

Kant's Alleged Racism

The Failure of Charles W. Mills (and all too many others)

Georg Geismann

„Die Klasse der Weißen ist nicht als besondere Art in der Menschengattung von der der Schwarzen unterschieden; und es giebt gar keine verschiedene Arten von Menschen.“ Kant, AA, vol. VIII, pp. 99-100.

In April 2016, I saw, in a German tv-programme about the history of racism, various contributions by Charles W. Mills, Professor of Moral and Intellectual Philosophy at Northwestern University. In one of them, he said that even Kant (among other philosophers) was a racist who believed in a hierarchy of races, and that for him blacks or indians were, it is true, human beings, but not persons. That was indeed quite surprising for me, since I had never encountered anything like that during all my Kant studies. Here now, amazingly enough, one of the inventors of the concept of race mutated miraculously into a racist.

So, I contacted Mr. Mills and asked him where I could possibly find in Kant's writings the proof of his statements. He was so kind to answer immediately and to send me one of his articles and some titles of his own works and of respective works of other authors. I read them all very carefully. Then I sent him the following letter. This time, I was not given the honour of an answer.

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Dear Mr. Mills,

I have studied your three articles: „Kant's Untermenschen“¹, „Kant and Race“² and the one in the „Handbuch“³. I read these interesting texts with care and expected to find a proof of your assessment about Kant. But the bold statements, which I got from you yourself and more from your sources, gave me rather the impression of hermeneutic acrobatics by which one pulls out of Kant's „hat“ the racist rabbit which one has put in before.

Without any reference to the German original (Academy Edition [= AA]) or at least to the Cambridge Edition (= CE) of Kant's works, you only mention what other

¹ Charles W. Mills, „Kant's *Untermenschen*,“ in: *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Valls (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 169–93

² Charles W. Mills, Kant and Race, Redux; in: *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, vol. 35, 2014

³ Martin Hermann / Claus Offe (eds.), *Politische Theorie und Politische Philosophie. Ein Handbuch*, Verlag C. H. Beck, München 2011

authors say about Kant. And I am not sure how many of them also only copied their statements again from others. You tell us that „Kant’s racial theories were fiercely contested“⁴ by Herder and Forster (referring, again, only to secondary literature, not to Herder’s and Forster’s works). But you don’t say neither that Herder, quite sensitive to Kant’s criticism, reacted to what Kant had before written against him⁵, nor what Kant replied to Forster.⁶

In the „Handbuch“ you write: "Kant [...] gilt mittlerweile für manche als Vater des modernen Rassismus, nicht Gobineau."⁷ As long as the reader is not told who these "manche" are and where they say it and how they prove it, the statement is not of much use. What I definitely know is this: Gobineau's „Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines“ had quite a strong influence in Germany, for example on Richard Wagner and Houston Stewart Chamberlain and, of course, on National-Socialism; Kant's works, however, whether or not containing some racist ideas, had not the slightest effect on the discussion; not even Kant's name appeared in it. And it couldn't! Kant had an empirical (descriptive and explanatory) theory about races; but in contrast to Gobineau and others, this theory was not itself racist.

According to Kant, man, unlike animals, has to perfect himself in the course of time, and so has his kind. Therefore, Kant is, with regard to his philosophical anthropology and also his philosophy of history (but clearly not with regard to the first principles of his moral philosophy), interested in what he calls „cultivation“ and „civilization“. All the texts on which you try to ground your „racist theory“ belong to this *exclusively empirical* field. Kant wants to know in which sense and degree the various peoples, tribes, races, nations are cultivated resp. civilized. Well, it is a doubtless statement of fact, true also for our times,⁸ that societies show, time and again, different and in itself changing levels of culture and civilization. It is therefore also not surprising that the same seemingly derogatory remarks which Kant made about some tribes or races, he also made about Europeans of the Middle Ages.⁹ His statements may be wrong (especially given the literature he had at his disposal; more than two centuries later, it is rather trite to know better), but they are *not moral (ethical and/or juridical) judgments*.

Here we come to the main point: your distinction between full persons and sub-persons. You make use of it in your attempt to give a real proof that Kant in fact was a racist: „So the idea was that even when these creatures are judged to be undeniably human, as with monogenetic theories, they are not full persons, since their inferiority – through some combination of deficient racially-based cognitive and characterological traits – is of a degree that leaves them *below the threshold* for normatively equal treatment.“¹⁰ Your distinction, however, is in stark contradiction to

⁴ Carles W. Mills, Kant and Race, Redux; in: Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal, vol. 35, 2014, p. 137

⁵ See AA, vol. VIII, pp. 43-66, esp. p. 62

⁶ See AA, vol. VIII, pp. 157-184

⁷ Martin Hermann / Claus Offe (eds.), Politische Theorie und Politische Philosophie. Ein Handbuch, Verlag C. H. Beck, München 2011, p. 287

⁸ Compare e. g. the present USA with North Korea or with the USA of 1860, or present Germany with the Kaiserreich, let alone with Hitler’s Germany.

⁹ See e.g. „Beobachtungen“, AA, vol. II, pp. 255-6

¹⁰ Carles W. Mills, Kant and Race, Redux; in: Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal, vol. 35, 2014, p. 138.

the very foundation of Kant's philosophy of Right. To have reason and with that the capacity to set oneself an end, is, what characterizes humanity as distinguished from animality.¹¹ Acting according to his ends can be imputed to man. And it is this imputability, *and only it*, which makes man, any man whatsoever (!), a person.¹² What is by no means necessary for being a person is civilization or culture. Cognitive and characterological traits are juridically absolutely irrelevant; just as is the question, whether one is more or less intelligent, or of a better or worse moral character. The most stupid or mentally retarded, the most uncivilized or criminal human being is still a person and therefore *above the threshold* for normatively equal treatment. Speaking of a sub-person, being, as it were, less „full“ than a normal person, is, with regard to Kant's *moral* concept of a person, as absurd as speaking of a woman being only a bit pregnant.

Thus, by the very principles of his moral philosophy, it is even inconceivable for Kant to discriminate against certain human beings. And indeed, no other philosopher has more fervently disapproved of any kind of discrimination and accordingly also of colonialism and imperialism.

„This rational idea of a *peaceful*, even if not friendly, thoroughgoing community of all nations on the earth that can come into relations affecting one another is not a philanthropic (ethical) principle but a principle having to do with rights. [...] if these people are shepherds or hunters (like the Hottentots, the Tungusi, or most of the American Indian nations) who depend for their sustenance on great open regions, [a] settlement may not take place by force but only by contract, and indeed by a contract that does not take advantage of the ignorance of those inhabitants with respect to ceding their lands. This is true despite the fact that sufficient specious reasons to justify the use of force are available: that it is to the world's advantage, partly because these crude peoples will become civilized (this is like the pretext by which even Büsching tries to excuse the bloody introduction of Christianity into Germany), and partly because one's own country will be cleaned of corrupt men, and they or their descendants will, it is hoped, become better in another part of the world (such as New Holland). But all these supposedly good intentions cannot wash away the stain of injustice in the means used for them. Someone may reply that such scruples about using force in the beginning, in order to establish a lawful condition, might well mean that the whole earth would still be in a lawless condition; but this consideration can no more annul that condition of right than can the pretext of revolutionaries within a state, that when constitutions are bad it is up to the people to reshape them by force and to be unjust once and for all so that afterwards they can establish justice all the more securely and make it flourish.“¹³

„If one compares with this [a cosmopolitan constitution for the whole human race] the inhospitable behavior of civilized, especially commercial, states in our part of the world, the injustice they show in *visiting* foreign lands and peoples (which with them is

¹¹ See AA, vol. VI, P. 392; CE: Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge UP, 1996, p. 522

¹² See AA, vol. VI, p. 223; CE: Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge UP, 1996, p. 378

¹³ CE: Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge UP, 1996, p. 489-90 (underlining mine); AA, vol. VI, pp. 352-3; see also AA, vol. XXIII, pp. 172-175. One should always be aware that the English translation of Kant's works is only a more or less close approximation of what Kant himself has said. A scholarly approach to Kant's philosophy cannot possibly do without the original text. Only in this short paragraph above I found nine deviations from the German text. Fortunately, in this case, only one of principal importance.

tantamount to conquering them) goes to horrifying lengths. When America, the negro countries, the Spice Islands, the Cape, and so forth were discovered, they were, to them, countries belonging to no one, since they counted the inhabitants as nothing. In the East Indies (Hindustan), they brought in foreign soldiers under the pretext of merely proposing to set up trading posts, but with them oppression of the inhabitants, incitement of the various Indian states to widespread wars, famine, rebellions, treachery, and the whole litany of troubles that oppress the human race. [...] the Sugar Islands, that place of the cruelest and most calculated slavery, [...] powers that make much ado of their piety and, while they drink wrongfulness like water, want to be known as the elect in orthodoxy.¹⁴

„The negro trade, already as such an infringement on the hospitality of the people of the blacks, becomes this even more for Europe by its effects. [...] The lands of America were hardly discovered when [...] even the inhabitants were partly, as a good belonging to no one, enslaved, partly driven out of their seats and wiped out by inner wars. [...] The principles of the alleged legitimacy of the acquisition of newly discovered lands which are taken for barbaric or unbelieving, acquired as goods belonging to no one without the approval of the inhabitants and even with their subjugation, – these principles are in plain contradiction to cosmopolitan right which is restricted to mere hospitality“.¹⁵

These texts cannot be more unambiguous. They make absolutely clear that for Kant *all men*, of whichever race and of whichever deficient racially-based cognitive and characterological traits, are *equal persons, endowed with the same rights of man and to be treated as such*.

I would like to see the *evidence* in Kant's *own* works that he inferred, as you maintain, from some kind of „inferiority“, that „norms and prescriptions applying to full persons are then going to apply differently or not at all to sub-persons“, especially to blacks and Native Americans. Where does Kant speak of sub-persons or some equivalent? Where does he say with these or other words, that „cognitive and characterological traits“ allow discrimination? Where does he maintain that certain human beings have a „*lesser moral standing*“? Where does he speak of any kind of *unequal treatment*? Where, that they may as „*natural slaves*“ even be „*colonized and enslaved*“¹⁶? In my own dealing with Kant's works, I never found a single syllable pointing in this direction.

Best regards,

Georg Geismann

Epilogue:

The search for Kant's alleged racism, sometimes even on the verge of zealotry, is all in vain. The principal reason for this is the failure to distinguish systematically

¹⁴ CE: Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge UP, 1996, p. 329-30 (underlining mine); AA, vol. VIII, pp. 358-9

¹⁵ AA, vol. XXIII, p. 174 (my provisional translation).

¹⁶ Carles W. Mills, *Kant and Race, Redux*; in: *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, vol. 35, 2014, p. 146

between an empirical and as such non-normative theory of races¹⁷ and a normative, moral (juridical and/or ethical) theory of races.

Instead of searching in the past for alleged forefathers¹⁸ of 20th century racism, one should better carefully unfold the arguments and so sharpen the weapons against racism. And here, no arsenal is better than Kant's.

¹⁷ If a „race-theorist“ would empirically find out that black people have an average IQ of 140 and white people an average IQ of 100, then stating this doesn't make him a „racist“. But if he infers from this outcome, that blacks have more rights than whites or that whites may even be enslaved, then he is a „racist“, no matter whether his empirically determined figures are correct or not.

¹⁸ That reminds me of John Dewey and his dismal book „German Philosophy and Politics“ (2nd Ed., 1942), in which he commits an intellectual leap from Kant to Hitler.