

# RESPONSES

*Kant and the Tahitians*



## A second birth in Tahiti

*Robert Koenig\**

TRANSLATED BY *Daryl Morini†*

Mr Koenig, you founded the publisher *Haere Pō* in 1981, which is well-known to all literary circles in the French-speaking Pacific. When did you arrive in Tahiti?

I came to French Polynesia in September 1969 for my compulsory national service. I was a member of the civilian scheme called the *volontariat à l'aide technique*, a kind of Peace Corps at that time. Because I didn't want to do my military service, the French military and Protestant mission in Tahiti expedited my coming, even though I wanted to go to Africa. Which is why I'm still unable to critique either institution, grateful as I am to each of them. Teaching philosophy in the small Protestant college in Papeete was eye-opening, or rather a second birth among Polynesian families and communities. I was lucky enough to be born twice. Why should cats hold a monopoly on having nine lives?

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**A unique path brings you to French Polynesia, that of philosophy.**

That's right. I taught philosophy or rather tried to teach it, and I remember throwing away all the lesson plans I had diligently prepared back in Alsace at the end of my second week in Tahiti. I took great pleasure in going to school for those 34 years, taking only two days off for my wedding and sick leave. I was fortunate enough to move around, teaching at Hermon Pastoral School, La Mennais Catholic College, and the Mamao School of Nursing—teaching my philosophy class each time. I delivered innovative lessons in civics on the political status of our islands and did my best to teach history and geography to junior college students in grades 6 and 5 [*ed.* – grades 7 and 8 in Australia] using the comic strip *Raban* on prehistory and *Alix* on the Roman period.

***Haere Pō* books are beautiful and relevant to the whole Pacific region. When did this adventure begin?**

*Haere Pō* means “nightwalkers”. This was chosen in response to Victor Segalen’s *Immémoriaux*, the story of a *haere pō* who trips over one word.<sup>1</sup> This project was brought to life in 1981 by a group of friends, our passion for reading and learning, and the need to share what we felt by allowing people to read books we thought could help them to keep getting along. Our goal was to publish books that were entirely designed and printed in Tahiti, as in the early days of the London Missionary Society (LMS) across the Pacific, and in the official and unofficial languages of our islands. In French, Tahitian, Marquesan, in Paumotu, in “Australian”, even in English. We were neither monocultural nor monolingual, but came from multiple backgrounds including Chinese, Tahitian, Alsatian, Swiss, even Swiss-German. This helps to understand and respect the complexity of insular places. We have now published around 110 books in 40 years.

**I understand that *Haere Pō* is an adventure which you have been on with your family.**

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Everything I say here—and everything I don't say—wouldn't have been possible without my wife Denise, who with loving care describes the sounds and colour of this world to me, colour-blind as I am!

**You have taught philosophy in Europe and the Pacific. How did these different cultural contexts modify your method of instruction?**

To try to teach philosophy in Tahiti means, firstly, doing everything you can to help students pass their written and oral exams to a respectable degree. That means writing dissertations on a given topic, providing coherent arguments over two or three sections while referencing classical sources, *i.e.* those taught in class. Philosophy has a delayed effect like some medications. With the only real question being whether curiosity, that is the desire to learn, can be taught. I would often try to inspire their desire for it using films, unusual documentaries, even books! I'd take them out to art exhibitions, to meet various prominent figures, and to observe court proceedings.

**Which Western thinker was most relevant in Tahiti? Was it Socrates?**

Some called my classroom “the cave”. Plato or rather Socrates and his *Symposium* and the second of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* were both at home in it. I preferred to ask questions, noting that *questio* is Latin for “to torture”, rather than giving answers. Catechisms exist for those whose curiosity is limited.

**What differences have you observed between European and Polynesian philosophy?**

The myths from the edges of the Mediterranean gave birth to the philosophical tradition, but Oceanian shores saw myths flourish that were remarkably full of lessons on how to live, on life experiences either lived or imagined, and on the potential for breaking and

tearing oneself away from life to live anew. Making students pay heed to this rich tradition by discovering it myself was unexpected.

**What did the Tahitian culture which you adopted teach you?**

Living in Tahiti—around the time of the nuclear tests, of various tourism campaigns, and during its so-called cultural renewal and wokism—is to live in ancient, modern, and postmodern misconceptions and perhaps even prejudices. Meaning that it is to live in the ideas of those who live, think, dream in Königsberg, Berlin, Paris, London, Shanghai, and even Sydney. I often asked myself where and when I was living, hence my interest in and our books on the first contacts of European navigators and missionaries. While it's easy to write about what one saw or thought one saw, I always tried to make students read between the lines, which was the only way of preserving their adolescent eyes.

**In one of his works,<sup>2</sup> the philosopher Immanuel Kant criticises Tahitians and their accursed happiness. Was Kant sad, and did he envy their happiness?**

I'm not sure if Kant was sad. Can a watch be sad? Kant was famous for the fact that one could set one's watch by observing him walking through Königsberg. If I recall correctly, he was "late" only once: after he read about the French Revolution in the newspapers. As for his attitude towards the Tahitians, is not thinking firstly thinking *against* something? Much as Kant did against Rousseau, against the simplifications of the myth of a "New Cytheria", meaning a romantic paradise, as the French navigator Louis-Antoine de Bougainville named Tahiti in 1768.

**If Kant had visited them, what would he have learned from the Tahitians?**

It depends. In which period? Alongside Captain Cook and the Forsters on their second voyage from 1772 to 1775, when Kant was 48 years old? Or alongside LMS missionaries on the *Duff* in 1797? Per-

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haps he might have learned Tahitian like them using Peter Heywood's manuscript<sup>3</sup> at age 73! He could have gone to the Marquesas islands like William Crook<sup>4</sup> or returned to London on their ship. In any case, he could have been inspired to write his 1798 *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* completely differently.

**Is your publishing house confronted with the language barrier, which cuts off the English-speaking from the French-speaking Pacific like a great barrier reef?**

Regarding publishing, we tried to release books for the English-speaking public living outside French Polynesia. It was a total failure. *Too bad*, as you say in English. But the Great Ocean is something that can separate as much as it can unite. Isn't that what Epeli Hau'ofa, a great Tongan thinker and theologian, once said?<sup>5</sup> In the old days, the Spanish, British, French, German, and Japanese colonies drew borders across the so-called Great South Sea, and modern maps significantly extend these old borders with the addition of Exclusive Economic Zones. Could the Māori name for the Pacific, *Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa* (which has nothing to do with the rugby team *Moana Pasifika!*), be a better alternative or a more holistic concept for half the surface of our Earth?

**So, are the Pacific's linguistic and cultural diversity more of an asset?**

Yes, I think so. Is not monoculture, whether agricultural or cultural, one of the factors behind a warming climate and nationalisms? Becoming aware of our biodiversity firstly means trying to be skeptical of what we see and hear, and not stopping there.

## Notes

- 1 Victor Segalen (1878-1919) was a French naval doctor posted to French Polynesia from 1903-1905. This inspired him to write *Les Immémoriaux* about the religious conversion of Tahiti's Maohi people. See Victor Segalen, *A Lapse of Memory*, transl. Rosemary Arnoux (Brisbane: Boombana Publications, 1995).
- 2 'Does the author really mean that if the happy inhabitants of Tahiti, never visited by more cultured nations, had been destined to live for thousands of centuries in their tranquil indolence, one could give a satisfying answer to the question why they exist at all, and whether it would not have been just as good to have this island populated with happy sheep and cattle as with human beings who are happy merely enjoying themselves?' Immanuel Kant, 'Review of J. G. Herder's *Ideas for the philosophy of the history of humanity. Parts 1 and 2* (1785)', transl. Allen W. Wood, in Robert B. Loudon and Günter Zöllner (eds.), *Anthropology, History, and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 142.
- 3 See Rolf E. du Rietz, 'Peter Heywood's Tahitian Vocabulary and the Narratives of James Morrison: Some Notes on their Origin and History', in *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (March 1989): 100-103.
- 4 William Pascoe Crook, *An Account of the Marquesas islands 1797-1799*, with an introduction by Greg Denig (Papeete: Haere Pō, 2007).
- 5 See, *inter alia*, Epeli Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008).



## Kant's critique of idealised Tahitians

*Simon Swift\**

Professor Swift, in 2005 you wrote a fantastic paper on Immanuel Kant's critique of his former student J.G. Herder.<sup>1</sup> It's hard to think of an odder couple. I can't imagine Professor Kant enjoying marking Herder's papers.

Me neither! I guess something that's always really fascinated me and that filters through in my argument is the question of student-teacher relations. I'm especially interested in the question of how the work of the student often holds the teacher's thought in an intimate embrace while rejecting key aspects of it. Think Heidegger and Hannah Arendt, Paul de Man and Gayatri Spivak who also features in my article, and Kant and Herder. All of these were star students who later took umbrage at their teachers' doctrines.

When some people read Herder, Hamann, Nietzsche, or Shestov critiquing reason in what has been called the "counter-Enlightenment", it sets off alarm bells as if they were extremists. Is this a testament to Kant's legacy?

I think so, yes. It's testament to how normative Kant's view of reason became, and his sense that it needs to be protected against

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‘fanaticism’.<sup>2</sup> But I’d also want to temper that claim in two different ways.

First, while people like Nietzsche were very close, even if hostile readers of the morality of Kant’s thinking, the rise of Kant-influenced ideas such as positivism and utilitarianism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century created a disconnect between Kant’s legacy and what he really had in mind. This is especially the case when we think about what reason is and what it does. Kant’s reason is a much more dynamic and lyrical force than the one of abstract calculation our inherited idea suggests.

**That’s certainly the idea I have of Kant. But you see lyricism in his works?**

Yes, and part of that lyricism comes from Kant’s efforts to save the Enlightenment by inoculating it with a dose of the kind of lyricism and ‘enthusiasm’<sup>3</sup> that he saw emerging in the work of people like Herder and Hamann. For Kant, this kind of thought didn’t know what it was doing. By trying to shake up enlightenment, to make it sensitive to language, culture, and expression as forms of determination, it risked destroying enlightenment altogether.

I think that remains a real risk even now—so I guess I’m sympathetic to Kant’s legacy! At the same time, he recognised that enlightenment needed to become responsive to ideas of history and embodiment—what we now take to be the counter-Enlightenment position.

But the second qualification would relate to what we mean by “counter-Enlightenment”. How did those who opposed Kant’s version of enlightenment in the 1780s impact later thinkers like Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, who themselves shaped later critical theory, which sets out its own critique of enlightenment? I’m not sure that that’s a question that we’ve adequately answered yet.

**Okay, so their dispute breaks out in 1785 because Professor Kant writes bad reviews—we’re talking 1-star—of Herder’s *Ideas on***

*the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*.<sup>4</sup> Fairly standard academic fare, but it seems personal.

I think it definitely is. Kant was desperate to make a claim that reason is a public, communal act that depends upon its readers as ‘co-workers’, as he writes at one point. Kant wanted to be accessible, yet most people found his writing totally impenetrable. Herder, by contrast, was much easier to read, wilfully popular, and therefore something of a rising academic star in 1785.

But Kant thought that Herder’s argument, and especially its use of poetical analogies, fooled readers into thinking they’d understood something about the cause of nature, which was still mysterious and impenetrable. For Kant, thinking is about collective hard work undertaken to try to advance in our understanding of a universe that is basically paradoxical and hard to explain. Kant, remember, didn’t have the benefit of particle physics. So, for Kant, style plays an important role in calling others into that communal labour. But none of this sounds very sexy!

**So, it annoyed Kant that Herder successfully popularised philosophy?**

Because Herder seemed to give his readers easy access to complete answers in an enjoyable form, one can only suspect that Kant felt a bit betrayed that someone he’d taught had so wilfully abandoned the meticulousness of his thinking about nature and history. And undoubtedly, Kant was jealous of the success! It’s not the first time that a philosopher or critic like Herder has got hold of some new ideas in science and spun a totalising metaphysics out of them—we still see that today. Kant would urge caution in making sense of science by those not trained in interpreting it.

**Kant rejects Herder’s claim that our true goal in life is our own individual happiness, which is something like an article of faith of modern Western culture. So, is Kant saying that happiness isn’t the point of our existence?**

He is. Here you begin to see why Herder seemed more sexy! Kant was a Protestant, after all, who thought that life was about labour and the life of the group rather than of the individual. So, one of the problems with establishing happiness as the purpose of life, for Kant, was that it seemed egotistical to him—as if my job is to establish my own satisfaction, rather than to build a better world for future generations by cooperating with those around me to achieve it. Here, I think we could understand Kant as a kind of forefather of eco-activism, which is all about imagining the consequences of our selfish actions in the future and building a better world for future generations.

At the same time, I think it's important to stress that Kant isn't saying that we should somehow aim to be miserable, or that happiness is bad. The fact that we find people who are happy in many different environments across the world suggests, in fact, that humans have a capacity to change their environments in ways that make them more satisfied—or so Kant would claim. And relatedly, he's also interested in ideas of rational happiness, the kind of contentment that we achieve by setting our own ends and realising them, as opposed to just going along with what we find around us.

**Here we get to Kant's famous quote that sparked its own share of academic quarrels. In attacking Herder's pæan to happiness, Kant asks why the Tahitians 'exist at all, and whether it would not have been just as good to have this island populated with happy sheep and cattle as with human beings who are happy merely enjoying themselves?'**<sup>25</sup> What does this mean?

It's hard to live with, isn't it? Kant is explicitly comparing non-European human life to the lives of animals, in order to suggest that both make problematic the idea that there is a purpose to human existence. And this as the colonisation of the Pacific is really getting under way. It's not in any way forgivable, but it's also important to look at what Kant says in context. We've seen that Kant is concerned with humans building a world for themselves, together, of their own rational design, and so he wrinkles his nose at cultures

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and environments that, from his European perspective, seem to be about satisfaction with what nature produces and show little desire to change it.

Yet Kant is actually more worried about Europeans who, reading stories about Tahitian life, might be drawn to it themselves. Herder's work is evidence, for Kant, of a growing hatred of rational life in the culture of the late Enlightenment, a desire to opt out of the civilisational process, which he found evidence of in the lure of Tahiti to the European imagination. Kant basically thought that this kind of opting out was selfish, but also insulting to the dignity of all humans, whether European or Tahitian.

**Fascinating. He was upset by Europeans opting out of his ideas, in a sense.**

So you could argue that he's more troubled by the surfer who wants to "get away from it all" on Tahiti than by the Tahitians themselves, because the surfer insists on Tahiti as a space that is outside of "it all", *i.e.* human cultural development, and that he wants to keep unspoiled for his own selfish purposes. Of course, Kant's ideas about the necessity of world-building look different to us, reflecting back on that moment through the intermediating history of genocide and ecocide. And it's undeniable that Kant imagines life outside of European civilisation as a life closer to the animals, and therefore a life less worth living.

**So, what Kant doesn't like is the claim that we can be happy apart from reason, that our happiness depends on feelings. It's interesting that Kant doesn't admire the cow's happiness. Nietzsche did.<sup>6</sup> Schopenhauer too.<sup>7</sup>**

For sure. One qualification I would make is that Kant doesn't necessarily think that reason and feeling are opposites. Recent critics have shown that Kant actually anticipates, in some ways, our more postmodern sense that reason is about embodiment.<sup>8</sup> He thinks that feeling and reason are deeply intertwined, and that we need to look at how each produces the other. But you are absolutely right that the

capacity to forget and to not feel resentment, which Nietzsche associates with the cow, is not something you'll find in Kant. We are absolutely historical beings of time and memory, and imagining the future and how things might otherwise be is a bit of a waste of time for him.

**But why does a German professor who never left Königsberg take issue with the happiness of the Tahitian people *in particular*? Was he influenced by Bougainville, Diderot, or Captain Cook, whose visit to Tahiti he references?**<sup>9</sup>

Absolutely. I think he's interested in Tahiti because it's available to him in source texts, and also because it's attractive. But in passages equivalent to the one you cite above in other works Kant also talks about indigenous peoples from other places remote to Europe.

**There are many interpretations of Kant's metaphor. Is it racism as some argue,<sup>10</sup> a travelogue trope, a way for him to deflate Herder's noble savage myth by arguing that Tahitian happiness is impossible, or all of the above?**

First off, I think it absolutely is racism, no doubt. Kant is just a typical middle class European in assuming that life outside of what counts, for him, as civilisation, is closer to animal life. Remember too, though, that Kant is writing at the very moment of ethnography's birth. Later on, people like Claude Lévi-Strauss will come along to teach Europeans about how culture has many meanings beyond Europe's arrogant assumption to have a trademark on it. Yet I think it's also important not to stop there—wherever there is racism, it helps with the anti-racist struggle to try to understand where it comes from.

And Kant is one of those racists who is trying to be benevolent, as I've indicated above. There's a sense in which he's arguing that it's *Herder* who's the real racist by making of Tahiti a kind of refuge for the agitated European imagination. A bit like Edward Said has argued about European imaginings of Asia in *Orientalism*,<sup>11</sup> Herder's idealisation of a life untouched by reason could be racism in dis-

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guise. For me, it seems incontrovertible that, on his own terms, Kant thinks that Herder's argument denies a true human vocation to Tahitians. In thinking this, he is clearly not much different than the missionary come to save souls. But I think that Kant's critique of Herder also tells us something more interesting about his argument that is easy to miss. Lots of critics have written about how Kant is, as it were, unconsciously drawing up a blueprint for colonial domination in phrases like the one you quote above. So, the idea would be that philosophy doesn't realise how up to its neck in geopolitics it is. It has a blind spot; its idea of itself is that it is just about ideas and it doesn't notice that it has a real effect in the world. I'd suggest, first, that that is unfair to Kant, and that he's always thinking about the importance of philosophy to the real world—he doesn't live in an ivory tower of abstraction.

But maybe even more interestingly, he *knows* he's being provocative in comparing Tahitians to animals. This is a riposte to Herder's idealisation of the noble savage idea which, if you read it through patiently, shows that idea to contain its own heavy dose of racism. At the very least, this calls into question the arrogance of the critic who thinks they know more about Kant's text than he does. None of which excuses the casual, unthinking racism though.

**At the end to your 2005 piece, you point to a literary quality to these symbols and analogies of Kant's, including that of the happy Tahitians.<sup>12</sup> That may be news to anyone who has attempted to read any of his three *Critiques*.**

No doubt! But actually, the *Critiques* don't necessarily deserve their forbidding reputation. I think it was the philosopher Jacques Derrida who said that the problem with the *Critique of Pure Reason* is that no one reads it backwards! If you just read the first half, all you have is really complex, taxing analytical and dialectical philosophy. And most people give up after 200 pages of that. But in the second part, especially Kant's 'Architectonic of Pure Reason', it becomes strange and beautiful, filled with amazing, hallucinatory metaphors of houses in wastelands, living statues, and so on. Again, Kant was

desperate to make his work translate into the popular imagination but struggled to achieve that without compromising on the integrity of his ideas. But the efforts he makes to do so are much more interesting than people generally realise.

**Is it possible that no one is as happy as the tropes about smiling Tahitians, Nepalese, and ni-Van people suggest? And that, if the self-help books by happiness gurus that are sold by the million aren't helping, Kant was right?**

That would make for a sad world! There's a lot to be unhappy about today: war, the condition of refugees in our world, environmental collapse, economic inequality, racism, the psychological consequences of the pandemic. But I guess I remain a Kantian in my belief that we are at our happiest when we work together for the common good. And by "common" I mean truly common, involving not just every human being, but every sentient, living being on the planet.

Kant's text in some ways marks the moment when modern Western humanity entered on its suicidal course of colonisation, genocide, and environmental devastation—which is to say, when it finally had the tools it needed to maximise the devastation it had always practiced. But I also think that humans are stunning beings of consciousness, empathy, sociability and that Kant also modelled many of these ideas. We can serve each other as much as we harm each other. Let's hope that happiness can flourish through the former impulse winning out.



## Notes

- 1 Simon Swift, 'Kant, Herder, and the question of philosophical anthropology', in *Textual Practice*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2005): 219-238.
- 2 Rachel Zuckert, 'Kant's Account of Practical Fanaticism', in *Kant's Moral Metaphysics*, eds. Benjamin James Bruxvoort Lipscomb and James K. Krueger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 291-318.
- 3 Religious 'enthusiasm' is a synonym for fanaticism. See Zuckert, 'Kant's Account of Practical Fanaticism', 291.
- 4 Also translated as J.G. Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, transl. T. Churchill, Second Edition (London: J. Johnson, St. Paul's Church-Yard, 1803).
- 5 'Does the author really mean that if the happy inhabitants of Tahiti, never visited by more cultured nations, had been destined to live for thousands of centuries in their tranquil indolence, one could give a satisfying answer to the question why they exist at all, and whether it would not have been just as good to have this island populated with happy sheep and cattle as with human beings who are happy merely enjoying themselves?' Immanuel Kant, 'Review of J. G. Herder's *Ideas for the philosophy of the history of humanity. Parts 1 and 2* (1785)', transl. Allen W. Wood, in Robert B. Loudon and Günter Zöller (eds.), *Anthropology, History, and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 142.
- 6 Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, transl. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60.
- 7 Arthur Schopenhauer, 'On the Sufferings of the World', in *Studies in Pessimism*, transl. Thomas Bailey Saunders (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1913): 9-30.
- 8 Christian Onof, 'Kant's conception of self as subject and its embodiment', *Kant Yearbook*, Vol. 2, Issue 1 (2010): 147-174.
- 9 Kant, 'Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view (1798)', transl. Robert B. Loudon, in *Anthropology, History, and Education*, 401.
- 10 Jimmy Yab, *Kant and the Politics of Racism: Towards Kant's racialised form of cosmopolitan right* (Cham: Springer, 2021), 106.
- 11 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).
- 12 Swift, 'Kant, Herder, and the question of philosophical anthropology', 236.

## The whitewashing of Kant

*Robert Bernasconi\**

Professor Bernasconi, you wrote a 2005 paper called: ‘Why do the happy inhabitants of Tahiti bother to exist at all?’<sup>1</sup> You were paraphrasing Kant, who you strikingly said ‘unwittingly contributed’ to a culture of genocide.

This is, as you point out, an old essay and I would certainly change some details if I were to rewrite it today. I had previously argued that Kant had in effect invented the modern scientific idea of race in terms of a permanent, that is to say hereditary, racial hierarchy. But this 2005 essay marks only an early stage in my attempt to address the role of a number of philosophers of history, and not just Kant, in promoting the idea that the very existence or purposefulness of some peoples was questionable because they could never attain the heights, the perfectibility, that was potentially open to the White race as a race. The actual phrase “bother to exist” was not my contribution; it is to be found in Robert Anchor’s translation of Kant’s review of Herder’s *Ideen* published in Lewis White Beck’s volume *Kant on History*. The translation of this phrase is not precise, but it captures perfectly the dismissive tone Kant frequently applied in his polemics.

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**You were not arguing that Kant had a direct, causal role in the events leading to later genocides, but that the famous Prussian had legitimised genocidal theories like many in his day. Is that a fair characterisation?**

Yes. Kant was certainly not advocating or celebrating the extermination of whole populations as later writers would do. But, as I pointed out in my essay, Kant himself recognised that if the meaning of the human species lay in its historical progress, there was an evident problem about the point of races and peoples that did not progress. For example, in lectures he delivered in 1778 he addressed the fact that Native Americans were in the process of dying out. He rejected as gruesome the idea of murdering them, but, given that he saw no role or need for them and indeed speculated that they would eventually kill each other as Europeans advanced into their land, he had articulated a dangerous perspective from which their presence could be seen as an obstacle to progress.

**It seems surreal that, as you say, Kant’s thought on ‘the question of the meaning of human existence’ could possibly legitimise genocides. Many people couldn’t imagine the quest for meaning being so dangerous. Is it?**

Kant’s starting point in his 1784 essay on history was the apparent chaos of human affairs, which he contrasted with the orderliness visible in the way animals like bees and beavers go about their lives. Whereas nature’s purposes for animal species was visible in each generation, it seemed to Kant that the meaning of human existence emerged only insofar as one took an historical perspective with regard to the species as a whole. But, having adopted this perspective, Kant was explicit that for nature’s aim for humanity to be fulfilled earlier generations are in effect sacrificed for those that came later. And then the question becomes: What does that sacrifice look like?

**You explain that Kant was one of the first Western thinkers to detach this question of “meaning” from God and attribute it to**

history, from which he deduced his beliefs that Native Americans are a weak, talentless race, *etc.*

Or, more precisely, because he believed that their weakness and other limitations were hereditary, there was a problem about how they and races other than the White race contributed to the perfection of the species. It seemed that the logic of Kant's position about history when combined with his views about race entailed the idea that just as earlier generations sacrificed themselves for later generations, so the less talented races were called upon to sacrifice themselves for the White race that, as a race, was unique in possessing all the talents.

**You also write that Kant defended Native Americans against colonialism. Was this defence unusual for an 18<sup>th</sup> century European philosopher?**

Much is made of what he wrote about hospitality, but discussions of the right to hospitality were widespread throughout the eighteenth century. There was nothing significantly new there. By contrast, we must give him credit for insisting that the right to settle uninhabited lands did not include cases where there were shepherds or hunters. But there is an inner tension in his account. From his perspective using force to remove them was to the world's advantage, but at the same time he saw the injustice of doing so and he explicitly denied that civilising or Christianising supposedly savage inhabitants could override that. So, a Kantian would recognise the injustice of Indian Removal in the United States in the 1820s, while at the same time acknowledging that it was consistent with nature's aim.

**Kant, you write, held a teleological view of history on which our happiness as individuals was entirely dependent on some collective end state, such as cosmopolitanism, first being secured. This is still a popular way of thinking.**

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Nobody today can look at the world and not see that the problems of world hunger, fighting disease, and combatting climate change can only be addressed by global cooperation. But those were not Kant's issues and that is not why he advocated cosmopolitanism. One should beware thinking that what Kant understood by cosmopolitanism is continuous with what the advocates of cosmopolitanism today (who nevertheless try to trade on Kant's name and attribute their own ideas to him) understand by that term. But buying into the Kant franchise is a much less attractive proposition now that his role in formulating what was effectively a new kind of racism is no longer concealed from the general public, as Kant scholars have frequently done since the Second World War, that is, until very recently.

**Which brings us to Kant's question of why the Tahitians 'exist at all, and whether it would not have been just as good to have this island populated with happy sheep and cattle as with human beings who are happy merely enjoying themselves?'<sup>22</sup> What about their happiness so bothered Kant?**

Kant was provoked by Georg Forster's description of Tahiti as one of the happiest spots on the globe, but his real target was Herder who understood that there was something inherently vicious about Kant's 1784 essay on history somewhat along the lines that I have already indicated. Herder believed that all peoples contributed to humanity. He celebrated their differences, but for Kant, although the white race possessed in principle all the talents, the other races were marked by limitations that were the product of the conditions in which they found themselves in the early stages of their existence. He viewed the happiness of the Tahitians as a product of the ease with which they were able to provide for themselves. But by living in such an environment they lacked the incentive to work and improve themselves and this had shaped their character. To Kant the source of their happiness was their downfall.

You write that philosophies of progress—in colonial, nationalistic, and pseudo-scientific forms—became bound up with mass murder in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Has this potential link you posit been broken in our day and age?

I believe that there were significant changes, one might say paradigm shifts, that separate the racisms of the late eighteenth century from those of the early twentieth century, so I was not charting a continuous line of development. But I would add that some of the ways that Kant thought about race—his insistence on its hereditary character, his antipathy on biological grounds toward race mixing, and perhaps above all his importation of those two ideas into a progressive philosophy of history—were at very least unusual in his own time and anticipate in some respects what came later. To that extent one can say, with appropriate reservations, that they prepare the way for the biopolitics that took hold in the late nineteenth century. The idea of progress, like that of civilisation, is still frequently associated with some peoples and some races and not other peoples and races, even though we seem to have every reason to question the ideas of progress and civilisation themselves. Unfortunately, the culture of genocide, cultural and physical, is alive and well and the echoes of earlier philosophies, including Kant's, can be heard in it.

More recently, you wrote on the so-called second thoughts question, *i.e.* the debated claim that Kant substantially rethought his views on race in later works.<sup>3</sup> Have the views you have set out above been altered by this debate?

The idea that Kant changed his mind late in the day has proved very attractive to a number of scholars, even though what evidence there is for such a change is slight and is in any case confined to relatively minor points, given the larger picture. But there have recently been some strong responses critical of the second thoughts thesis. They not only largely vindicate my position, but even demonstrate that things are worse for Kant's reputation than I had imagined ten years ago. I have learned a lot from these new studies.

**If Kant was wrong in making happiness subservient to ideas like progress, how do we learn from his failure as we try to live morally in our own time?**

I would be surprised if many people today still want to promote a philosophy constructed around either happiness or progress. Neither of these ideas speak to the moral and political issues of our time. But when it comes to living morally today, one prerequisite is intellectual honesty. There is a fundamental dishonesty in the attacks on critical race theory by politicians in the United States and it is mirrored in the way that academic philosophers have sought to whitewash the role of a number of canonical philosophers, not just Kant, when they promoted slavery and a racially based philosophy of history. In my view, we should be focusing more on the current crises and much less on trying to rehabilitate past philosophies. To that extent, I regret the fact that I have had to spend so much of my time having to show the deficiencies of past philosophies that still have adherents who want to defend them. But I judged it necessary to do so in order to create the space where other approaches might flourish and I believe we are seeing signs that there is now a strong appetite for radical change in the way philosophy is taught.

## Notes

- 1 Robert Bernasconi, 'Why Do the Happy Inhabitants of Tahiti Bother to Exist at All?', in *Genocide and Human Rights: A Philosophical Guide*, ed. John K. Roth (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 139-148.
- 2 'Does the author really mean that if the happy inhabitants of Tahiti, never visited by more cultured nations, had been destined to live for thousands of centuries in their tranquil indolence, one could give a satisfying answer to the question why they exist at all, and whether it would not have been just as good to have this island populated with happy sheep and cattle as with human beings who are happy merely enjoying themselves?' Immanuel Kant, 'Review of J. G. Herder's *Ideas for the philosophy of the history of humanity. Parts 1 and 2* (1785)', transl. Allen W. Wood, in Robert B. Loudon and Günter Zöllner (eds.), *Anthropology, History, and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 142.
- 3 Robert Bernasconi, 'Kant's Third Thoughts on Race', in *Reading Kant's Geography*, eds. Stuart Elden and Eduardo Mendieta (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 291-318.

## Tahiti in the European mind

*Chunjie Zhang\**

**Dr. Zhang, you are an expert on the role of the Pacific in 18<sup>th</sup> century German culture, an often forgotten colonial power. In the Pacific, Britain and France are usually seen as the leading colonisers.**

Yes, when we think about colonialism and imperialism, the common association is the British Empire along with French or Dutch colonial enterprises in the twentieth century. The colonialism of the second German Empire was short-lived around 1900 and upended with WWI. Germany did not experience a wave of decolonialisation movements after WWII, like Britain or France. The lack of a lengthy colonial history in the German empire does not necessarily mean a lack of intellectual and cultural discourse of colonialism in Germany. My work on German-speaking culture and the Pacific aims to shed more light on the active role that German intellectuals played during the long eighteenth century while major colonial powers in Europe were exploring possibilities to establish colonies worldwide. The German intellectual and literary discourse substantially influenced Europe-wide discussions on racism, slavery, abolition, and colonial trade and exploitation.

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In your book *Transculturality and German Discourse in the Age of European Colonialism*,<sup>1</sup> which built on your doctoral work,<sup>2</sup> you write about Georg Forster who went to Tahiti with Captain Cook in 1772-1775.<sup>3</sup> He was torn between the ideas that it was a paradise and uncivilised. Was this ambivalence towards Tahiti common?

Forster provided a unique perspective due to his special status as a scientist onboard Cook's expedition and his foreigner status of being ethnically German with a work contract for the British. His travel writing, translated from English into German by himself, was a huge success in Germany and established the South Sea myth of paradise in central Europe. I think Forster was more impressed and fascinated with Tahiti rather than dismissing it as "primitive". He was torn between his admiration for Tahiti and his choice of not staying there for good. My point is that Forster was strongly influenced by the Tahitian way of life and he transported this admiration back home to Germany. It is the sustained impact of Tahiti on the European mind that has not been emphasised enough.

You note that Forster's travel writings—and his 1778 book *Voyage Round the World*<sup>4</sup> in particular—shaped European ideas about Tahiti, which for context you note was then the second most popular genre after novels.

Yes, travel writings were very popular, even though the novel was still an emerging genre that aroused a passion for reading (among young women) and, at the same time, skepticism and critique of this fervent interest. It may be a bit similar to today's videogames. But travel writings were an important repository of ethnographic knowledge and cultural-philosophical speculations about non-European places in European tradition. Forster managed to turn travel writing into a serious science.

Very interesting. It's easy to forget the role of the Pacific in European culture. You compare the impact of Forster's work then

to ‘the landing on the moon and having an astronaut at one’s dinner table in the 1960s.’

Haha, yes, Forster was invited to German courts and instantly became a celebrity after the German publication of his *Voyage Round the World*. He was offered a position as a natural history professor at the Collegium Carolinum in Kassel. That solved his financial issues, which had been caused by his father’s feud with the British Admiralty over his right to publish his own travel writings.

**The naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, who visited Australia among other places, also saw his mentor Forster as a world authority on Tahiti and other ‘happy islands of the Pacific’. Was that happiness trope popular back then?**

Yes, Humboldt grew up steeped in this South Sea myth and sees Forster as an authority on the matter of scientific travel writing. Indeed, Forster endeavoured to write a fact-based travelogue instead of a fantasy-filled account to quench consumers’ thirst for curiosity. That ideal served as a model for Humboldt.

**Were Rousseau’s theories a direct influence on Forster’s idea that Tahiti was an earthly paradise, or is it more the case that both men drank from the same cultural waters?**

Rousseau’s theory of the noble savage was indeed very influential in the eighteenth century. Yet, from my reading of Forster’s writing, I feel that Forster was more directly influenced by what he experienced in Tahiti rather than imposing preconceived ideas on the Tahitians. Of course, Forster was not completely prejudice-free, but he strived to write based on his scientific findings instead of looking at things as though through ‘coloured glass’, as he terms it.<sup>5</sup> That’s why I consider Forster’s writing remarkable in the eighteenth century.

**Another part of this Edenic myth equated Tahiti with sexual freedom, as captured by the traveller Bougainville’s and philosopher**

Diderot's writings, and in Paul Gauguin's paintings later. Even king Frederick William II had a strange Tahitian fantasy. This was totally mainstream in Europe, wasn't it?

That's correct. The idea of paradise is deeply connected to the satisfaction of our basic desires. Freud's psychoanalysis could be largely seen as a critique of the social suppression of desire in the Victorian era. The European sailors' experiences in Tahiti and the South Sea in general fuelled the fantasy of unrestrained sexuality, quite unlike the Christian mores in Europe. At the same time, a thinker like Denis Diderot used this hearsay to enunciate his critique of the Catholic Church during the Enlightenment. Gauguin used East Asian Buddhist paintings to portray nudity in a Tahiti of his fantasy. Thus, Forster's contribution to a more or less factual account of Tahiti was even more valuable vis-à-vis the other ends Tahiti was made to serve in the European imagination.

In a review of his former student J.G. Herder, even philosopher Immanuel Kant famously asked why Tahitians bother to 'exist at all', and whether it would not have been better for 'happy sheep and cattle' to live there if being happy is all the Tahitians do.<sup>6</sup> Why did he so disdain Tahitian happiness?

I am not quite familiar with this expression of Kant's. If it is true, it is definitely an arrogant and ignorant European colonial attitude to dismiss other cultures. At the same time, Kant was very interested in non-European cultures. He was an avid reader of travel writings, befriended seamen at the port city of Königsberg, and lectured regularly for decades on the anthropology, geography, and botany of the world in his lecture course on physical geography. Indeed, Kant developed his theory of race in his book *Anthropology* as part of the lecture script of this course.

Kant never went to Tahiti—he never left Königsberg. So, did his views rest on the same European clichés about Tahiti which he inherited uncritically? Or did they reflect his own racism as some argue,<sup>7</sup> or some other factors?

Kant was an avid reader of travel writings and enjoyed conversing with seamen about their experience abroad. Kant, as well as many other European thinkers of the time, was keenly interested in systematising the “findings” of the European expeditions into categories and typologies. Kant’s racism was a product of his time, along with the dismissive language about Africans and Asians. Yet this happened before the dominance of European imperialism between 1850 and 1950. However, the coloniser’s use of such philosophical accounts as authority to justify and support colonial exploitation and racial discrimination in policies and laws is a different issue.

**You worked on German cultural ties with China, Japan, India, Vietnam, and the Pacific. That’s fascinating. Is there much interest in Germany today in the cultures of former Pacific colonies, parts of PNG and Solomon Islands?**

Franz Kafka’s short story *In the Penal Colony* (1919) is set in the Pacific, I believe. The contemporary Swiss-German writer Christian Kracht’s novel *Imperium* (2012) is set in German New Guinea. There is also a wave of decolonisation in German and European museums these days to return looted artefacts, mostly to African countries. But I am not sure whether the Pacific Islands were among the countries that would receive any repatriations.

## Notes

- 1 Chunjie Zhang, *Transculturality and German Discourse in the Age of European Colonialism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017).
- 2 Chunjie Zhang, ‘Views from the Other Side: Colonial Culture and Anti-Colonial Sentiment in Germany around 1800’, Doctor of Philosophy, Department of Germanic Languages and Literature, Duke University, 2010.
- 3 Johann George Adam Forster (1754-1794), known also as Georg Forster, was a German naturalist who at the age of 17 took part, then as an assistant to his father Johann Reinhold Forster (1729-1798), in James Cook’s second expedition to the Pacific. He was a major figure of the Enlightenment in Germany and maintained a

correspondence with Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, some of whose work features in this issue of *Synkrētīc*.

- 4 George Forster, *A Voyage Round the World in His Britannic Majesty's Sloop, Resolution, commanded by Capt. James Cook, during the Years 1772, 3, 4, and 5* (London: B. White et al., 1777). This work is in the public domain and available on archive.org.
- 5 Carina Pape, “Race”, “sex”, and “gender”: Intersections, naturalistic fallacies, and the Age of Reason’, in *Modernity and its Ramifications*, ed. Martin L. Davies (London: Routledge, 2016), 160.
- 6 ‘Does the author really mean that if the happy inhabitants of Tahiti, never visited by more cultured nations, had been destined to live for thousands of centuries in their tranquil indolence, one could give a satisfying answer to the question why they exist at all, and whether it would not have been just as good to have this island populated with happy sheep and cattle as with human beings who are happy merely enjoying themselves?’ Immanuel Kant, ‘Review of J. G. Herder’s *Ideas for the philosophy of the history of humanity. Parts 1 and 2* (1785)’, transl. Allen W. Wood, in Robert B. Loudon and Günter Zöllner (eds.), *Anthropology, History, and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 142.
- 7 Robert Bernasconi, ‘Will the real Kant please stand up: The challenge of Enlightenment racism to the study of the history of philosophy’, in *Radical Philosophy*, Issue 117 (January/February 2003): 13-22.

## The colour blindness of reason

*Eunah Lee*\*

**Assistant Professor Lee, you wrote a 2018 book chapter<sup>1</sup> in which you argue, in the debate on Kant's racism, that he never really recanted it and that it is woven into his thought. Before getting to this, when did you first read Kant?**

My first experience of reading Kant was as an undergraduate student at Seoul National University. I read parts of his works including his three *Critiques* in my various coursework, but his essay 'What is enlightenment?', which I read in a social philosophy course, left me with the most vivid impressions. Then I had opportunities to study Kant with Dr Jeff Edwards at Stony Brook University in the U.S. and later with Dr Andrea Esser at Marburg University in Germany during my doctoral program. I always had, and still have, a love-hate relationship with Kant.

**Some readers who associate Kant with his moral philosophy may be surprised by this racism debate. When did it start?**

Kant is best known for his ethical concepts like the categorical imperative, according to which we should do what could be willed to become universal moral laws and never treat other persons

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merely as a means but as ends in themselves. But even in earlier research Kant's thoughts on different races were not a secret. I believe his racist ideas started to receive more public attention and critical illumination through anti-racist social and intellectual movements in our time, such as critical race theory. Although the historian E.H. Carr said this of history in general, the history of philosophy seems to be an unending dialogue between the present and the past.

**This interest in Kant's anthropology and concept of race may be striking in and of itself. I wasn't taught Kant in this light. The focus in my political science lectures was on his cosmopolitanism and perpetual peace theory.**

I, too, was introduced to Kant's philosophy through his universal moral law in my ethics course and to his cosmopolitan ideas in my political philosophy course. Ironically, I became increasingly interested in his racist remarks while working on my doctoral dissertation on Kantian and Hegelian cosmopolitanism. As I delved deeper into his philosophy of history, I was introduced to his anthropological works, where I encountered these striking and troubling remarks on non-white races. As a non-white woman, I wrestled with these passages and wrote the last chapter of my dissertation on the problem of race in Kant.

**You write that 'Kant *develops* his theory of race, which is a sign that it is not a regrettable personal prejudice, but the product of extended philosophical reflection.' Is a consensus forming in that direction, or is this still debated?**

I encounter increasingly more critical voices rather than those seriously defending Kant in this regard. Should we take this as a sign of a consensus among scholars? I am not sure. My observation could be due to the AI's algorithmic suggestions based on my intellectual predilection or political orientation. I believe the debate is still going on. The critical spirit and the willingness to defer seem to be the *modus operandi* of philosophers.

Some have argued that Kant was, to some extent, ahead of his time in defending the rights of Native Americans and other non-white groups, even as he described them as weak and lazy. What is Kant's record on this point?

In his *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1795), Kant proposes the establishment of a league of nations in which different peoples would live peacefully side by side. This is where Kant mentions the somewhat virtuous characters of other races. For one, he acknowledges the military courage of Native Americans being akin to that of the mediæval European knights. Some scholars emphasised these records as an indication that he recanted his 'earlier' racist views as they differ from his downright hostile assessments of non-white races in other writings. My article refuted this view for being too charitable. Kant's notion of cosmopolitan right does not require a strong egalitarian view of the different races, as many defenders would wish it did.

One anecdote you cite as among the egregious cases of Kant's racism is his review of J.G. Herder's work in which he asks why Tahitians bother to 'exist at all' if they're just as happy as cattle.<sup>2</sup> What is going on in this quote?

Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) was a contemporary of Immanuel Kant, and in fact Kant's former student. Both Kant and Herder wrote about the 'universal history of humanity,' a genre popular among 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment thinkers. Kant's 'Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan aim' (1784) and Herder's 'Ideas for the philosophy of the history of humanity' (1784) were good examples of this genre. These works attempt to discover humanity's meaning and purpose by examining the course of history. This teleological historiography enabled them to explain past events from the perspective of progress and predict future paths. Kant was invited to review Herder's work, which he did in 1785.



One notable difference between Kant and Herder was that Herder seemed more reluctant to use the notions of different human races than Kant. Herder envisioned borderless humanitarianism in contrast to Kant's version of a loose community composed of different nations. Perhaps this difference in their vision could explain their different attitudes toward other races. Also, Herder opposed Kant's idea that humanity will fully reach its perfection *as a species*, not as individual human beings. This is noteworthy because Kant maintained that humanity could reach its highest stage by the European white, denying other non-white races this privilege.

The infamous passage 'why do they [the happy inhabitants of Tahiti] exist at all?' comes from this context. Kant's rhetorical question assumes the Tahitians are awakened from their idleness by the visitors from more civilised nations, through whom they could achieve a higher stage and also play a role in the overall history of humanity. This passage is often viewed as his justification for colonial expeditions and enslavement, although Kant criticised the harsh treatments of enslaved people elsewhere.

**Is there anything in Kant's philosophy of history or anthropology that predisposed him particularly badly towards the Tahitians, or that placed them on a lower rung of an imagined ladder of civilisation in his eyes?**

Many European authors of the 18<sup>th</sup> century depended on travellers and explorers such as James Cook (1728-1779) or Sydney Parkinson (1745-1771) in their understanding of peoples living in distant places. Herder, who quotes extensively from ethnographic descriptions of these travelogues, also expressed a wish for a collection of portrayals and more faithful paintings of different people. So, whether in Kant's negative judgment toward 'backward people' or in Rousseau's notion of 'noble savage' in the other direction, the philosophers had to work with limited information as a window to vastly diverse ways of life.

If I have to point out something that might have predisposed Kant badly toward the Tahitians, I think it originates in his funda-

mental anti-hedonism. For Kant, the goal of human life is not to idle in a happy state but to strive for perfection through labour, to be worthy of happiness. From this point of view, Tahitians living in their 'tranquil indolence' are comparable to 'sheep and cattle' peacefully grazing in nature's abundance as they have not achieved, nor were actively working toward, a civilised state.

**The claim that Kant's comments on race do not invalidate his philosophy, you argue, is evidence of 'colour-blindness' in philosophy. With interest in race apparently growing worldwide, do you still see this as the case today?**

I did not intend to go so far as to claim that his racism invalidates his philosophy in its entirety. That would be too radical a claim for me. Although I am sympathetic to such a view, my claim is much more modest. I contend we must present and teach these edifying thinkers in all their complexities and tensions without idolising them by concealing their weaknesses or offering apologies. As a comparison, one may denounce Martin Heidegger's metaphysics for the reason that he was a Nazi member at one point. Although true, I do not want his Nazism to serve as an excuse not to study Heidegger. Instead, it behoves us to work harder to understand where and how his thinking allowed him to agree with and work for such a totalitarian regime.

When I think of Kant's racist remarks, I am reminded of what he said about his concept of 'inner freedom' or freedom of thought, which he defined as 'the freedom from the chains of concepts and ways of thinking that are habitual and confirmed by general opinion; - a freedom that is *not at all* common, so that even those who confess loyalty only to philosophy have only rarely been able to work themselves all the way up to it.'<sup>3</sup> I am afraid that Kant, a marvellous and magisterial thinker though he is, was not entirely freed from the chains of habitual concepts and general ways of thinking despite his own warnings and precaution.

**If scholars come to agree that Kant's works were in fact irremediably racist, what do you think that will mean for how, or whether, his works are taught?**

It would be hard to predict if scholars could ever agree if Kant was an irremediable racist and, even if he were, how deeply his racism affected various branches of his philosophy. However, the ways in which Kant's works are taught need significant changes. In introducing his proposal for everlasting peace, we also need active discussions on his troubling ideas. One way to bring about such change is to expand canons so that students can be exposed to diverse authors from marginalised and oppressed groups. And this requires conscious efforts to excavate these groups' writings and uncover their thoughts.

For example, juxtaposing Quobna Ottobah Cugoano (c. 1757-c. 1791) with Kant could be an illuminating way to situate Kant's own prejudices. Cugoano, also known as John Stuart, was a native of the West African British colony of the Gold Coast. He was enslaved and shipped to the West Indies, and later worked as an abolitionist after being freed in Britain. His *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery*,<sup>4</sup> published around the same time as Kant's anthropological works, serves as proof of the talent of non-white races, which Kant denied.<sup>5</sup> Cugoano powerfully argues that 'the Africans, though not so learned, are just as wise as the Europeans; and when the matter is left to human wisdom, they are both to err.' Criticising those who justified slavery based on revelation or reason, he writes that such pretences and excuses to deem any particular set of men inferior are 'the grossest perversion of reason, as well as an inconsistent and diabolical use of the sacred writings.'

**Which parts of Kant's project do you think will outlive his prejudices?**

I jokingly recall that one of my college professors would not encourage students to dwell on Kant's anthropological pieces because they are not Kant's 'essential' works. But who gets to decide what is

essential and inessential to us? Kant's ethical concepts provide us with formidable antitheses to the sweeping consequentialist ideas in Western philosophy. Because of this significant contribution and the symbolic place Kant has, I believe readers or scholars have often neglected or downplayed his racist remarks.

## Notes

- 1 Eunah Lee, 'Race and the Self-Defeating Character of Kant's Argument in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*', in *Natur und Freiheit: Akten des XII. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses*, eds. Violetta L. Waibel, Margit Ruffing, and David Wagner (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 2737-2744.
- 2 'Does the author really mean that if the happy inhabitants of Tahiti, never visited by more cultured nations, had been destined to live for thousands of centuries in their tranquil indolence, one could give a satisfying answer to the question why they exist at all, and whether it would not have been just as good to have this island populated with happy sheep and cattle as with human beings who are happy merely enjoying themselves?' Immanuel Kant, 'Review of J. G. Herder's *Ideas for the philosophy of the history of humanity. Parts 1 and 2* (1785)', transl. Allen W. Wood, in Robert B. Loudon and Günter Zöllner (eds.), *Anthropology, History, and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 142, AA 8:65.
- 3 Immanuel Kant, 'Review of J. G. Herder's *Ideas for the philosophy of the history of humanity. Parts 1 and 2* (1785)', transl. Allen W. Wood, in Robert B. Loudon and Günter Zöllner (eds.), *Anthropology, History, and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 135, AA 8:57.
- 4 See Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (Penguin: London, 1999). The original title reads *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1787).
- 5 Immanuel Kant, 'Physical Geography', in *Natural Science*, ed. Eric Watkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), AA 9:316.

## Kant's impure ethics

*Robert Louden\**

Professor Louden, you are one of the editors of a major 2007 collection of Kant's works called *Anthropology, History, and Education*.<sup>1</sup> The book has been cited 530 times and its chapters over 1,000 times each. How did this project start?

*Anthropology, History, and Education (AHE)* is a volume in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant in Translation*. I was initially invited to translate Kant's works on education for this volume, and my role later expanded to that of co-editor (with Günter Zöller) and translator of *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. I am also co-editor and translator of a second, related volume in this series.<sup>2</sup>

I'd like to return to one piece in this volume in a moment. But first, about your interest in Kant more generally, do you recall which of his works you first picked up and what effect they had on your thought?

I have always been primarily interested in Kant's *practical* philosophy—particularly his ethical theory. But like many readers of Kant, I initially found the abstractness of his ethical theory intimidating, and this is part of what led me to his more empirical writings

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and lectures on ethics and human nature. However, I do believe that anyone with serious interests in Kant should examine his entire corpus. For me, the question of how the different parts of his system do (or don't!) fit together has always been a very challenging puzzle.

**In 2000, you wrote a book with the intriguing title of *Kant's Impure Ethics*.<sup>3</sup> Does this impurity refer to the content of his ethics, e.g. people are morally impure, or to something else?**

In *Kant's Impure Ethics* I was intentionally playing with an ambiguity in the word 'impure'. For Kant, 'impure' means empirical or *a posteriori*, and my main argument was that his ethics contains more empirical or *a posteriori* content than most readers realise. But in ordinary speech, 'impure' means unclean or dirty, and I was also implying that his ethics is impure in this second sense as well.

**In this book, you touch on the hotly debated question of Kant's comments on Indigenous and non-white populations. Did your 2007 book, which translates relevant passages, start the debate on Kant's attitude to race?**

'Start' is an overstatement. Extracts of Kant's writings on race were published back in 1963 in a book edited by Gabriele Rabel,<sup>4</sup> and several of Mark Mikkelsen's more recent translations<sup>5</sup> were also published a few years before the ones in *AHE*. But I suspect that *AHE* has played a role in the English-language debate on Kant's attitudes toward race.

**In one piece, while writing an unfavourable review of a book by J.G. Herder, Kant criticises Tahitians for being as happy as cattle. He asks why they 'exist at all' if that's all they do.<sup>6</sup> Why did their enjoyment bother him?**

Unlike many contemporary ethical theorists, Kant holds that we have duties *to ourselves* as well as to others. Indeed, on his view, duties to ourselves are the foundation and pre-condition of all duties. The duty to develop one's talents is one of the primary duties to

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oneself, but it is also an *imperfect* duty (it doesn't prescribe exactly what to do, but merely presents us with a broad goal to pursue). Individual agents need to use their discretion in deciding how best to fulfil this duty, after carefully assessing their own particular situation and interests. Some agents will choose to develop their athletic talents, others will strive to become musicians, *etc.* But to choose not to develop *any* of one's talents, which is how Kant reads the Tahitians, is a basic violation of one's duty, in addition to being inconsistent with the categorical imperative.

**You have argued that this quote is often misunderstood, that Kant wasn't attacking the Tahitians *per se* but was critiquing human beings everywhere who are just enjoying themselves.<sup>7</sup> But, still, why is that a problem for Kant?**

Kant reads people who are 'just enjoying themselves' as people who have intentionally decided not to cultivate *any* of their talents and rational capacities—again, a violation of duty that is inconsistent with the categorical imperative. Part of what he means here is that such a decision cannot be universalised without contradiction. If everyone were to make such a decision, humanity would not survive.

**Some argue that Kant's comments on the Tahitians are proof of his racism<sup>8</sup> and of the genocidal seed in his ideas.<sup>9</sup> You have written that Kant did not defend the genocide of non-Europeans.<sup>10</sup> Was he racist towards Tahitians?**

Yes, clearly Kant was 'racist towards Tahitians'—as well as towards all other non-whites. But when he writes that the non-white races will eventually die out, he is making an empirical prediction (one that was unfortunately shared by a great many white colonialists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). He is not advocating the mass murder of specific racial groups. As he remarks in the *Pillau* anthropology lecture:

We find peoples who do not appear to have progressed in the perfection of human nature, but have reached a standstill, while others, such as the Europeans, are always progressing... [I]t appears that all of the Americans will be wiped out, not through acts of murder—that would be cruel!—but rather they will die out.<sup>11</sup>

**In your book, you cite French philosopher Diderot's *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville*. Do we know if Kant read that work, and where else he got his ideas about Tahiti? He cites Captain Cook's diary at one point.**

Diderot's *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville*, though written in 1772, was not published until after his death in 1796. And I believe that all of Kant's remarks about Tahitians predate 1796. However, Kant does cite Bougainville as well as Cook several times. Diderot's *Supplement* is an important counter-voice in Enlightenment debates about non-Europeans. Not all Enlightenment intellectuals were convinced that the West is the Best. But the *Supplement* has its own vices. Ultimately, it is more a projection of Diderot's own views than an accurate description of Tahitian culture.

**Kant talks about non-white races like the Tahitians dying or being 'wiped out' (*ausgerottet*) for lacking the skill, drive, and 'germs' (*Keime*) of whites.<sup>12</sup> Was he a social Darwinist ahead of his time or is his theory different?**

I see similarities as well as differences between Kantianism and Social Darwinism. One basic similarity is that both outlooks stress a version of 'only the strong survive'. But Kantianism has a theological dimension that is missing in Social Darwinism. On Kant's view, Providence has a plan for the human species, one that unfortunately grants more progress to some races than others.

**In an era in which many fear that the faculty of reason and rationality as standards of thought and ethical behaviour are being trampled on around the world, what part of Kant's ethics do you think stands the test of time?**



I do think Kant's categorical imperative—particularly the formula of Humanity as an End in Itself ('*So act that you use humanity, in your own person as well as in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means*'<sup>13</sup>)—is a sound moral principle that has stood the test of time. Additionally, there are several aspects of the political side of Kant's practical philosophy—e.g., the core commitment to human rights, a strong system of international law, and a federation of democratic states devoted to peace—that are sorely needed at present.

## Notes

- 1 Robert B. Loudon and Günter Zöller (eds.), *Anthropology, History, and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 2 Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Anthropology*, eds. Allen W. Wood and Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- 3 Loudon, *Kant's Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 4 Gabriele Rabel, *Kant* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).
- 5 See, *inter alia*, Jon M. Mikkelson, 'On the different races of human beings (1777)', in *The Idea of Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Tommy Lee Lott (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 2000), 8-22.
- 6 'Does the author really mean that if the happy inhabitants of Tahiti, never visited by more cultured nations, had been destined to live for thousands of centuries in their tranquil indolence, one could give a satisfying answer to the question why they exist at all, and whether it would not have been just as good to have this island populated with happy sheep and cattle as with human beings who are happy merely enjoying themselves?' Immanuel Kant, 'Review of J.G. Herder's *Ideas for the philosophy of the history of humanity. Parts 1 and 2* (1785)', transl. Allen W. Wood, in Robert B. Loudon and Günter Zöller (eds.), *Anthropology, History, and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 142.
- 7 Loudon, 'General Introduction', in *Anthropology, History, and Education*, 9.
- 8 Eunah Lee, 'Race and the Self-Defeating Character of Kant's Argument in Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View', in *Natur und Freiheit: Akten des XII. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses*, eds. Violetta L. Waibel, Margit Ruffing and David Wagner (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 2737-2744.
- 9 Robert Bernasconi, 'Why Do the Happy Inhabitants of Tahiti Bother to Exist at All?', in *Genocide and Human Rights: A Philosophical Guide*, ed. John K. Roth (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 139-148.

- 10 Louden, *Kant's Impure Ethics*, 212, note 92.
- 11 AA 25: 840; cf. *Lectures on Anthropology*, 274.
- 12 Louden, *Kant's Impure Ethics*, 212, note 92.
- 13 AA 4: 429.