Antinomies of race: diversity and destiny in Kant

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ABSTRACT Larrimore’s essay reads Kant’s pioneering work in the theory of race in the context of his thought as a whole. Kant wrote on race for most of his career; at different stages of his thinking, race assured meaning in human diversity, confirmed the value of a practical-reason-informed understanding of human destiny, and provided a model for the ‘pragmatic’ knowledge of what ‘man can and should make of himself’. ‘Race’ was invented in 1775 as an advertisement for the new disciplines of geography and anthropology that Kant inaugurated and promoted throughout his career. Giving new meaning to a foreign (French) term associated with animal husbandry, Kant presented the (supposedly) exceptionlessly hereditary traits of race as the first fruit of a truly scientific ‘natural history’ of humanity. His concerns were not merely classificatory; his four-race schema, modeled on the temperaments, allowed a special status for Whites as at once a race and the transcendence of race (Kant invented ‘whiteness’ as well as ‘race’). The notion of ‘race’ was refined in essays Kant published in the 1780s, in the same journal as his celebrated essays on Enlightenment and the philosophy of history. It was given a new status, rather than displaced, by the critical turn. Granted a sanction ‘similar’ to the postulates of pure practical reason, its empirical verification would confirm Kant’s whole critical system. Kant’s theory of race came into its own in the 1790s, gaining wide acceptance. He relied on familiarity with it (and its lingering association with animal husbandry) in explaining the larger project of the ‘pragmatic anthropology’ without which he thought human progress impossible. Understanding how the concept of race contributed to Kant’s more familiar and still appealing intellectual and practical concerns, we gain a better sense of its fateful and enduring attractiveness in subsequent eras.

KEYWORDS anthropology, ethics, geography, human diversity, Immanuel Kant, practical reason, pragmatic, race, temperament, whiteness

Immanuel Kant, the inventor of autonomy, was also the inventor of race. Understanding the invention of a concept is a challenging business, however, especially when the concept has played so fateful a part in

subsequent history. Even histories of race as a construction risk reifying what they seek to dismantle by treating it from the start as *explanandum* rather than *explanans*. When first invented, race was an answer to questions we no longer ask, and conceived in terms of schemes of human diversity we barely remember. Kant lectured on human diversity against the backdrop of geography and history throughout his career out of an eighteenth-century sense of diversity as real and inevitable as well as potentially meaningful. The critical turn and his mature ethics did not displace these concerns. They reframed them and, as they did, ‘race’ became a term claiming at once scientific, providential and pragmatic significance. In this essay I will explicate Kant’s writings on race of the 1770s, 1780s and 1790s, not in terms of the disingenuous ‘science’ his work helped make possible, but rather in relation to the concerns of Kant’s practical thought in their true home.

Scholarship on Kant’s contributions to race theory tends either to focus on his appalling views of non-Europeans, especially Africans, or to see him as engaged in a classificatory exercise, albeit one connected to understanding man’s place in nature and history. But Kant didn’t need the concept of race to maintain noxious views of non-Europeans, and classification of human varieties is never innocent. Scholars also often fail to distinguish between writings from different stages of Kant’s career, allowing others to draw false comfort from the possibility that Kant dropped his hateful views with the critical turn of the 1780s or his theory of race with the cosmopolitan turn of the 1790s.\(^2\) Kant’s views did change in important ways. Once invented, however, the race concept only became more complex and ambitious, moving from geography to anthropology and from discussions of ‘what nature makes of man’ to those concerning ‘what man can and should make of himself’.

Kant’s theory of race shows the importance of reading together elements of his *oeuvre* that tend to be studied in isolation: practical philosophy, philosophy of history, anthropology, physical geography. But race is more than an instance of their interrelation. Both before and after the critical turn, Kant was committed to race for its potential to anchor his larger understanding of human diversity and destiny, and reserved a special place for Whites beyond

\(^2\) Important arguments that fail to distinguish pre-critical from critical works by scholars such as Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (*Achieving Our Humanity: The Idea of the Postracial Future* (London: Routledge 2001), ch. 3) and Charles W. Mills (‘Kant’s *Untermenschen*’, in Andrew Valls (ed.), *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2005), 169–93) allow scholars like Thomas E. Hill and Bernard Boxill (‘Kant and race’, in Bernard Boxill (ed.), *Race and Racism* (New York: Oxford University Press 2001), 448–71), and Robert B. Louden (*Kant’s Impure Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press 2000), 93–106) to claim that Kant’s racism was confined to his pre-critical thought. Pauline Kleingeld has recently shown that Kant’s racial views persist well into the critical period (she goes so far as to assert that he supported slavery during this time), but argues that he renounced his view of race in the 1790s; Pauline Kleingeld, ‘Kant’s second thoughts on race’, *Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 229, October 2007, 573–92.
race. In a manner paralleled by his characterizations of the German national character and one of his accounts of moral autonomy, Kant argues not that Whites are a superior race but that they are the pre-emption and redemption of race: Kant’s invention of race was attended by the simultaneous invention of ‘whiteness’ as an escape from it. Seeing in Kant race’s pivotal role linking nature, diversity and freedom raises difficult questions for Kant scholarship. It can also help us understand the appeal of this pseudo-concept and why it was able to exert such widespread influence throughout western culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Races and not-quite races

Kant’s first essay on race, ‘Von den verschiedenen Racen der Menschen’ (‘On the Different Races of Men’) of 1775, was one of only two works he published during the ‘silent decade’ when the Kritik der reinen Vernunft (Critique of Pure Reason) was germinating. It announced his upcoming lectures in physical geography. Kant thought he had identified an exceptionless law in human heredity that for the first time promised a truly scientific natural history of man. Establishing a precise concept of race offered Kant the opportunity to assert himself as a scientist, indeed as the philosophical policeman among scientists. As important was the fact that it showed that physical geography, a field Kant had introduced and thought vital to understanding human destiny, could be a science.

The word ‘race’ (Race) was an import into German from English and French with no precise meaning; it didn’t become the German word Rasse until the 1780s. Like Geschlecht, Art, Stamm and Gattung it was used to refer to genetically related communities or lineages. If it had any particular resonance

3 With the exception of this essay, references to Kant’s writings will be given in the text to the standard edition, the Akademie-Ausgabe: Immanuel Kant, Gesammelte Schriften, ed. Königliche Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 29 vols (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and predecessors 1902– ). The important differences between the 1775 and 1777 versions of this essay are easier (if still not easy) to see in Immanuel Kant, Werke, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel, 12 vols (Frankfurt-on-Main: Suhrkamp 1968), xi:9–30, which I will cite in the text as ‘W’. English translations by Jon Mark Mikkelsen of both the 1775 and 1777 versions of ‘On the different races of men’ will soon to be available. In general and with some modifications, I use the English translations in the multi-volume series, the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant in Translation (1995– ), and Immanuel Kant, Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press 1960). Some texts discussed in this essay have not been published in English; translations of such texts here are by the author.

4 John H. Zammito, ‘Policing polygeneticism in Germany, 1775: (Kames,) Kant, and Blumenbach’, in Eigen and Larrimore (eds), The German Invention of Race, 35–54 (36–7).

of its own, it referred not to natural variation but to husbandry and breeding. As in other languages, one main use was in reference to dogs and horses (and aristocrats). A race in this sense was an artefact, the development of the potential in an animal (or plant) species brought out through careful breeding. It used knowledge of natural processes to improve on nature, but could be undone through neglect and an unguided mixing with other stocks. In using the word ‘race’ Kant suggested that *Menschenrassen*, too, were products of something like the process of breeding, or could be.

Kant followed Buffon in defining a ‘species’ in terms of the limits of viable hybrid offspring. All the different kinds of human beings were, by this definition, members of the same species. But Kant departed from Buffon in seeing races as more than accidental ‘degenerations’ caused by climate. Some heritable differences among human populations seemed permanent. Unlike ‘varieties’, ‘variations’ and ‘stocks’, terms Kant proposed to name various traits that were transmitted less deterministically or only for a few generations, Kant proposed restricting the term ‘race’ to populations characterized by inevitably heritable and perdurable traits (W12). Mixed-race children thus inevitably bore the marks of both parents. The necessity Kant claimed to find here showed something non-accidental in the unfolding of human diversity. It presaged a study of nature that could move beyond mere ‘description of nature’ (*Naturbeschreibung*) to a true ‘natural history’ (*Naturgeschichte*).

Kant proposed that human nature contained within itself ‘seeds’ (*Keime*) and ‘predispositions’ (*Anlagen*) for the races, which were triggered but not caused by climate in the same way that different climes trigger thicker husks in wheat or a second layer of feathers in birds (W17). The full unfolding of *Keime* takes time. ‘Natural cataclysms’, like the seas that isolated the Indian subcontinent and sub-Saharan Africa ‘in those times of floods’, helped keep human populations apart long enough for the different races to take form (W24, 25n). In all only four races needed to be posited to account for the appearance of all of the people across the globe: ‘1) the race of the Whites, 2) the Negro race, 3) the Hunnish (Mongolian or Kalmuck) race, 4) the Hindu or Hindustani race’ (W14). The supposed permanence of race traits led Kant to conclude that, once the potentiality for a race was precipitated by a climate, the potentialities for other races were disabled.

Kant’s contemporaries, too, thought that human beings had changed in response to different climates as they radiated out from a place of origin in southwest or central Asia, but thought that these changes were accidental and generally harmful, though reversible, at least in theory.\(^6\) For Kant, race

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was an achievement: the unfolding of a seed or predisposition put there precisely for the occasion. Race was an Abartung (deviation) rather than an Ausartung (degeneration), a modification that did not imply decline. Defined in terms of its terminus as well as its point of departure, race seemed to confirm that human beings were meant to populate the whole globe without degeneration. Nature's cataclysms functioned like good husbandry.

Four 'base races' (Grundrassen) sufficed to account for all mixtures, Kant argued, but not all peoples were fully raced. The ancestors of (Native) Americans had apparently migrated too fast. Americans' supposed congenital weakness could be explained by the incomplete achievement (Einartung) of the 'Hunnish' Keim exacerbated by a further degeneration (Ausartung) as they moved south from one climate to another. Races were not 'degenerations' but the 'half-degenerated' (halb ausgeartet) Americans very nearly were (W22). Like Buffon, Kant had long seen nature as an orderly but indifferent system in which many got lost. Indeed, he seems to have seen the dying out of some populations as inevitable, a sublime spectacle of the grandeur of nature and the fragility of humanity.

There was another anomalous population, however. Whites, too, were not fully eingeartet (achieved). In this case, however, the consequence was not weakness but strength. If the ancestors of the Americans had moved too quickly for any Keim fully to unfold, those of Whites had moved slowly enough not to trigger the development of one Keim at the expense of the others. 'If one asks with which of the present races the first human stock (Menschenstamm) might have had the greatest similarity, one would, though without any prejudice, pronounce in favour of the Whites because of the evidently greater perfection of one colour over others' (W25n). While supposedly one of the 'base races', Kant in fact referred to Whites using all the terms against which he had defined race. As Peggy Piesche has argued, the less deterministic terms used in describing Europeans, especially Spielart, suggest that development may be expected here alone.

7 In 1788 Kant suggested that 'race' should be rendered progenies rather than degeneratio in Latin (8:163–4).
8 In the undated ''Reflexion'' 1520', Kant writes: 'All races will be wiped out (Americans and negroes cannot govern themselves. Thus are good only as slaves.), except for the white' (15.2:878). I suggest that this view, if not perhaps Kant's considered opinion, is consistent with his published views in Mark Larrimore, 'Sublime waste: Kant on the destiny of the "races"', in Catherine Wilson (ed.), Civilization and Oppression, supplementary vol. 25 of the Canadian Journal of Philosophy (Calgary: University of Calgary Press 1999), 99–137.
9 Peggy Piesche, 'Der "Fortschritt" der Aufklärung—Kants "Race" und die Zentrierung des weißen Subjekts', in Maureen Maisha Eggers, Grada Kilomba, Peggy Piesche and Susan Arndt (eds), Mythen, Masken und Subjekte: Kritische Weißseinsforschung in Deutschland (Münster: Unrast 2005), 30–9 (34).
That neither Americans nor Whites were fully a race didn’t weaken Kant’s theory. Indeed, race unified human natural history by explaining not only races and their mixtures but anomalies and their relative strength or weakness. It is no surprise that Whites should be the happy anomaly. By tucking into his theory of race an idea of Whites distinguished by a completeness no other race could attain, Kant invented ‘whiteness’ at the same time and by means of his theory of race.

Kant’s was one of three essays published in 1775 that seem simultaneously to inaugurate the discourse of race but it alone invoked a concomitant invention of ‘whiteness’. All were probably provoked to some degree by the eloquent restatement of the polygenetic argument in Lord Kames’s *Sketches of the History of Man*. The idea that the various human communities spanning the globe were not descendants of a single original set of parents wasn’t new; Voltaire and Hume had argued that climate theory could not explain the variety to be found within climatic zones or the endurance of certain traits as populations moved. Kames’s case was less polemical. Had an original monogenesis perhaps been fractured by divine decree after the building of the Tower of Babel? In the terms of four-stage theory he argued that non-Whites were stalled but could be helped. Africans were prevented by their climate from developing ‘judgement’ and ‘prudence’, but ‘who can say how far they might improve in a state of freedom, were they obliged, like Europeans, to procure bread with the sweat of their brows?’

Monogenesis has no intrinsic connection to egalitarianism or universalism, in science or religion, as the example of the relation of ‘degeneration’ to monogenesis in Buffon shows. Belief in degeneration was widespread; the real issue was whether or not ‘regeneration’ was possible. On this question Kant’s monogenetic view was more unforgiving than polygenetic ones like Kames’s. There was no contradiction between Kant’s view and the biblical monogenesis that was one of its distant sources. In its very rigidity it may even have been more theologically correct than universalistic monogenetic views. Everyone’s ancestors may have been in Eden, but few biblical traditions have believed that all or even most would be gathered again in Paradise.


11 Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man*, 4 vols (Dublin: printed for James Williams 1774–5), 43–4 (available in ‘Eighteenth Century Collections Online’). This work was immediately translated into German after it was published.

12 Ibid., 35.

At this stage Kant’s interest in establishing the unity of the human species through a theory of race had more to do with the project of physical geography than with religion or ethics. As Kant had made clear in an important 1765 description of his courses, encountering the theoretical sciences without having first learned to exercise the understanding in empirical judgements led to ‘the precocious prating of young thinkers which is blinder than any other self-conceit and more incurable than ignorance’ (2:305). The lectures in physical geography that Kant gave throughout his career provided a sort of place-holder for life experience his students were too young to have.14 But it was not theoretical as opposed to practical knowledge Kant was hoping to ground. The 1775 announcement advertised physical geography as ‘anticipatory practice in a knowledge of the world’ that added ‘the pragmatic’ to all other knowledge and abilities ‘so that they are useful not only in school but in life, and through which the finished apprentice is introduced to the place of his destiny, namely the world’. Its two components ‘nature and man’ must be appraised ‘cosmologically’, not in terms of isolated differences but in terms of ‘their relation in the whole, within which they stand, and wherein each takes its place’ (W26, cf. 9:157).

Physical geography afforded students a sense of a bounded and thus knowable set of phenomena, the ‘unity without which all our knowledge is nothing but fragmentary patchwork’ (2:313). The most basic fact about the earth was that it was spherical with a tilted axis. Since its surface area was limited and continuous, its varied geological and other phenomena could and must be understood as part of a single system. The diversity of human populations could and must be understood in this context too. The physical geography lectures expanded into a companion course on anthropology in 1772, but long before that Kant had offered a ‘physical, moral and political geography’ (2:312) that included ‘cosmological’ discussions of the peoples of the world.

A taste of the kind of material Kant offered his students may be found in Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen (Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime) of 1764, a popularizing work less interested in aesthetic objects than in the utility of aesthetic concepts for illuminating the differences and synergies of various sorts of human difference, from varieties of moral sensibility and temperament to gender and national character. These categories of difference remained central to Kant’s lectures on human diversity to the end. The same discussions appeared in 1798 under the title ‘Anthropologische Charakteristik’ in Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht (Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View). Charakteristik was a specifically eighteenth-century genre concerned with ‘the way of cognizing the interior of the human being from the exterior’ (7:283) to which

*Observations* already recognizably belonged. Also known as *Moralistik*, its point was pragmatic, teaching how best to make use of other people: whom to trust, whom to entrust with different kinds of work, what sort of couplings produced the best offspring.¹⁵

The understanding of diversity displayed in *Observations* showed that things fit together as a whole. The conclusion of the chapter on different kinds of virtue and their correlates among the four temperaments can speak for the whole work: ‘the different groups unite into a picture of splendid expression, where amidst great multiplicity unity shines forth, and the whole of moral nature exhibits beauty and dignity’ (2:227). Yet this unity was more an article of faith than something Kant could demonstrate.

If I examine alternately the noble and the weak side of men, I reprimand myself that I am unable to take that standpoint from which those contrasts present the great portrait of the whole of human nature in a stirring form. For I willingly concede that so far as it belongs to the design of nature on the whole, these grotesque postures cannot give anything but a noble expression, although one is indeed much too shortsighted to see them in this relation (2:226–7).

Human diversity posed a kind of theodicy problem for Kant. At this point the unity was assured, whether we could see it or not. In the ensuing decades Kant would make this postulated unity first an article of moral faith, and then a project for human beings.

*Observations* offered several models for unity in multiplicity but the underlying template was the bounded whole formed by the sanguine, choleric, melancholy and phlegmatic temperaments.¹⁶ This was not unusual for the 1760s; temperament was the mainstay of western anthropology and psychology until the nineteenth century. Seeing all types as different mixtures of the same few elements was a helpful way of reconciling unity and diversity, and articulating as natural various kinds of social complementarity and hierarchy. Like many of his contemporaries, Kant explained national characters in temperamental terms. The nations of Europe made a kind of whole like that of the temperaments: the French sanguine, the Spanish choleric, the English melancholy, the Dutch phlegmatic. The nations of Asia were then explored as analogies of Europe. Persians were the French of Asia, Japanese the English and so on (2:252). Finally, the ‘savage’ nations

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¹⁶ I have traced Kant’s commitment to the temperaments in Mark Larrimore, ‘Substitutes for wisdom: Kant’s practical thought and the tradition of the temperaments’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 39, no. 2, April 2001, 259–88.
were described in terms resonant again with the temperaments: this is where Kant’s shocking and widely quoted lines about Africans (whom he, unusually, describes as phlegmatic) appear. Human variety was a problem of meaning and order to which Observations provided a somewhat wavering hope for a solution.

Kant revised the 1775 announcement for the collection *Der Philosoph für die Welt*, edited by Aufklärer J. J. Engel in 1777, and made changes that strengthened race as a kind of theodicy of diversity. Terms were tidied up. All references to partial or incomplete *Einartung* were removed, as was all reference to *Ausartung*. The irrevocability of race was affirmed: ‘A race, when once it has taken root and extinguished the other seeds, resists all further transformation because the character of race at one point became dominant in the generative power’ (W29). Kant added a table reminiscent of Linnaeus that suggested only four races were possible; it also made the loophole for the not-quite race of Whites explicit.

**Stem Genus:**

Whites of brunette colour

*First race*, very blond (northern Europe) of damp cold.

*Second race*, copper-red (America) of dry cold.

*Third race*, black (Senegambia) of damp heat.

*Fourth race*, olive-yellow (Indians) of dry heat (2:411).

These four races—defined now in terms of colour as well as geography—didn’t match those still discussed in the body of the essay. But the purpose of the summary was not to account for the four posited races so much as to show that they fit together as a whole, and that no others were necessary (or possible). The grid of heat and cold, and dry and damp was the template of temperament theory. By correlating them with the temperaments, Kant locked the races into one of the most familiar and closed schemes of differentiation available in western culture.

The apparent chaos of diversity was safely contained, but counting the weak Americans a full race made race no longer a guarantee of fitness. Correspondingly, Whites’ circumvention of race was affirmed; already in 1775 Kant had written that white ‘brunettes’ and ‘blondes’ differed only as *Spielarten* (W13). ‘Whiteness’ was explained in a different way than ‘blackness’, which Kant had argued resulted from iron in the blood precipitated by tropical climate. ‘Among the Whites (*Geschlechte der Weißen*), however, the iron dissolved in these juices is not precipitated at all, demonstrating both the perfect mixing of juices and the strength of this human stock in comparison to others’ (W27). A race emerged as a single *Keim* unfolded, stifling the others. But among Whites the story was one of balance, of a perduring and dynamic mixture in which no possibilities were lost. The temperate zone
between 31 and 52 degrees latitude in the old world … can justifiably be thought of as that with the most fortunate mixture of influences of colder and hotter regions, and the greatest wealth of creatures; where man too, because from there he is [sic!] equally well-prepared for every transplantation, must have diverged least from his original form (W27).

It seems that by not moving too soon or quickly, Whites had outlasted the danger of becoming a race, and now could survive transplantation anywhere.

Whites’ escape from the one-sidedness that constituted race through a balance of forces paralleled arguments in other areas of Kant’s thinking. In the roughly contemporary Über Pädagogik (Pedagogy) Kant wrote: ‘There are many seeds (Keimen) lying undeveloped in man. It is for us to make these seeds grow, by developing his natural dispositions (Anlagen) in their due proportion, and to see that he fulfils his destiny’ (9:445, emphasis added). Around the same time as his invention of race, Kant’s view of the temperaments underwent a significant and related shift. The once contemptibly weak phlegmatic was joined by a ‘phlegma as strength’, which was superior not only to ‘phlegma as weakness’ but to all (other) temperaments, as it contained within itself all motives. ‘Phlegma as strength’, which was henceforth the temperament of the German national character, reappeared as a trait of the autonomous agent in Kant’s mature ethics. Freedom cannot by definition be accounted for, but is attended by a mastery of inclinations constituted not by their absence or suppression but by the tranquil equipose resulting from their due proportion. It is composed of every inclination but determined by none (6:408).

With ‘Of the Different Races of Men’ and physical geography, Kant claimed to have laid the foundation for a ‘natural history’ of humanity that could move beyond the imprecision of mere ‘description of nature’. It offered a way to see (at least some) human varieties as teleological achievements rather than accidental degenerations, in the process confirming that man was destined to spread over the whole earth. Kant’s account of the nature and emergence of race out of Keime that unfolded irrevocably in the distant past also assured a limit to diversity, a limit already reached. But Kant had invented not only race but ‘whiteness’ as an escape from it. Whites were at once a race and beyond race, the summation and circumvention of race, an uncertainty that we will see Kant sharpen into an antinomy with his critical philosophy. To those whose ancestors moved far from the place of the original Stamm, race in its necessity was destiny. The white students of Kant’s lectures on physical geography and anthropology learned that they were well prepared even then to make the whole world their home. Prepared for transplantation anywhere, they must and could make something of themselves.
Race a priori

Discussions of Kant’s racial views quote mainly from pre-critical works like the *Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime* and from the *Physische Geographie (Physical Geography)*, which, while published in 1801–2, was based on notes long predating Kant’s theory of race (see 9:509ff.). This can leave the impression that the Kant of the *Critiques* had outgrown an interest in race and diversity. Indeed, as conventionally understood, Kant’s mature ethics should certainly have led him to repudiate it. Yet the critical turn did not displace diversity from Kant’s concerns. The critical turn changed the status of all knowledge claims, but the relationships described in Kant’s works in geography and anthropology remained substantially intact. His rigorously abstract mature ethics was developed against the backdrop of a continued commitment to the importance of understanding deep human differences like gender, temperament and race, and may indeed presuppose them.

Kant wrote two essays on race in the very midst of elaborating the critical philosophy. ‘Bestimmung des Begriffs einer Menschenrace’ (‘Determination of the Concept of a Human Race’) appeared in 1785 less than a year after the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (*Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*) and ‘Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?’ (‘Answer to the Question, “What Is Enlightenment?”’). The second, ‘Über den Gebrauch teleologischer Principien in der Philosophie’ (‘On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy’), an important step towards the analyses of the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (*Critique of Teleological Judgment*), appeared in 1788 just after the B version of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and a few months before the *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (*Critique of Practical Reason*). Wedded to the ambitions of the critical philosophy, Kant’s thinking on race took flight.

Human beings still needed to understand themselves as part of a unified whole, but with the critical turn the whole could no longer be discovered or confirmed empirically. Where human nature and destiny were concerned, the relevant whole—the ‘kingdom of ends’—was not found in phenomena but posited by practical reason. In the 1770s race had been discovered by assembling empirical reports, and demonstrated a necessity not otherwise known in human heredity. If only in theory it had confirmed that human beings could indeed populate the whole globe without loss of their humanity. With the critical turn things went the other way round. The idea that humanity was destined to spread free republics all over the globe was posited by practical reason rather than gleaned from theoretical reason. The idea of a mechanism like ‘race’ suggested itself as a way this end could be achieved in a climatically varied world. If it could also be confirmed empirically, race would demonstrate the value of a practical-reason-shaped understanding of human destiny for all the human sciences.

The immediate occasion for these two essays was the public quarrel with J. G. Herder that was so important for the development of Kant’s
thinking. Herder had attended Kant’s pre-critical lectures in the early 1760s, including the lectures in physical geography and moral philosophy. In 1784 Herder published the first part of his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (*Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Humanity*), a work he thought consonant with Kant’s geographical and anthropological project and even a sort of consummation of it. Kant’s frosty reviews are well known. Less well known is the effect this quarrel had on Kant’s ideas of race. Herder had rejected the concept of race as ‘ignoble’, inappropriate to humanity. Human history unfolded in harmony with nature, he felt, but needed to be understood in specifically human terms, in terms of culture. Kant retorted that it was Herder’s view that sold short the as yet unrealized potential of human existence for true freedom and reason.

‘Determination of the Concept of a Human Race’ was the second of three anti-Herderian essays Kant published in 1784, 1785 and 1786 in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, a central organ of the Aufklärung. The first, ‘Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht’ (‘Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent’), had offered Kant’s view on what a truly human history would have to look like. It did not concern itself with actual history at all. On available evidence, Kant reasoned, human history—a history of human beings achieving their ‘end’—had yet to take place. Since everything else in nature achieved its end, however, one could hope that humanity’s ‘seeds and predispositions’ (*Keime* and *Anlagen*) for reason would unfold and achieve their end too (8:18). But nature had willed that man ‘should produce entirely by his own initiative everything which goes beyond the mechanical ordering of his animal existence, and that he should not partake of any other happiness or perfection than that which he has procured for himself without instinct and by his own reason’ (8:19). Somehow nature—still the wise breeder—was nevertheless needed to push man through ‘antagonism’ (8:20) out of the ‘arcadian, pastoral experience of perfect concord, self-sufficiency and mutual love’ in which he might otherwise stagnate (8:21). This essay opened up a new kind of historical enquiry, which looked beyond the surface of events to see the underlying processes and clues that humanity might yet make good as a species, but also insisted that a history of freedom was a necessarily paradoxical project (cf. 8:41).

This could not be more different from Herder, whose *Ideas* (like Kant’s pre-critical geography) worked from empirical knowledge of nature and travel reports. Herder’s was a cosmos in which everything reflected and influenced

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everything else; the best method for understanding it was ‘analogical’, a kind of *Naturbeschreibung* on speed. Inspired rhapsody seemed the likeliest way to discern the significant features of human nature figured analogically throughout nature. Man achieved his end everywhere in cultures developed in harmony with a nature articulated in a spectrum of microclimates. Herder reveled in the thought of ever new forms emerging, filling out the continuum of possibilities, and thought any effort to set a limit to this variety pernicious.

There are neither four nor five races, nor are there exclusive varieties on earth. The colors run into one another; the cultures serve the genetic character; and overall and in the end everything is only a shade of one and the same great portrait that extends across all the spaces and times of the earth.¹⁹

What was needful was not a ‘systematic history of nature’ but a ‘physical-geographical history of humanity’.²⁰

In critical reviews of the first two volumes of *Ideas*, Kant sniffed at Herder’s enthusiastic method. By claiming to find human potential achieved in every individual, era and culture, Herder proved incapable of distinguishing human from animal happiness and so missed the true destiny of man. ‘Does the author really mean that, if the happy inhabitants of Tahiti, never visited by more civilized nations, were destined to live in their peaceful indolence for thousands of centuries, it would be possible to give a satisfactory answer to the question of why they should exist at all ...?’ (8:65). Kant’s asking the question reveals more than Herder’s failing to consider it. His own answer to the question is not immediately obvious: did ‘antagonism’ fail to jostle people out of indolence in some climates, or does antagonism in some cases require the antagonism of peoples?

Kant thought the very poetic lengths to which Herder had to go confirmed that human history was shapeless and meaningless as it stood. He quoted Herder’s hope that someone might ‘gather together the faithful paintings which are scattered here and there of the different branches of our species, and would thereby lay the foundations of an explicit natural science and physiognomy of the human species’ (8:59). This sounded a lot like what Kant endeavoured to do in his lectures, but he now asserted that travel narratives were inconclusive. It would be far more useful to the writing of a ‘general natural history of mankind’, he opined, if ‘a historical and critical mind ... select[ed] from the boundless mass of ethnographic descriptions or travelogues, and from all the reports in these which can be presumed to

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²⁰ Ibid.
shed light on human nature, those in particular which are mutually contradictory’ (8:61–2). What follows is a sort of antinomy of ethnography.

As it is, one may prove, if one wishes, from numerous descriptions of various countries, that Americans, Tibetans, and other genuine Mongolian peoples are beardless—but also, if one prefers, that they are naturally bearded and merely pluck their hair out. Or one may prove that Americans and Negroes are races which have sunk below the level of other members of the species in terms of intellectual abilities—or, alternatively, on the evidence of no less plausible accounts, that they should be regarded as equal in natural ability to all the other inhabitants of the world. Thus, the philosopher is at liberty to choose whether he wishes to assume natural differences or to judge everything by the principle tout comme chez nous, with the result that all the systems he constructs on such unstable foundations must take on the appearance of ramshackle (baufällige) hypotheses (8:62).

In ‘Die Antinomie der reinen Vernunft’ (‘Antinomy of Pure Reason’) theoretical reason stalemates itself, freeing us to take the biddings of practical reason into account. Is the question of the unity of the human species something as impossible to confirm or disconfirm as freedom or God? Kant immediately turned to Herder’s objections to the concept of race (the examples mentioned above all relate to claims about race) and clarified his own view. The explanation of what or how an understanding of race could tell concerning the intellectual capacities of Americans and Africans—and its kinship to the presentiments of practical reason—would however have to wait until 1788.

In ‘Determination of the Concept of a Human Race’, which appeared the same month as his second Herder review, Kant reiterated his theory of race in a newly philosophical way. ‘One finds what one needs in experience only when one first knows what to look for’ (8:91). Readers of his 1775/7 essay had focused on the implied historical claims but the ‘hypothetical application of the principle’ was secondary to the principle’s potential to found a Naturgeschichte (8:91). Kant instead asked the theoretical question what if anything might qualify as a ‘class difference’ within a species. Race, defined as ‘the class difference of animals of one and the same line of descent in so far as it is invariably heritable’ (8:100) and identifiable by the ‘law of necessarily half-bred generation’ (8:95), met the specifications. Race was not specific to humanity—the wolf, fox, jackal, hyena and domestic dog were ‘races of dogs’ (8:100n)—but in the human case it was made easy to visualize by an exclusive emphasis on colour. Skin colour had been dismissed as a marker of variety by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, but Kant insisted skin was the most important organ of climatic adjustment (8:93, 95). One could read people’s racial history in their faces, at least in the moderate climate of Europe.
The 1785 essay makes race seem like a matter only of classification, innocent of any interest in establishing the superiority or inferiority of different human populations. ‘Even the character of the Whites’, Kant closed the essay, ‘is only the development of one of the original predispositions’ (8:106). Some scholars argue that Kant’s theory of race is detachable from his views on particular races, and this essay, presenting the concept as the answer to a theoretical puzzle in classification, is their favourite. ‘Necessity’ appeared only in the case of those traits at one time indispensable to human survival (8:99), and one could see which traits those were by examining patterns of inheritance. But even the traits that are not transmitted exceptionlessly could come only from seeds in the species as a whole. Kant’s experimental method for rendering the processes of human variety visible seems a picture of scientific rigour and detached objectivity. Kant’s next essay filled in the background that these interpretations, ignorant of the project of physical geography, overlook.

‘On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy’ (1788) was provoked by an attack on Kant’s race theory by Georg Forster, a celebrated young ethnographer (he’d visited the Tahitians with Captain Cook) and admirer of Herder. Forster accused Kant of ignoring empirical data to make way for unacknowledged theological commitments. He appears to have known little of Kant’s other work besides the tongue-in-cheek ‘Conjectural Beginning of Human History’ (the third of the anti-Herderian essays in the Berlinische Monatsschrift) in which Kant had suggested that a practical-reason-informed idea of human beginnings could make as much sense of the text of Genesis as Herder had, if not more. To Forster, both essays arrived swiftly at a monogenesis he thought was disconfirmed by empirical experience. Africans seemed to him to belong to a different human ‘family’ or ‘species’. The scientific as well as the Christian thing was to acknowledge this. Had ‘the thought that Blacks are our brothers anywhere even once led a slaver to put down his whip’? Far better to think that God, who fills out the whole chain of being, had created Africans as the highest task for Whites. Cultivating the capacities of Africans might be the role of Whites in creation, developing latent capacities of their own too.

21 Even in this essay it is only the non-white races whose colour is explained however. Kant’s account of blackness as an effect of iron precipitation implies that people started as white.
25 Ibid., 165.
The 1788 essay is the richest and strangest of Kant’s essays on race. In response to the double attack of Herder and Forster, Kant revealed both the philosophical ambition of his concept of race and its abiding relationship to his derogatory views of non-Whites. The essay argued that teleological principles were sometimes indispensable both in metaphysics (defined as concerning the world and God) and physics (which only concerned the world). In the former case, the idea of the highest good derived from ‘pure practical reason’ alone allowed us to speak of God (8:159). In the latter, the relationship with ‘theoretical’ knowledge was more complicated. One can’t know a priori that there are elements of nature that demand teleological understanding. However, the situation offered a ‘similar permission, indeed need, to proceed from a teleological principle where theory abandons us’ (8:159). The only thing more stunning than the parallel between the ideas of God and of ‘race, as radical peculiarity’ (8:163), is the suggestion that race might offer experimental confirmation of the critical philosophy as a whole.

The issue was the same as before: putatively exceptionless half-breed generation. Systems of nature like Linnaeus’s hadn’t noticed race, but the ‘concept which this expression designates is nevertheless well established in the reason of every observer of nature’, even should it never be found in nature (8:163)! The spread of peoples all over the earth was no longer the key. Instead, race was an ‘idea of the way reason might unite the greatest diversity in generation with the greatest unity of descent’ (8:164) given nature’s concern that ‘all the multiplicity implicit in a species’ Keime should unfold’ (8:167). For Kant this claim about nature is really a claim about what we are entitled to assert about nature in a regulative way; its warrant comes not from empirical experience (recall the antinomy of ethnography) but from practical reason.

As Kant explained the teleology, however, race shared the spotlight with ‘variety’. Already in 1775, ‘variety’ was defined as lacking the necessity characteristic of race, but here the very lack emerged as purposive. ‘The variety among people of the same race was in all probability laid just as purposively in the original genus to develop the greatest multiplicity to the end of infinitely different purposes, as race difference was to achieve fewer but more essential purposes’ (8:166). Race differences, which must have unfolded in ancient times, would give rise to no new forms, but variety revealed a nature inexhaustible in producing ‘new characters (external as well as internal)’ (8:166). ‘Variety’ was specifically human. In animals all traits were transmitted exceptionlessly, as they ‘have value only as means’, and so must have predispositions in place for various human uses (8:168).

As Kant’s students would already have known, race also affected ‘external as well as internal characters’. Africans and (East) Indians had no more ‘drive to activity’ than was required by the climate in which they were at home (8:174, 174n). This was a standard argument, shared by climate theorists and Kames. Kant’s Keim theory alone made the loss of ‘drive to activity’ permanent. Kant also revived his argument from the 1770s about
the congenital weakness of Americans. His view alone was able to explain—without faulting providence—‘why this race is too weak for heavy labour ... incapable of all cultivation, for all the example and encouragement nearby’, and so ‘stands far below the negro, who occupies the lowest step of all others which we have called racial differences’ (8:176). These views, mainstays of Kant’s lectures, seem extraneous to the argument only if we accept that race can be a mere philosophical puzzle.

Kant had kept the promise made in his reviews of Herder’s Ideas. His ‘natural history’ informed by a practical-reason-inspired concept of race had shown that there were permanent differences between races, including permanent inferiority for all races but the Whites, the only ones with the ‘drive to activity’ required to make themselves over in the image of freedom.26 The place of the non-white races in history is uncertain but surely grim. The arrival of white colonists seemed the only hope for the Tahitians. Robert Bernasconi notes that Kant explicitly quotes from a pro-slavery pamphlet in this essay (8:174n), and detects an argument against race-mixing here.27 As implied already in earlier essays, Keime and Anlagen were meant to mature together, not one at the expense of the others. Unluckily for the (non-white) races, nature—less stepmotherly than extravagant—spread their ancestors too quickly into distant climates and then isolated them there. Whites, nature’s intended if only by default, have all seeds and predispositions at their disposal, and are now ready for transplantation to every climate.

It is in Kant’s essays of the 1780s that race gets philosophical traction. We may think that the critical philosophy should have turned Kant’s gaze away from empirical human differences, but he remained committed to geography and anthropology, and to race. In its new critical form derived from a priori understandings of human destiny proffered by practical reason, race could even serve as a test of the efficacy of an anthropology structured by the needs of reason. Indeed, empirical confirmation of race would show the critical project as a whole to be viable and indeed necessary. Allied with the philosophy of freedom and the idea of God, race was ready to assert metaphysical and world-historical significance.

What man can and should make of himself

The last chapter in Kant’s race thinking presents a textbook case of the need for contextual work in the history of ideas. Kant wrote no further essays on

26 See Susan Shell, ‘Kant on race’, in Eigen and Larrimore (eds), The German Invention of Race, 55–72.
the subject, and race was not mentioned where it might be expected in the Critique of Teleological Judgment (1790), and when Kant described how nature had ‘taken care that men can live in all regions of the world’ in Zum ewigen Frieden (Towards Perpetual Peace, 1795) (8:363). The only discussion of race is a section in the ‘Anthropological Characteristic’ of Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View (1798), which is barely a page long and devoted mainly to discussing ‘family kinds’. It has recently been argued that Kant, inspired by new cosmopolitan insights, dropped his race theory in this period. In fact it was in the 1790s that Kant’s view of race came into its own. Kant did not lose interest in race, let alone repent of this interest.

Kant wrote no more essays on the subject because he didn’t have to. All three race essays were republished numerous times in collections of his works starting in 1793. More importantly, they were cited and recommended by Blumenbach in the 1795 edition of De generis humani varietate nativa (On the Natural Variety of Mankind), who now accepted the centrality of skin colour. In 1796 the young chemist Christoph Girtanner published Über das kantische Prinzip für die Naturgeschichte (The Kantian Principle for Natural History), a book-length synthesis of Kant’s three essays together with some ideas from Blumenbach. By 1797 Herder again saw the need to denounce race as inimical to a ‘human’ understanding of humanity. And in 1799 Schelling integrated Kant’s theory of race into Naturphilosophie.

The section on race in Anthropology was abbreviated, but this is because race was the one part of his anthropology that Kant could assume his readers already knew. Indeed, Kant built on this familiarity in explaining what a ‘pragmatic’ understanding of diversity was more generally. Not knowing what to look for, scholars have not seen the structural and structuring part race plays in the work. Race was mentioned at the beginning and at the end of the Anthropology. Those few who notice the section on race wonder why it is there. Surely race belongs not to ‘pragmatic’ anthropology but to

28 All of Kant’s race theory except the word itself appears in §§66 and 80.
29 Kleingeld, ‘Kant’s second thoughts on race’.
30 The 1785 and 1788 essays were reprinted in Immanuel Kant, Zerstreute Aufsätze (Frankfurt and Leipzig 1793) and Immanuel Kant, Kleine Schriften (Neuwied 1793). Immanuel Kant, Immanuel Kant frühere noch nicht gesammelte kleine Schriften (Linz 1795) reprinted the 1785 essay. All three essays were reprinted in Immanuel Kant, Immanuel Kants sämtliche kleine Schriften, 3 vols (Königsberg and Leipzig 1797/8) and Immanuel Kant, Immanuel Kants vermischte Schriften, vol. 1 (Halle 1799).
31 Blumenbach, The Anthropological Treatises, 207.
32 Christoph Girtanner, Über das kantische Prinzip für die Naturgeschichte (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht 1796); reprinted as vol. 7 of Robert Bernasconi (ed.), Concepts of Race in the Eighteenth Century, 8 vols (Bristol: Thoemmes 2001).
35 See, e.g., Louden, Kant’s Impure Ethics, 94.
‘physiological’ anthropology? Indeed, wasn’t race covered in Physical Geography (9:311–18)? But that part of Physical Geography was based on pre-critical notes, and recently edited student notes confirm that the races were regularly discussed in Kant’s anthropology lectures (25.2:843, 1187–8).

In the preface, Kant seemed to say as much: ‘even knowledge of the races of human beings as products belonging to the play of nature is not yet counted as pragmatic knowledge of the world, but only as theoretical knowledge of the world’ (7:120). Taken in isolation from the rest of the work, this seems to say that race has no place in pragmatic anthropology. But of course there is a section on race. The contrast Kant was making was not between anthropology and geography (with race relevant only in the latter), but between two kinds of anthropology, both of which have things to say about race. Kant’s concern is race, but precisely not as a mere play of nature.36 Scholars today don’t see that interest in what Kant called ‘race’ had always been practical as well as theoretical, ‘concerned with what man can and should make of himself’ as much as ‘what nature makes of man’ (7:119).

Immediately before this reference to race Kant had prepared readers for the ‘Anthropologische Didaktik’ (‘Anthropological Didactic’), the first part of Anthropology, by contrasting a merely ‘physiological’ knowledge of memory with a ‘pragmatic’ one that ‘uses perceptions concerning what has been found to hinder or stimulate memory in order to enlarge it or make it agile, and ... requires knowledge of the human being for this’ (7:119). The contrast between a merely physiological and a pragmatic knowledge of race was analogous, and suggested a breeder’s knowledge of racial possibilities as the model for ‘Anthropological Characteristic’ as a whole. This should not be surprising. It had always been a point of Charakteristik to determine suitable matches and chart the destinies of the offspring of well-matched and ill-suited pairings. The chapter ‘Vom Charakter des Geschlechts’ (‘On the Character of Sex’) ends with a whole section of just such ‘pragmatic consequences’ for marriage (7:308–9), and ‘Vom Charakter des Volks’ (‘On the Character of the Nation’) ends with the observation: ‘that the mixture of tribes ... which gradually extinguishes their characters, is not beneficial to the human race—all so-called philanthropy notwithstanding’ (7:320). Reproduction wasn’t the only concern of the ‘Anthropological Characteristic’, but it made the importance of the project clear in the baldest terms.

Of course the ‘Anthropological Characteristic’ was ‘pragmatic’ in a different way than Kant’s pre-critical physical geography and anthropology. In the Observations, the meaning and harmony of diversity were posited, though one could not yet make them out. Now the meaning of diversity was something human beings must make their own, transforming physiological knowledge of characters and their interactions into pragmatic knowledge by

36 Reinhard Brandt obscures this by erroneously asserting that races are Spielarten; Reinhard Brandt, Kritischer Kommentar zu Kants Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht (1798) (Hamburg: Meiner 1999), 119.
reference to the needs of practical reason. One could and should learn from
the physiology of race to work with nature for the end of the highest good.
Knowledge of temperament, gender, national character could and should be
analogously functionalized for the good of the species.

The pragmatic upshot of physiological knowledge of race—one could
call it human self-husbandry—was implicit in the *Anthropology*. ‘Vom
Charakter der Rasse’ (‘On the Character of Race’) referred readers to
Girtanner’s *Kantian Principle for Natural History*, which is not a pragmatic
work. To illuminate what the pragmatic upshot would be, Kant instead
dilated on ‘family kinds’ in a manner reminiscent of the discussion of
‘variety’ in 1788.

Instead of assimilation (Verähnlichung), which nature intended in the melting
together of different races, she has here made a law of exactly the opposite:

Mental and physical traits were once again linked, but it didn’t seem to
occur to Kant that the mixing of races might help achieve his infinity of
characters. The determinism of race had its place in nature, but a pragmatic
anthropology showed it to be a threat to the human future, closing down
rather than opening up possibilities. ‘Assimilation’ of races was to be
avoided not for ‘natural’ but for ‘pragmatic’ reasons.37 The achievement of
man’s end was in his own hands.

‘On the Character of Race’ needs to be understood also in terms of the
larger argument of which it is part. Following it was the section ‘Vom
Charakter der Gattung’ (‘On the Character of the Species’), something on
which Kant insisted not much could be said in the absence of knowledge of
‘non-terrestrial rational beings’ with which to compare ourselves (7:321). But
Kant nevertheless made several observations. He closed the section (and the
‘Anthropological Characteristic’ and the *Anthropology* as a whole) with a
discussion entitled ‘Schilderung des Charakters der Menschengattung’
(‘Main Features of the Description of the Character of the Human Species’),
and here he described a way in which the human species could be seen as
one member of a larger set of beings after all.

37 Kleingeld (‘Kant’s second thoughts’, 591) interprets this passage as saying the
opposite: ‘“fusion” of races is seen as at least part of Nature’s design’, but this
identification of nature’s aims with our own collapses the distinction between
physiological and pragmatic anthropology.
If one now asks whether the human species (which, when one thinks of it as a species of rational earthly beings in comparison with rational beings on other planets, as a multitude of creatures arising from one demiurge, can also be called a race)—whether, I say, it is to be regarded as a good or a bad race, then I must confess that there is not much to boast about in it (7:331).

This extension of the concept of race was something new. (Note also the reference to good and bad races!) It might seem that Kant’s theory of race should not have been available for this extension: a race is a historically emerged subgroup of a species with a common origin whose particularity was triggered by a particular climate. The populations of various planets did not share a common genetic origin or (for all one knew) produce fertile hybrids. And yet this analogy with race makes sense: the foundation of Kant’s anthropology is still physical geography. We are earthly or terrestrial beings, affected one and all by the particularities of the earth.

Suggesting that we think of our species in terms of a *Keim* in ‘rational beings’ triggered by the particularities of our planet is a good way of emphasizing our dependence on the earth, and the difficulties our embodied existence sets for our lives as rational beings (finite, and so required to arrange for reproduction). It is also a challenge. Are there other *Keime* forever extinguished in us by the requirements of earthly life? Some, perhaps most, races are ‘bad’: what reasons have we to think we’ll make good? This is a cosmopolitan moment but a bittersweet one. All human beings might be only one race of this species; even if not a ‘real race’ in the terrestrial scheme, Whites might turn out to be a race (or a ‘bad race’) after all in the cosmic scheme, unable to achieve their end. ‘Pragmatic’ use of knowledge of human diversity might make the difference here. Whites might yet redeem the terrestrial race. What this meant for other races of human beings was not clear. It could lay the groundwork for human solidarity across races (though not mixing), or for the white man’s burden.

**From theoretical to practical**

Immanuel Kant was not singlehandedly responsible for the spread of the ideology of race, but his work giving scientific and philosophical cachet to this term with roots in the world of breeding was indispensable. Developed and elaborated as a response to worries about human prospects raised both by questions of human diversity and, later, by his critical understanding of human destiny in freedom, Kant’s concept of race was never just a classificatory term in a physiological anthropology. We will not understand its continuing appeal if we accept the anachronistic idea that race was a ‘theoretical’ or ‘scientific’ issue rather than a ‘practical’ or ‘pragmatic’ one: it was and is both. We will better understand the abiding appeal of race if we see it in the context of the interconnections of geography, anthropology,
philosophy of history and practical philosophy, and if we recognize the promise of ‘whiteness’ that attended it from the start: to escape from race just as autonomy does from nature.

Kant’s theory of race changed significantly over the course of his career. Each iteration was more ambitious and, as empirical counter-evidence arose, more dangerously ideological. Race was first offered as proof that a scientific understanding of human experience in the context of our varied terrestrial existence was possible. The template for race was temperament, itself an uneasy theodicy of human diversity. From the first, Whites were described not as one race among others but as qualitatively different, distinguished from the others as balance is from imbalance. The question whether Whites were ‘raced’ in the operative sense would persist until Kant’s last references to race in 1798.

Challenged by Herder and Forster in the 1780s, the critical Kant described a kind of antinomy of ethnography from which only a practical-reason-informed understanding of human destiny could offer a responsible way out: race became an a priori concept, its teleology evident independently of empirical data. In 1788 Kant likened the ‘permission’ practical reason granted for approaching human experience with race as a category to that it gives for faith in God, and made clear that the hierarchy of races he had been lecturing about for decades had not been forgotten or revised. But, while developed independently of evidence, race looked to be empirically confirmed, and in this way legitimized Kant’s whole project.

In the 1790s Kant’s theory of race came into its own, making important converts in physical anthropology and Naturphilosophie. Race provided the template for explaining the nature of a ‘pragmatic’ understanding of human diversity, and the need for it. ‘What man can and should make of himself’ involved a kind of self-husbandry of humanity; nature still has a hand, but humans must use knowledge of themselves as part of nature to make and keep themselves free. As rational beings shaped by the exigencies of life on earth, they must recognize the power of geography to trigger fatal imbalances in human potential, and hope that the least ‘raced’ of earthlings—Whites—might yet attain their end.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to assess the possibly constitutive place of race in Kant’s philosophical system, but we can say this much. Kant did not think you could responsibly do practical philosophy without physical geography and pragmatic anthropology, and wasn’t trying to. We misread his ethics if we do not also read his accounts of human diversity and their implications for respecting the humanity in everyone, treating none as a means only. We misunderstand his philosophy of history and politics if we forget the potentially fatal imprint of the earth and its regions on human populations, first through climatic Einartung and later (and still) through reproduction. Kant thought one could not live out his practical philosophy without the kind of pragmatic knowledge of which his theory of race was the emblem and first fruit. We may not be able to uproot the ideology of race he
helped legitimate without tracing its connections to practical reason and providing pragmatic as well as theoretical counter-knowledge.

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