
KANT'S RACISM AS A PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM

BY

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Abstract: Immanuel Kant was possibly both the most influential racist and the most influential moral philosopher of modern, Western thought. So far, authors have either interpreted Kant as an “inconsistent egalitarian” or as a “consistent inegalitarian.” On the former view, Kant failed to draw the necessary conclusions about persons from his own moral philosophy; on the latter view, Kant did not consider non-White people as persons at all. However, both standard interpretations face significant textual difficulties; instead, I argue that Kant’s moral egalitarianism is so thin as to remain almost entirely useless as an antidote to racism.

1. Introduction

Immanuel Kant was possibly both the most influential racist as well as the most influential moral philosopher in the history of modern, western thought. On the one hand, Kant’s work and handwritten remains contain outrageously racist remarks. Moreover, Kant was arguably the first European thinker to produce an entire theory of race.¹ On the other hand,

¹For recent discussions of Kant’s theory of race, see Bernasconi (2001, 2002, 2006, 2010), Boxill (2017), Eberl (2019), Eze (1995), Herb (2018), Lagier (2004), Larrimore (1999, 2006), Leutgöb (2015), Malter (1990), McCarthy (2009, chapters 2 and 5), Mikkelsen (2013), Sandford (2018), Shell (2006) and Zammito (2006). For interpretations that highlight the particular historical context of Kant’s theory of race, see especially Eberl (2019) and Sandford (2018) who compellingly argue that Kant’s theory of race must be understood in the historical context of his rejection of popular accounts of polygenism and the prevailing discourse on “barbarism.” See also Geier (2022), who equally emphasizes the ongoing debates about “race” in the 1770s and consequently defends a (comparatively) less negative view of Kant. For a recent collection dealing with the emergence of the idea of race in 18th century Germany more generally, see Eigen & Larrimore (2006). For a discussion of Kant’s racism in relation to his philosophy of history and teleology, see Boxill (2017) and Sutter (1989, pp. 258–259). Finally, for recent literature dealing more specifically with Kant and colonialism, see especially Eberl (2019), Hedrick (2008), Williams (2014), and Flikschuh and Ypi (2014).

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Kant's conception of all rational beings as "ends in themselves" is widely considered a paradigm of moral egalitarianism. Even more, his insistence on the inviolable dignity of each person and his ideas for "cosmopolitan" rights continue to be a major influence on contemporary moral and political philosophy. This stark contrast between Kant's racist remarks and his moral egalitarianism has inspired a long-overdue debate about the problem of Kant's racism: How could an ardent advocate of the universal dignity of all human beings simultaneously hold such despicable views about non-White people? And does the combination of these two facts indicate a failure of Kant's moral philosophy itself? Or does it merely indicate a failure of the person Immanuel Kant?

After a long period of almost complete complacency about Kant's racism in European and Anglo-American academia, recent scholarship has started to take Kant's racism seriously and profoundly deepened our understanding of both the historical development of Kant's views on race and the nature of his racism. Within the emerging literature on Kant's racism, scholars still virtually unanimously agree over framing the problem as choice between two interpretations of Kant's moral philosophy: either Kant was an *inconsistent egalitarian*, or he was a *consistent inegalitarian*.² Undoubtedly the majority of Kant scholars believe that Kant was an inconsistent egalitarian. On their view, Kant was simply inconsistent in that he failed to draw the necessary conclusions from his own moral philosophy.³ By contrast, some scholars have argued that Kant was a *consistent inegalitarian*. On their view, Kant's racist remarks are not incompatible with his moral philosophy, because when Kant wrote about the dignity of all persons as ends in themselves, he did not mean to include non-White people.⁴

Both sides of the debate agree that Kant's moral philosophy and his racist beliefs are not merely in tension but in obvious contradiction.⁵ However, this assumption faces significant textual difficulties. Of the two most intuitive

²The first scholar to characterize the debate in these terms was Pauline Kleingeld (2007), but her characterization also fits contributions to the debate that do not use this explicit wording.

³Versions of this view have most recently been defended by Allais (2016), Bernasconi (2011), Hill & Boxill (2001), Kleingeld (2007, 2014, 2019), Kaufmann (2019), McCabe (2019), Mensch (2017) and Terra (2013). For an interpretation of Kant's theory of race on which even Kant's use of teleological principles in anthropology contains significant anti-racist elements, see Malter (1990) and Dörflinger (2001).

⁴For recent defenses of this view, see Eze (1995), Serequeberhan (1996) and Mills (2005, 2014). For a similar, but somewhat less radical, argument that Kant's view was less universalist than usually assumed, see Larrimore (1999), who argues that Kant had a "two-stage view of racionism insulated from history and ethics," but "should the international federation of republics he looked forward to ever be achieved, the members of (non-white) races would have no place." (ibid. p. 125). Similarly, Serequeberhan also argues that Kant's notion of enlightenment and historical progress excludes non-White people and thus manifests an inegalitarian "metaphysics" under the cover of universalism. Cf. Hedrick (2008).

⁵See, for example, Mills (2014, p. 22) (speaking about a "contradiction so flagrant"), Allais (2016, pp. 1, 8) ("startling contrast" and "obvious contradictions"), McCabe (2019, p. 7) ("gross incompatibility"), Kleingeld (2007, p. 584) ("genuine contradiction").

candidates for a possible contradiction, neither are as obvious as commentators have suggested. First, Kant's outrageous remarks about non-White people in his lesser-known writings never go as far as to literally deny their moral personhood. While his texts evince both bigoted prejudice and the belief that people of different "races" would have different psychological and physical characteristics that could be ranked, Kant's comments are never in outright contradiction with his view of each human being as an end in itself. Second, Kant explicitly denied that equal legal and political rights would follow from his conception of equal moral status: In the *Doctrine of Right*, Kant both explicitly affirmed the equal moral status of women while also denying them equal legal and political rights. If there really is any genuine contradiction between Kant's anthropological racism and his abstract egalitarianism, this contradiction is much less obvious than is usually assumed – if it exists at all.

Fortunately, these two interpretive options are not exhaustive, though the correct answer is much more worrisome for Kantian ethics than the two options presented so far. On my view, the verdict about Kant's racism and its relevance for his moral philosophy must be far more cynical than the two dominant interpretive options in the literature allow. Kant was arguably a *consistent formal egalitarian*: Kant's characterization of the equal dignity of all persons is so abstract that it remains largely useless as an antidote to racism.⁶ Consequently, we have to seriously question if Kant's language of universal human dignity really is the powerful tool against racism and misogyny that it is frequently said to be.

In the course of treating Kant's views as contradictory, most commentators still deny that Kant's racism demonstrates a *philosophical* problem – that is, a problem truly pertaining to the kind of moral philosophy Kant was committed to doing. Those who argue that Kant was an inconsistent egalitarian inadvertently portray the issue of his racism as a personal failure of Immanuel Kant but of no larger significance for his moral philosophy; on their view, the problem of Kant's racism is simply that Kant himself was capable of moral failure and cognitive dissonance, but his personal cognitive

⁶To my knowledge, the only authors to openly (albeit passingly) acknowledge this possibility are Hedrick (2008), Basevich (2020) and Lu-Adler (2022a). I discuss their respective views in more detail below. Although my argument is in a similar spirit as the famous "empty-formalism" charges by Hegel and Mill – and one may read this paper as a Hegelian-inspired formalism worry – my primary targets in this paper are contemporary readers of Kant and their largely unexamined assumption that Kant's abstract moral egalitarianism and his racism are in obvious contradiction. On my reading, Hegel's empty-formalism charge is directed against *any* attempt to develop a moral philosophy through a conceptual separation of form from content; by contrast, my argument here is significantly less ambitious, claiming merely that Kant's moral egalitarianism is too formal (or "thin") to clearly rule out his deeply racist views. Thus, my argument also does not rely on some of the topics usually discussed in the context of the empty-formalism charge (like maxim-description or the alleged universalization test). My argument also differs structurally in crucial ways from Hegel's classic "empty-formalism" charge: the latter accuses Kant of not being entitled to otherwise acceptable conclusions, while I argue that Kant's abstract egalitarianism appears compatible with completely *unacceptable* conclusions.

dissonance does not demonstrate any shortfall of his moral philosophy. Those who argue that Kant was a consistent egalitarian inadvertently also risk portraying the issue of Kant's racism as primarily a personal failure. On their view, the problem of Kant's racism is that he did not include enough individuals in the community of persons, but once we admit that really all human beings are persons the story of Kantian abstract egalitarianism allegedly has a happy ending. By contrast, this paper joins a minority of commentators in arguing that Kant's racism really is a philosophical problem: It neither demonstrates the failure to overcome cognitive dissonance nor the failure to recognize some people as fully human; rather, Kant's racism demonstrates the failure of Kant's moral philosophy. However deep his insights were in other regards, his egalitarianism remained so abstract as to be almost entirely useless as an antidote to his own racism. In this way, the seeming compatibility between Kant's abstract egalitarianism and his racism also highlights a perennial philosophical difficulty: How do we get from abstract principles to substantive ideals in a way that doesn't merely polish up our existing prejudices?

In section two, I briefly highlight the standard assumption that unifies the great majority of contemporary interpretations of Kant's racism by recourse to two opposing (and equally invaluable) recent accounts. Section three argues that this common assumption faces textual difficulties by taking a closer look at the two most intuitively plausible candidates for a contradiction between Kant's account of moral equality and his racism. Finally, section four argues that this seeming compatibility between Kant's racism and his abstract egalitarianism is of wider philosophical significance.

2. *The standard assumption*

So far, the standard approach to Kant's racism has been based in the assumption that Kant's racist remarks are in obvious contradiction with his moral egalitarianism, and that Kant's language of universal human dignity offers a powerful tool against racism and misogyny. Consequently, a central question of recent scholarship and popular commentary is how we should make sense of the apparent contradiction behind Kant's racism.⁷ According to the more critical voices within the standard reading, the best way of making sense of Kant's racism is to see him as a *consistent egalitarian*: When Kant spoke of the dignity of all human beings as ends in themselves, he did not actually mean it. But according to the majority of voices within

⁷This standard assumption of a contradiction between Kant's racist remarks and his moral egalitarianism also permeates popular culture. See for instance the recent contributions by Markus Willaschek, Bernd Dörflinger, Marina Martínez Mateo, among others, in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*; and Stefan Gosepath and Gabi Wuttke, *Kant und die Rassismus-Debatte: „Die Vertreter der Aufklärung sind nicht unschuldig“* Deutschlandfunk Kultur, June 16, 2020.

the standard approach, the best way of making sense of Kant's racism is to see him as an *inconsistent egalitarian*: When he made his outrageous remarks about non-White people, he was not being a good Kantian.

Over the last decades, the consistent-inegalitarian reading has prominently been defended by Emmanuel Eze and Charles Mills. While Eze's interpretation of Kant's racism (on which Kant explicitly assigns different moral worth to different human beings) has not found many, if any, sympathetic readers,⁸ Charles Mills has since powerfully argued that Kant was a consistent inegalitarian. Like Eze, Mills claims that the dignity of each person as an end in itself was only meant to apply to White people, and that Kant simply didn't consider non-White people to be persons. But unlike Eze, Mills claims that Kant had a *silent* taxonomy of moral worth, and thus implicitly distinguished not merely between persons (i.e., those with the capacity for practical reason) and things, but also between those human beings who are persons and those humans who are considered less than persons, or "sub-persons."

The "sub-person" category is, admittedly, a reconstruction of the normative logic of racial and gender subordination in his [Kant's] thought, a reconstruction that is certainly not openly proclaimed in the articulation of his conceptual apparatus, and may seem, *prima facie*, to be excluded by it. [...] Nonetheless, I would claim that it is the best way of making sense of the actual (as against officially represented) logic of his writings, taken as a whole, and accommodates the sexist and racist declarations in a way less strained than the orthodox reading.⁹

Mills provides two further claims to support this interpretation of Kant's thought. First, Mills points out that words can assume different meanings depending on their context, and invites us to consider that Kant simply did not really mean to include non-White people in his category of persons. Thus, although the Formula of Humanity ("So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means." GMS 4:429) might sound egalitarian to us, Kant himself might not have meant it to include non-White people. Second, Mills has argued that ascribing such a hierarchy of persons and sub-persons to Kant's moral theory is, in fact, the only reasonably charitable interpretation of Kant's writings. In response to two authors who had previously defended the inconsistent egalitarian reading, Mills contends:

⁸Eze (1995) also claims to have shown that Kant's racist theory of race is "intimately" connected with the basic tenets of Kant's transcendental philosophy, and thereby compromises Kant's entire transcendental idealism. Specifically, Eze claims that on Kant's view "racial differences and racial classifications are based a priori on the reason of the natural scientist," and that for Kant the "classification of humans according to race [...] is a priori, transcendently grounded and immutable." (Eze, 1995, pp. 122 and 124). For a discussion of Eze's argument, see Hill & Boxill (2001, pp. 452–459). Cf Kaufmann (2019, pp. 191–192).

⁹Mills (2005, p. 106).

How could it be more plausible to attribute to Kant the degree of cognitive dissonance requisite for the genuinely universalist reading of his work to be correct? I will put the contrast in the following stark form, to bring home (what I see as) the absurdity involved. [...]

Unqualified Universalism: All biological humans/all races, as full persons, must be treated as ends, never as mere means.

Racist Particularism: The races of Blacks and Native Americans may be colonized and enslaved. I submit to the reader that a contradiction so flagrant would have been noticed by anyone of the most minimal intelligence, let alone one of the smartest minds in the more than two thousand-year history of the western philosophical tradition. [...] So, faced with the alternatives of a Kant blind to this flagrant contradiction and a Kant for whom there was no contradiction given the extent of radical interracial differentiation within the human race, the far more plausible interpretation seems to me that humanity was normatively divided for him.¹⁰

This, it seems to me, is the strongest argument for ascribing to Kant the view of a consistent inegalitarian. As Mills knows, the actual text of Kant's moral philosophy cannot be squared with the idea that some human beings are not persons, that is, that some human beings do not have a dignity as ends in themselves. By tying the moral status of persons to their capacity for practical reason, and by further characterizing human beings as practically rational animals, Kant is explicitly committed to the view that all human beings have an absolute moral value that is entirely incommensurate.¹¹ The strength of Eze's and Mills' claim that Kant was a consistent inegalitarian ultimately comes from the apparent cognitive dissonance that Mills so poignantly describes in the passage above.

Although most Kant scholars have not followed Mills radical conclusion, they share Mills' view about the "flagrant contradiction." But instead of concluding that Kant must have been a secret inegalitarian, they conclude that Kant must have been an inconsistent egalitarian. Lucy Allais, for instance, has recently argued that we should see Kant's racism as a lesson about the nature of racism in general – namely, that racism can involve a lot of cognitive dissonance and even the rationalizing of entirely irrational antipathies. As she puts it:

¹⁰Mills (2014, p. 22).

¹¹In the *Religion*, Kant states this notion of the human being as consisting of "animality" (as a living being), "humanity" (as a rational being) and "personality" (as a responsible being). The difference between "rationality" and "responsibility" consists in rationality that is merely theoretical or means-end rationality and *practical* rationality, that is, rationality that is itself capable of determining the power of choice. (Rel 6:26). Thus, on first sight, it may seem odd that "humanity" and practical rationality can come apart on Kant's view; however, Kant explicitly lists "animality," "humanity," and "personality" as "elements of the determination of the human being." Consequently, what Kant somewhat unhelpfully labels "humanity" in this passage is merely one aspect of being human; the human being not only has "humanity" in light of her theoretical reason but also "responsibility" in light of her practical reason. For a recent discussion of the humanity-personality connection in Kant's ethics, see especially Geiger (2020). For an insightful overview of Kant's conception of the person as linked to a special *Gattungswesen* (rather than an empirical conception of the person focused on the specific individual's capabilities), see Kaufmann (2019, pp. 200–202). And for a discussion of the historical, scholastic context of Kant's conception of the person as *Gattungswesen*, see Kobusch (1993, pp. 129–157).

Kant's practical philosophy cannot be made compatible with Mills' *Untermensch* postulation. However, I accept Mills' point about the dramatic and important inconsistency this requires ascribing to Kant, and how striking it is to think Kant could have not noticed such an obvious problem. I argue that rather than trying to make Kant consistent, we can use the example of Kant's racism to tell us something about the nature of racism.¹²

Thus, Allais agrees not only that there is a "dramatic inconsistency" but also that it is striking that Kant did apparently not notice this "obvious problem." This fact, she believes, can "tell us something about the nature of racism: How pervasive it can be in a person's belief system and resistant to evidence – as shown by the possibility of a person's not noticing obvious contradictions in their thinking."¹³ On this view, it now seems that Kant's racism might be an interesting empirical phenomenon, and moral psychology might have a place in explaining it. But on this view, it also seems like Kant's racism is not a problem for his moral egalitarianism. While Allais's emphasis that racism can involve deep-seated cognitive dissonance provides an important lesson, it also misses what is most worrying about the famous moral philosopher's racism: namely, that whatever the alleged contradiction between his abstract egalitarianism and his racism may be, it is simply not as "obvious," "dramatic" and "flagrant" as either Mills, Allais or other contemporary Kant scholars present it. And this, as I will suggest below, has significant consequences for how we should understand Kant's ethics, and ultimately also for how we engage in moral and political philosophy more generally.

3. *The problems for the standard approach*

Although Kant scholars have devoted significant efforts to making sense of the alleged contradiction between Kant's racism and his abstract egalitarianism, they have so far devoted little effort to examining the precise nature of the contradiction. One reason for this lack of interest might be that the basic outlines of Kant's moral philosophy, and in particular Kant's insistence on the inviolable dignity of each person, have become almost synonymous with moral egalitarianism in general. Thus, to question the idea that racist ideology necessarily contradicts Kant's abstract egalitarianism is a counterintuitive route, to put it mildly.¹⁴ But if we really want to figure out if Kant's racism entails a failure of Kantian moral philosophy itself, rather than a mere failure of Kant the person, we had better pursue this route. As this section

¹²Allais (2016, p. 8).

¹³Allais (2016, p. 20).

¹⁴Of course, philosophy can become complacent about philosophical difficulties exactly where things are too intuitive: Adorno and Horkheimer warned us long ago that "by assuming the unity of humanity to have been already realized in principle, the liberal thesis serves as an apology for the existing order." (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 128).

demonstrates, what seems intuitively contradictory to many contemporary readers did not seem so to Kant; and as I will emphasize in the following section, this lack of an obvious contradiction can tell us something significant about the potential shortfalls of Kant's account of moral equality and how we should do moral philosophy more generally.

Here, then, are some of the worst remarks we find in Kant's work about non-White people:

- (A) Humanity has its highest degree of perfection in the White race. The yellow Indians have a somewhat lesser talent. The Negroes are much lower, and lowest of all is part of the American races (PG 9:316).¹⁵
- (B) Whites contain all the impulses [Triebfedern] of nature in affects and passions, all talents, all dispositions to culture and civilization and can obey as well as govern. They are the only ones who always advance toward perfection (Refl 15:878, translation mine).
- (C) [T]he Hindus have incentives, but they have a strong degree of composure, and they all look like philosophers. Despite this, they are nevertheless very much inclined toward anger and love. As a result, they acquire culture in the highest degree, but only in the arts and not in the sciences. They never raise it up to abstract concepts (V-Anth/Mensch 25:1187).
- (D) The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the ridiculous. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to adduce a single example where a Negro has demonstrated talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of Blacks who have been transported elsewhere from their countries, although very many of them have been set free, nevertheless not a single one has ever been found who has accomplished something great in art or science or shown any other praiseworthy quality [...] So essential is the difference between these two human races, and it seems to be just as great with regard to the capacities of mind as it is with respect to color (GSE 2:253).¹⁶
- (E) Americans and Blacks cannot govern themselves. They thus serve only for slaves (Refl 15:878, translation mine).
- (F) To adduce only one example: One makes use of the red slaves (Americans) in Surinam only for labors in the house because they are too weak for field labor, for which one uses Negroes (GSE 2:438n).

Quote A comes from Volume II of the *Physical Geography*, published in 1802.¹⁷ Quote B and E are both taken from Kant's sketches for his lectures

¹⁵Compare also Refl 15:877.

¹⁶Translation modified.

¹⁷Because there are similarly racist remarks in other works, I assume that this is an adequate representation of Kant's thought at the time. However, it is open to debate to what extent the *Physical Geography* can be said to be Kant's text at all. For a discussion, see the editorial preface to the translation of the *Physical Geography* in the CUP edition's volume on *Natural Science* (2012 pp. 434–437). For a detailed discussion of Kant's *Physical Geography*, see Elden and Mendieta (eds., 2011).

on anthropology during the 1780s, which are contained in his “Reflections” on anthropology. Quote C is taken from a student’s notes on one of Kant’s lectures on anthropology,¹⁸ and quotes D and F come from Kant’s (pre-critical) work *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* of 1764.

Quotes A–D clearly demonstrate that Kant believed in a racial hierarchy. Evidently, he believed that only (male) White Europeans have all the psychological and physiological “talents” that make human beings excel in work, in the sciences, and the arts. Quote E clearly indicates that Kant believed that some non-White people cannot politically govern themselves. And most importantly, quotes E and F might also suggest that Kant condoned slavery. In this context, it is also worth noting that before writing the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant never explicitly condemned slavery. Although Kant was clearly aware of the heated debates between defenders of and critics of the institution of chattel slavery,¹⁹ as well as the tortious treatments slaves were subject to,²⁰ he did not take an explicit stance on this topic in any of his published texts until the *Doctrine of Right*.

If Kant had condoned slavery for non-White people while also rejecting it implicitly through the Formula of Humanity and explicitly in his *Metaphysics of Morals*, this would indeed be a plausible contradiction. Although it is notoriously difficult to extrapolate what Kant might have meant exactly by treating someone as an end in themselves, and almost equally difficult to know what it means to treat someone *merely* as a means,²¹ it is uncontroversial that treating someone as a living tool is incompatible with treating them as an end in themselves. However, Kant also denies that slavery (whether for non-White people or White Europeans) could be a rightful institution in his *Metaphysics of Morals*.²² Already in the introduction to the *Doctrine of Right*, Kant claims that this volume deals with the relations between human beings who have both rights and duties vis-à-vis each other. By contrast, the

¹⁸This Academy Edition’s text of these lecture notes is based on the book *Immanuel Kant’s Menschenkunde oder philosophische Anthropologie*, edited by Johann Bergk (under the pseudonym of Friedrich Starke) in 1831. To my knowledge, we do not know where Bergk got the manuscript from and who originally took these notes.

¹⁹See ÜGTP 8:174n where Kant approvingly quotes a German text by Matthias Sprengel (1786) as written by a “knowledgeable man,” in which Sprengel had paraphrased the pro-slavery polemic by James Tobin (Tobin, 1785) against the abolitionist James Ramsey. For a discussion of the debate between Tobin and Ramsey, see Shyllon (1977, pp. 59–70). Kant was thus clearly aware of the arguments for and against the institution of slavery at the time.

²⁰See Kant’s remarks in his essay *Toward Perpetual Peace* at ZcF 8:359.

²¹For recent discussions of what it means to treat someone as a *mere* means, see Denis (2007), Kerstein (2009, 2013), Formosa (2014), Papadaki (2016), Patrone (2018) and Kleingeld (2020).

²²For the purpose of this paper, I leave aside the question how Kant’s account of the *Groundwork* and second *Critique* allows the move to his rejection of slavery in the *Doctrine of Right*. The precise nature of the relation between these works remains a topic of considerable controversy. This of course leaves open the possibility that Kant did not believe legal equality follows from moral equality. For the purpose of this paper, I assume that legal equality of at least able-minded adults would follow from moral equality in order to assume the strongest case for the standard reading, since such a continuity between moral and legal equality would then provide a plausible case of a contradiction in Kant.

book does not deal with humans' relationship to a being that has only rights but no duties (God), for a duty to such a being would be "transcendental," that is, no corresponding external subject to whom this duty is owed could be found. And, most importantly, Kant also says that his book does not deal with relations to beings who do not have rights but merely duties ("serfs, slaves"). But Kant does not merely reject slavery as a potential topic of the book, leaving open that it could still be an otherwise acceptable institution. Kant explicitly rejects this potential topic as *empty*, because it would imply that there are human beings without personality. And because all human beings are persons a doctrine of right need not concern itself with such empty topics.²³ Moreover, in section I of the *Doctrine of Right* (which deals with the acquisition of a right to property in external objects), Kant explicitly denies that anyone could own other human beings. So someone can be his own master (*sui iuris*) but cannot be the owner of himself (*sui dominus*) (cannot dispose of himself as he pleases) – still less can he dispose of others as he pleases – since he is accountable to the humanity in his own person. (MS 6:270).²⁴

Despite rejecting slavery in general, Kant also makes an exception in the case of a criminal who has "forfeited his personality by a crime." (MS 6:283). As Kant puts it, "Certainly no human being in a state can be without any dignity, since he at least has the dignity of a citizen. The exception is someone who has lost it by his own crime, because of which, though he is kept alive, he is made a mere tool of another's choice (either of the state or of another citizen)." (MS 6:329–30).²⁵ Notwithstanding this exception, Kant makes clear that such a loss of personality can only occur through a particularly grave crime. Thus, in the *Doctrine of Right*, Kant regards the legal institutions of slavery or serfdom as incompatible with the personhood of the subjugated. And however racist Kant's views of non-White people were, he clearly did not believe that not being White was literally a crime that would forfeit one's personality. As mentioned above, even the most critical interpreters like Charles Mills point out that Kant's work is incompatible with the denial of personhood to any human being merely because of the color of their skin.

Therefore, we might conclude that Kant's remarks on slavery in his unpublished notes for his lectures on anthropology (written sometime during the 1770s–1780s) are incompatible with his account of moral equality in the *Groundwork* as well as his substantive political and legal philosophy developed in the *Doctrine of Right* in the late 1790s. But consider again the following two remarks from Kant's preparatory notes on anthropology and his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*:

²³See also Kant's discussion of innate right as "innate equality" at MS 6:237 and Kant's remarks in his preparatory notes for *Toward Perpetual Peace* VAZef 23:174.

²⁴See also MS 6:283, 6:359–60 and V-NR/Feyerabend 27:1319.

²⁵Kant also denied that enemy combatants could be rightfully enslaved in war (MS 6:348–349).

- (E) Americans and Blacks cannot govern themselves. They thus serve only for slaves.
- (F) To adduce only one example: One makes use of the red slaves (Americans) in Surinam only for labors in the house because they are too weak for field labor, for which one uses Negroes.

These two statements demonstrate Kant's uncanny indifference to the suffering of non-White people as well as his beliefs in both racially determined characteristics (both physical and psychological) and a racial hierarchy. The even more troubling fact, however, is that neither of these racist diatribes is, strictly speaking, incompatible with Kant's formalistic account of moral equality. Kant's view of moral equality in the *Groundwork* is based on the thought that all mature rational beings have the capacity for autonomous practical reason and are thus capable of setting themselves moral ends. And Kant believed that this claim can be derived from an analysis of our practical reason: In representing some of my ends as *moral* ends, I represent them according to a particular form (i.e., the categorical imperative); and this form can be expressed in different ways in order to highlight the commitments that result from this form of representing ends. One of these commitments is that insofar as I take myself to be capable of representing moral ends through my practical reason, I must also accept the capacity of every other rational being to set themselves ends through practical reason (i.e., as an end in itself). This special capacity for setting ends makes a living being into a person; and for Kant, this is what a person's dignity consists in.²⁶ Quotes A-D clearly display Kant's belief in a racial hierarchy based on the idea that only (male) White Europeans have all the psychological and physiological "talents."²⁷ However, this belief by itself does not entail that Kant also believed non-White people are not in possession of practical reason and thus ends in themselves. Moreover, quote E does not claim that slavery or serfdom are rightful institutions (pace Mills' suggestion in the passage quoted above); rather, E claims that an entire group of people (most

²⁶Compare also Kant's definition of "person" in the introduction to the *Metaphysics of Morals* at MS 6:223.

²⁷It is worth repeating that in this regard, Kant was not simply a child of his time. Kant's remarks in his review of the first two volumes of Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784 and 1785) make clear that by the mid 1780s, Kant had become aware of conflicting anthropological evidence available at the time, and the importance of picking one's sources carefully: "But now from a multiplicity of descriptions of countries one can prove, if one wants to, [...] that Americans and Negroes are each a race, sunk beneath the remaining members of the human species in their mental predispositions, but on the other side by just as apparent records that as regards their natural predispositions, they are to be estimated equal to every other inhabitant of the world; so it remains to the choice of the philosopher whether he wants to assume differences of nature or wants to judge everything in accordance with the principle *tout comme chez nous*, so that all his systems he erected on so shaky a foundation must take on the look of rickety hypotheses." (RezHerder 8:62). For a discussion of Kant's debate with Herder, and his ensuing dispute with Georg Forster, see especially Eberl (2019, pp. 401–407).

non-White people) would not be good at anything except serving as slaves.²⁸ The same applies to quote F. Notwithstanding its hideousness, it does not logically contradict either the view that all human beings are ends in themselves qua their capacity for practical reason, nor does it contradict Kant's claim that slavery cannot be a rightful legal institution.²⁹

But would it not be more plausible to think Kant changed his mind between writing the racist remarks E and F quoted above and writing his *Doctrine of Right* with its strict rejection of slavery? That Kant had “second thoughts” on race? Although I am quite skeptical of this conjecture, Kant may well have changed his mind.³⁰ Whether (and to what extent) he might have done so we will never know for sure. But whether or not he did so is, I believe, orthogonal to the present question – however interesting it might otherwise be. For the present question is whether there really is an obvious contradiction between Kant's racism and his abstract egalitarianism and what consequences this might have for our understanding of Kant's ethics and Kantian moral and political philosophy in general. If there is no such obvious contradiction, then this fact remains of philosophical significance

²⁸Note that this is not exactly the same claim that readers often attribute to Kant, namely that Americans and Black people are “natural slaves” (Mills, 2014, p. 22) or “made to be” slaves (McCabe, 2019, p. 6). At least if “natural slave” is taken in Aristotle's sense of the term, this view clearly cannot be attributed to Kant. Kant's racist diatribe claims that Americans and Black people are only really good at the work of slaves, and do not excel at other work; his claim is not that there is some moral or teleological principle determining that they ought to serve as slaves.

²⁹This has also been pointed out by Boxill (2017, p. 46). One might object to Boxill and my interpretation of quotes E and F by claiming that this is too charitable to Kant. After all, both quotes might sound like *implicit* condonements of the enslavement of non-white people. Thus, one might be tempted to follow Kleingeld and think that at the time he wrote these passages, Kant still approved of slavery and changed his view later (in the 1790s) when writing the *Metaphysics of Morals*. However, I believe we must reject such a reading for two reasons. First, reading these early passages E and F as condonements of slavery would also presuppose either a consequentialism or teleological thinking that Kant rejected – for Kant, whether or not someone is good at a task is simply irrelevant to whether a particular social relation is morally wrong. And second, Kant's handwritten remains also contain notes more explicitly critical of slavery, like the following from between 1772 and 1777: “It is well possible that human beings are ruled over as slaves or minors through coercion, status and prejudice; but all these evils must come to an end one day, and philosophy must provide the principles for this, if it should have any use at all.” (Refl 15:230, translation mine). Compare also Kant's discussion of suicide in the *Vigilantius* lectures from 1793/94. There, Kant discusses two casuistical questions about suicide in which he wants to exemplify both the immorality of suicide while also highlighting why suicide can seem so reasonable. One example concerns a slave who wants to end their life because they do not consider the life of a slave worth living (V-MS/Vigil 27:603). This example strongly suggests that Kant slavery was an unjust institution. And finally, in Kant's *Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and the sublime* from 1764, he describes the disposition of a virtuous person: “He [the person of a melancholic frame] has a lofty feeling for the dignity of human nature. He esteems himself and holds a human being to be a creature who deserves respect. He does not tolerate abject submissiveness and breathes freedom in a noble breast. All shackles, from the golden ones worn at court to the heavy irons of the galley-slave, are abominable to him.” (GSE 2:221) For further discussion of this topic cf. Lu-Adler (2022b), who argues that Kant “was morally indifferent to [slavery] (as an institution), and so he neither straightforwardly endorsed it as morally permissible nor condemned it as morally wrong” (ibid 269).

³⁰For a detailed discussion of this question, see especially Kleingeld (2007), Bernasconi (2011), Kleingeld (2014) and Lu-Adler (2022b).

whether or not (and to whatever extent) Kant might have changed his mind.³¹

Alternatively, could it not be that when Kant denied that slavery could be a rightful institution in the *Doctrine of Right*, he held on to a silent taxonomy of persons, according to which some human beings are not persons (as Mills has suggested)? As I already pointed out above, the reason for ascribing such a *silent* taxonomy – contrary to what Kant explicitly says about all human beings being ends in themselves – has been the assumption that there is a “flagrant” contradiction between Kant’s racist remarks and his abstract egalitarianism. However, Kant’s racist remarks do not explicitly condone slavery, despite their hideousness; nor do they deny the personhood of non-White people. Thus, Mills overstates the reason for attributing such a silent taxonomy to Kant. If Kant’s statements are not obviously contradictory, then we also have no obvious reason to assume a silent taxonomy either; and surely, we cannot presuppose a silent taxonomy in Kant only to then justify our attribution of this silent taxonomy to Kant by pointing to an alleged contradiction that itself relies on presuming that very silent taxonomy.

Although Kant’s racist remarks do not, technically speaking, imply an acceptance of slavery, they still demonstrate his belief in a racial hierarchy – only (male) “Whites” are said to have all the psychological and physiological “talents” that make human beings excel. Importantly, quote (E) suggests that non-White people could not successfully govern themselves politically. Even if this is not an endorsement of slavery, at the very least it suggests that Kant did not endorse the idea of equal political and legal rights; and for the sake of the argument, we may plausibly take it to suggest that Kant also would not have endorsed equal rights to political participation and representation.³² Could this be the “flagrant contradiction” that the standard reading assumes? Unfortunately, it cannot. The inconvenient truth is that Kant’s abstract account of the moral equality of all persons in the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* is just not obviously incompatible with egalitarian substantive political doctrines. In fact, Kant himself explicitly considered the question what rights followed merely from the status as a person, and denied that this status would be sufficient for

³¹One limited connection between the present topic and the question whether Kant’s views changed is that if there is no obvious contradiction, then we also incidentally have fewer reasons to think that Kant would have changed his mind.

³²To my knowledge, there is no explicit discussion in Kant’s work of the political and legal rights that non-white people should be accorded within the state. In the *Doctrine of Right*, Kant eventually discusses the rights of indigenous peoples in the context of international law, in his discussion of colonialism and the settlements of land (and affirms their rights to land). One might perhaps take the claim that all peoples have a right to their land, and Kant’s rejection of colonialism, as incompatible with the idea that women, non-white people, and dependent male citizens should not have full political rights within the same polity. However, this alleged incompatibility is, once again, not self-evident and would require more complex elaboration.

equal legal and political rights. For instance, in the *Doctrine of Right*, Kant makes clear that he believes women should not be accorded the same legal and political rights as men, while also explicitly affirming women's moral equality as ends in themselves.

For instance, in a discussion of citizenship, Kant says:

[B]eing fit to vote presupposes the independence of someone who, as one of the people, wants to be not just a part of the commonwealth but also a member of it, that is, a part of the commonwealth acting from his own choice in community with others. This quality of being independent, however, requires a distinction between active and passive citizens, though the concept of a passive citizen seems to contradict the concept of a citizen as such. - The following examples can serve to remove this difficulty: [...] a minor (naturaliter vel civiliter); all women and, in general, anyone whose preservation in existence (his being fed and protected) depends not on his management of his own business but on arrangements made by another (except the state). (MS 6:314)

In the paragraph immediately following Kant's characterization of women as necessarily "passive citizens" who should not be allowed to vote, he continues:

This dependence upon the will of others and this inequality is, however, *in no way opposed to their freedom and equality as human beings*, who together make up a people [...] But not all persons qualify with equal right to vote within this constitution, that is, to be citizens and not mere associates in the state. For from their being able to demand that all others treat them in accordance with the laws of natural freedom and equality as passive parts of the state it does not follow that they also have the right to manage the state itself as active members of it [...] (MS 6:315, emphasis added)

Given his misogynistic discussion of the status of women,³³ Kant clearly did not believe that abstract moral equality, that is, the mere status of every person as an end in themselves, entailed that every person should also have even remotely similar legal and political rights – as we saw, Kant explicitly denied this. Instead, Kant's discussion of women and the family in the *Doctrine of Right* makes clear that he viewed some human beings as akin to children: Although they have dignity and are ends in themselves, he also believed that they would not have the physical and psychological abilities to successfully govern a body politic, a household, or even themselves.³⁴

It is tempting to think that Kant might here simply contradict himself once again. However, to deny the relevance of Kant's misogynistic views in the *Doctrine of Right* for the present question by presuming that Kant must there simply contradict himself once again would beg the question why we

³³A discussion of Kant's views on women would be far beyond the scope of this paper. Important passages in this context are GSE 2:230ff and 2:236, MS 6:276–280, 6:314 and 6:358, Anth 7:303–309, WA 8:35, MAM 8:113, and TP 8:295. For recent discussions of Kant's views of women, see especially Varden (2017) and Kleingeld (2019).

³⁴Note that Kant at times expressed (surprising) confidence in the *moral* knowledge of children. See, for example, MS 6:480–81 and TP 8:286.

should discount Kant's explicit discussion of the unequal legal and political rights of moral equals as evidence for his own conception of moral equality. Surely, we cannot simply preclude Kant's views on women's rights as evidence for his conception of moral equality only to then justify this preclusion by saying that his views on women's rights are incompatible with his moral egalitarianism. As Kant did not believe that it was at all contradictory to claim that women should have significantly fewer rights than men, it seems difficult – however tempting it may be – to claim that there is really an obvious contradiction between Kant's own abstract moral egalitarianism and his racist beliefs about the alleged unsuitability of non-White people to be active members of a body politic.³⁵

Similarly, one might object that Kant's abstract egalitarianism is just not compatible with the idea of passive citizenship in the *Doctrine of Right*. Although most commentators on Kant's political philosophy take for granted that some citizens (paradigmatically children) should not have active rights of political participation, one may take issue either with the notion of passive citizenship in general or with the way Kant draws the distinction. Over the last decades, existing literature on Kant's *Doctrine of Right* has become truly voluminous – including ample controversy over Kant's notion of passive citizenship.³⁶ However, the crucial point is this: If passive citizenship in general or Kant's way of drawing the line are incompatible with Kant's abstract moral egalitarianism, then this incompatibility is again far from obvious – for, this incompatibility is precisely one of the open questions in contemporary Kant scholarship. Whatever the potential contradiction between Kant's formal egalitarianism and the idea of passive citizenship, it is not so “flagrant,” “startling,” “obvious” or “gross” as to prevent a considerable amount of philosophical debate.

Of course, none of this is to say that a Kantian egalitarianism could not, when further developed, turn out incompatible with Kant's racist (and misogynist) commitments. Rather, I am suggesting that any such incompatibility is far less obvious and flagrant than commentators so far assume; that, further, Kant explicitly considered the possibility of such an incompatibility and denied it (in the case of the political rights of women); and that this lack of any obvious contradiction should be problematized in discussions of Kant's ethics because, as I argue in the following section, it highlights a potential blind spot in a particular way of doing moral and political philosophy more generally.

³⁵In fact, Kant's political inegalitarianism goes much further than his racism and misogyny. As the passage quoted above (MS 6:314) already indicated, Kant also argued that white males are not fit for being active citizens if they are dependent on someone else through their employment. In this, Kant is entirely unoriginal. For another politically inegalitarian view on which all manual laborers are allegedly unfit for being citizens, see Aristotle (1998, 1278a20–21, 1328b33–1329a39).

³⁶For recent discussion, see especially Davies (2021), Moran (2021) and Vrousalis (2022).

4. *Kant's racism as a philosophical problem*

What, then, should we make of Kant's moral egalitarianism? Nothing that was said so far entails that Kant's abstract analysis of practical reason in the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* was, technically speaking, wrong; rather, I have suggested that is not enough. Kant's moral egalitarianism might be necessary for a substantive account of moral equality, but it is far from obvious that it would be sufficient. While the idea of human beings as ends in themselves can rule out some inegalitarian accounts like Aristotle's defense of slavery, it is not clear that Kant's abstract egalitarianism should also be enough to rule out bigoted views of the type we encounter in Kant's own writings, as most authors still habitually assume.

But how is any of this of philosophical interest? In other words, why might anyone outside of Kant scholarship care? Kant's racism is philosophically interesting because it demonstrates a potential blind spot within formalistic approaches to moral and political philosophy, and should serve as a warning to other moral and political philosophers whose ideal vision of society is supposedly derived from abstract moral principles. As I have argued above, Kant's abstract egalitarianism seems *prima facie* compatible with conceptions of what ethical and political life should be that (hopefully) most of us would intuitively judge morally repugnant. (Indeed, I suspect that this seeming compatibility of Kant's egalitarianism with such a wide variety of substantive conceptions of ethical and political life is part of the explanation for its immense popularity.) And if Kant's egalitarianism is *prima facie* compatible with stark forms of racism, then relying on Kant's conception of moral equality by itself cannot be enough to show that we are not merely varnishing our existing prejudices and parochial intuitions.³⁷

So far, few commentators have openly acknowledged the *prima facie* compatibility between Kant's racism and his abstract egalitarianism, and none of them have yet explicitly problematized this *prima facie* compatibility to the extent I believe we should. Todd Hedrick, toward the end of his discussion of the place of racial differences in Kant's teleological conception of world history, briefly mentions this problem in passing. As he points out, Kant is "maddeningly sanguine about permitting substantive inequalities within structures of formal equality, as his insistence that restricting citizenship to economically self-sufficient men is perfectly compatible with the moral demand for civic equality and freedom for all attests." Hedrick

³⁷One may even argue that Kant's abstract egalitarianism – if its limits are not taken seriously – can be a powerful ideology in the pejorative sense. Although Marx himself identified ideology with *false* beliefs that are in the interest of one social class, and whose existence can be explained functionally as helping maintain a system of material and sexual exploitation, we might follow Michael Forster's broader conception of ideology as not necessarily involving falsehood (Forster, 2015). From this perspective, an abstract conception of equality might be ideology *par excellence*, insofar as it might be mistaken as justifying every other conservative conception of a "just society."

continues: “Many of us today would, I think, be much quicker than Kant to claim that substantive inequalities often render formal equality empty, although the point at which substantive inequality undermines formal equality is more often than not debatable.”³⁸ Unfortunately, Hedrick does not discuss this problem any further in his discussion of Kant’s cosmopolitanism, and his mention of the problem is not quite as explicit as could be. By contrast, Elvira Basevich perspicuously points out that it is not at all obvious – contrary to the frequent claims by Kant scholars – how Kant’s abstract egalitarianism should contradict his racism.³⁹ But unfortunately, Basevich also does not problematize this potential consistency itself. Instead, Basevich (re)interprets Kant’s theory of race as part of an alleged “non-ideal theory,” that is, as meant to “illustrate the human species” tendency to deviate from the requirements of justice,⁴⁰ and Kant’s abstract egalitarianism as part of an alleged Kantian “ideal theory.” Thus, on her view, the problem is not any potential contradiction between Kant’s alleged “non-ideal theory” (i.e., his theory of race) and his alleged “ideal theory” (i.e., his abstract universalism and mature political philosophy) but the implausibility of Kant’s alleged “non-ideal theory.”⁴¹ Consequently, Basevich’s response is to provide a new “Kantian” non-ideal theory, as an alternative to Kant’s own bigoted theory of race: namely, a Kantian approach to racial justice reform. Although I find Basevich’s proposal for a Kantian approach to racial justice reform compelling, this way of framing Kant’s racism also retains a short-fall: From this perspective, the problem of the *prima facie* compatibility between Kant’s abstract egalitarianism and his racism drops out of view. For now, we simply focus on finding a plausible “non-ideal” theory. But if Kant’s alleged “non-ideal” (i.e., racist) theory was compatible with Kant’s “ideal theory” (i.e., his abstract egalitarianism and mature political philosophy) to begin with, what, we may ask, is the substantive content of the (presumably) new Kantian “ideal theory” in light of which we judge the current state of affairs as unjust in the first place? Unfortunately, Basevich’s account of Kantian racial justice reform does not discuss this question. Thus, despite her astute observation that Kant scholars have been too quick in assuming an obvious contradiction in Kant’s thought, on Basevich’s account, the philosophical problem highlighted by Kant’s racism – the relation between an abstract principle of equality and substantive ideals – drops out of view.⁴²

³⁸Hedrick, 2008, p. 267.

³⁹Basevich, 2020, pp. 227–228.

⁴⁰Ibid. 227.

⁴¹This interpretation, taking Kant’s abstract universalism to be his “ideal theory” and his theory of race part of his “non-ideal theory,” is also adopted by Lu-Adler (2022a pp. 272–273). Since Basevich’s treatment of this topic is significantly more elaborate my discussion focuses on Basevich (2020).

⁴²In this way, Basevich follows authors like Mills and Allais who hold on to Kant’s abstract egalitarianism in different ways and thus deny that Kant’s racism points to a deeper problem with abstract egalitarianism. Indeed, Basevich explicitly claims to “tackle Charles Mills’s suggestion to theorize a ‘black radical Kantianism’, because following Mills, it is instructive to illustrate the extent to which Kant is [a] helpful resource for racial justice.” (Basevich, 2020, p. 224 n7).

As mentioned above, the fact that Kant's racism highlights this philosophical problem does not imply that his abstract analysis of practical reason was wrong; rather, my argument has suggested that this analysis and its resulting moral egalitarianism are not enough to provide the antidote to Kant's racism they are often hoped to be. Consequently, Kant's moral philosophy need not be outright rejected – rather, what must be rejected is (merely) the mistaken belief that a correct, abstract formula will, by itself, give us a full understanding of how to collectively build a practice of moral equality.

This thought prompts several important questions, two broad and two narrow. If Kantian abstract egalitarianism is not enough to provide an antidote to racism by itself, what else is needed to respond to racism in a philosophically satisfying way? And how should philosophy as a discipline deal with racism? Even if the literature within contemporary critical philosophy of race were less extensive than it is, it would be immodest to suggest or outline where exactly this question should lead us at the end of an essay on Kant. Much closer to the spirit of this paper are the following two narrower questions: What might it look like to respond to Kant's racism within a broadly Kantian framework? And what challenges might such approaches face? While a full discussion of even these narrower questions would go beyond the scope of this paper too, a brief outline is still worthwhile.

One tempting possibility might be to think that Kant's abstract egalitarianism simply needs to be furnished with adequate empirical knowledge about human nature.⁴³ In his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant concurred with Hume in the bizarrely false assertion that “among the hundreds of thousands of Blacks [...] not a single one has ever been found who has accomplished something great in art or science or shown any other praiseworthy quality.” In light of such statements, it might be tempting to think of the required supplement as simply consisting of adequate empirical knowledge.

However, this approach faces its own challenges. First, one might worry that if we conceded the task of countering racism to empirical investigation, we would also have to concede that philosophy itself could not explain why a certain type of racism is wrong. Because by conceding the question whether or not some persons are fit for substantive moral and political equality, we would also concede to the racist what they want most: namely, the air of moral legitimacy for an empirical investigation into the characteristics of any singled-out group. Once the task of determining whether or not some person or persons are fit for moral and political equality is conceded to empirical investigation it is difficult to see how, on that basis alone, it could ever be taken away. Without some further philosophical resources, one could presumably only counter the racist with existing empirical evidence and argue that enough empirical investigation has taken place. However, one may

⁴³See, for example, Hill & Boxill (2001).

think that such a response would omit an important moral criticism. More importantly still, this way of supplementing Kant's abstract egalitarianism would not so much answer the philosophical question about the relation between abstract principles and substantive ideals that Kant's racism highlights as push it to a different place. In other words, this approach only "supplements" Kant's abstract egalitarianism on the assumption that people's natural abilities are decisive for determining their rights as moral equals. However, whether or not, for example, rights to political participation should be distributed in a way that tracks people's natural abilities and talents – and if so, which ones? – is itself a normative question that is not obviously answered by Kant's abstract egalitarianism. And this is to say nothing yet of the epistemic difficulties of estimating people's "natural abilities and talents." Because surely the mere absence of certain types of achievements cannot be taken as evidence of lacking abilities and talent. As Emmanuel Eze has perspicuously pointed out in the context of Kant and 18th century colonialism: "Kant notes that some races, as if by right, 'have educated the others and controlled them with weapons.' [...] He does not raise the question of whether it is the 'education' and superior weapons of the conquering tribe that produce the 'immaturity' of the conquered."⁴⁴ Under conditions of inequality, one may see a lack of talents and achievements where one is really staring at the work of oppression.

Another possible way of supplementing Kant's abstract egalitarianism within a Kantian framework might be to start from a postulate of political, rather than merely moral, equality and to rely on some hermeneutic device like a contractalist procedure and normative assumptions about people's substantive interests to guide our political imagination. The most formidable recent attempt to develop such an anti-racist Kantianism is undoubtedly Charles Mills' political philosophy.⁴⁵ Conceiving of existing political reality as embodying an exclusionary racial contract, we may ask what a truly universal social contract may look like and how reparative justice might address existing and previous wrongs. Of course, an essay on Kant's racism is not the place to provide a full discussion of Mills' political philosophy. Here, I only want to mention one difficulty this approach would have to respond to: Even a postulate of political equality cannot ensure that the philosophical difficulty of moving from abstract to substantive egalitarianism will not return. In the preface to his theory of political equality, Charles Beitz draws our attention to a version of this problem for theories of democracy and political participation. Speaking in the context of egalitarian institutional reforms in the United States from the 1960s to late 1980s, Beitz points out:

⁴⁴Eze (2001, p. 81).

⁴⁵See especially Mills (2017, 2018).

All of these reforms were defended by their proponents as requirements of political equality. Yet, as continuing controversy in the courts, the legislatures, and the political parties attests, there is no consensus about the meaning of this principle. Even the most ardent supporter of the reforms is bound to be troubled by this questioning: while we feel confident that political equality means something, it is surprisingly difficult to give it a clear explanation and defense.⁴⁶

Beitz's himself proposes for a contractualist account he labels "complex proceduralism," relying both on a hypothetical social contract procedure and a presumed set of substantive, regulative interests of individual citizens that help him determine what might count as "sufficient reason to refuse to accept" procedures of political participation. Here, the main challenge is to supply both the structure of the procedure and the normative assumptions about people's interests in a way that does not smuggle our existing prejudices back into our substantive account of equality. But whatever we might think about Beitz's concrete proposal, he perspicuously identifies the underlying philosophical difficulty in the context of political participation:

The most natural thought is that a requirement of procedural equality is compelled by some version of the more basic principle that persons have a right to be treated as equals. But [...] there are very deep difficulties in this relationship, and its plausibility fades on analysis. To anticipate, equal treatment might be seen either as an abstract moral requirement or as a concrete rule with determinate institutional content. If the idea is regarded abstractly enough to be noncontroversial, then its application to institutional questions will be uncertain without controversial intervening premises. [...] If, on the other hand, the principle is taken to specify a determinate institutional right – for example, a right to have one's expressed interests given equal weight in the determination of policy – then it will fail to settle the issue that provoked it.⁴⁷

As I hope to have demonstrated, the problem Beitz identified in his 1989 book (as well as the surprisingly common disinterest in this problem⁴⁸) appears to be merely one instance of a larger phenomenon: the philosophical difficulty of getting from abstract principles to substantive ideals. And as examples like Mills' "Black radical Kantianism" and Basevich's proposal for Kantian racial justice reform show, some authors may have compelling political ideals while still leaving open the question how, exactly, their substantive ideals and postulates are supposed to emerge from their abstract Kantian egalitarianism.

As already mentioned above, this is not to rule out once and for all the possibility that a further developed Kantian egalitarianism might turn out

⁴⁶Beitz, 1989, p. x.

⁴⁷Beitz, 1989, pp. 6–7.

⁴⁸As Beitz points out in the context of theories of democracy: "Not everybody will agree that there is any need for a theory of political equality. In fact, the most widely held view of the subject is to deny it. [...] Something like this conception of political equality represents a persistent conviction among contemporary democratic theorists; indeed, it has become a kind of philosophical orthodoxy, perhaps because it has seemed to express so obvious a truth as not to require systematic defense." (Beitz, 1989, pp. 4–5).

incompatible with Kant's racist and misogynist commitments. Rather, I have argued that such an incompatibility is far less obvious than readers have traditionally assumed and highlighted some problems for developing the Kantian approach further. A full discussion of how we should go beyond Kant's abstract egalitarianism would go far beyond the scope of this paper – and possibly also beyond the scope of a single book. Because if my argument was correct, then we should not expect such a discussion to be reducible to yet another concise formula unless we want to rehearse the problem of abstract egalitarianism yet again. Thus, my comparatively modest aim throughout this paper has been to point out that Kant's racism highlights a genuine philosophical difficulty: How do we get from abstract principles to substantive ideals in a way that doesn't merely polish up our existing prejudices?⁴⁹

Corresponding to this philosophical difficulty of getting from principles to substantive ideals, there is a potential blind spot in moral and political philosophy when it relies too complacently on abstract principles. And getting the seeming compatibility between Kant's racism and his abstract egalitarianism in view demonstrates this blind spot in one of our most prominent accounts of moral equality. In this way, Kant's racism is philosophically significant quite unlike, say, Aristotle's defense of slavery. Aristotle's views on the permissibility of slavery are deeply problematic, but hardly anyone would treat Aristotle's ethics as an uncontroversial starting point for a progressive account of moral and political equality. By contrast, as Robert Bernasconi has aptly put it, what makes the racism of the European Enlightenment philosophers so troubling is that 'they join their racism to the new universalism or cosmopolitanism, which is supposed to be one of the great achievements of the Enlightenment and an antidote to racism'.⁵⁰ And this remains a popular view about Kant's ethics today: Similar to Mills' and Basevich's attempt to theorize a "Black radical Kantianism," Jennifer Mensch has

⁴⁹Of course, such polishing up of existing prejudices with abstract egalitarian formulas is not the only way in which philosophy – and entire philosophical traditions – can be implicated in racism. For a discussion of another way, see Katrin Flikschuh's "Philosophical Racism" (2018). Flikschuh identifies a form of philosophical racism consisting in "unstated background assumptions about which contexts and domains of human experience are or are not worthy of philosophical reflection." (Ibid. 103). Because of this type of academic racism, Flikschuh ultimately suggests: "Philosophical discussions about racial injustice assume that the discipline is capable of offering theoretical solutions to it; my argument has been that our inherited terms of philosophical discourse are themselves a likely source of the problem." (Ibid. 107). Thus, our arguments reach similar conclusions, albeit for different (if mutually compatible) reasons.

⁵⁰Bernasconi (2002, pp. 146–147). Although Bernasconi's remark captures perfectly the general reaction to Kant's and other Enlightenment philosophers' racism, it is somewhat misleading to call the universalism and cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment "new." Earlier versions of universalism were a central tenet of ancient Stoicism. See for instance Cicero, 1991, pp. 108–111. For a detailed discussion of Stoic cosmopolitanism, see especially Schofield (1991). For a comparison of Kant's and the Stoic's cosmopolitanism, and Kant's reception of the latter, see Nussbaum (1997). Christian philosophers had also long since believed in a basic moral equality of all humans. See, for instance, Augustine (1998, pp. 942–945).

recently claimed that “we must take Kant’s universalism for what it is: an approach to morality whose own claims undermine the racist provincialism on display in Kant’s works” because “the language of universal moral worth [...] still offers us a conceptual tool of the kind that can be helpful when combatting the ongoing problems of racism and misogyny today.”⁵¹ However, if my argument was correct, then we have to take seriously the possibility that Kant’s abstract egalitarianism that dominates much of contemporary moral and political philosophy cannot, by itself, provide this antidote.⁵²

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⁵¹Mensch (2017, pp. 142 and 143).

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