

Will the real Kant please stand up

The challenge of Enlightenment racism to the study of the history of philosophy

Robert Bernasconi

This article poses the question of racism in philosophy. I will be referring to the racism that we often find in the texts of some of the most eminent figures of the history of Western philosophy, particularly Locke and Kant. They seem to express racist views that appear to us, but not apparently to them, to run counter to the ethical principles that they themselves proclaimed. However, the focus of this article is not so much on their racism, but on our ways of addressing it, or, more often, our ways of not addressing it. My question is whether there is not an institutional racism within contemporary philosophy that emerges in our tendency to ignore or otherwise play down their racism while we celebrate their principles. It is to my mind shocking to see how little thought contemporary philosophers give to this issue, although there are definite signs that there is now at least a recognition of the problem, just as the sexism of so much philosophy is also now being more carefully scrutinized.¹ Because the details of both Locke's and Kant's racism are now more readily available to anybody who wants to know about them than they were even three or four years ago, it is important to think about what difference they might make to the way these thinkers are discussed and taught. In other words, we must explore the possibility, which some people may want to dismiss too quickly as a symptom of political correctness in the academy, that these investigations raise serious and difficult philosophical questions that we need to attend to as a matter of urgency.

The unwillingness of philosophers generally to confront, for example, the failure of Locke and Kant to oppose the African slave trade does not arise out of a healthy refusal to engage in tabloid philosophy, but represents both a moral and a philosophical shortcoming.

I should make it clear at the outset that I do not understand this article as offering reasons not to read them. In spite of my best efforts to avoid giving precisely this impression, some people have assimilated my efforts to the way that certain scholars attempted to use the facts of Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism as a way to expel him from the canon: according to Gilbert Ryle, because Heidegger was not a good man, he cannot have been a good philosopher.² But I have never used that argument, nor sought to apply any variation of it to the works of Locke or Kant. My point is not that we should now bypass these thinkers, but that, given their unquestioned importance, such that we cannot afford not to read them, we should make their racism a further reason to interrogate them. In other words, because they were unquestionably major philosophers whose impact lives on outside the academy as well as in it, their racism has a particular claim to our attention. This is what makes Kant's racism more philosophically interesting than that of Christoph Meiners, for example. So how should we address the racism of Locke and Kant? I will detail three initial tasks, but this is not intended as an exhaustive list.

The first task is to research, acknowledge and address philosophically the racism of canonical philosophers in such a way that it is seen in relation to the larger body of their work. This includes raising the question of how the racism of these thinkers relates to their philosophy. For example, Frege was strongly anti-Semitic, but it is hard to draw a connection between his anti-Semitism and his philosophy. Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism raises serious questions that cannot be evaded by any philosophical assessment of his work, but his anti-Semitism, although undeniable, is not so easily associated with his philosophy,

although an argument along these lines can be formulated. The case against Heidegger quite properly relies on the fact that he was at work in a crucial time period when the question of the fate of the Jews could not be evaded, but at other times other moral questions impose themselves. Slavery was one of these. Western philosophy has been and is still largely in denial about its racism, not least because most specialists tend to be defensive about the thinkers on whom they have devoted years of study.

Take Locke, first. It is true that Locke scholars for a number of years have recognized the need to address the question of his leading role in the administration of British colonial activities and his investment in the slave trade through the Royal African Company, as well as the Company of Merchant Adventurers, who operated in the Bahamas, but the consideration of these topics is still largely the preserve of historians and political theorists, as if they raised no philosophical questions.³ Although the precise role that Locke played in writing *The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* is unknown and may never be settled, it seems that, when that document grants to slaveholders ‘absolute power and authority’ over their Negro slaves, the reference to ‘power’ was added to the manuscript in his own handwriting to read: ‘Every Freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and Authority over his Negro slaves, of what opinion or Religion soever.’⁴ The point of the specific article of the *Fundamental Constitutions* was to resolve the question of whether conversion to Christianity on the part of the slave would jeopardize the slaveholder’s interest in his property. But Locke’s intervention in 1669 was continuous with his insistence in the *Second Treatise of Government* that subjection to ‘absolute, arbitrary, power’ defines slavery.⁵ With reference to power, the terms ‘absolute’ and ‘arbitrary’ are used by Locke virtually interchangeably.⁶ And yet, as a generation of scholars have now repeatedly observed, the chapter ‘Of Slavery’ in the *Second Treatise* clearly excludes chattel slavery of the kind practised in Carolina, because it is restricted to captives in a just war.⁷ Locke must have recognized that what he said about legitimate forms of slavery in the *Second Treatise* contradicted the conditions he helped to establish for Negro slaves in Carolina. And the fact that ‘Slaves bought with Money’ by planters in the West Indies make an appearance in the *First Treatise* shows that he was perfectly capable of relating his political theory to conditions outside England, when it helped his argument.⁸ Nevertheless, most commentators on Locke take it for granted that what needs to be explained is merely a contingent,

anomalous, aberrant Locke behind which lies the benign farsighted liberal Locke, the Locke of whom Lockeans are proud to be the heirs.

Turning to Kant, it is hard to know whether the fact that Kant scholars waited for non-specialists like Emmanuel Eze and me to raise the issue of Kant’s racism was because these scholars did not know the full range of Kant’s works very well – which would be somewhat damning if true – or because they persuaded themselves that there was nothing here worth discussing.⁹ In any event, Kant’s essays on race were acknowledged by philosophers until the Second World War, and it was only after that time that recognition of their existence seemed to be confined to non-philosophers, such as Leon Poliakov and George Mosse, who included reference to Kant in their books on the background to the Holocaust.¹⁰ It is true that some philosophers, and not just historians of science, when writing on the ‘Critique of Teleological Judgment’, saw that some of the central problems addressed in that work were first formulated by Kant in his essays on race.¹¹ However, the racism that is apparent in those essays, as in his lectures on anthropology and on physical geography, was almost never brought into relation with his teleology, his moral philosophy, or his essay on universal history, in spite of the obvious question that they raised: how could his racism coexist with his moral universalism?¹²

Discussions of the racism of Enlightenment philosophers are often met by the response that the philosopher in question – it does not really matter who it is – simply shared the assumptions of the time. This suggests a second task: one must recognize the importance of context for an understanding of these philosophers. To assess their remarks one needs to know the range of views being expressed at the time in which they wrote. This exercises a form of external control on our judgements. The ‘child of his time’ defence cannot be used until we research what their contemporaries thought and particularly how their contemporaries responded to them. Although there does not appear to have been a thoroughgoing public debate about the legitimacy of chattel slavery until some time after Locke’s death, we do know that he was familiar with a debate, involving one of his former students, over the question of whether Christians can be enslaved, a question that concerned planters fearful about the impact on their investment of missionary efforts among slaves.¹³ Blumenbach objected to some of Kant’s racial remarks against the Tahitians as unfair.¹⁴ Concern about Kant’s racism is not therefore a ‘new concern’, the product simply of sensibilities that

have only recently surfaced. This part of the inquiry is important because it makes it possible to decide whether or not an interpretation is anachronistic.¹⁵

A third and somewhat related task is to inquire into their sources, paying particular attention to the selection of sources. What did they know, when did they know it, and what could they have easily known had they wanted to? To my surprise, in raising these questions I have made the kind of historical discoveries that one would have thought specialists in the area would have known long ago. My earlier discussion of Locke's insertion of the term 'power' in the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* is a case in point. Even though the fact that Locke had a role in the drafting of this document has been widely known, so far as I am aware no scholars focused on the evidence that Locke added the term 'power' until I did.¹⁶ Similarly, I find it surprising that Kant scholars would not have noticed that Kant had alternative accounts of the character of Africans at his disposal from that 'On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy', and that when he characterized the freed Negroes of America and England as – like the Gypsies in Germany – unwilling without exception to work, he deliberately gave credence to the account provided by James Tobin of the pro-slavery faction rather than that proposed by James Ramsay, a prominent opponent of slavery, although both were equally available to him in the same periodical.¹⁷ Kant was well aware of the problem of alternative sources and explained why in his review of Herder's *Ideas*: one could prove whatever one chose to prove.¹⁸ But that is why Kant's own choices must be carefully examined. Kant's failure to express disapproval of the chattel slavery of Africans, either in his published works or, so far as I can tell, in his lectures, has to be understood in the context of the fact that this was one of the most prominent moral issues of his day.

Excising contradictions

These three tasks – identifying the problematic statements of these thinkers that are *prima facie* racist, locating them in the context of their works and the broader historical context, and establishing their sources – are basic tasks that intellectual historians would perform as a matter of course, although they involve scholarly and historical skills that philosophy graduate programmes, for the most part, do not spend much effort in developing among their students. By contrast, many philosophers, even historians of philosophy, seem not to care about these tasks, because they are intent on taking the problem into a different

sphere. Historians of philosophy tend for the most part to isolate Locke, Kant and Hegel from the historical realities which nurtured them and to which they responded. Furthermore, whole volumes of their works are disregarded. In short, the basic rules of good history are disregarded. For largely historical reasons, the study of the history of philosophy in the English-speaking world has much more to do with maintaining its philosophical legitimacy in the face of the very narrow conception of philosophy that came to prominence in the period immediately after the Second World War than with meeting the standards that would establish its credentials as history.

For fifty years or so historians of philosophy have believed that they can write a work in the history of philosophy and brazenly rewrite the arguments of the canonical philosophers, if they think they can improve on what those philosophers had managed for themselves. For example, Bernard Williams in the preface to his book on Descartes explains that because Descartes' work was inevitably and essentially 'ambiguous, incomplete, imperfectly determined by the author's and his contemporaries' understanding', he would take it upon himself to write a 'rational reconstruction of Descartes' thought'.¹⁹ The history of ideas, he explained, is 'an historical enquiry and the *genre* of the resulting work is unequivocally history', but the history of philosophy faces 'a cut-off point, where authenticity is replaced as the objective by the aim of articulating philosophical ideas'.²⁰ Clearly the casualty of such efforts is an understanding of the historical dimension of a philosopher's work and I believe that this leaves anyone who takes this route ill-equipped to address the question of the coexistence in the same thinker of both racism and moral universalism, which is why they tend to ignore one or the other, usually the racism. This approach allows philosophers to persist in presenting racism as no more than a surface feature of a philosophy, in contrast with moral universalism, which is a philosophical thesis that, as such, will always trump racist particularism.

What is a philosopher who believes that arguments are the base currency of philosophy to do in the face of a bad argument or a contradiction in some text by a major historical philosopher? Whereas some academics seem to gain some satisfaction from exposing the errors of a Plato or a Kant, and for many of them this seems to be all the satisfaction they need, Williams seems to advocate that one simply pick and choose, add and subtract, until one arrives at what the philosopher should have said. If the problem is that a thinker appears to contradict himself or herself, then

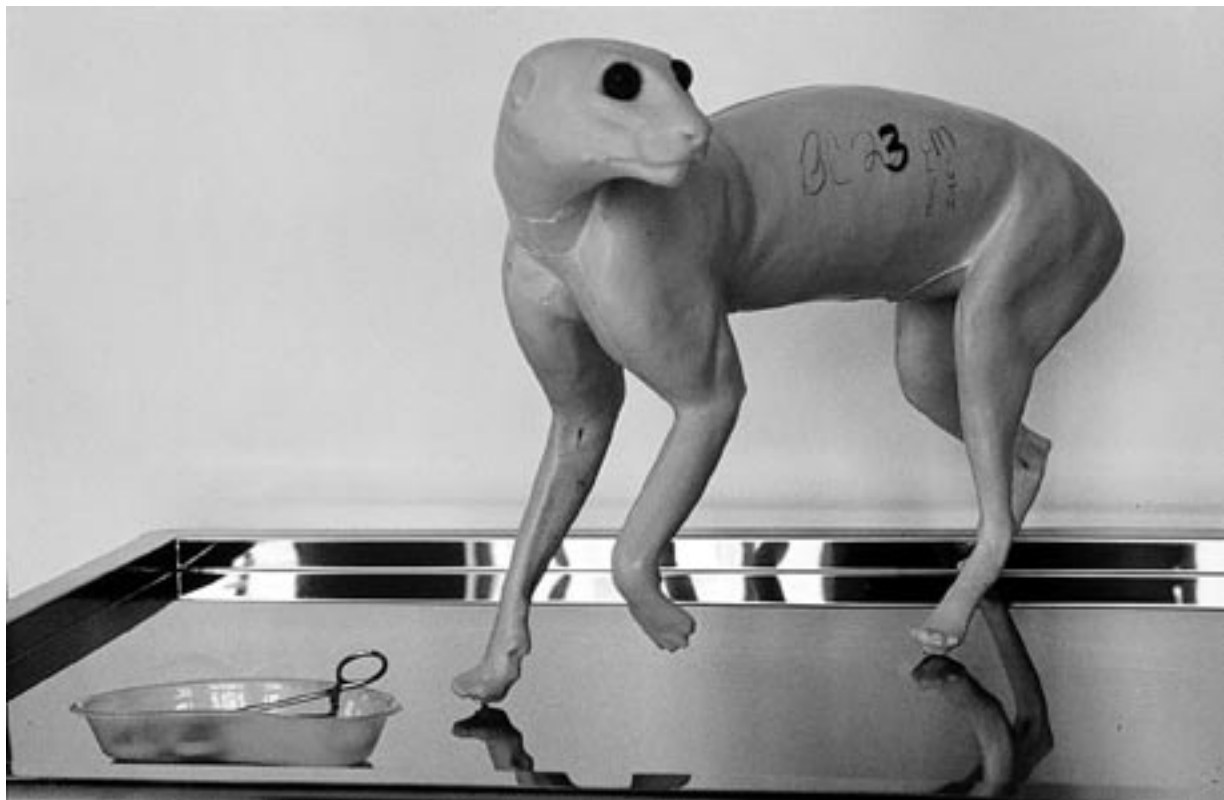
one can always drop one of the competing claims. The rule is that one saves the proposition that is most worth saving, and it is only a slight extension of this practice to drop all claims that are in the least bit embarrassing, whether there is a contradiction or not. What remains is the ‘authentic’ doctrine of the philosopher in question. We are served a new, slimmer, more elegant Kant, after he has undergone liposuction and had the surplus removed. This is quite normal philosophical practice, which is why no eyebrows are raised when it is applied to Locke’s role in writing *The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina*, Kant’s insistence on the racial superiority of whites, and, for that matter, Hegel’s exclusion of Africa, China and India from history proper. What remains is a benign, sanitized philosophy.

Although most commentators choose to excise the racism from the philosopher in question in the way I have just described, a few have begun to address the contradiction between racism and moral universalism. They have found that sometimes imputing a racist position to the thinker renders them more coherent and serves to defend their philosophical credentials. So when trying to explain why Locke accepted the idea that blacks could be slaves, but seems at the same time not to have wanted Native Americans to be slaves, Barbara Arnell simply concludes that the former were for him ‘less than human’, although she seems to have no direct evidence for choosing that particular formulation.²¹ Consider also the example of James Farr’s essay on the problem of slavery in Locke’s political thought.²² Following his recognition that Locke’s theory positively condemns seventeenth-century slave practices even though Locke invested in the African slave trade and was involved in legislation concerning it, Farr asks: ‘are there other grounds in Locke’s political thought that *would* justify seventeenth century slavery?’ His answer is as follows: ‘*I fear* that there just are no other grounds. In particular, Locke was not a racist in the strong sense required to justify slavery’.²³ Farr seems to be saying that it would be better that Locke had been a consistent racist than that he be caught contradicting himself. Or, more precisely, it seems that Farr would prefer evidence that Locke was a racist in a strong sense than that he was inconsistent, where being a strong racist means having ‘both an *empirical* theory that explains black racial inferiority and a *moral* theory that justifies enslavement because of racial inferiority’.²⁴ I do not accept Farr’s account, which identifies strong racism neither with strength of feelings, nor with the character of actions, but with explicit theories. Nor do I believe

that he has exhausted the historical evidence. But my interest here is that Farr, who was not a philosopher, nevertheless wants, above all, a Locke who is free of contradiction. Of course, had Farr been a philosopher of the kind that is all too familiar, he could have simply disregarded the evidence of Locke’s investment in the slave trade and in its institutionalization by declaring that this was not the real Locke. Indeed, he could also have disregarded any empirical theory on the grounds that it was not the real Locke either, as happens when philosophers read Kant.

This can most easily be illustrated by reference to Thomas Hill and Bernard Boxill’s recent essay, ‘Kant and Racism’. I applaud their essay as one of the few serious treatments of the topic, but I regard it as symptomatic of the failings I identify as endemic to predominantly analytic approaches to this topic. Hill and Boxill’s strategy is to distinguish at the outset Kant’s philosophical theses from his empirical claims, to which they assimilate his ‘racist and sexist beliefs and attitudes’. This allows them to segregate what they call his ‘basic ideas (e.g. the central and more foundational claims in the three Critiques and the *Groundwork*)’ from the ‘separable parts’ of that philosophy, which are ‘independent of the basic ideas and perhaps falsely believed to be derivative’ from them, and from particular illustrations.²⁵ In other words, they operate by making distinctions. So long as there is no necessary connection between the ‘racist and sexist beliefs and attitudes’ and what they identify as his main philosophical claims, then this provides them with the basis for saying that, if Kant writes racist remarks, it is not the real Kant who does so.

So who is the real Kant? The ‘real Kant’ apparently is not the historical Kant but, rather, the author only of his ‘central philosophical principles’. The real Kant is defined not by texts so much as by select ideas that contemporary Kantianism finds valuable. So Kant’s teleology is discarded because contemporary philosophers are sceptical about it and because it appears to be separable.²⁶ The emphasis is on constructing a Kant that can meet the demands we place on a contemporary moral theory, including providing resources against racism. But it is striking that even within these very restricted accounts of Kant, the name Kant is still made to do all the work, and the theory remains parasitic on a brand name whose status largely derives from texts that are now for the most part ignored. I am thinking of the fact that for the generations immediately after Kant it was the *Critique of Teleological Judgment* that was regarded as his true accomplishment. It is almost impossible for anyone



taught Kant by a contemporary Kantian to make sense of most of what Schelling, Hegel, or Hölderlin had to say in praise of him, let alone the majority of their criticisms. For example, at the beginning of 1795 Hölderlin wrote to Hegel that he regarded the way in which Kant united mechanism with the purposiveness of nature to contain 'the entire spirit of the system'.²⁷ That is to say, the version of Kant taught in history of philosophy courses today has been developed to protect Kant against the criticisms leveled by his immediate successors, thereby making the writings of the latter appear arbitrary and idiosyncratic. The real Kant is the version of Kant that approximates most closely to what the philosophers who propose this construction recognize as the truth. The real Kant is the true Kant because common sense, freedom from contradiction, and, where possible, freedom from racism, are introduced as hermeneutic principles even where they contradict the historical evidence. What one often finds is anything but the much-vaunted analytic necessity; what one finds is pick and mix. Kant himself is damned: his racist attitudes are judged to be incompatible with his basic principle of respect for humanity in each person. But 'the deep theory' is salvaged to live and fight racism another day.²⁸

The point of contention here is not the racism of the historical Kant, which Hill and Boxill concede, but how philosophers can come to a better understanding of how racism operates, the better to understand and so combat it. Hill and Boxill believe that in spite

of his racism, Kant's moral theory 'can serve as a reasonable framework for addressing contemporary racial problems, provided it is suitably supplemented with realistic awareness of the facts about racism and purged from associations with certain false empirical beliefs and inessential derivative theses'. But the problem of the coexistence of what they deem to be Kant's racist attitudes and his philosophical ideas incompatible with those attitudes is not pursued. This is all the more surprising because their defence of Kant as a philosophical resource to address racism and particularly their defence of 'reasonable deliberation and dialogue to address racial problems' leads them to argue for an examination of racism in terms that I fully endorse. This is what they say: 'such use of reason must be informed by an adequate understanding of the empirical facts about racism, its genesis, its stubbornness, its hiding-places, its interplay with other factors, and the most affective means to combat it'.²⁹ My response is that if one indeed wants to address racism, then investigating Kant's racism in its coexistence with cosmopolitanism would have been a good place to start. One finds there an influential, articulate racism whose genesis, stubbornness, self-deception, and interplay with its opposite that is there to be studied. But how is this to be done?

One's answer to this question will depend on how we already think of racism, which is why I applaud the publication of Boxill's recent anthology on this issue,

in which the essay 'Kant and Race' is to be found. Reliance on a narrow definition of racism has led to a society which is obsessed almost exclusively with the task of avoiding saying certain things, especially policing certain types of essentialist remarks about racial inequality, while doing nothing to address, for example, inequalities in access to education, health care and economic wellbeing, as well as life expectancy, as they correlate with racial identity. If one wanted to address those questions, in terms of both diagnosis and remedy, Kant's philosophy has, particularly in the curtailed versions now popular among Kantians, much less to recommend it than some other philosophies, and that too belongs under the topic of Kant and racism. And I might add that, although arguments drawn from Kant could be used to combat racism, historically they seem to have had little impact – as a study of, for example, debates about the abolition of slavery confirms.

The analytic approach relies heavily on the assumption that the appropriate hermeneutical task in this context – the primary imperative – is to resolve the contradiction between racism and universalism in these philosophies, either by amputating one limb of the contradiction or by supplying a missing premiss. As Michel Foucault noted in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, both philosophers and historians have tended to operate on the assumption that the discourses they analyse possess coherence and that we all speak to overcome the contradictions of our desires, our influences, and the conditions under which we live.³⁰ However, if, as Foucault suggested, we challenge that assumption, then the contradictions I have identified in Locke and Kant, far from being mere surface phenomena that can easily be surgically corrected, are perhaps better understood dialectically, although Foucault would not have liked the idea.³¹

Take the parallel and more familiar case of the contradiction between the American Declaration of Independence's proclamation of human equality and the practice of sexual discrimination and chattel slavery which the Founding Fathers continued to underwrite. The claim is still often made that the Declaration of Independence in some way entailed the emancipation of slaves and it was only a matter of time before the inference would be drawn and the United States would become the place it was destined to be. But another way to reconcile the Declaration's statement of the equality of human beings with the racist practices of the country was to declare *The Negro a Beast*, as one author insisted at the end of the nineteenth century.³² These alternative ways of resolving the contradiction

are indeed opposed, but, from what I am here calling provisionally a dialectical perspective, it can in addition be seen that that opposition is sustained by their mutual adherence to the words of the Declaration. The Declaration of Independence, understood as an expression of a society sustained by a racially based slavery, called for both a universalism and a more explicit racism than had hitherto existed. To that extent it is possible to see these rival positions as nevertheless mutually supporting each other, insofar as they both work to sustain the space that makes possible their opposition.³³ This allows some insight into the coexistence of moral universalism and racism in Kant, as I hope now to show by taking up a problem identified by Robert Loudon in his recent book *Kant's Impure Ethics*.

Cosmopolitan prejudice

Louden quotes a passage from Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties* where Kant writes that 'all peoples on earth ... will gradually come to participate in progress'. Loudon's gloss is that 'Kant is logically committed to the belief that the entire human species must eventually share in the destiny of the moral species: moral perfection'. This leads Loudon to identify Kant as a gradualist. Loudon quotes a statement from the *Reflections*: 'we must search for the continual progress of the human race in the Occident and from there spreading around the world.'³⁴ It sounds no better in context. The previous sentence, the first of the note, which unfortunately Loudon does not cite, reads: 'The oriental nations would never improve themselves on their own.'³⁵ The problem is that attributing gradualism to Kant seems to raise more questions than it resolves: given his view of the permanency of racial characteristics, including talents and dispositions, and given his opposition to colonialism and race mixing, one still has no answer to the question of how 'the entire species' would progress. Hence Loudon explains, according to a formula that is more familiar than illuminating, although Kant is logically committed to the idea that the entire species progresses in perfection, he is not personally committed. My hypothesis is that Kant's cosmopolitanism – his search for a purpose in human history – made his racism even more pronounced because the racial inferiority he already recognized now struck him as an offence against all humanity, an offence against this very cosmopolitanism. When we read in Kant's 'Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent' that Europe will probably give law to the rest of humanity, we should hear not only

pride but frustration directed against the other races from a man who elsewhere will complain that the white race alone of all the races contains ‘all impulses and talents’.³⁶

When philosophers today find in Kant’s cosmopolitanism a resource for their own thinking, they need to be more aware than they are of the different ways in which it is severely compromised, at least in its original formulation. The cosmopolitanism that is today taken to be an appropriate response to nationalism, or what some people like to call tribalism, is very different from Kant’s cosmopolitanism because the latter was formulated not as an antidote to nationalism, let alone racism, but as an answer to the question of the meaning of human history. Kant could see purposefulness at work in nature, but he could not see anything comparable in human affairs, which, by contrast, seemed arbitrary.³⁷ A universal history with cosmopolitan intent addressed that problem, but at a clear price. Henceforth, to be lazy was not merely to be less deserving – a judgement that, from Locke’s perspective, would be damning enough, as it would threaten God’s plan by running counter to his command ‘to increase and multiply’. It was also to infect or compromise the very idea of humanity as Kant conceived it.

Kant expressed this concern in a number of places, most notably in his review of Herder’s *Ideen* and in the *Critique of Judgment*. From Herder’s perspective, all people contributed to the idea of humanity, but in Kant’s time laziness was not only a fault of select individuals; it was also widely regarded as a racial characteristic of, among others, Africans, Gypsies and South Sea Islanders. On Kant’s account, their dispositions, like their other racial features, were the product of the effect of the climate on the germs (*Keime*) of their ancestors, a climate so benign that it gave them no reason to do anything but enjoy Nature’s largesse. Hence the question of why they existed. This same question of purposefulness that is at the heart of Kant’s conception of cosmopolitanism is also at the heart of his concept of race. What makes Kant’s concept of race so distinctive is its reliance on the teleological principle for judging nature in general as a system of ends. As I mentioned, Kant wrote in his review of Herder’s *Ideen* that one can use the empirical evidence to give either a favourable or an unfavourable account of people like the Tahitians. But if history is to be read as if it has the meaning that he believed should be attributed to it, then there is no choice. Kant saw the Tahitians as by nature less talented and so, although they may be better suited to survive their

particular climate, their role in human progress was problematic.

From a dialectical perspective, Kant’s stature as a philosopher derives from the way he helped to articulate and thereby helped to produce a radical transformation of the philosophical landscape, a shift in our way of conceiving ourselves and the world, something like what certain philosophers of science sometimes call a paradigm shift. But this is invisible to an analytic approach. Cosmopolitanism as a philosophy of history embodies a new basis for prejudice: hatred, distrust or incomprehension in the face of those who, by refusing to assimilate to European ways, do not contribute to the march of humanity towards cosmopolitanism. This renders them in some sense less human. Hence believers in a certain form of reason renounce with all the zeal of religious believers those whom they see as refusing what reason demands of them. Then universalists in the name of ‘all’ attack those who seek to maintain their difference. A new more virulent strain of prejudice has germinated as a side effect of the new version of universalism. Theoretical racism does not only take the form of believing in polygenesis or a simple biological destiny. Racism is more often to be found in moral gradualism, geographical determinism, or in the gesture which demands ‘become like us’ and which adds *sotte voce* ‘you can never become like us because you are not one of us’.³⁸ Cosmopolitanism in at least some of its versions is a constituent form of such racisms, not its contrary, which is why we need to be on our guard to recognize racism in the concrete – that is to say, in context. If analytic reasoning establishes that there is no necessary connection between Kant’s caricature of Africans and his cosmopolitanism,³⁹ it can do so because it can choose to reformulate his cosmopolitanism so as to establish this result. That saves cosmopolitanism, but it does nothing to throw light on how racism operates within major philosophical texts, let alone exploring ways to combat it.⁴⁰

With his introduction of a more rigorously defined concept of race, Kant opened up a new space for thinking: he took it into new territory. And then his thinking stopped. One could attribute this to cowardice or laziness, but it is more likely that, because this was new territory, he did not know what to think. Those who came after him worked within the space he opened up. He never resolved the problem of how to reconcile his belief in cosmopolitanism with his racism, but this left a dangerous legacy, one which he occasionally glimpsed. To the question of how ‘the entire species’ might progress, he responded: ‘It appears that all of

the Americans will be wiped out, not through the act of murder – that would be cruel – but they will die out.... A private conflict will emerge among them, and they will destroy each other.⁴¹ Kant, it must be remembered, was a defender of Native Americans against their exploitation through colonialism. But it is clear from this statement that when he referred to the entirety of humanity he did not mean everybody. Indeed, in note 1520 of the *Reflexionen zur Anthropologie* Kant wrote in a somewhat sinister way: ‘All races will be extinguished ... only not that of the Whites.’⁴² But how would that take place? Kant explicitly opposed genocide as a solution, and commentators agree that that was not an option for him. In one place in *The Racial Contract* Charles Mills writes, ‘I’m not saying that Kant would have endorsed genocide.’⁴³ It is a throwaway line, much like Paul Gilroy’s similar remark in *Against Race*: ‘he [Kant] does not himself conceive of genocide or endorse its practice against Negroes, Jews, or any other variety of peoples’.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Kant needed to reject it explicitly only because it suggested itself as a solution to the problem of reconciling a specific conception of progressive cosmopolitanism with a belief in the inequality of the races that threatened to frustrate it.

Forgetting history

I readily concede that most analytical philosophers will find little, if anything, here to threaten moral universalism or cosmopolitanism as they understand it. It is for them enough simply to observe that they can formulate versions of these positions that do not entail racism. I also recognize that my call for a re-examination of the way that the study of the history of philosophy operates threatens a practice so thoroughly established that to many of its adherents it is obvious. When charges of sexism and racism are levelled against a canonical philosopher they can easily be dismissed as the result of a failure to understand the task and procedures of the history of philosophy. But perhaps it is time to put that task and those procedures in question so as to challenge a history of philosophy that takes itself so seriously as philosophy that it forgets that it is also supposed to be history. Whenever a thinker is defended by use of the ‘central arguments defence’ the risk is that, in trying to marginalize the criticism, philosophy itself is rendered less and less central because it comes to be more and more restricted. In other words, the price to be paid for defending some of the major philosophers of the Western tradition against charges of racism is that we diminish philosophy as an activity more generally. Ultimately ill-conceived defences of

these philosophers do more to damage the place of philosophy in our culture than any of the evidence brought against them. Philosophers are not and never have been as divorced from historical reality as their defenders are forced to make them: Locke was proud of the fact that he was a practical man and not just a thinker; however embarrassed we might now be about some of his activities, we do not serve ourselves by dismissing their relevance to an understanding of his thought. By teaching slimmed-down versions of these thinkers – the so-called ‘real Kant’ rather than the historical Kant – we contribute to the illusion that all that matters is the annunciation of fine principles.

My point is not to deny or dismiss the need we feel to address the contradictions in a philosopher, particularly when the contradiction arises in the context of moral issues. When this problem arises for us in the context of studying the life and works of philosophers to whom we feel especially indebted in our own thinking, the urge to find a resolution is particularly strong. Nor would I deny that there is much to be learned from these exercises. But if the analytic philosopher has a way of separating off the question of the racism of great philosophers from what is considered to be their authentic doctrines, thereby suppressing the problem in a way consistent with his or her overall philosophical stance, the continental philosopher has a different strategy: he or she is prone to offer ever more fanciful interpretations, turning the transgression into its opposite.⁴⁵ However, to the extent that I believe that so-called continental philosophy or, more precisely, dialectical philosophy is ultimately better equipped to address these issues than analytic philosophy because it is less prone to sacrificing the complexity of the issues to the distorting lens of false clarity and abstraction from historical reality, then it is so much the worse for continental philosophy, because it has largely failed to do so.

But let me end on a conciliatory note with what might be agreed by good-minded representatives of both approaches. Hill and Boxill close their essay by recognizing that ‘confident, complacent, well-positioned white people’ will find it difficult to do what they know to be right and indeed still more difficult to know what is right.⁴⁶ The cure to self-deception, in so far as there is one, lies, they argue, in listening to what others with different viewpoints, attitudes and emotions say and indeed designing institutions to help us do so, institutions which would allow reason to do its work. I believe that this is a most significant recommendation which would, if it was widely adopted, change what is taught under the name philosophy, as well as the way it is taught, and in a way that ultimately will

impact on the question of whether philosophy in the future addresses a broad audience or an increasingly narrow one.⁴⁷

Notes

1. I talk exclusively about racism in this article because I believe it should be treated in its uniqueness, just as sexism or homophobia should be, although I grant that at various points they intersect. Indeed, I will focus primarily upon anti-black racism, although prejudice against other races and groups is also rampant in the works under consideration.
2. *The Times Higher Educational Supplement* 850, 17 February 1989, p. 12.
3. John Dunn considered Locke's silence on the Europeans' use of Africans as chattel slaves an 'immoral evasion'. John Dunn, *The Political Thought of Locke*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1969, p. 175 n.4. See also Geraint Parry, *John Locke*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1978, p. 70.
4. 'The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina', *North Carolina Charters and Constitutions 1578–1698*, ed. Mattie Erma Edwards Parker, Carolina Charter Tercentenary Commission, Raleigh, 1963, p. 164. On the question of Locke's authorship, see J.R. Milton, 'John Locke and the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina', *The Locke Newsletter* 21, 1990, pp. 111–33. Milton does not draw specific attention to the phrase on which I am here focusing, but the conclusion that he considers it to be in Locke's hand is unmistakable if one compares what he says with Parker's edition of the manuscript changes.
5. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. 284 (henceforth *TT*).
6. See Nicholas Jolley, *Locke: His Philosophical Thought*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, pp. 211–12.
7. *TT*, pp. 283–5, 322–3, 382–3.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 236–8.
9. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, 'The Color of Reason: The Idea of "Race" in Kant's Anthropology', in Katherine M. Faull, ed., *Anthropology and the German Enlightenment*, Bucknell University Press, Lewisburg, 1995, pp. 200–41; and Robert Bernasconi, 'Who Invented the Concept of Race?' lecture first delivered in 1995, now published in Robert Bernasconi, ed., *Race*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2001, pp. 11–36. Also R. Bernasconi, 'Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Racism', in Julie Ward and Tommy Lott, eds, *Philosophers on Race*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2002, pp. 145–66. See now Robert B. Loudon, *Kant's Impure Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, pp. 93–100; Thomas E. Hill and Bernard Boxill, 'Kant and Race', in Bernard Boxill, ed., *Race and Racism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, pp. 448–71. Allen W. Wood defers to Loudon in *Kant's Ethical Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 338–9. It is striking that Hill and Boxill themselves characterize the debate as one provoked by 'non-Kantians' ('Kant on Race', p. 448).
10. Léon Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth*, trans. Edmund Howard, Barnes & Noble, New York, 1996, pp. 171–3. George Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1985, pp. 30–31 and 73. One of the few philosophers to show an interest in these essays after the Second World War was Gabrielle Rubel. See the selections translated in *Kant*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1963, pp. 98–100, 150–52, and 184–9. However, this could be judged to be merely a continuation of an interest began almost forty years earlier in *Goethe und Kant* (Selbstverlag, Vienna, 1927) and 'Kant as a Teacher of Biology' (*The Monist* 41, 1931, pp. 436–70).
11. For example, J.D. McFarland, *Kant's Concept of Teleology*, University of Edinburgh Press, Edinburgh, 1970, pp. 56–68; Peter McLaughlin, *Kant's Critique of Teleology in Biological Explanation*, Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, 1990, pp. 29–32; Manfred Riedel, 'Historizismus und Kritizismus: Kant's Streit mit G. Forster und J.G. Herder', *Kant-Studies*, vol. 72, no. 1, 1981, pp. 41–57.
12. The question was raised briefly by Nathan Rotenstreich in 1979, but seems not to have been pursued further for almost twenty years. 'Races and Peoples' in *Practice and Realization*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1979, p. 100.
13. Locke had in his personal library a copy of Rev. Morgan Godwyn's *The Negro's and Indians Advocate, Suing for Their Admission into the Church: or a Persuasive to the Instructing and Baptizing of the Negro's and Indians in our Plantations*, London, 1680. See John Harrison and Peter Laslett, *The Library of John Locke*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1971, p. 144. *The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* had already pronounced on this issue. I am currently working with Anika Simpson on a more detailed treatment of Locke's relation to the enslavement of Africans, in which among other things the question, neglected here for lack of space, of the legitimacy of using a term like 'racism' with reference to Locke is raised.
14. F.W.P. Dougherty, *Commercium epistolicum J.F. Blumenbachii. Aus einem Briefwechsel des klassischen Zeitalters der Naturgeschichte*, Göttingen, 1984, p. 189.
15. Hill and Boxill, 'Kant on Race', p. 448. In an earlier, longer version of this essay I also addressed Hegel's racism. The issues raised are ultimately no different in his case; it suffices to refer briefly to the parallels. On the question of whether the change of racism was an anachronism, G.E. Paulus publicly attacked Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* at the time of its publication for its Eurocentrism. 'G.E. Paulus', *Vorlesungen über Rechtsphilosophie*, ed. Karl-Heinz Ilting, Frommann, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1973, vol. 1, p. 372. See further R. Bernasconi, 'With What Must the Philosophy of History Begin?' *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 22, 2000, pp. 171–201. On Hegel's outrageous distortion of his sources in an attempt to justify violence against Africans, see R. Bernasconi, 'Hegel at the Court of the Ashanti', in Stuart Barnett, ed., *Hegel after Derrida*, Routledge, London, 1998, pp. 45–6. Finally, for a discussion of Hegel that takes a similar form to that I have found among some Kant scholars, see Darrel Moellendorf, 'Racism and Rationality in Hegel's Philosophy of Subjective Spirit', *History of Political Thought*, vol. 13, no. 2, Summer 1992, pp. 243–55. Moellendorf judges that 'Hegel's account of spirit makes his racism possible not necessary' (p. 249). Furthermore, 'Hegel's racism is not contradictory to his more general theoretical views, nor does it follow from them, rather it is compatible with them' (p. 249). But this begs the question as to what 'the fundamental claims' (p. 244) are, just as Moellendorf asserts that Hegel's racism can be traced 'to the general ideology of the nineteenth century' (p. 244) without investigating either Hegel's use of his sources or his contribution to the formation of that ideology.
16. See R. Bernasconi, 'Locke's Almost Random Talk of

- Men', *Perspectiven der Philosophie*, 18, 1992, p. 316 n4.
17. I. Kant, 'Über den Gebrauch teleologischer Principien in der Philosophie', *Kants Werke*, Akademie Ausgabe, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 1923, vol. VIII, p. 174n; trans. Jon Mark Mikkelsen, 'On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy', in Bernasconi, ed., *Race*, p. 54 n4. See Bernasconi, 'Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Racism', pp. 148–9. Subsequently, I found that Monika Firla-Forkl had already made the same observation: 'Philosophie und Ethnographie: Kants Verhältnis zu Kultur und Geschichte Afrikas', in XXV *Deutscher Orientalistentag*, ed. Cornelia Wunsch (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1996), p. 439 (henceforth all references to the Akademie Ausgabe of Kant are abbreviated as AA followed by the volume number).
 18. AA VIII, p. 62.
 19. Bernard Williams, *Descartes. The Project of Pure Enquiry*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1978, p. 10.
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
 21. Barbara Arneil, *John Locke and America*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 127.
 22. James Farr, "'So Vile and Miserable an Estate": The Problem of Slavery in Locke's Political Thought', *Political Theory*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1986, p. 263–89.
 23. *Ibid.*, p. 264; my italics.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 278.
 25. Hill and Boxill, 'Kant on Race', p. 448.
 26. *Ibid.*, pp. 452, 456, 462–3. I am not challenging the thesis 'that objections to Kant's teleological claims are not of themselves ground for dismissing his emphasis on reason in his basic moral and political theories' (*ibid.*, 463). My inquiry operates at an entirely different level.
 27. See *Briefe von und an Hegel*, ed. J. Hoffmeister, Felix Meiner, Hamburg, 1969, vol. 1, p. 20.
 28. Hill and Boxill, 'Kant on Race', pp. 467, 449.
 29. *Ibid.*, pp. 449, 467.
 30. Michel Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savior*, Gallimard, Paris, 1969, p. 195; trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Tavistock, London, 1972, p. 149.
 31. I employ the word 'dialectical' provisionally here because, although this term is now fraught with ambiguity, the basic insight into the reciprocal relation that ties contradictory terms, an insight widespread in so-called continental philosophy, first became pronounced in Hegel's dialectical philosophy.
 32. Charles Carroll, *The Negro A Beast*, American Book and Bible House, St Louis, 1900). Lest I be misunderstood, I should make it clear that I am not, of course, suggesting that the idea that the Negro was a Beast was a proposition that Kant could ever have allowed. Kant wrote his essays on race in large part in an effort to exclude this possibility and, indeed, further to secure the unity of the human species.
 33. Recognition of this fact at some level may have been what led some abolitionists to challenge the Declaration of Independence, but in so far as the Declaration defined the space of discourse this option could not be sustained politically. See Robert Bernasconi, 'The Constitution of the People: Frederick Douglass and the Dred Scott Decision', *Cardozo Law Review*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1991, pp. 1281–96.
 34. AA VII, p. 89; AA XV1, p. 789, both quoted in Louden, *Kant's Impure Ethics*, p. 105.
 35. AA XV, p. 788. See also AA XXV, p. 840.
 36. AA VIII, p. 29; AA XXV/2, p. 1187.
 37. AA VIII, p. 17.
 38. Hence my surprise at finding Joseph McCarney defend Hegel from the charge of racism on the grounds that he was, rather, a geographical determinist: *Hegel on History*, Routledge, London, 2001, p. 143. Indeed, it is even suggested that 'a firmer theoretical basis for the fundamental equality of human beings than Hegelian spirit provides can scarcely be conceived' (*ibid.*, p. 145).
 39. I should be clear that I am not using the term 'analytical philosophy' as a synonym for 'Anglo-American philosophy'. I mean, rather, those philosophers committed to a form of thinking that leaves no room for synthesis, holism or dialectic, while recognizing that analysis nevertheless plays an indispensable role in these other ways of thinking. But it should not go unnoticed that the approach to the history of philosophy that I am here describing as analytic has its roots in a certain reading of Kant.
 40. For an invaluable contribution to a historical understanding of cosmopolitanism, see Pauline Kleinfeld, 'Six Varieties of Cosmopolitanism in Late Eighteenth Century Germany', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, 1999, pp. 505–24.
 41. AA VIII, p. 35; AA XXV, p. 840.
 42. AA XV/2, p. 878.
 43. Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1997, p. 72.
 44. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2000, p. 60.
 45. For example, Jacques Derrida, *De l'esprit*, Galilée, Paris, 1987; trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, *Of Spirit*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989. Derrida argues for a reading of 'spirit' in Heidegger that neglects the connotations of the word at that time. See R. Bernasconi, 'Heidegger's Alleged Challenge to the Nazi Concepts of Race', in James E. Faulconer and Mark A. Wrathall, eds, *Appropriating Heidegger*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 50–67.
 46. Hill and Boxill, 'Kant and Race', p. 470.
 47. In a more thorough treatment I would need to address the philosophical canon and philosopher's resistance to multiculturalism as well as the racial constitution of the average philosophy department, including its student body. On the latter, see Leonard Harris, "'Believe it or Not" or the Ku Klux Klan and American Philosophy Exposed', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 68, no. 5, May 1995, pp. 133–7. On the former, see Robert Bernasconi, 'Philosophy's Paradoxical Parochialism: The Reinvention of Philosophy as Greek', in Keith Ansell-Pearson, Benita Parry and Judith Squires, eds, *Cultural Readings of Imperialism*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1997, pp. 212–26. I should stress that I do not mean to deny the existence of a significant number of philosophers who have at some cost long raised these issues and advocated a reexamination of the canon. Nor would I deny that for much of my career I have been unambiguously part of the problem, until some of my students woke me from my dogmatic slumber.