

The Relevance of Race in Modern Philosophy

Darren Hibbs

Modern philosophy, broadly construed, encompasses the philosophy of European authors from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century. Over the past few decades, modern philosophy has been subjected to increasingly intense criticism as Eurocentric, chauvinistic, and racist.¹ For example, Noam Chomsky has argued that the empiricist conception of human nature as a blank slate is naturally suited to support an extreme right wing ideology.² If human beings are nothing more than empty vessels to be filled by those in power, then totalitarians with racist views can argue that coercive, discriminatory measures are justified on paternalistic grounds. Contrary to Chomsky, Kay Squadrito has argued that the rationalist characterization of human nature as having intrinsic properties or a fixed essence is more easily wedded to theories of racial inferiority.³ If human nature is not the product of contingent environmental influences, then it can be argued that different races have different natures and the differences justify unequal treatment. The empiricist and rationalist notions of human nature that Chomsky and Squadrito had in mind were derived from the empiricist and rationalist traditions in modern philosophy.

The debate over whether empiricist or rationalist theories of human nature are more closely aligned with racist ideologies, regardless of which side may

1 The literature on this topic is extensive, so the following selections are not offered as inclusive but representative of the discussion. Lucy Allais, "Kant's Racism," *Philosophical Papers* 45 (2016): 1-36; Avril Alpert, "Philosophy's Systemic Racism," *Aeon*, accessed May 7, 2021, <https://aeon.co/essays/racism-is-baked-into-the-structure-of-dialectical-philosophy> (September 2020); Robert Bernasconi, "Will the Real Kant Please Stand Up," *Radical Philosophy* 117, accessed on May 11, 2021, <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/will-the-real-kant-please-stand-up#fnref20> (2003); Harry Bracken, "Philosophy and Racism," *Philosophia* 7 (1978): 241-60; Noam Chomsky, *Reflections on Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1975); Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); "Hume, Race, and Human Nature," *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 61, No. 4 (2000): 691-698; Pauline Kleingeld, "On Dealing with Kant's Sexism and Racism," *SGIR Review* 2, (2019): 3-22; Charles Mills, "Kant and Race, Redux," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 35 (2014): 125-57; Eric Morton, "Race and Racism in the Works of David Hume," *Journal on African Philosophy* 1 (2002): 1-27; Peter Park, *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon*, (New York, SUNY Press, 2013); Kay Squadrito, "Empiricism and Racism," *Behaviorism* 7, No. 1 (Spring 1979): 105-115; Andrew Valls (editor), *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

2 Chomsky, *Reflections*, 132.

3 Squadrito, "Empiricism and Racism."

Darren Hibbs is Associate Professor of Philosophy in the Department of Humanities and Politics, Halmos College of the Arts and Sciences, Nova Southeastern University; hibbs@nova.edu.

have the stronger case, does not entail that empiricism or rationalism are racist doctrines. Although the question is intriguing, the fact that a theory can serve as a conceptual platform for racist ideologies does not entail that the theory is racist or that it encourages racism. Consider the concept of positive law. Laws established by legislatures may be explicitly designed to discriminate against racial groups (or not), but it does not follow from this self-evident truth that the concept of positive law is itself inherently racist, that it promotes racism, or is “problematic.” Just as there is nothing about the concept of positive law that entails racist content for specific laws, there is nothing about the empiricist and rationalist conceptions of human nature that necessitates or encourages racist elaborations of those doctrines.

However, a more complex issue is whether the racial views of some luminaries in the modern tradition are integral to their philosophical theories and that any evaluation of their philosophy must incorporate their views on race. Many modern philosophers denigrated non-Europeans as inferior with respect to both their character as a people and the quality of the societies they built. For scholars who write about modern philosophy and teach the subject in the academy, this raises a question about how those views should be approached in their scholarship and in the classroom. This is no trivial matter since how scholars address this issue can have a significant impact on the content and treatment of philosophy in the curriculum. David Hume’s infamous footnote in his essay “Of National Characters” has been widely discussed in connection with this concern:

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the 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 manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences.⁴

In what way should Hume’s blunt assertion of racial inferiority impact our understanding of his philosophy? The answer to that question will depend upon which aspect of Hume’s philosophy is under scrutiny. If the subject is Hume’s

⁴ David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, edited by Eugene Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985): 208, 10. A subsequent edition included a modified footnote that restricted the scope of the claim to blacks only, rather than non-whites generally, and replaced “never” with “scarcely ever.”

anthropology, his views on racial differences would obviously be relevant. But with respect to other doctrines, such as his central epistemological challenges to both the empiricist and rationalist methodologies of his predecessors, Hume's views on race are irrelevant to the assessment of those arguments. Against earlier expressions of empiricism, Hume argued that sensory experience does not provide conclusive proof of the existence of external (extra-mental) material objects, although we are naturally inclined to believe in the existence of such objects. According to Hume, since the immediate objects of perception are private impressions or ideas, we cannot be certain of their origin because we do not have direct experiential access to their causes. This reasoning makes no appeal to racialist principles, so the inference to skepticism is either sound or unsound regardless of Hume's views on race.⁵

Against the rationalists, Hume argued that pure reason, like sensory experience, cannot discover the content or nature of objective reality. Reason is the capacity to compare, contrast, and analyze concepts or ideas. Thus, reason can establish with certainty that bachelors are unmarried and that the sum of the three interior angles of a triangle is 180 degrees, but these definitional truths tell us nothing about whether there are any bachelors or triangles in extra-mental reality. The analysis of our ideas can definitively establish truths about our ideas, but these truths are about the contents of our minds alone. Again, Hume's reasoning does not issue from racialist principles nor does an evaluation of his argument require knowledge of his views on race.⁶

However, Emmanuel C. Eze has argued that Hume regarded blacks as incapable of reasoning and that his racial views stem from his epistemology.⁷ Although Andrew Valls argues convincingly that Eze's position is not supported by the textual evidence in Hume's published writings, let us assume that Eze is correct and that Hume considered blacks to be essentially non-rational beings.⁸ Again, although this would obviously be relevant for evaluating Hume's anthropological views, it would not entail that Hume's assessment of pure reason is essentially flawed in the sense that reason, as he defines it, is incapable of demonstrating the content and nature of objective reality. If scholars were to discover a previously unknown essay wherein Hume renounced his former

5 David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), Book I, part IV, section 2.

6 *Ibid.*, Book 1, part IV, section 1.

7 Eze, *Hume, Race, and Human Nature*, 694-695.

8 Valls, "A Lousy Empirical Scientist" in *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, 127-149.

racial views (assuming Eze's interpretation is correct) and asserted the cognitive equality of blacks and whites, would this require us to reconstruct or reevaluate his epistemology? No. Supporters and critics of Hume's epistemology would not have to recalibrate their arguments because the basic structure of Hume's epistemology is not about racial categories but the probative value of sensory experience and the capacity to analyze the logical relationships between ideas. The latter issues are a matter of the logic of his arguments, which amounts to the question of whether *any* cognitive subject can use evidence from sensory experience or the rational analysis of ideas to conclusively demonstrate the content and nature of objective reality. The answer to this question simply does not require knowledge of Hume's views on race. The case of Hume's epistemology is analogous to the case of Aristotle's views on the inability of "natural" slaves to deliberate for themselves.⁹ According to Aristotle's system of categorical logic, the following syllogism is valid:

1. All A are B.
2. All B are C.
3. Hence, all A are C.

That is, the truth of 1 and 2 guarantees the truth of 3. The assessment of whether 3 follows from 1 and 2 has nothing to do with Aristotle's views about who has the cognitive capacity to reliably make that determination. Similarly, the soundness of Hume's assessment of the epistemic value of perception and reason is independent of his anthropological views.

It might be argued that epistemology is unlike moral philosophy in that the latter necessarily involves the valuation of other people and that a philosopher's belief in racial differences might be embedded in the key principles of their moral philosophy. For example, Kant's moral philosophy has drawn the attention of critics who note the apparent tension between Kant's published views on racial differences and the nominal universality of his moral principles.¹⁰ A central principle in Kant's moral philosophy is that all persons possess inherent moral worth and deserve to be treated with respect. A person is a rational being who is capable of moral judgment and freely acting on the basis of the moral principles that he adopts. For Kant, all persons are of equal value and have equal

⁹ Aristotle, *Politics*, translated by C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998): I.5, 1254a-b.

¹⁰ Bernasconi, "Will the Real Kant Please Stand Up?"; Mills, "Kant and Race, Redux."

standing within the moral community.¹¹ However, critics have pointed out that Kant's many comments about the inferiority of non-whites raise the question of whether Kant regarded non-whites as non-persons (or not fully developed persons) and therefore ineligible for full membership in the moral community.¹² For example:

The Negro can be disciplined and cultivated, but is never genuinely civilized. He falls of his own accord into savagery.¹³

Americans and Blacks cannot govern themselves. They thus serve only for slaves.¹⁴

These comments and many others of similar content are not, like Hume's footnote, an adventitious remark in one work but are indicative of his considered view of racial distinctions articulated in several published works where he repeatedly espouses a racial hierarchy with whites positioned in the top tier.¹⁵

In what way do these views relate to Kant's notion of personhood as the basis of his moral philosophy? That Kant maintained a racial pecking order with whites at the apex does not necessarily imply that Kant thought of non-whites as non-persons. The category of persons may be divvied up into racial groups hierarchically arranged while all individuals in the category count as persons in the relevant sense. Although there is no scholarly consensus that Kant regarded non-whites as non-persons, let us assume that he did hold that view when he formulated his theory on the nature and moral significance of personhood. As in the case of Hume, we might ask whether the discovery that Kant abandoned his (assumed) view of non-whites as non-persons would require a reformulation of the attributes and moral status of persons. If that were so, then Kant's views on race are obviously relevant to the composition and evaluation of the crucial notion of personhood and therefore his moral philosophy in general. With Hume, this was a purely hypothetical exercise, but with Kant there is evidence

11 Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. By Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959): 24ff.

12 Mills, *Kant and Race, Redux*, 143-146.

13 Robert Bernasconi, "Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Racism," in *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays*, edited by Julie K. Ward and Tommy L. Lott (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002): 158.

14 *Ibid.*, 152. "Americans" refers to the indigenous population of the Americas.

15 Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Anthropology*, translated by Robert Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); "Of the Different Human Races of Human Beings," translated by Holly Wilson and Gunter Zoller, in *Immanuel Kant: Anthropology, History, and Education*, edited by Gunter Zoller and Robert Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 82-97. "Determination of the Concept of Human Race," in *Immanuel Kant: Anthropology, History, and Education*, edited by Gunter Zoller and Robert Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 143-159.

that he did change his mind about racial hierarchies. Given what Kant did, and didn't do, following this reconsideration is instructive.

Kleingeld has argued persuasively that, during the 1790s, Kant's published writings indicate his acceptance of non-whites as authentic moral agents equally equipped to engage in mutual recognition of individual rights and dignity.¹⁶ Kleingeld also shows that Kant adjusted his positions on slavery, colonialism, and other "intermediate" principles in his wider political thought during this period as a consequence of his disavowal of his former position on a racial hierarchy.¹⁷ However, Kant did not revise the basic notions of personhood, rationality, and autonomy that provide the foundation for his criteria for moral significance and the universalist character of his moral philosophy. This suggests that Kant was aware that his revised views on race were relevant for some derivative aspects of his social and political philosophy, but not to the central moral doctrine of personhood. So, if Kant initially thought (again, by assumption only) that non-whites were non-persons, retracting that position did not require an emendation of his notion of personhood itself. Alternatively, if Kant had not changed his mind about racial hierarchies, the principle regarding the moral significance of persons would still be either true or false independently of his pronouncements on race. For example, at some point in the future, Kantian ethicists will likely be puzzling over whether specimens of advanced artificial intelligence meet a Kantian standard of personhood and would therefore gain membership in the moral community. But the correct answer to that question has no relevance to whether Kant was right about the moral status of persons *per se*.

Kant's writings on race have been called the first effort to establish a "rigorous scientific concept of race."¹⁸ Given Kant's stature in early nineteenth century German philosophy, it is not surprising that scholars have noted the connection between Kant's views on race and those expressed by Hegel.¹⁹ Hegel's philosophy of history has been challenged on the grounds that his account of world history relies upon a hierarchy of civilizations with Christian Europe at the pinnacle while sub-Saharan Africa and other regions are explicitly excluded from history as having made no contribution to the progress of history. Bernasconi

16 Pauline Kleingeld, "Kant's Second Thoughts on Race," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 57, No. 229 (2007): 586-589.

17 *Ibid.*, 584.

18 Robert Bernasconi, Tommie Lott, *The Idea of Race* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000): viii.

19 Michael Hoffheimer, "Race and Law in Hegel's Philosophy of Religion," in Valls ed. *Race and Racism*, 194-216.

has argued that Hegel's hierarchy of civilizations reflects an underlying racial hierarchy.²⁰ According to Bernasconi, Hegel maintained that it is only with the appearance of Caucasians that authentic history begins and that it is with Caucasian civilization that history reaches its apotheosis.²¹ McCarney has argued that Bernasconi's critique of Hegel's philosophy of history is misguided since Hegel's philosophy precludes a racist interpretation of history.²²

As in the cases of Hume and Kant, let's assume that Hegel's critic, Bernasconi, is correct. Although the racial opinions of Hume and Kant are irrelevant for determining the truth-value of their primary doctrines relating to knowledge and ethics, respectively, Hegel's empirical claims about the civilizational status of non-European peoples clearly bear upon whether his historical analysis is accurate. If Hegel's basic understanding of how history develops is based on an inaccurate appreciation of non-European civilizations, and the inaccuracy is in turn grounded in the dismissal of non-Europeans as inferior races, then Hegel's views on race are essential to the evaluation of his philosophy of history. So, even if McCarney is right, a judicious assessment of Hegel's philosophy of history would still have to include his critiques of non-European societies and address the possibility that these criticisms may have been motivated by his views on race.

The cases of Hume, Kant, and Hegel suggest a principled method for determining whether the racial views of a philosopher matter. The key issue is whether a false view about race would possibly undermine the philosophical thesis or argument under scrutiny. The specific examples taken from Hume, Kant, and Hegel are not intended to support blanket judgments about their philosophy as a whole but to illustrate the necessity of isolating discrete doctrines or arguments to determine the relevance of their views on race. Bernasconi has criticized this sort of maneuver to sift doctrines that can be evaluated apart from the racial views of philosophers as an ahistorical exercise that diminishes philosophy by concealing inconvenient facts about its history.²³ But the highest aspirations of philosophy go beyond the historical exercise of providing comprehensive, accurate descriptions of the works of the most influential philosophers. Philosophy is essentially tasked with marshaling the strongest

20 Robert Bernasconi, "With What Must the Philosophy of World History Begin? On the Racial Basis of Hegel's Eurocentrism," *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 22, no. 2 (2000): 171-201.

21 *Ibid.*, 184-5.

22 Joseph McCarney, "Hegel's Racism?," *Radical Philosophy* 119 (2003): 33.

23 Bernasconi, *Will the Real Kant Please Stand Up*, 15-16.

arguments possible in search of guidance, clarity, and ultimately, the truth about some of the most consequential issues addressed in the humanities. The best ideas produced by modern philosophers are more important than the philosophers themselves and constructing their arguments in their most cogent form does not diminish philosophy but elevates it.

Although none of the authors I have cited have argued for the removal of any modern philosophers from the curriculum due to their views on race, students at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies recently demanded that authors such as Kant and other Enlightenment philosophers be retained in the curriculum *only if* their works are taught from a "critical viewpoint."²⁴ This is a bewildering condition for inclusion since philosophy necessarily involves the critical evaluation of doctrines and arguments. Given the context of the demand, it is plausible to assume that what is meant by "critical viewpoint" is not the usual assessment of the quality of their arguments but the judgment of the authors of those arguments politically. It is a short step from the call to judge authors politically to banning those who fail to satisfy an ideological purity code established by self-appointed or officially authorized academic censors. The politicization of the curriculum in order to enforce conformity to the latest fashionable ideology is flatly incompatible with the mission of higher education, which has as its principal goal the impartial pursuit of truth guided by strength of evidence alone. With respect to race and racism in philosophy, this goal can be achieved only if faculty exercise good judgment about when race matters and administrators refuse to subordinate the legitimate educative aims of the university to craven political expediency.

24 Kenan Malik, "Are Soas students right to 'decolonise' their minds from western philosophers?," *The Guardian*, February 19, 2021; Jonathan Petre, "They Kant be serious! PC students demand white philosophers including Plato and Descartes be dropped from university syllabus," *Daily Mail*, May 24, 2021.