

Know Your Place, Know Your Calling: Geography, Race, and Kant’s “World-Citizen”

[Saiba seu Lugar, Conheça sua Vocação: Geografia, Raça e o Cidadão do Mundo Segundo Kant]

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Abstract

Anthropology and physical geography were among Kant’s most popular and longest running courses. He intended them to give his students the world-knowledge [*Weltkenntniß*] that they needed in order to be effective world-citizens [*Weltbürger*]. Much of this indoctrination amounted to teaching Occidental white men, Kant’s default audience, to perceive themselves as uniquely entitled and obliged to work as agents of human progress on the assumption that they, thanks to their geographic location on Earth, were naturally formed as an exceptional race. I trace this perception to a combination of Kant’s lectures and publications. He already indicated it in some of his works from the 1750s and 1760s. He subsequently fleshed it out through a theory of race based on his geography course in conjunction with a pure moral theory, a pragmatic anthropology that complements the moral theory, and a theory of education that builds on those three.

Keywords: anthropology; embodiment; geography; human progress; moral destiny; race; world-knowledge [*Weltkenntniß*]; world-citizen [*Weltbürger*].

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1. Introduction

Nosce te ipsum (know yourself). Carl Linnaeus used this dictum to introduce the concept of *homo* in his *Systema Naturae* (1735). He followed it with a division of all humans into four varieties according to a four-continent view of the world: whitish Europeans, reddish Americans, tawny or darkish Asians, and black Africans. Later, in the tenth edition of the *Systema Naturae* (1758), Linnaeus explicated the dictum about *homo* in various respects, from physiology and pathology to morality and theology. And he now differentiated the four human varieties not only by skin color but also by such characteristics as temperament and habit of the mind. For instance, he described the American as obstinate and free, the African as slothful and negligent, the Asian as haughty and avaricious, and the European as acute and inventive (Linnaeus, 1758, p. 20–22).

This basic Linnaean worldview would be reflected in Kant's work, only to be bolstered by the latter's cutting-edge scientific theory of "race."² In the first announcement about his physical geography course (1757), Kant outlined a plan to compare humans "in respect of their differences in natural shape and colour in various regions of the Earth" and to explain "those tendencies of human beings that are derived from the zone in which they live," including their "way of thinking." Kant intended such world-knowledge (*Weltkenntniß*), as he would call it in his 1775 essay on race (VvRM, AA 02: 443), to enhance his students' *self-knowledge* (EACG, AA 02: 9; see PG, AA 09: 183–375; VPG/Holstein, AA 26: 3–5).³ How so?

Kant's younger contemporary Friedrich Schiller would later suggest an illuminating answer to this question, in the famous inaugural lecture on "universal history" that he delivered in 1789. "Our [white] race," Schiller told the young men crowding the largest lecture hall at the University of Jena, can clearly see itself as a superior race in the "mirror" constituted by all the other "races contemporary in time but in different geographical areas." In these distant others, the white man sees nothing but manifestations of indolence and stupidity, slavery or otherwise "lawless freedom," and "rude taste." By contrast, he is to view himself as a spirited thinker, an educated man of the world [*Weltmann*], who is linked to other thinking minds of his race in a cosmopolitan [*weltbürgerlich*] bond (Schiller, 1972, p. 325–28). According to Schiller, these world-citizens or *Weltbürgern* have a shared "vocation" [*Bestimmung*]: they are to cultivate themselves as individuals whose lives link up to the universal history of humanity (Schiller, 1972, p. 322). Each of them is thereby called to "contribute something" to humanity's "rich legacy of truth, morality, and freedom" (Schiller, 1972, p. 334).

This call to action was Schiller's concluding appeal to the young men at his lecture. He was thereby channeling a similar call that Kant made at the end of the "Conjectural Beginning of Human History" (1786), which we will encounter in section 3.2. Schiller's invocation of a cosmopolitan standpoint also mirrored Kant's in the "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim" (1784). By 1789, Schiller had read both of those essays,⁴ and Kant had published all three of his dedicated essays on race (1775/7, 1785, 1788).⁵ Schiller's lecture exhibited an astute grasp of the Kantian message to the *Weltbürgern*, including its racial inflection. In short, the message is this: white men have a unique calling to work as the agents of human progress because they, thanks to their privileged location on Earth, represent an exceptionally well-endowed race.

² On the relation between Kant's scientific theory of race and Linnaeus's classification of human varieties, see Lu-Adler (2023a, p. 181–89).

³ *Physical Geography*, edited by Friedrich Theodor Rink, was published in 1802. But much of its content—from §53 (PG, AA 09: 273) onward—was based on notes that Kant prepared around 1757–59. The Holstein manuscript (VPG/Holstein, AA 26.1: 7–320) is a close copy of those notes (Stark, 2011, p. 72). When I cite from *Physical Geography*, I also include corroborating segments from the Holstein manuscript wherever applicable.

⁴ See the editor's note in Schiller (1972, p. 321).

⁵ On the history of these essays, see Mikkelsen (2013, p. 18–32).

In what follows, I explain how this message took shape in Kant's own writings and teachings. We will begin with some important clues in his works from the 1750s and 1760s, in which he established the image of the *Weltbürger* as an Occidental white man. This Kantian *Weltbürger* would understand himself both through iterated contrasts with the other - the "Oriental," the "Negro," and the American "savage" (section 2.1) - and in view of his cosmic situation as an earthbound rational creature (2.2). We will then see how this self-image would be completed and sharpened through Kant's works from the 1770s onward, including his *theory of race* (section 3.1), his pure *moral theory* plus the complementary *anthropology* (3.2), and the *theory of education* that builds on those three (3.3). This interpretation will have some implications for how to deal with the racist orientation of Kant's philosophy (section 4).

2. Some clues in Kant's early works

2.1 The Kantian *Weltbürger* as an Occidental white man

Kant published his first essay on race, "Of the Different Races of Human Beings," in 1775. By then, he had lectured on physical geography for nearly two decades (since 1756/7) and started to teach a new course on anthropology (since 1772/3).⁶ As he saw them, these two courses together constituted the world-knowledge that would prepare a student "for life" and introduce "the accomplished apprentice (...) to the stage of his destiny, namely, the *world*" (VvRM, AA 02: 443). Who was the apprentice-to-be?

Kant indicated the answer to this question in an earlier essay, "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime" (1764). The final paragraph of this essay contains a history of "the taste of human beings." This history started with ancient Greeks and Romans, who in Kant's view "displayed clear marks of a genuine feeling for the beautiful as well as the sublime in poetry, sculpture, architecture, legislation, and even in morals." This feeling allegedly "degenerated" during the medieval period. Then, Kant sees a happy revival of the human genius in his own time. His special wish for this era is to tap into "the as yet undiscovered secret of education (...) in order early to raise the moral feeling in the breast of every young world-citizen into an active sentiment" (GSE, AA 02: 255-56, modified translation).

The "world-citizen" [*Weltbürger*] Kant has in mind here is an Occidental white man - not any of the nonwhite or "Oriental" white men he has depicted,⁷ nor any woman.⁸ The preceding parts of the "Observations" make this exclusionary view amply clear. The history of taste I just mentioned appears at the end of the section "On national characters in so far as they rest upon the different feeling of the sublime and the beautiful" (GSE, AA 02: 243-56). Insofar as peoples' mental characters [*Gemüthscharaktere*] are "most evident in that which is moral," Kant considers a people's feeling from this perspective (GSE, AA 02: 245).⁹ He begins with a detailed treatment of "the peoples of our part of the world." These include the *Italian* and *French* peoples, on the one hand, and the *German*, *English*, and *Spanish* peoples, on the other, who in Kant's view excel in the feeling of the beautiful and that of the sublime respectively (GSE, AA 02: 243).

Kant then takes "a quick look through the other parts of the world." To those "in the Orient" (GSE, AA 02: 252), he attributes a "false taste" but "no conception of the morally

⁶ On the origin of Kant's anthropology lectures and their relation to his geography lectures, see Wilson (2006, p. 7-26).

⁷ For Kant's distinction of the "Occidental" and "Oriental" whites, see VAnth/Mensch, AA 25: 1188.

⁸ To appreciate the literal nature of Kant's references to the European *man*, see GSE, AA 02: 228-43 (also VAnth/Mensch, AA 25: 1188-94; Anth, AA 07: 303-6).

⁹ On Kant's notion of "character" as pivotal to his raciology, see Yab (2021, p. 135-87).

beautiful" (GSE, AA 02: 254). He says, for instance: the Arab has an "inflamed power of imagination [which] presents things to him in unnatural and distorted images"; the Indian has "a dominant taste for grotesqueries"; and the "verbose and studied compliments" of the Chinese are likewise only "ridiculous grotesqueries" (GSE, AA 02: 252). In Kant's vocabulary, "grotesqueries" are "unnatural things, in so far as the sublime is thereby intended, even if little or none of it is actually found" (GSE, AA 02: 214), while the "ridiculous" is that which "sinks [most] deeply beneath the sublime" (GSE, AA 02: 233). Given his conception of sublimity as the "criterion" of manhood (GSE, AA 02: 228), he is thereby implicitly associating what is Oriental with what is effeminate or at least childish.¹⁰

This insinuation of immaturity also extends to "the Negroes of Africa," who in Kant's view "have by nature no feeling that rises above the ridiculous." The difference between the "Negroes" and the "whites" is so "essential," he claims, that "it seems to be just as great with regard to the capacities of mind as it is with respect to color." As for the native inhabitants of the "new world" (America), Kant characterizes them as "savages" who "have little feeling for the beautiful in the moral sense" and who overall exhibit "an exceptional lack of feeling" (GSE, AA 02: 253–54).

In sum, Kant's Occidental man "alone" has all sorts of feelings, drives, and inclinations plus the ability to interweave them "with so much that is moral" and thereby make them "proper" (GSE, AA 02: 254). So, when he subsequently urges for an education to cultivate the moral feeling in every young *Weltbürger*, Kant is targeting a very specific audience. Accordingly, the *Weltkenntniß* delivered first through his geography course and then through the complementary course on anthropology is intended only to prepare the young Occidental white men for the world as *their* stage. Part of the preparation is for them to know themselves better - especially regarding their capacity and destiny as a naturally privileged race - through iterated contrasts with *other* inhabitants on Earth (more on this in sections 3.1 and 3.3).

Meanwhile, the early Kant also invited his audience to zoom out further and consider themselves as *earthbound* rational beings, in contrast with the rational creatures inhabiting *other planets*. As odd as this move may sound, we will see that it constitutes a crucial piece of the backdrop for understanding how the later Kant would flesh out his plan for the young Occidental *Weltbürgern* simultaneously through a pure moral philosophy, a pragmatic anthropology, and a scientific theory of race building on physical geography.

2.2 Knowing the human being as an earthbound rational creature

In the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), Kant states that one may call the human species a "race" if one thinks of it "as a species of rational *beings on earth* in comparison with rational beings on other planets, as a multitude of creatures arising from one demiurge" (Anth, AA 07: 331). The expression 'beings on earth' reflects an important feature of Kant's notion of race: the characteristics of a race - in comparison with other races that share the same phylum - causally depend on the *material conditions* of its embodiment. That is why locating one's geographic origin matters: a geographic location is associated with a type of *climate*; the climate, which on Kant's account has mainly to do with air (dry or humid) and sun (hot or cold), in turn determines what natural characteristics get to be developed or expressed in its inhabitants. These characteristics, as Kant understands them, include such things as one's physical form, temperament, and level of intelligence. When we consider Kant's account of different races within the same human species in section 3.1, we will see how he correlates four basic climates - according to a four-continent map of the globe - with four distinct sets of those

¹⁰ Kant portrays the "Orient" as "the land of sensation" (VAnth/Fried, AA 25: 552) and its peoples as in "the childhood of the understanding" (Refl. 1486, AA 15: 710). One manifestation of this supposed immaturity is their "child's language" made of mere pictures [*Bildern*]; by contrast, the Occidentals purportedly have "a more masculine language" made of words (VAnth/Mron, AA 25: 1232–33). On the significance of this contrast, see Lu-Adler (2023b).

characteristics. He already laid down the "law" for this kind of correlation in an essay published in 1755, "Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens."

Part Three of this tripartite essay is "an attempt to compare the inhabitants of the different planets" (NTH, AA 01: 349). The attempted comparison is not a mere fiction, Kant contends, but accords with a natural law akin to the Newtonian law of universal gravitation. The putative law goes as follows:

the perfection of the spiritual world [Geisterwelt] as well as of the material world increases and progresses in the planets from Mercury on to Saturn [...] in a correct sequence of degrees in proportion to their distances from the Sun. (NTH, AA 01: 360)

Of the then-known planets in our solar system, Mercury is the closest to the Sun, Saturn the furthest, and Earth at the midpoint between those. Accordingly, Kant submits two propositions that are "more than probable conjecture[s]," with "a degree of credibility that is not far removed from an established certainty":

(a) from Mercury, through Earth, to Saturn, the *matter* that constitutes the inhabitants of various planets goes from coarser to finer;

(b) the same inhabitants are less or more excellent in their *intellectual abilities* (particularly the ability to form clear concepts), as such abilities "have a necessary dependence on the material of the machine they inhabit" - the finer the matter, the greater the intellect (NTH, AA 01: 358–59).

Assuming this dependence of intellect on material embodiment, Kant locates earthlings at the midpoint on the spectrum of all finite (i.e., created) intellects. Depending on which direction they look, their sense of self may vary from perspective to perspective. While "the idea of the most sublime classes of rational creatures that inhabit Jupiter or Saturn arouses their jealousy and humiliates them by the knowledge of their own baseness" (NTH, AA 01: 359), they may be comforted by the thought of the Mercurians, who belong in a "class [of rational beings that] borders more closely on the lack of reason" (NTH, AA 01: 362).

To illustrate this perspectival relativity, Kant writes: "On the one hand, we saw thinking creatures [on Mercury] among whom a Greenlander or Hottentot would be Newton, on the other hand, those [on Jupiter and Saturn] who would marvel at [bewundern] him as an ape" (NTH, AA 01: 359–60, modified translation). This reference to the Greenlandic Inuit and the "Hottentot" (derogatory reference to an African people) is telling. Kant is using them to mark the lowest bounds of humanity and to make the point that, in the eyes of the Mercurians (the dumbest race of all rational creatures), *even* a human being like the "Hottentot," for instance, would appear very intelligent, whereas to someone from Saturn, this being amounts to a mere animal.

On Kant's account, a similar material principle underlies the inferiority of a Mercurian (relative to the more intelligent planetarians) and that of a "Hottentot" (relative to the more intelligent humans). Roughly speaking, the intelligence of a class of rational creatures depends on how far from the Sun their native habitat is, where their class developed its unique characteristics in adaptation to the local climate.¹¹ Regarding the human being as such (as an earthbound race), "his ability to think rationally" is limited by "the constitution of the matter to which he is bound and which is proportionate to the distance from the Sun." This limitation is not equally materialized in all members of the human species: provided it takes several stages for the human being to approximate "the purpose of his being," *some* humans may advance far less than others and forever "remain at [an early] stage of development." For instance, they may

¹¹ In the case of the Greenlandic Inuit, Kant would say that they are *too far* from the source of heat: *extreme* cold (in the polar region) and *extreme* heat (along the equator) have similar effects on human development (PG, AA 09: 311).

never develop the “faculty of combining abstracted concepts and controlling the tendencies of the passions by the free application of insights” (NTH, AA 01: 355–56). Kant can conveniently single out the “Hottentot” as a case in point.¹²

When we connect this account of the human race with what we uncovered in section 2.1, we can see that Kant’s *Weltbürger* would know himself along two basic dimensions. First, he would know himself as an *earthbound* rational creature, whose rationality is finite - since all are finite who are created - and limited by the materiality of his earthly embodiment. In this respect, he must learn about the dispositions and capacities of the human being as such, insofar as these depend on the overall conditions of his cosmic habitat and, at the same time, determine what kind of perfection he is capable of achieving.

Second, turning the gaze onto Earth itself, Kant’s *Weltbürger* would have to orient himself geographically on this planet, in order to get a more specific sense of what natural dispositions and talents characterize his class of humans, insofar as these again depend on the material conditions of his native habitat. Kant had introduced a multifaceted framework for this orientation by the end of 1775, when he published his first essay on race after nearly two decades of teaching geography. One may begin with the two angles presented in the “Observations,” which consist in contrasts between the *Orient* and the *Occident* and between the *wilderness* of America and the *cultured* part of Europe. Meanwhile, there is a latitudinal division of “zones” in Kant’s geography lectures: two torrid zones around the equator, two frigid zones between the polar circles and the poles in both hemispheres, and two temperate zones in the middle (PG, AA 09: 177). This division serves as an organizing principle for Kant to sort humans in terms of “form [*Bildung*] and colour” among other things and to locate the fair-skinned and “most attractive of the Earth’s peoples” in the temperate zones, particularly “along the line of longitude running through Germany, and some degrees on either side” (PG, AA 09: 311; see VPG/Holstein, AA 26.1: 85–6). Finally, the conception of climate as the basic material factor that affects the development of a creature lays the foundation - together with a four-continent mapping of the globe - for Kant’s rigid fourfold classification of human races (V₄RM, AA 02: 432–41).

With all these framing apparatuses, the Occidental white (male) *Weltbürgern* would come to perceive themselves as the aesthetically most pleasing, culturally most advanced, and morally most promising class of all earthbound rational creatures thanks to the most suitable place where their race was formed on the planet Earth. This self-perception is supposed to inspire in the *Weltbürgern* a sense of calling and entitlement to be the sole agents of human progress - as Schiller would highlight in his 1789 lecture. In next section, I will explain how we can read this message off a combination of Kant’s theory of race (3.1), his pure moral theory plus the anthropology that complements it (3.2), and his plan of education (3.3).

3. Race and destiny

3.1 One species, four races: establishing the natural superiority of the white race

Kant holds a monogenetic view of humanity, according to which different human races belong in the same species. This view tends to be associated with humanitarian and egalitarian ideas (we are all humans, right?). For that reason, some scholars have claimed that Kant’s racist views are simply “at odds” with his monogenism (Wilson, 2014, p. 205) or that the latter has

¹² Negative reports about the “Hottentots” were abundant in the eighteenth century. See Bernasconi (2014) on how some of them might have influenced Kant’s view.

a "moral meaning" that squarely contradicts racism (Louden, 2000, p. 103–4). Such claims misunderstand Kant's monogenism, though. In fact, not only is it perfectly compatible with racism, but it also provides a potent theoretical foundation for the latter. As Charles Mills (2014) puts it, Kant's racism is a form of "monogenetic racism."

To see this, it is worth emphasizing that Kant uses the idea of the unity of human species primarily to explain perceived hereditary *differences* among its members. Above all, he emphasizes that racial differences - as necessarily, unfailingly, and persistently hereditary differences - are comprehensible only on the assumption of a shared original phylum [*Stamm*], whereas polygenism, which posits multiple original phyla, would render this phenomenon unintelligible. Thus, the Kantian concept of race already contains not only a notion of "necessarily hereditary characters" that differentiate the races but also that of a "common phylum," from which those characters must be derived (BBM, AA 08: 98–9; see ÜGTP, AA 08: 163).

As a general explanatory model to make sense of the diversity within any given organic species (be it a plant or an animal), Kant posits the following teleological principle: nature originally equips the species "through hidden inner provisions for all kinds of future circumstances, so that it may preserve itself and be suited to the difference of the climate or the soil." The inner provisions include certain "germs [*Keime*]" and "natural predispositions [*Anlagen*]" contained in the original phylum of the species; those germs and predispositions would develop differently under different material conditions in different climates; if a population remained in a given climate for a sufficiently long period of time, the specific characteristics developed through the adaptive process could become persistently hereditary in the descendants, even in altered climates (VvRM, AA 02: 434).

With the human species, the early developments of its original germs and predispositions depended on the various climates in which the most ancient humans had to adapt and preserve themselves. On Kant's account, there are exactly four climate types determined by the qualities of air and sun: humid cold, dry cold, humid heat, and dry heat. Four distinct skin colors emerged as a result of prolonged and isolated adaptations in those climates - white (Europeans), red (Americans), black ("Negroes"), and yellow (Asiatic Indians).¹³ These developments became irreversible and necessarily hereditary, which is why each skin color marks a race (VvRM, AA 02: 441; BBM, AA 08: 93–4).

In Kant's system, the racial characteristics occasioned by a climate include more than skin color. He writes: the same hot and humid equatorial climate where "Negroes" became black also made them "strong, fleshy, supple" - because "humid warmth is beneficial to the robust growth of animals in general" - and "lazy, soft and trifling" due to the natural abundance of their motherland. Meanwhile, Kant derives native Americans "as an incompletely adapted race," whose poor acclimation led to "a half extinguished life power" (VvRM, AA 02: 437–38). As a result, Kant claims, this race is "too indifferent for industry and incapable of any culture," wherefore it ranks "still far below even the Negro, who stands on the lowest of all the other steps that we have named as differences of the races" (ÜGTP, AA 08: 176). That is, while "Negroes" are still usable as field labor on the plantations, "the red slaves (Americans)" are suitable only for domestic chores due to a lack of power and endurance (VvRM, AA 02: 438n).¹⁴

Kant is adamant that whatever "adapted natural character" a race acquired in its native climate would become persistently hereditary in other climates as well. He finds evidence for this proposition in the "Creole Negroes" and the "Indians under the name of the gypsies": both races lack an "immediate drive [*Trieb*] to activity"; they have not brought "any more of this impetus into other climates and pass it on to their offspring than was needed for their preservation in

13 Kant locates "true Negroes" in the Senegambian region (VvRM, AA 02: 441–42; PG, AA 09: 312; V-PG/Holstein, AA 26.1: 87). The air is so "phlogistized," he reasons, that only those with the blackest skin can survive there (BBM, AA 08: 103; ÜGTP, AA 08: 169–70n).

14 On Kant's differential treatments of these two races, see Lu-Adler (2022a; 2022b).

their old motherland”; this shows that their natural laziness or disinclination to work - as an “inner predisposition” - “extinguishes just as little as the externally visible [skin color]” (ÜGTP, AA 08: 174).¹⁵ As far as Kant is concerned, the inner and outer characteristics are indelible for the same reason: they were ancient products of climatic adaptations. That is,

the germs which were originally placed in the phylum of the human species for the generation of the races must have developed already in most ancient times according to the needs of the climate, if the residence there lasted a long time; and after one of these predispositions was developed in a people, it extinguished all the others entirely. (BBM, AA 08: 105; see ÜGTP, AA 08: 173–77)

Thus, Kant may posit a whole range of predispositions in the original human phylum, so that all races can be derived from it and that “even the character of the whites is only the development of one of the original predispositions that together with the others were to be found in that phylum” (BBM, AA 08: 105). What matters to him in the end, however, is the *differential* development whereby a distinct race was formed, in whom only some of the original predispositions were expressed whereas others were permanently stifled.

This racialization of characteristics other than skin color has a practical upshot: it gives Kant’s audience a sense of which race is *by nature* (in)capable of “culture” (I will explain the significance of this focus on culture in section 3.2). Kant already indicated this much when he depicted native Americans as a naturally weak race incapable of any culture. To get a view of his complete system of racial profiles and the deep meaning he attaches to it, though, we will have to turn to his work on anthropology. The most striking text in this regard is the *Menschenkunde*, which contains student notes of Kant’s anthropology lectures from sometime in the 1780s. “Despite the unity of the human species,” he reportedly said, “there is still a difference of races to take up” (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1195). After affirming that there are four human races on earth “descend[ing] from a single phylum,” Kant offers a list of their respective characteristics. He focuses on the ones that determine what, if any, culture a race is capable of. Here is a rough sketch.

(1) The Americans have no driving force [*Triebfeder*], no affects or passions, and no care for anything. They acquire no culture.

(2) “Negroes” are full of passions. Being sensitive and “afraid of beatings,” they can be trained [*abrichten*]. They are suitable only for a “culture of slaves”.

(3) Asiatic Indians or “Hindus” have driving forces and passions, but no ability for abstract thoughts. Accordingly, they can acquire some culture in the arts, but not in the sciences. They have come to a standstill.

(4) The white race contains all the driving forces and talents (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1187).¹⁶

Kant presents this system of racial profiles only to explain why his anthropology course is designed exclusively for the white race. “As a result,” he says right after the statement about this race, “it must be considered in a bit more detail. Information concerning it is given above” (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1187, original emphasis).

What was the antecedently provided “information concerning [the white race]”? In the *Menschenkunde*, the preceding parts discussed, among other things, such inner characteristics as “talent, temperament, and character; that is, natural gifts, the way of sensing, and the way of thinking” (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1156–76). It is important to talk about these things

¹⁵ For a contextualized analysis of these remarks and what they can tell us about Kant’s view on chattel slavery, see Lu-Adler (2022b).

¹⁶ We can find similar racial profiles at, for instance, *Refl.* 1520, AA 15: 877–78; V-Anth/Parow, AA 25: 450–51; V-Anth/Pillau, AA 25: 843; V-PG/Hesse, AA 26.2: 119–23; V-PG/Dönhoff, AA 26.2: 900–1, 907–8.

because, if (as I shall explain in section 3.2) the Kantian anthropology is primarily concerned with what the human being can make of himself, there must be something for him to work on: "The human being is formed according to talent, he is made polite (civilized) according to temperament, and he is moralized according to character." Take talent, which includes "natural aptitude, or the capacity to learn, and spirit [*Geist*] or genius." Kant finds it important to learn about these because to ascribe a natural aptitude to someone, for example, is to demarcate "the natural vocation of talent, the end for which *nature has equipped one subject more than another*" (*VAnth/Mensch*, AA 25: 1157, emphasis added).

The italicized part of this claim resonates well with Kant's ensuing outline of an extremely uneven distribution of such natural provisions as drives and talents among the four races. To his Occidental white audience, this outline must sound like a straightforward demonstration that nature has equipped their race significantly better than all the other races and that this arrangement at the same time indicates their "natural vocation." That is, insofar as nature has generously endowed their race *alone* with all the favorable drives and talents, they also have a *unique calling* to work as the agents propelling the human species toward its final (moral) end. This is basically the same message that Kant signaled in the "Observations" back in 1764, except that now he has an elaborate raciology to repackage and sharpen the message in explicitly racial terms.

At this juncture, you may wonder: what about the universalist moral theory that Kant also articulated in the 1780s? After all, in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), he was talking about humanity as such, not this or that race. Don't the universal moral concepts and laws that he set down there, you may ask, directly contradict the racist - racially exclusionary - view I just attributed to him? My answer is this: there is really no contradiction between Kant's moral universalism and his racist view of who gets to participate as agents in human progress;¹⁷ to the contrary, if we read the former in connection with other parts of his system, including the works I mentioned in section 2, we can see it as just another layer of the Kantian *Weltbürgern's* self-understanding: the moral outlook presented in the *Groundwork* now gives them a clearer view of the moral destiny that their race is uniquely prepared to pursue as agents. Let me explain.

3.2 The moral destiny of humanity as a species

In the *Groundwork*, Kant seeks to establish moral concepts and laws in their universality [*im Allgemeinen*]. He does so by setting them forth *in abstracto* and tracing their "origin completely *a priori* in reason" (GMS, AA 04: 409, 411). To him, strict universality - as opposed to "empirical universality" - presupposes apriority (*KrV*, B 3-4). So, moral concepts and laws "cannot be abstracted from any empirical and therefore merely contingent cognitions"; rather, they must be derived *a priori* "from the universal concept of a rational being as such [*überhaupt*]" (GMS, AA 04: 411-12), which is a concept "of pure reason" (GMS, AA 04: 389). The resulting claim that moral concepts and laws hold for "human beings" in general therefore comes with a significant caveat: the beings in question must be considered solely in terms of their putative rationality, in abstraction from "the nature of the human being" and from "the circumstances of the world in which he is placed" (GMS, AA 04: 389). As Henry Allison puts it, in the *Groundwork* Kant uses 'humanity' only as "a place-holder for finite rational agency"; so construed, it refers neither to concretely embodied individuals nor even to the human species (Allison, 2011, p. 207, 209-18).

To clarify this point, recall what we learned in section 2.2: Kant divides rational creatures into three classes according to their locations in the solar system, each of which has a degree of rational capacity that depends on the material conditions of its cosmic habitat. Nonetheless, as beings who are created by and hence ontologically dependent on a higher "demiurge" (*Anth*, AA 07: 331), they share the feature of finite rationality. Now, what Kant does in the *Groundwork*

¹⁷ I give a detailed argument for this view in Lu-Adler (2023a, p. 33-75).

is to treat human beings merely in terms of this feature, in abstraction from their unique nature as earthbound beings. He thereby leaves undetermined whether the abstract morals that he has established for a (finite) rational being *überhaupt* are indeed applicable to humans *qua* *earthly creatures*, whose ability for rationality is fundamentally limited by the specific conditions of their embodiment.

This is where anthropology comes in. Kant says: the system of morals, which must first be established a priori as pure metaphysics of morals, “needs anthropology for its *application* to human beings” (GMS, AA 04: 412). What anthropology studies for this purpose, as Kant later puts it in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), is “the particular *nature* of human beings.” Above all, it will specify “the subjective conditions in human nature that hinder people or help them in fulfilling the laws of a metaphysics of morals” (MS, AA 06: 217; see GMS, AA 04: 388–89). This point resonates with Kant’s account of “the character of the species” in the *Anthropology*, which considers how “the human being, as an animal endowed with the *capacity of reason* (*animal rationabile*), can make out of himself a *rational animal* (*animal rationale*)” in accordance with “the idea of possible rational beings on earth in general [*überhaupt*]” (Anth, AA 07: 321–22).

Anthropology thus complements Kant’s pure moral teachings with its account of the human being “according to his species as an earthly being [*Erduwesen*] endowed with reason.” It teaches what the human being “as a free acting being makes, or can and should make of himself” (Anth, AA 07: 119). This being, one is told, “is destined by his reason to live in a society with human beings and in it to *cultivate* himself, to *civilize* himself, and to *moralize* himself by means of the arts and sciences” (Anth, AA 07: 324–25). This anthropological account is still abstract in its own way: it mainly studies “human nature in general [*überhaupt*]” (V-Anth/Pillau, AA 25: 838), so as to establish the hope - as “an idea which is possible” - that “the human race (...) will attain the greatest degree of perfection,” namely moralization (V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 696–97).

Importantly, Kant reserves this hope for humanity *as a species*, which is not the same as the aggregate of all individual humans. Unlike the other animals on Earth, he submits,

with the human being only the *species*, at best, reaches [its complete destiny]; so that the human race can work its way up to its destiny only through *progress* in a series of innumerable many generations (Anth, AA 07: 324).

What explains this difference is that the human being is an animal endowed with reason. Kant elaborates this point in the “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim [*in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*]” (1784), the title of which suggests that he is once again addressing the *Weltbürgern*-to-be.

In the human being (as the only rational creature on earth), those *predispositions* whose goal is the use of his reason were to develop completely only in the *species*, but not in the individual. Reason (...) needs attempts, practice and instruction in order gradually to progress from one stage of insight to another. (...) nature perhaps needs an immense series of generations (...) in order finally to propel its germs in our species to that stage of development which is completely suited to its aim. (*IaG*, AA 08: 18–19; see Anth, AA 07: 329–30)

Kant stresses this species-bound viewpoint partly because he needs to instill in his audience the hope that the human race, for all the evils that presently beset it and that may make any observer of human affairs pessimistic, *can eventually* reach its destiny. The Kantian *Weltbürger* is to trust that nature has already laid certain predispositions in the human being for this purpose; and the future perfection of humanity - at least as an “idea” - must be “the goal of his endeavors.” Otherwise, Kant cautions, “the natural predispositions would have to be regarded for the most part as in vain and purposeless,” which would violate the rational principle that nature is purposive. The task for the *Weltbürgern* is that they each do their share to facilitate the purposive development of the innate “germs in our species,” especially through intergenerational education whereby insights are communicated and improved upon over time

(*IaG*, AA 08: 19).

In emphasizing this idea of species-bound progress, Kant is evidently cognizant of the need to address the suspicion that the culture of the supposedly civilized part of the world - the Occident - has in fact made humanity worse off. "Under the present conditions of human beings," he recognizes, "there is still the question whether we would not be happier in a raw state, without all this culture, than we are in our present condition" (*Päd*, AA 09: 451). Indeed, he observes, some may feel so disenchanted with the present culture that they long for a "golden age" of the past. This is only an "empty longing" in Kant's view, however (*MAM*, AA 08: 122). The "true golden age," he contends, can only be "the age of the developed culture of humanity" (*V-Anth/Mron*, AA 25: 1418). For the state of culture, as opposed to the state of nature or savagery, is "the only condition in which all the natural predispositions of the human being can be developed" (*V-Anth/Mron*, AA 25: 1423; see *V-Anth/Fried*, AA 25: 685-88). Rather than being a regression from past goodness, culture is a necessary preparation for a truly good and truly free future, when the human species has finally reached its destined perfection (moralization).¹⁸

"The course of things human on the whole," Kant insists, "does not start from good and progress toward evil, but develops gradually from the worse toward the better." He presents this view of progress to inspire a sense of duty in his audience, the *Weltbürgern*: "each of us, for his part, is called upon by nature itself to contribute as much as lies in his power to this progress" (*MAM*, AA 08: 123). Given Kant's anthropological account of the human being as an earthbound animal with the yet-to-be-fully-developed capacity for rationality, it follows that each *Weltbürger* has the vocation "to make himself worthy of humanity by *actively* struggling with the obstacles that cling to him because of the crudity of his nature" (*Anth*, AA 07: 325). Specifically, he must contribute to the perfection of humanity "through progressive culture" and hard work, even if this means "some sacrifice of his pleasures of life" (*Anth*, AA 07: 321-22; see *V-Anth/Mron*, AA 25: 1423). If "nature has laid in human beings" the trajectory of progress - from culture and civilization to moralization - that befits their station as the only earthly creatures capable of rationality (*V-Anth/Mensch*, AA 25: 1198), it behooves on the human beings themselves "to develop the natural predispositions proportionally and to unfold humanity from its germs and to make it happen" that the species reaches its destiny (*Päd*, AA 09: 445, modified translation).

Accordingly, a major task of Kant's anthropology is to show what germs [*Keime*] and natural predispositions [*Naturanlagen*] are innate to humanity as a species, which will at the same time indicate the means by which to hasten their development - mainly through proper education. In the *Menschenkunde*, however, a statement of this task is immediately followed by the claim that, *despite* the unity of humanity as a species, one still has to consider "a difference of races" - exactly as Kant has done in his physical geography (*V-Anth/Mensch*, AA 25: 1195). And this message comes shortly after the proposition that the white race alone contains in itself all the drives and talents, wherefore the whole course has been virtually about them (*V-Anth/Mensch*, AA 25: 1187). We will now see how things hang together for the Kantian *Weltbürger* - the pure morals of the *Groundwork*, the anthropological account of humanity as an earthbound species endowed with a capacity for reason that can and must be perfected over time, and the account of racial differences that emerged from Kant's geography course.

3.3 You are unlike them: the heuristic role of the racial "other"

The focus on racial differences is a philosophical decision on Kant's part. As he writes in the second of his two reviews of Johann Gottfried Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, it is "the choice of the philosopher whether he wants to assume differences of nature or wants to judge everything in accordance with the principle [all is as with us]." Specifically, the philosopher can read the same travel reports and prove either that "Americans and Negroes

¹⁸ On Kant's account of culture as the necessary medium between nature and (moral) freedom, see Marwah (2012).

are each a race, sunk beneath the remaining members of the human species in their mental predispositions” or that “as regards their natural predispositions, they are to be estimated equal to every other inhabitant of the world” (*RezHerder*, AA 08: 62). Kant has evidently chosen the former.

The timing of this choice is significant: the Herder review I just cited was published in 1785, shortly before Kant published his second essay on race and the *Groundwork*.¹⁹ It is also notable that, in both the Herder review and the *Groundwork*, Kant mentions a remote other only to show what *not* to do if one wishes to be worthy of humanity. In the former, he asks rhetorically about the “happy inhabitants of Tahiti ... in their tranquil indolence”: why do such human beings exist at all, who are “happy merely enjoying themselves” (*RezHerder*, AA 08: 65)? Similarly, in the *Groundwork*, he uses the imagery of “South Sea Islanders” to depict people who “let [their] talents rust” by devoting their lives “merely to idleness, amusement, procreation - in a word, to enjoyment” (GMS, AA 04: 423; see MAM, AA 08: 122–23; V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1422). Given Kant’s view, as we saw in section 3.2, that a human being must *make himself worthy* through active struggles, he is clearly using the trope of lazy islanders to caution against any romanticization of a state of contented existence.

This heuristic use of the trope of lazy islanders exemplifies a more general strategy on Kant’s part, for which his raciology offers a convenient framework. Susan Shell summarizes it as follows.

In the absence of an *image* of cosmopolitan perfection (...) the arrested development of the nonwhite races provides tangible evidence that European man, at least, is heading in the right direction. The non-European peoples (especially those of Africa and of America) contribute to the achievement of man’s moral destiny on Earth (...) in the manner of an inner wasteland, providing an historically emergent humanity with a means of (...) measuring its progress. (Shell, 2006, p. 69)

To begin with native Americans, who Kant has placed at the bottommost rank of humanity, their supposed savagery represents the state of being that is the exact opposite of human destiny and signifies the animality that always threatens to get in the way of human progress.²⁰ If the human being, as an *animal* endowed with reason, is to develop his reason and actually make a *rational* animal out of himself, he must first be disciplined or trained. Discipline, on Kant’s account, is “the taming of our natural animal independence,” without which one would be “wild” (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1170; see *Päd*, AA 09: 449). It “prevents the human being from deviating by means of his animal impulses from his destiny: humanity.” It is therefore the “merely negative” measure by which “man’s tendency to savagery is taken away” (*Päd*, AA 09: 442; see *KU*, AA 05: 432). One is susceptible to discipline, however, only if one has certain drives and passions. According to Kant, as I pointed out in section 3.1, native Americans lack the requisite drives and passions, wherefore they are incapable of any culture whatsoever: they represent a race of humanity that cannot even leave the state of nature or savagery. Kant can therefore use the indelible wildness attributed to them as a real-life cautionary tale: a human being must be disciplined first and foremost, whereby he is “accustomed early to subject himself to the precepts of reason,” lest he “retain a certain savagery throughout his life”; for “savagery cannot be taken away, and negligence in discipline can never be made good” (*Päd*, AA 09: 442, 444; see Lu-Adler 2022a). Such is how the imagery of “savages” becomes relevant to Kant’s vision of a suitable “plan of education and government” that could prepare his *Weltbürgern* for the world as the stage of their destiny (V-Anth/Fried, 25: 689).

The “positive” part of Kant’s educational plan concerns culture, broadly meant to include cultivation, civilization, and moralization. This part marks a fundamental distinction between a human being who is “merely trained, conditioned, mechanically taught” and one

¹⁹ The *Groundwork* might be directly prompted by Herder’s *Ideen* (Ameriks, 2012, p. 221–37).

²⁰ On Kant’s theory of animality and its relation to his raciology, see Baumeister (2022).

who is "actually enlightened" or who has learned to *think* and to comprehend the "principles from which all actions arise" (*Päd*, AA 09: 499–50). A complete education, Kant argues, must unite disciplinary training with the cultivation of "the capacity to use one's freedom" (*Päd*, AA 09: 453). The former is *physical* education or "maintenance," which attends to what "the human being has in common with animals." The latter is *practical* or *moral* education "toward personality, the education of a freely acting being who (...) can have an inner value for itself" (*Päd*, AA 09: 455). Physical education is passive, whereby the student merely learns to be "obedient to the direction of someone else" and let others "think for him." By contrast, through moral education a student - a male student to be exact - learns to act "from his own maxims, not from habit," so that "he must at all times comprehend the ground of the action and its derivation from the concepts of duty" (*Päd*, AA 09: 475).²¹ This education forms "character" (*Päd*, AA 09: 481; see AA 09: 486–89).

To show why the *Weltbürgern* must be so educated, Kant can turn to his portraits of the remaining two nonwhite races. On the one hand, he presents "Negroes" as beings who can merely be trained and made suitable for slavery; for they lack the "immediate drive" to work, so much so that the formerly enslaved all became drifters [*Umtreiber*] once "freed" (*ÜGTP*, AA 08: 174n). With this imagery, the Kantian *Weltbürger* can see what a human being looks like who cannot use his freedom, but can only follow someone else's direction and be driven by external forces.

On the other hand, the imagery of the yellow race represented by the Hindus helps Kant to emphasize that, to form a "character," one must develop the capacity to act from moral concepts and principles, which one comprehends in their strict universality and hence *in abstracto* (as I explained in section 3.2). That is, one must cultivate a "deep" or masculine understanding (*GSE*, AA 02: 229–30), an understanding of the ground or principle of things. The Hindus, Kant suggests, *appear* to have intellectual depth - "they all look like philosophers" - but are really incapable of it because they never rise to the level of abstract thinking (*V-Anth/Mensch*, AA 25: 1187). Because they are "completely incapable of judgment in accordance with concepts" but only "according to shape, appearance, and intuition," Kant claims, they are "not in the position to explain a single property of morality or of justice through concepts," wherefore they are also incapable of forming any character or moral personality (*V-Anth/Fried*, AA 25: 655). Kant generalizes this to "all Oriental peoples," including the Chinese, the Persians, and so on. He surmises that these peoples are bound to be stuck in their present culture of arts and cannot progress further toward the more advanced culture of sciences or toward moralization, because there is in them "a certain natural predisposition, which [they are] not capable of exceeding" (*V-Anth/Mensch*, AA 25: 1181; see *V-Anth/Pillau*, AA 25: 843).

In this way, Kant's writings and teachings from the 1770s onward clarified, deepened, and systematized the message about *Weltbürgern* that he conveyed in the "Observations" (1764). In the latter essay, as I explained in section 2.1, Kant already submitted that the Occidental whites - in comparison with the "Orientals" as well as the "Negroes" and American "savages" - *alone* have the wherewithal to develop a mental character that is properly "moral." He also suggested that, in the young *Weltbürgern*, such a development can only take place through proper education (*GSE*, AA 02: 255). This suggestion explains Kant's subsequent interest in revolutionizing education.²² If the human being, as an animal, "can only become human through education" (*Päd*, AA 09: 443), a "truthful" education is one that "develops all of the human being's natural

21 Kant literally intended his theory of education for males. In the *Anthropology Friedländer* (1775/6), which contains his first elaborate account of education, the section "On education" (*V-Anth/Fried*, AA 25: 722–28) immediately follows the section "On the difference of the two sexes" (*V-Anth/Fried*, AA 25: 697–722). In the latter, Kant concludes that the education of women and that of "the masculine sex" must be different in kind, especially concerning morality: while the latter must be based on moral principles and duties, the former must solely revolve around "honor and propriety," as women are "incapable of these principles" (*V-Anth/Fried*, AA 25: 722; see *V-Anth/Mensch*, AA 25: 1170, 1172–73).

22 On Kant's interest in education, see Shell (2015).

predispositions proportionally and purposively, thus leading the whole human species towards its vocation” (*Päd*, AA 09: 445–46).

Now, Kant’s courses on anthropology and geography together with the *Groundwork* have given the Occidental *Weltbürgern* a full picture of their shared cosmopolitan vocation and of why they are uniquely equipped - and obliged - to work for it. The *Groundwork* tells them what constitutes the moralization of a finite rational being *in abstracto*. Through anthropology, they “know the human being according to his species as an earthly being endowed with reason” (*Anth*, AA 07: 119); and they learn that humanity can - according to “the idea of possible rational beings on earth” - reach the destiny of moralization through an ever-progressing culture (*Anth*, AA 07: 322), albeit only as a species (*Anth*, AA 07: 324). Finally, Kant’s geography teaches them that, thanks to the climate in which their race was formed, they alone have the wherewithal to advance this species-bound progress. They are thereby called to enter the world as *their* stage, each to play his part as an agential world-citizen and contribute “as much as lies in his power to this progress” (*MAM*, AA 08: 123). As for other human inhabitants on Earth, they serve as concrete reminders of what the Occidental man should *not* be like - not the unruly American “savage,” nor the slavish “Negro,” nor the overly sensuous “Oriental.” Through these contrasts with the racial others, the Kantian *Weltbürgern* are to see themselves as the privileged race bearing a special duty toward humanity. This was the exact message that Schiller enthusiastically delivered in 1789.

4. Conclusion

I have explained how Kant narrowly conceptualized *Weltbürgern* as Occidental white men who were uniquely entitled and obliged to work as agents of human progress because they, thanks to their geographic location on Earth, were naturally formed as an exceptional race. Kant already indicated this view in some of his works from the 1750s and 1760s (sections 2.1–2.2). He subsequently fleshed it out through a *theory of race* based on his geography course (3.1) in conjunction with a pure *moral theory*, a pragmatic *anthropology* that complements the moral theory, and a *theory of education* that builds on those three (3.2–3.3).

This interpretation weaves together diverse parts of Kant’s philosophical corpus. Unlike the standard practice in Kant scholarship, I do not privilege his own publications over student notes of his lectures, or his publications from the Critical period (starting in 1781) over the pre-Critical ones, or the supposed core represented by such works as the *Groundwork* over his works on anthropology, education, and geography, which interpreters often consign to the periphery. I have two basic reasons for this holistic approach, which also indicate my view on how Kant scholars today should reckon with - atone for, if you like - his racist views.

First, racism is not just a tangential element that can be cleanly excised from Kant’s broader philosophical system, but represents a general *orientation* of the system itself. By Kant’s own account, as I pointed out in section 3.3, this orientation was a matter of philosophical *choice* on his part. Accordingly, anyone today who wishes to use Kant’s philosophy for antiracist purposes must begin with a deliberate effort to *re-orient* it toward such purposes. This re-orientation cannot be colorblind: one cannot do antiracist work without understanding how “race” shapes lived realities in the first place. Just as Kant was color-conscious when he sought to figure out how humanity’s moral potentials could be gradually realized in a non-ideal world, so must a Kantian today keep in mind that ours is a world that has been profoundly transformed by the practices of colonialism and racism that were the backdrop of the Enlightenment. The transformation is reflected not only in the systematically unequal distributions of political power, resources, and opportunities along the lines of whites versus nonwhites and the formerly colonized versus colonizers, but also in mundane social experiences. For the historically denigrated races and

peoples in particular, the legacies of racism and colonialism still affect, explicitly or implicitly, how they relate to others and how they see themselves. A Kantian who recognizes her obligation to rectify the wrongs of Kant's raciology should pay attention to these lived realities.²³

Second, while the controversy over Kant's raciology tends to follow an individualistic approach that dwells on whether or for how long he was racist, I am more interested in understanding the roles he - both as a prominent philosopher and as a lifelong educator - could play in the *formation of a racist ideology*. This is why I paid so much attention to his anthropology and geography lectures, which together constituted his most popular courses for decades. It is also why I used the young Schiller's well-attended lecture at the University of Jena to introduce the Kantian message that connected the white men's supremacist racial self-positioning with their sense of historical calling. Meanwhile, I refrained from judging either Kant or Schiller as a "racist" individual. For this individualistic judgment of past thinkers can distract us - scholars who study them as a profession - from our own burden to undo their *racist legacies* in the present.²⁴

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²³ I explain this point in Lu-Adler (2023a, p. 329-52).

²⁴ For further discussion, see Lu-Adler, (2023a, p. 76-107). I thank the following scholars for their feedback on an earlier version of this paper: Mavis Biss, Sabina Bremner, Rima Hussein, Tim Jankowiak, Katharina Kraus, Maya Krishnan, Laura Papish, Karen Stohr, and Krista Thomason.

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