



# Race, Culture, and the Horizons of Agency: Kant's Racism, Systematically Understood

**ABSTRACT:** *Readers should be aware that content about Kant's racism may be difficult and distressing to read. In various texts, Kant makes statements alleging that Indigenous Americans have 'no culture' and Black people possess only the 'culture of slaves'. These are straightforwardly repugnant commitments. In order to address the role of Kant's account of 'culture' in his racism and provide additional support to Charles Mills' 'Untermensch (subhuman) interpretation' of Kant's views on race, this article situates Kant's comments on 'racialized cultures' within his teleological account of human history. In his system, 'culture' refers to the possession of developed capacities to achieve the ends that one sets for oneself. He sees achievement of culture as part of the development of human beings into members of a socialized, moral kingdom. Given his understanding of culture, I argue that Kant's remarks on the cultural limitations of persons of color commit him to the further claims that Indigenous Americans and Black people are incapable of setting their own ends and that these deficiencies are hereditary and permanent. For Kant, this has the consequence that these individuals do not possess genuine moral worth in his system, thus supporting Mills' Untermensch interpretation of Kant's views on race.*

**KEYWORDS:** Kant, Race, Racism, Culture, Humanity, Agency, Morality

## I. Introduction

Bettering our understanding of the history of racism, especially in the canon of philosophy, can inform philosophers' contemporary efforts to dismantle white supremacy and develop emancipatory frameworks. Many contemporary scholars of Immanuel Kant's racism give voice to this commendable motivation, including Bernasconi (2003: 17), Huseyinzadegan (2018: 20), and Kleingeld (2019: 20). Knowledge of Kant's racism may reveal shortcomings of dominant philosophical theories and provide guidance about where racial justice demands additional consideration (Mills 1997, 2018). Furthermore, the examination of Kant's theory of race, particularly in relation to his egalitarianism and cosmopolitanism, can shed light on the nature of racism, equipping us to combat racial injustice today (Bernasconi 2011: 295; Mills 2014: 138; Allais 2016: 20–21; Lu-Adler 2023: 19–23). Likewise, such study can exhibit the way in which contemporary philosophy, built upon the racist canon, is complicit in racial oppression, which may inform reformatory and ameliorative projects (Huseyinzadegan 2018).



The value of studying the history of racist thought in the philosophical canon hence consists not only in bettering our understanding of those canonical systems, but further in its supporting of contemporary liberatory work. For the most part, Kant's remarks on race are bald in both their meaning and their abhorrence. However, not all of his racist commitments are as clear, and there also remains scholarly disagreement about the systematic details of his philosophy. Here, I aim to clarify Kant's theory of race. This project involves the presentation and examination of quotations containing heinous racist and ableist content. I intend to consider these passages not blithely, but with the goal of illuminating aspects of the nature of racism and its place in Kant's philosophy, both to inform contemporary understanding of Kantian philosophy and to support the redress of racial injustice. That said, readers should be aware that this content may be difficult and distressing to read.

Kant espouses a racial hierarchy, with whites at the top and descending respectively to the Asian, Black, and Indigenous American races.<sup>1</sup> He rehearses crude racist stereotypes, characterizing Black people as 'full of affect and passion, very lively, talkative and vain' (V-Anth/Mensch, 25:1187) and as possessing 'by nature no feeling that rises above the ridiculous' (GSE, 2:253), whereas Indigenous Americans are described using dehumanizing slurs (GSE, 2:253; PG, 9:430, 432) and characterized as maladaptive and unfit (ÜGTP, 8:175–6; VvRM, 2:443, 438), 'lack [ing] affect and passion', and therefore 'lazy' and 'not car[ing] for anything' (V-Anth/Mensch, 25:1187). Furthermore, Kant contends that these and other racial characteristics are hereditary, fixed, and unchanging (ÜGTP, 8:172–8; VvRM, 2:430, 434–5, 440–1). Kant condemns miscegenation, being attributed the view that by the mixing of the races 'the whites would become degraded' (V-Anth/Dohna, 353), and he speculates that, in the future, 'all races will be extinguished, except that of the whites' (Refl 1520, 15:878; see V-Anth/Pillau, 25:840).

Based on such odious claims, Charles Mills (1997, 2005)—among those who first called the attention of Anglo-American, analytic philosophers to Kant's theory of race and racism<sup>2</sup>—argues that Kant's account of race commits him to the subhuman moral status of persons of color. I, following Mills, title this the '*Untermensch* (subhuman) interpretation' of Kant's views on the moral implications of his theory of race.

In his argument for the *Untermensch* interpretation, Mills (2005) juxtaposes Kant's racist sentiments like those above alongside his more well-known egalitarian moral pronouncements. The apparent conflict between these commitments naturally raises the question of how best to understand Kant's philosophy and the application of his moral theory to persons of color. After arguing against a series of interpretive stratagems that isolate, sideline, or

<sup>1</sup> My terminology diverges from Kant's, who refers to the races respectively as 'whites' (*Weißten*), 'Indians' (*Indianer*), 'Negroes' (*Neger*), and 'Americans' (*Amerikaner*) (BBM, 8:93).

<sup>2</sup> A note on my use of the term 'racism' in reference to Kant. By calling Kant a racist, I am not making a statement about his psychology or his bearing a personal affective animus. Rather, along the lines of Mills (2014: 126–30) and Shelby (2002: 415–16), I understand racism doxastically, as fundamentally a set of beliefs or an ideology. So 'Kant's racism' refers to his *theory* of race, which explains and justifies the racial system of oppression. For a more thorough examination of the claim that Kant is a racist, see Lu-Adler (2023: 76–107).

otherwise downplay Kant's racist comments, Mills argues that Kant's racism is part of his philosophical system, to be understood alongside his moral theory. The principle of charity, according to Mills, recommends interpreting Kant's practical philosophy as *consistent* with his racism. His *Untermensch* interpretation fits the bill by explaining how Kant's moral theory ends up classifying members of different races. That is, according to Mills' reading of Kant, only whites count as full-fledged moral agents; only they possess the humanity that is to be respected '*as an end, never merely as a means*' (GMS, 4:429). Consistency is brought to Kant's system by understanding his baseline commitment to a lack of moral worth of persons of color, that is, to their status as *Untermenschen* (subhumans).<sup>3</sup>

While the literature on Kant's theory of race outlines a variety of positions, scholars predominantly appear to agree that the *Untermensch* interpretation is mistaken. For example, Hill and Boxill (2000), Kleingeld (2007), Bernasconi (2011), and Allais (2016), despite espousing widely divergent positions on Kant's racism, all find the *Untermensch* interpretation wanting.

Here, I argue for the *Untermensch* interpretation based on a relatively underexplored set of Kant's claims: those regarding the *cultures* of races. Such pronouncements can be found, for instance, in the infamous *Reflexion* 1520, in which Kant details his views on the four races. Here, I use Kant's terminology, which may be distressing to read:

1. **American** insensitive. Without affect and passion apart from revenge. Love of freedom is here only lazy independence. Do not speak, love nothing, care for nothing. Mexico and Peru. Take on absolutely no culture.
2. **Negro**. Exactly the opposite: are lively, full of affect and passion, chatty, vain, devoted to pleasure. Take on the culture of servants [*Knechte*],<sup>4</sup> but not of the free, and are incapable of leading themselves. Children.
3. **Indians**. Are calm, self-controlled, as it were, and take on the culture of art, but not that of science and enlightenment. Are always students, good to citizens and patient, but not to magistrates, because they know only coercion and not right and freedom. Do not achieve concepts of the true honor and virtue. [...]
4. [White:] Contain all incentives of nature in affects and passions, all talents, all predispositions [*Anlagen*] to culture and civilization, and can obey as well as rule. (Refl 1520, 15: 877–8)

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Eze also argues that, according to Kant's theory of race, individuals of non-white races lack moral worth (1995: 221). Eze's interpretation differs from Mills', however, as he holds that race is a *transcendental* concept, for Kant (1995: 219–23). Strong arguments against this claim have been offered by Hill and Boxill (2000: 453–5) and Loudon (2000: 105–6), which have also been underwritten by Mills (2005: 181).

<sup>4</sup> While scholars and translators almost uniformly use 'slaves' instead of 'servants' to translate '*Knechte*' in this and related passages (especially V-Anth/Mensch, 25:1187), I have chosen to alter that standard translation. Whereas Kant sometimes runs together the standard word for 'slave' (*Sklave*) with other related terms, like that for 'bondsmen' (*Leibeigener*) (MS, 6:241), I find no evidence in Kant's corpus that he generally understood '*Knecht*' and '*Sklave*' as synonymous. Better, hence, to translate '*Sklave*' as 'slave' and '*Knecht*' as 'servant'.

These sentiments are echoed repeatedly in Kant's corpus, albeit with some variation in terminology. In ÜGTP (8:176), Kant describes Indigenous Americans as lacking culture. Throughout student notes from his lectures on Anthropology, he is attributed similar views. V-Anth/Dohna (350–3) includes the claim that Black people possess the culture of the 'servant' (*Knechtes*) or the 'tramp' (*Umtriebers*) and contrasts this case with members of the Asian and white races, likewise in V-Anth/Matuszewski (446–8). In V-Anth/Mensch (25:1187) the claims are that Indigenous Americans take on no 'formation' (*Bildung*), while members of the Black race only assume the 'formation of servants' (*Bildung der Knechte*). The same is found in V-Anth/Petersburg (315), with some slight variations in language: for instance, 'culture' (*Cultur*) replaces 'formation' (*Bildung*). Finally in V-Anth/Starke II (119), the view expressed is that Black people take on the culture of 'servants' (*Diener*) but not that of the 'master' (*Herr*). Although these are obviously repugnant commitments, in this article, I clarify the role that Kant's account of 'culture' plays in his racism, which provides additional support to Charles Mills' '*Untermensch* (subhuman) interpretation' of Kant's views on race. I consider the following questions. What is culture, according to Kant? What does it mean for cultures to be limited or absent? Are cultural deficiencies permanent or mutable? What implications does cultural inaptitude have for moral value?

In order to address these questions and to better our understanding of Kant's conception of race and its implications, below I situate Kant's comments on the cultures of races within his teleological description of human history. Within this account, culture is the generalized aptitude to set and achieve ends one sets for oneself. Ultimately, I argue that according to Kant, the cultural limitations of persons of color entail that Black people and Indigenous Americans are incapable of setting their own ends and that these deficiencies are hereditary and permanent. This account further entails that in Kant's system these individuals do not possess genuine moral worth, providing additional support to Mills' '*Untermensch* interpretation.

Notably, Larrimore (1999) and Marwah (2019: 45–9; 2022) also situate Kant's theory of race within his teleological conception of human history, which connects it with his notion of culture. However, my analysis diverges from each, particularly insofar as they focus on the participation of persons of color in the moral vocation of humanity. Neither centers Kant's comments on racialized cultures nor extracts their implications for Kant's views on ends-setting behavior and the moral humanity of persons of color (see below).

To be clear, this article provides a consistent, systematic interpretation of Kant's views on race *at least* up until 1794, making use of sources before ZeF (1795), with a few, insubstantial exceptions. Thus, the controversy over Kant's late views on race, slavery, and colonialism—whether he rejected his hierarchical theory of race in the mid-1790s (Kleingeld 2007) or not (Bernasconi 2011; Lu-Adler 2022)—has no bearing on my interpretation. Even if Kant changed his views on race in the 1790s, the present account still clarifies Kant's views on race during his 'astonishing decade' (Beck 1969: 433). I reject the claim that such transformed views on race would be those of the 'real' Kant or ought to be taken as belonging to *the* Kantian system (see Bernasconi 2003). Finally, it is relatively common to periodize philosophers'

theories: consider the appellations, ‘pre-Critical Kant’, ‘late Wittgenstein’, and ‘the turn’ (*die Kehre*) in Heidegger’s thought. Shifts are not necessarily taken to supplant earlier views.

Additionally, this article contributes to recent discussions of Kant’s theory of race by demonstrating its interconnectedness in Kant’s general philosophy, building from and supporting the accounts of Mills (2005, 2018), Mensch (2013, 2017), Sandford (2018), and Lu-Adler (2023). Far from being a marginal and separable set of commitments, consideration of the wide swath of published books and articles, unpublished handwritten reflections (*Reflexionen*), and student lecture notes show Kant’s theory of race to be deeply embedded in his systematic philosophy. Kant’s theory of race is contextualized by other of his commitments, resonates with distinct parts of his philosophy, and possesses various implications in the system. A systematic understanding of his theory of race reveals that Kant is not committed to skin color constituting the solitary essential racial characteristic; rather, his theory of race has moral, teleological, and cognitive implications.

In section 2, I provide an overview of Kant’s account of culture in his overarching teleological theory of history. In this account, culture refers to a suite of capacities allowing for human beings to achieve the ends that they set for themselves. Subsequently, in section 3, I describe the implications of this account of culture for our understanding of Kant’s claims about the cultural limitations of persons of color, explaining that, for Kant, Black and Indigenous American people lack the capacity to set their own ends. Section 4 concerns the moral implications of this account, supporting Mills’ *Untermensch* interpretation of Kant’s views on race, according to which Black and Indigenous American people lack moral worth. Finally, section 5 addresses notable objections to the *Untermensch* interpretation.

## 2. Culture and Human Development

It is easy to assume a sort of ‘off-the-cuff’ conception of culture as it is deployed in Kant’s account of race. One might naturally understand ‘culture’ in such contexts as referring to a particular way of life: the behavior of a people, the social organization in which they find themselves, their customary practices and traditions, and their history. This natural, pre-theoretical understanding of culture is commonly assumed by scholars examining Kant’s claims about the cultures of races, including Louden (2000: 99–100), Allais (2016: 18–9), and Eberl (2019: 406). This is especially noteworthy in the case of Louden, as elsewhere in the same book he discusses the technical notion of culture from KU, from which my own interpretation derives (2000: 40, 93).

This understanding, however, muddles Kant’s categorical denial of culture to Indigenous Americans. Certainly, Kant recognizes Indigenous Americans as possessing a way of living. Kant praises Indigenous Americans for their courage (Z&F, 8:365) and for having a ‘sublime character of mind’ and ‘strong feeling of honor’ (GSE, 2:253–4). In the published version of his lectures on physical geography, Kant includes a detailed discussion of various aspects of Indigenous American societies, mentioning practices of hunting, spiritual beliefs, modes of transportation, body modification, reports of geronticide among Inuit peoples,

forms of governance and justice, practices of warfare, and tobacco ceremonies (PG, 9:428–35). All in all, there is ample evidence that, were culture properly understood as encompassing the characteristic beliefs, practices, and customs of a people, Kant would have recognized Indigenous Americans to possess culture.

Kleingeld, for her part, suggests that by ‘culture’, Kant could mean *agriculture*, thus when he denies Indigenous Americans’ culture, he is merely denying their use of agriculture (2007: 574n, 587). Kleingeld proffers no textual support for this suggestion, however, and the reading makes little sense of Kant’s claims that Black individuals possess the ‘culture of servants’ and that Asians have the ‘culture of art’. Unless we could make sense of an ‘agriculture of servants’ or an ‘agriculture of art’, this suggestion likewise ought to be dismissed.

Furthermore, ‘culture’ possesses a perfectly coherent, technical meaning in Kant’s philosophy; there would need to be compelling evidence to read it non-technically, as Loudon, Allais, Eberl, and Kleingeld do. When Kant elsewhere comments on culture in his corpus, he describes it not as a way of life or as related to agriculture but as an aspect of the development of the human species. According to Kant, there are three intertwined phases of human development: culture, civilization, and moralization, the last of which is the highest and ‘final end’ (*Endzweck*) for humanity (Anth, 7:324–5; IaG, 8:26; Refl 1524, 15:896–7; V-Anth/Mensch, 25:1197–8; V-Anth/Mrong, 25:1426–7). (For more on the place of culture in Kant’s teleology, see Wood (1991), Loudon (2000, 40), and Marwah (2012; 2019: 45–9). For a perspective on culture’s pivotal role in KU, see Bremner (2022).) Perhaps the clearest description of the historical conception of culture appears in the Doctrine of Method of the Critique of Teleological Judgment, in which Kant describes culture as the ‘ultimate end [*letzter Zweck*] of nature’ (KU, 5:429–34) and specifies that ‘the production of the aptitude of a rational being for any ends in general (thus those of his freedom) is **culture**’ (5:431; see Wood 1991: 341–3). According to the picture that Kant develops in §83 of KU, nature aims at the development of human predispositions to their highest degree, so that humans become able to set and to achieve *whatever* ends they desire (see Reath 2009: 199–200n). In the *Pädagogik* Kant reiterates that culture is ‘the procurement of skillfulness’, which is ‘the possession of a capacity [*Vermögens*] which is sufficient for the carrying out of whatever purposes’ (Päd, 9:449, translation modified). This understanding of culture is reiterated in various contexts by Kant. According to student notes from his lectures on metaphysics, ‘culture of skillfulness’ is ‘necessary, because we use it for all ends’ (V-Met-L<sub>2</sub>/Pölitz, 28:534). In other notes from lectures on anthropology we find the claim that ‘Culture [is] the enlargement [*Vergrößerung*] of our talents’ (V-Anth/Busolt, 25:1511). Similar descriptions are found in student notes from Kant’s theology lectures, where culture is characterized as the development of one’s talent and as requiring the overcoming of a ‘raw’ state in which one is driven merely by instinct (V-Phil-Th/Pölitz, 28:1077; V-Th/Volckmann, 28:1187).

According to Kant, nature primarily employs *unsocial sociability* to drive human beings to develop their predispositions to the highest degree, that is, to achieve culture (Anth, 7:321–2; IaG, 8:20–1; KU, 5:432–4). By means of the tension between our need to be around other human beings and the conflicts that inevitably thereby arise, we humans are forced to develop our abilities (Wood

1991). The development of human capacities (achievement of culture) makes possible civilization and moralization, that is, the attainment of justice and morality in society. To achieve these rarefied heights of human development, nature's tools—like unsocial sociability—are no longer the primary driver. Rather, the 'final end of nature', that is, 'the human being [...] as a moral being' (KU 5:435), is set as an end by human reason and is to be pursued via human beings' cultivated predispositions. As Wood (1991: 343) famously puts it: in the 'epoch of nature', nature aims at its goal of developing human predispositions, which culminates in the achievement of the ultimate end of nature, viz., culture. Upon realizing the capacity to set and to achieve our own human ends, thus begins the 'epoch of freedom', in which humans aim their developed predispositions at the final end of nature: 'a human society free from antagonism, where every rational being is treated as an end and [...] free development of each has become the condition for the free development of all' (Wood 1991: 345; see also Refl 1521, 15:882–92). Ernst Cassirer (1944) likewise articulates this progressive conception of culture: 'Human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man's progressive self-liberation. Language, art, religion, science, are various phases in this process. In all of them man discovers and proves a new power—the power to build up a world of his own, an "ideal" world' (1944: 228).

Nevertheless, insofar as different kinds of ends that rational agents may set require different aptitudes to achieve them, there are accordingly distinct components of culture. So, for instance, Kant distinguishes the 'culture of skill' and the 'culture of training (discipline)' (KU, 5:431–2). On the one hand, discipline, for Kant, consists in an agent's ability to not be drawn uncritically or irrationally by instincts or desires. In that sense, it is a 'negative' condition of culture: in order to set ends for oneself and act according to maxims to achieve those ends one must be disciplined. This is why Kant sometimes distinguishes discipline as an *antecedent*, historical stage of development and condition of cultivation (KrV, A709–10/B737–8; Päd 9:449). If one is merely pushed and pulled by appetite, one cannot satisfy the first condition of culture: the setting of ends. On the other hand, the culture of skill is a positive, technical disposition; it involves the ability to manipulate objects for the achievement of one's ends (Anth, 7:322).

But the analysis of culture does not end with the distinction between the culture of skill and that of discipline. Kant's corpus is replete with mentions of different *sorts* of culture, including cultures of 'spirit' (*Geist*) (Päd, 9:470), 'mind' (*Gemüth*) (Anth, 7:152), 'reason' (KrV, A817/B845; MS, 6:484), 'taste' (Anth, 7:297; KU, 5:170; Refl 993, 15:438; V-Anth/Collins, 25: 187–96), 'memory' (Anth, 7:328; Päd, 9:474), 'soul' (*Seele*) (Päd, 9:469), and 'power of judgment' (*Urteilkraft*) (V-Anth/Mensch, 25:973). As Kant explains in the *Pädagogik*, these particular cultures are capacities to achieve particular kinds of ends, whereas culture in the general sense, outlined above, is a general aptitude to achieve ends of *whatever* sort (Päd, 9:475). Cultivation of these individual capacities does not just involve strengthening one's mental faculties: it is important, for instance, to rein in an overactive imagination (Päd, 9:476). There are, hence, for Kant, a wide variety of particular cultures, concerning distinct capacities and types of ends.

So, to conclude and elaborate the connections among these notions, culture, in general, is the state of possessing actualized human predispositions, adequate for the achievement of whatever ends one may set. To an extent, however, this state is a mere ideal; as Kant puts it, ‘because of the multitude of purposes, skillfulness becomes, as it were, infinite’ (Päd, 9:449–50). During the advance toward this state, human predispositions are developed piecemeal, and particular cultures are achieved, which progressively expands the horizons of one’s ends. In the ideal endpoint of cultivation, one would have developed all particular cultures and thus achieved the ultimate end of nature, that is, general culture, ‘the aptitude of a rational being for any ends in general’ (KU, 5:431). However, a precondition for the possession of or development of culture, whether general or particular, is the capacity to set ends for oneself, a capacity that is equivalent to the possession of humanity (see section 4).

### 3. Cultural Inaptitude

With the teleological understanding of culture described, I return to spelling out Kant’s views on the cultures of the races. I note that this content may be upsetting to read. According to the preceding interpretation of culture, the claim that Black people can achieve only the culture of servants means that they have developed predispositions to achieve certain kinds of ends, namely those ‘of servants’. Which, then, are the ends of servants? I contend the best explanation of Kant’s view is that the culture of servants involves proficiency to achieve ends *that another—namely a master—sets for them*.

Although I produce more positive evidence for my thesis below, support for my interpretation of the culture of servants is found in ruling out a competitive interpretation. According to this understanding, those possessing the culture of servants are proficient at the sorts of physical labor with which servants are commonly tasked: field work, milling, spinning, and so forth. There is, indeed, some evidence that Kant thought this way. As Lu-Adler puts it, Kant believed that Black people possessed an ‘animalistic excellence’ (2022: 275), a physical aptitude outstripping the other races. In student notes from Kant’s lectures on physical geography, we find assertions that plainly support that view (V-PG, 26:93; see also VvRM, 2:438).

But, while Kant clearly believes that Black persons have physical aptitude for manual labor, I contend that this is not what he had in mind when describing them as possessing the culture of servants. First and foremost, Kant had other terminology to identify Black individuals’ alleged physical prowess. This sort of physical aptitude could have been called the ‘culture of skill’ (KU, 5:432) or even ‘physical education’ (Päd, 9:466–9). More speculatively, a proficiency with the activities commonly undertaken by servants could be titled a ‘culture of (physical) labor’. But Kant did not use this terminology; he wrote instead of a culture *of servants*. What distinguishes servantry from a particular set of skills, a physical education, or a kind of labor? The conditions of the activity: the relation to a master who sets the ends of activity. Hence, when Kant assigns Black people the culture of servants, he does not mean to spotlight physical prowess (though he also believes in this prowess and that it makes Black



people capable servants and slaves), but rather he means they are proficient at achieving the ends that masters set for them.

What, however, does it mean to *restrict* Black individuals to the ‘culture of servants’ and Indigenous Americans to ‘no culture’, whatsoever? One implication is clear and well-trodden in the literature on Kant’s racism: being limited to these preliminary aspects of development entails that, for Kant, Black and Indigenous American people have no place in the future civilization and moralization of humanity (Larrimore 1999; Bernasconi 2003: 19–20; Marwah, 2019: 102–9; Lu-Adler 2022: 276–80). In the remainder of the section, I argue that Kant’s restriction of the cultural horizons of people of these races further entails that they are incapable of setting their own ends.<sup>5</sup>

First, this interpretation fits the technical understanding of culture, discussed above. Since culture, in general, is the capacity to achieve ends of any sort and particular cultures are capacities to achieve ends of particular sorts, the categorical denial of Indigenous Americans’ culture is to deny that they can achieve ends of any sort. Likewise, Black people are capable only of the servant’s culture for Kant, meaning that they can achieve only those ends that are set *for* them by a master. Indeed, the direct opposition of the culture of servants to that of the master (*Herr*) in V-Anth/Starke II (119) supports this understanding. Such a culture of servants is, however, culture in a *degenerate* sense. Being limited to this culture of servants entails that other possible ends—like those set by a Black individual themselves—cannot be achieved.

Second, more direct textual support for this interpretation can be found throughout Kant’s writings on the topic, atrocious as they are. For example, Kant emphasizes that Black people ‘are incapable of leading themselves’ and that ‘Americans and Negroes cannot govern themselves [and] serve therefore only as slaves [*Sclaven*]’ (Refl 1520, 15:877–8). Relatedly, in V-Anth/Matuszewski appears the claim that ‘He [the Negro] appears to be made for this purpose, to serve others, however never to be civilized’ (447; see also V-Anth/Dohna, 352). In virtue of being ‘incapable of leading themselves’, according to Kant, Indigenous Americans and Black people are lacking in a condition for culture: namely, that of setting their own ends. Thus, he claims, they must have ends set for them in the context of a master-slave/servant relationship. Relatedly, in two of Kant’s lecture notes, the ‘culture of servants’ or ‘formation of servants’ he assigns to Black persons is glossed as follows: ‘i.e., they can be trained [*tressirenlabrichten*]’ (V-Anth/Mensch, 25:1187; V-Anth/Petersburg, 315), here suggesting that the cultural deficiency involves a need to be directed, dominated, or tamed.

Additional evidence is found in Kant’s claim that Indigenous Americans are less capable slaves than Africans (VvRM, 2:438n). This is, for Kant, because Indigenous Americans are *incapable* of culture, even the culture of servants. The minimal culture

<sup>5</sup> This is where my interpretation especially breaks from that of Marwah. Although Marwah’s ‘individual conception of culture’ (2019: 46) resembles the understanding expounded above (section 2), he does not argue that Kant’s assertions about racialized cultures entail that Indigenous Americans and Black individuals cannot set their own ends. Instead, he, like Larrimore (1999), focuses on nonwhite individuals’ lack of participation in the moral vocation of humanity, that is, our *future* moral development (Marwah 2019: 102–9; 2022: 628–30).

of Black individuals—the ability effectively to achieve the ends that others set for them—makes them, according to Kant, more competent as slaves, a difference chalked up to Indigenous Americans’ lack of *discipline*. Discipline, as I explain above, is a prerequisite to culture for Kant. ‘Discipline [...] changes animal nature into human nature’ (Päd, 9:441), making possible the overcoming of instinctual drives, setting and achieving ends, and attaining culture (Päd 9:450; Refl 1497, 15:771). Black Africans, according to Kant, *are* capable of being disciplined and are therefore capable of the rudimentary culture of servants, meaning that they are more proficient at achieving those ends set for them than Indigenous Americans.

Third, Kant regularly depicts Black and Indigenous American people as congenitally listless, which provides further support for my interpretation. For instance, Kant describes Black people as such in a notorious footnote from his third race essay, in which he approves of James Tobin’s denunciation of free Black laborers. Tobin’s essay is a response to James Ramsey’s abolitionist book, which was paraphrased in Sprengel’s *Beiträge zur Völker und Länderkunde*, to which Kant refers (Bernasconi 2002: 148):

among the many thousand freed Negroes which one encounters in America and England, he [Tobin] knew no example of someone engaged in a business which one could properly call *labor*; rather that, when they are set free, they soon abandon an easy craft which previously as slaves [*Sklaven*] they had been forced to carry out, and instead become hawkers, wretched innkeepers, lackeys, and people who go fishing and hunting, in a word, tramps [*Umtrieber*] (ÜGTP, 8:174n.)

It is liberation from slavery that, according to Kant, leads Black people astray. Instead of finding and dedicating themselves to constructive ends, they are found in random, frivolous endeavors. This depiction suggests, that, for Kant, outside the confines of slavery—in which slaves are directed toward others’ ends—Black people are desultory and rudderless. When freed, on his view, Black former slaves are found languid because they are incapable of setting and achieving their *own* ends. Furthermore, this passage implies that the culture of servitude is not a merely conditional aspect of Black persons. Kant goes on to suggest that the low drive to activity, or ‘impetus’ [*Antriebe*], which explains freed Black slaves’ inability to adapt to their liberated condition, is ‘received from nature’, is passed down from generation to generation, and does not become ‘extinguished’ (ÜGTP, 8:174n.).

Kant likewise describes Indigenous Americans as by nature passive. According to Kant, Indigenous Americans ‘have a great indifference in their character’ (V-Anth/Collins, 25:233); are ‘insensitive’ (Refl 1520, 15:877; V-Anth/Brauer, 194; V-Anth/Parow, 25:409, 451), which means that they are unmoved by affect; have ‘no passions’ (Refl 1520, 15:877; V-Anth/Starke II, 119; V-Anth/Petersburg, 315); and possess ‘no incentives’ [*Triebfeder*] (V-Anth/Mensch, 25:1187). Kant additionally is attributed the view that nothing ‘causes a drive [*Trieb*]’ in Indigenous American and Black individuals (V-Anth/Parow, 25:409). In virtue of Indigenous Americans’ insensitivity and indifference, ‘nothing affects them, they are disturbed neither through promises nor threats’ (V-Anth/Brauer, 194; V-Anth/Parow, 25:451) and

‘they can stand longest in deep thought, they do either totally nothing or commit themselves to luck and games of chance’ (V-Anth/Collins, 25:233). Collectively, such passages indicate that nothing appears to Indigenous Americans, and arguably, to Black people, as valuable or so as to be set as an end. Herein lies, by Kant’s lights, the fundamental cultural deficiency: members of these races are incapable of effectively achieving their ends because nothing can be incorporated *as an end* into their decision making.

Lastly, a variety of passages attest that Black and Indigenous American persons are incapable of further historical development, implying that their cultural deficiencies cannot be overcome. For instance, the following passage from student notes to Kant’s anthropology lectures attributes to him the sentiment that Black and Indigenous American peoples’ development has stalled out.

The Americans have such relations in their nature that they now should become no more perfect... The Negroes, however, are also no longer susceptible of any further civilizing; but they have instinct and discipline, which is lacking in the Americans. (V-Anth/Pillau, 25:843; see also 25:840)

This sentiment, that Black people cannot achieve civilization is reiterated elsewhere: ‘The Negro can be disciplined and cultivated, never however genuinely civilized. He lapses from himself into savagery [*Wildheit*]’ (Refl 1520, 15:878). Relatedly, in student notes from Kant’s lectures on anthropology, it is stated that ‘The Negroes and Americans will hence never be capable of founding an orderly civil society for themselves’ (V-Anth/Starke II, 119; see also V-Anth/Mensch, 25:1181). Such passages suggest that these cultural deficiencies are, for Kant, unchangeable and part of their racial nature.

Mikkola (2011: 99), borrowing from Louise Antony, distinguishes between an individual bearing a property ‘by nature’ either *determinatively*—the individual’s bearing of the property cannot be changed—or *normatively*—the individual’s bearing the property is desirable. In Kant’s view, Indigenous Americans and Black people are *determined* by nature to possess their cultural deficiencies.

That much is also implied by Kant’s underlying theory of racialization (VvRM, 2:434–43). According to Kant, the initial, ‘phyletic’ human beings, who existed prior to the development of the races, possessed natural predispositions to adapt to their environments as they migrated across the globe. Such environmental conditions were the (occasional) cause of racialization, according to Kant: upon being exposed to various environments, over time, humans of various communities developed distinct characteristics, like skin colors, which were subsequently invariably passed down generation upon generation. However, the predispositions that cause adaptation to environments became *inert* after this initial stage of racial formation. That is, subsequent to racialization, environmental conditions can no longer activate predispositions to effect adaptation or another racial transformation. Racial features are ‘unfailingly hereditary’ (VvRM, 2:430; BBM, 8:100–1), according to Kant; they are fixed, unchanging, and invariably inherited.

Racial characteristics, however, include not only skin color. Kant maintains that a wide variety of features are racialized, including cognitive aptitude, physical ability, sociability, temperament, and sensitivity. Among these racial characteristics, for Kant, are the limitations of culture exhibited by persons of color, which entail that they suffer from inability to set and to achieve their own ends. On his view, the lack of culture of Indigenous Americans and the limited culture of Black individuals, like other racial characteristics, are based on the respective natures of the races, not on their mere contingent circumstances, and are therefore permanent.

While Kant's racist views depicted in this section are odious and distressing to read, my intent in presenting them is to support the redress of racial injustice, especially by clarifying the history of racism and its place in the philosophical canon. In the following, I describe the way that these commitments hang together in Kant's philosophical system, highlighting their moral ramifications.

#### 4. Humanity and Moral Worth of the Uncultured

Thus, with a more thorough understanding of Kant's views on culture, I come to the pressing question of their moral implications. To be clear, I do not mean to imply that the moral context is the only or the most important context for discussing Kant's racist ideology and its implications on our reception of his thought. For instance, there is excellent scholarship on the implications of Kant's racism for contemporary political theory, such as Mills (2018), Huseynzadegan (2019), and Basevich (2020). But some of the most prominent debates about Kant's racism relate to moral philosophy, the egalitarian character of which appears to conflict with Kant's racial hierarchy: see Eze (1995), Hill and Boxill (2000), Mills (2005, 2014), Bernasconi (2002, 2003, 2011), Kleingeld (2007), and Allais (2016). In this section, I explain why on Kant's view the capacity to set one's own ends is essential to moral worth, which has the consequence that Black people and Indigenous American people lack moral worth, for Kant, thereby supporting the *Untermensch* interpretation.

The following passage from the *Metaphysik der Sitten* weaves together the concepts of ends-setting, culture (in the technical sense), and humanity. In this section, 'humanity' refers to the set of characteristics described by Kant as distinguishing human beings from mere animals in a moral context, and, hence, that which gives agents their moral worth. In the following section, I distinguish this *moral* concept of humanity from the *biological* concept of humanity (qua species). Most importantly for the argument of this section, Kant is clear that the status of humanity—a necessary condition for moral worth—involves an ability to set ends for oneself.

*Natural* perfection is the *cultivation* of any *capacities* whatever for furthering ends set forth by reason. That this is a duty and so in itself an end, and that the cultivation of our capacities, even without regard for the advantages it affords us, is based on an unconditional (moral) imperative rather than a conditional (pragmatic) one, can be shown in this way. The capacity to set oneself an end—any end whatsoever—is

what characterizes humanity (as distinguished from animality). Hence there is also bound up with the end of humanity in our own person the rational will, and so the duty, to make ourselves worthy of humanity by culture in general, by procuring or promoting the *capacity* to realize all sorts of possible ends, so far as this is found in the human being itself. (MS, 6:391–2; see also 6:387 and GMS, 4:423, 430)

Several themes in this passage are notable (see Reath 2009: 199–200). First, Kant is clear that human beings have a duty to achieve culture, that is, to develop their capacities to achieve ends of all different sorts. Second, the reason that humans possess this duty is that the capacity to set ends is an essential part of their humanity, that which distinguishes them from mere animals. Unlike mere animals, humans are not simple agents of instinct; they set goals, rationally direct their behavior, develop and frame their life projects, and, fundamentally, act for reasons. So, crucially for my purposes, humanity, according to Kant, involves the ability to set ends for oneself (see Wood 1999: 118–20). As Korsgaard puts it, ‘Kant takes the characteristic feature of humanity, or rational nature, to be the capacity for setting an end’ (1986: 187). Further, Kant maintains that humanity is an objective end of absolute, non-relative worth, a commitment most clearly exhibited in the Formula of Humanity of the Categorical Imperative: ‘*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; see also KpV, 5:86–7). Humanity, for Kant, is the end in itself, whereas ‘all the objects of the inclinations have only a conditional worth’ (4:428). Yet this absolute worth of humanity depends on its ‘characteristic feature’, its being the capacity for setting ends.

This line of reasoning, coupled with our conclusion about Kant’s views in section 3, that persons of color lack the capacity for ends-setting, has a further heinous consequence: individuals who cannot set ends for themselves—Indigenous Americans and Black people—do not possess absolute moral worth. They lack the humanity that is to be respected as an end. Kant himself suggests precisely this, namely, that some peoples have not developed their humanity: ‘though they may be in service of Europeans for a long time, they can never grow accustomed to the European way of life. [... This] is a certain raw state that the animal in this case has so to speak not developed the humanity inside itself’ (Päd, 9:442). Indeed, Kant’s descriptions of the crudity of Indigenous Americans (GSE, 2:253; Päd, 9:444; PG, 9:432; Refl 1497, 16:771; V-Anth/Fried 25:622, 512; V-Anth/Matuszewski, 331; V-Anth/Mensch, 25:1190; V-Anth/Mrong, 25:1251; V-Anth/Starke II, 119) and Black people (Refl 1520, 15:878 (above); V-Anth/Mrong, 25:1251) as well as his mention of those ‘in service of Europeans for a long time’ show that it is precisely these persons of color that he takes to lack actualized humanity. Thus, analysis of Kant’s comments on the racial manifestations of culture supports the *Untermensch* interpretation of his views on the moral dimensions of race.

## 5. Supporting the *Untermensch* Interpretation

As mentioned above, although scholars disagree about the appropriate reaction to and understanding of Kant's racism, many, including Hill and Boxill (2000), Kleingeld (2007), Bernasconi (2011), and Allais (2016), oppose the *Untermensch* interpretation. The apparent crux of their opposition is the proposition that there is no conceptual space in Kant's system for human beings who fall short of moral humanity. In this section, I offer rejoinders to these accounts, particularly as voiced by Allais and Kleingeld.

On one hand, Allais criticizes the idea that nonwhite individuals lack moral personhood, for Kant, on the following grounds.

There is simply no evidence that the inferior moral and intellectual capacities Kant attributes to non-whites involve their not having the capacity to set and pursue ends, or act for reasons. Having the capacity to act for reasons is not the same as being a good, effective of prudent self-governor; *it does not require culture*, and it is compatible with the laziness and lack of drive Kant attributes to some non-whites at certain times. (2016: 18–9; my italic emphasis)

Where Allais goes wrong is in tacitly assuming a pretheoretic conception of culture. If 'culture' referred merely to a way of life, then, indeed, lacking a particular sort of culture or even lacking culture, full stop, would be no barrier to moral worth. However, as I have shown by analyzing passages from Kant above, when particular cultures are understood technically as the state of actualization of one's predispositions for particular sets of ends, the restricted cultures of Black people and Indigenous Americans have precisely the implication Allais claims to be requisite for the *Untermensch* interpretation.

On the other hand, Kleingeld (2007: 584) argues that the *Untermensch* interpretation fails, because, while it supposes that nonwhite individuals are not humans (since humanity is the condition for moral worth), Kant explicitly claims members of each race belong to the same human species (VvRM, 2:429–30; BBM, 8:99). Indeed, this was one of the explicit aims of Kant's account: to detail a *monogenetic* theory of race. In response, Mills (2014: 140) iterates that Kleingeld's response rests on an equivocation: she assumes the identity of humanity as a biological concept and humanity as a moral concept. That is, she mistakenly infers that since individuals of each race belong to the same species (biological concept), they must all possess the same capacities and, hence, moral worth (moral concept). In the remainder of this article, I provide additional support for Mills' rejoinder by clarifying the biological concept of humanity and by illustrating the division between these concepts.

First, consider Kant's biological concept of humanity. In VvRM (2:429–30), Kant distinguishes between two methods of classifying species: that characteristic of Carl Linnaeus and that of Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon. In his influential taxonomy, the *Systema Naturæ*, Linnaeus classified organisms based on observable similarities. In contrast, Buffon, in his *Histoire Naturelle*, argued that we ought to

classify species based on unity of origin. Kant is clear in his preference for Buffon's approach, claiming that, whereas Linnaeus' approach provides a 'system for memory', Buffon's 'provides a natural system for the understanding' that 'bring [s the species] under laws' (VvRM, 2:429). Kant faults the Linnaean approach as providing us only '*nominal species*', but Buffon's approach carves nature at its joints, describing '*real species*' (BBM, 8:102). Of course, it is difficult to determine whether given individuals share a generative history, humans being unable to survey the entire history of organisms' ancestry.<sup>6</sup> To this end, Kant proposes that we utilize '*Buffon's Rule*' to determine unity of origin and thus identity of species: 'animals which produce fertile youth with one another (whatever difference in shape there may be) still belong to one and the same physical species' (VvRM, 2:429). Kant goes on to utilize this standard to infer that individuals of every race belong to one and the same species, for those of different races may have fertile offspring.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to recognize, as Mills suggests, that belonging to the same biological species—possessing a shared generative history—does not entail that individuals possess the same mental or moral capacities. Just because an individual (biological) human being may produce fertile offspring with others does not imply that they share in the capacity to set and to achieve their own ends. Indeed, the evidence on offer indicates that this is precisely Kant's position: Black and Indigenous American people are biological humans, sharing a unity of origin with whites and Asians, while being incapable of setting their own ends and, thus, not achieving the status of moral humanity.<sup>8</sup>

A second line of response to Kleingeld's interpretation highlights Kant's own descriptions of human beings who lack capacities that are prerequisites to moral worth. That is, Kant believes there to be individuals who fall under the biological concept of humanity but not the moral concept of humanity. He includes those with mental disabilities in this category, as shown by the following quote, which may be distressing to read as it expresses Kant's ableism.

Complete mental deficiency, which either does not suffice even for animal use of the vital force (as among the *Cretins* of Valais), or which is just sufficient for a mechanical imitation of external actions that are possible through animals (sawing, digging, and so on), is called *idiocy*. It cannot really be called sickness of soul, it is rather absence of soul. (Anth, 7:211–2)

In this passage, Kant asserts that human beings may be so severely mentally disabled that they only act *mechanically*, mimicking the labor of animals, and, for that reason,

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, this difficulty was at the heart of Kant's disagreements with Georg Forster (see Forster 1958–, 8:130–56, ÜGTP, and McNulty 2022).

<sup>7</sup> For accounts of Kant's theory race in the context of 18<sup>th</sup> century natural description, highlighting his innovations vis-à-vis Linnaeus and Buffon, see Sandford (2018), Cooper (2023: 112–22), and Lu-Adler (2023: 162–240).

<sup>8</sup> Additional support for the decoupling of the moral and biological concepts of humanity can be found in the *Grundlegung* when Kant emphasizes that duty must derive from rational nature, in general, and therefore must be binding on the wills of *any* rational beings, not only on human beings (GMS, 4:425).

lack a soul.<sup>9</sup> Because one with ‘complete mental deficiency’ would act merely mechanically, they would be incapable of setting their own ends, meaning that they do not satisfy the criterion for inclusion in humanity as a moral concept. Such an individual is human in the biological sense, as they share a generative history with others of the biological class, but not in the moral sense, as they lack the requisite ends-setting capability. Indeed, as mentioned above, Kant sometimes indicates that members of nonwhite races face substantial cognitive deficiencies, suggesting a deeper connection between his racism and his ableism. For instance, he asserts that ‘indifference indicates stupidity’ (Refl 601, 15:258) and that ‘indifference from insensitivity is stupidity’ (V-Anth/Fried, 25:561), where, as I address above, ‘the character of all Americans is insensitivity and the indifference that derives from it’ (V-Anth/Parow, 25:451).

Kant makes related claims about children. In the *Pädagogik*, Kant explains that the first task of education is to instill discipline, where ‘[d]iscipline or training changes animal nature into human nature’ (Päd, 9:441). Training (*Zucht*), which produces discipline, ‘is therefore merely negative, that is to say, it is the action by means of which man’s tendency to savagery is taken away’, where ‘[s]avagery is independence from laws’ (Päd, 9:442). Although children share a generative history with other human beings and therefore belong to humanity as a biological concept, inclusion in this species does not immediately entail their mental and moral development. To achieve rationality requires a process of training, education, and maturation, which allows one to overcome the drive of one’s animal nature. This case is particularly analogous to those of Indigenous Americans and Black persons (see, again, *Reflexion* 1520, 15:877). The difference, for Kant, is that, whereas white children can overcome their state of immaturity, Indigenous Americans and Black people are permanently developmentally stunted.

These instances exemplify the mismatch between the biological and moral concepts of humanity for Kant, contradicting Kleingeld’s response to Mills.<sup>10</sup> It is therefore not only possible, but, given the evidence on offer, probable that Kant thought Indigenous Americans and Black people fall short of moral humanity while nonetheless being biologically human.

<sup>9</sup> Caused by lack of iodine in the soil, congenital iodine deficiency syndrome, which has, among other symptoms, cognitive impairment, was (relatively) common in the Valais region in the Alps (Merke 1984: 226). It is to those with the condition that Kant refers with ‘the *Cretins* of Valais’. Congenital iodine deficiency syndrome was effectively eliminated in Switzerland after the prophylactic iodization of salt beginning in 1922 (Zimmerman 2008, 2061–2). To be clear, Kant suggests that such individuals are even *worse* off, cognitively and mentally, than those who act only mechanically. Indeed, Kant is elsewhere attributed the view that they lack ‘understanding’, drawing a parallel with Jonathan Swift, who was disabled by a stroke (V-Anth/Mensch 25:1010–1).

<sup>10</sup> An anonymous referee helpfully noted that women may also instantiate the gap between the biological and moral concepts of humanity in Kant’s system, insofar as they play only an instrumental role in the development of humanity (see Anth, 7:305–6). Women, too, arguably lack the capacity to set ends characteristic of moral worth: see Schröder (1997) and Marwah (2013). For a contrasting account of Kant’s views on women’s agency, see Mikkola (2011).



## 6. Conclusion

I have argued that analysis of a rather overlooked set of claims—about races' respective cultures—provides additional textual and systematic support for the *Untermensch* interpretation. Yet, even if this interpretation is the most accurate to Kant's views, there remains a crucial set of questions to consider: how do we best react to Kant's racism, as philosophers, as historians, and as educators? How does the diagnosis of Kant's failures assist us in recognizing the nature of racism and better prepare us to redress racial injustice? What are the connections between Kant's racism and current forms of racism? Can a genuine, egalitarian Kantianism be formulated and directed toward pressing contemporary social issues? Or ought we instead turn away from our racist forefather, preferring instead those philosophical and political systems tailored to addressing racial oppression? My hope is that the understanding of Kant's racist commitments on offer in this article better prepares us for the consideration of such questions.

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The following abbreviations are used for references to Kant's writings.

Anth = *Anthropologie in Pragmatischer Hinsicht*  
 BBM = *Bestimmung des Begriffs einer Menschenrace*  
 GMS = *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*  
 GSE = *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*  
 IaG = *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*  
 KpV = *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*  
 KrV = *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*  
 KU = *Kritik der Urteilskraft*  
 Log = *Logik*  
 MAM = *Muthmaßlicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte*  
 MS = *Metaphysik der Sitten*  
 Päd = *Pädagogik*  
 PG = *Physische Geographie*  
 Refl = *Reflexionen*  
 ÜGTP = *Über den Gebrauch teleologischer Principien in der Philosophie*  
 V-Anth/Brauer = *Anthropologie Brauer*  
 V-Anth/Busolt = *Anthropologie Busolt*

V-Anth/Collins = *Anthropologie Collins*  
 V-Anth/Dohna = *Anthropologie Dohna-Wundlacken*  
 V-Anth/Fried= *Anthropologie Friedländer*  
 V-Anth/Matuszewski = *Anthropologie Matuszewski*  
 V-Anth/Mensch = *Anthropologie Menschenkunde*  
 V-Anth/Mrong= *Anthropologie Mrongovius*  
 V-Anth/Parow = *Anthropologie Parow*  
 V-Anth/Petersburg = *Anthropologie Petersburg*  
 V-Anth/Pillau = *Anthropologie Pillau*  
 V-Anth/Starke II = *Anthropologie Starke 2*  
 V-Met-L<sub>2</sub>/Pölitz = *Metaphysik L<sub>2</sub>*  
 V-Phil-Th/Pölitz = *Philosophische Religionslehre Pölitz*  
 V-Th/Volckmann = *Natürliche Theology Volckmann*  
 VvRM = *Von den verschiedenen Racen der Menschen*  
 ZeF = *Zum ewigen Frieden*

Citations of Kant's primary works refer to their production in *Immanuel Kants Gesammelte Schriften* (Kant 1900–), including the volume and page number. References to V-Anth/Dohna refer to Kowalewski (1924), those of V-Anth/Starke II refer to Bergk (1831), and those of V-Anth/Matuszewski to Kowalewski and Stark (2000). Citations of V-Anth/Brauer and V-Anth/Petersburg refer to versions available in Werner Stark's *Kant Online* (1997). Where available, English translations derive from those in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. Other translations are my own.

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