activity in anyone who fails to think or perceive in the so-called right way. The Copernican turn in philosophy takes objects to conform to human ways of cognizing, but only if you are a certain type of human.

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