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Ideas of Race in the Canonical History of Philosophy

To speak of human race is to speak of human races—if there were only one human race, that “race” would be the whole of humanity. To understand the history of ideas of race in Western philosophy, it is important to avoid anachronism and not interpret earlier forms of human **hierarchy** or status, as racial systems, where and when there were not yet fully developed ideas of human races as hereditary physical systems. Because we now know that many of the past beliefs concerning human racial taxonomy were not scientifically accurate in terms that scientists would accept today, we cannot rely on the existence of human racial **taxonomies** as a system of division timelessly given in nature. We also know that ideas of human race have changed over centuries and even decades, particularly in the USA (the main focus of this book), so it is useful to begin a discussion of race in the history of philosophy by stating five main meanings of the word “race” in contemporary intellectual discourse.

1. Race is biologically inherited and it causes both physical and cultural and moral traits that can be objectively compared in terms of human worth;
2. Race is biologically inherited but it causes only physical traits;
3. Race is a matter of superficial physical appearance, mainly skin color;
4. Race is a cultural artifact based on biology, even though the biological differences between societal or cultural races are arbitrary and unscientific;
5. Race is a social construction that reflects history, politics, and shared social traditions among dominant and subordinate human groups, each of which shares interlocking, intergenerational lines of family descent.

Race as biologically inherited, with or without cultural and moral traits ((1) or (2)) was the dominant model and meaning of the word from the eighteenth to twentieth century, which is to say, over the modern period. Of course, biology as studies of living things predated modernity and has overflowed Western science. But biological distinctions with a basis in classification or taxonomy are distinctive to the modern period in the West, because modern biology began with *systematics* (Mayr 1942). The equation of racial difference with differences in appearance (3) also relies on a biological or hereditary physical foundation. And the contemporary conception of race as unscientific (4) refers to the science of biology. Race as a contemporary social construction (5) mirrors the experience of race as lived realities.

If we accept the starring role of biology in modern ideas of race, it needs to be shown why ideas of human difference that resembled race before modern biology should not be considered full-blown ideas of race, even though they may have had oppressive effects comparable to those of modern racism. Within the philosophical canon (containing ten to fifteen of the major historical figures), it makes sense to begin with Plato (427 BC–348 BC) and Aristotle (384 BC–323 BC) and then move on to Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and John Locke (1632–1704), followed by David Hume (1711–1776) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831), John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) were influential philosophers of race over the nineteenth century. Altogether, canonical philosophers created a model of race with normative anti-nonwhite bias. Constructing a chronological account of their thought is disciplinarily appropriate, because philosophers typically begin inquiries with what past philosophers thought about a topic. And coincidentally or not, a consideration of race within or through the history of philosophy lines up with real-life historical events and narratives. For instance, all of the philosophers mentioned were aware of slavery as a legal institution in their own times. (The practice of slavery preceded ideas of race until it became coincident with race during the centuries of USA black chattel slavery.)

Race-Like Ideas in the Ancient World

Plato believed that the structure of the individual and of society were analogous—the state or society was the individual “writ large.” The person has parts with distinct functions and so does society. The mind ideally rules the body and the passions, and the most intelligent and rational members of society should rule soldiers and workers. In the *Republic*, a “noble lie” about human hierarchy is suggested. Those setting up the Republic who were in

charge of education, will have observed the characters of the young, testing them for memory, critical capacity (their ability not to be deceived), courage, composure, and discipline. Performance on these tests would determine the person's appropriate place in society—guardian-king, soldier (including military, police, and local administrators), or worker (laborers and mechanics).

The noble lie was to begin with a story of origins, when rulers and educators told the young that they had all had been born to the state through a process of “molding” underground, so that what they believed had been their education was in reality a dream. As creations of the state, all of the young were brothers, expected to love one another and the city as God that had fashioned them. But they were not equal, so they would be also be told:

God in fashioning those of you who are fitted to hold rule mingled gold in their generation, for which reason they are the most precious—but in the helpers silver, and iron and brass in the farmers and other craftsmen. And as you are all akin, though for the most part you will breed after your kinds, it may sometimes happen that a golden father would beget a silver son and that a golden offspring would come from a silver sire and that the rest would in like manner be born of one another. (Plato 1964, 415, a–b, p. 659)

Some scholars have found a theory of race in these distinctions that included innate capacities (Kamtakar 2002). Moreover, Plato envisioned the Republic as a society that would function based on these differences and the noble lie would presumably sustain that structure by being retold to each new generation. However, Plato was not primarily interested in the different **identities** that resulted from his proposed race-like classifications—which he was quite open in labeling as what we would call “propaganda”—but in assigning societal roles based on individual capacities. The metallic categorizations were thus a heuristic device, because different individual capacities were to be determined before the metallic categorizations were applied as labels for the person. Also, the metallic categories were not hereditary as biological racial categories came to be, because gold parents could have silver offspring or silver parents.

Ironically, the closest resemblance to a theory of race in Plato's *Republic* is his introduction of the theory as a fabrication that Socrates is ashamed to propose: “You will think I have right good reason for shrinking when I have told [you about this noble lie]” (Plato 1964, 414c, p. 659). There is also great honesty in Plato's stated need to manipulate people into accepting a hierarchical, nondemocratic system. Both before and after modernity, subsequent political theorists who proposed race-like distinctions took pains to be convincing about the nature of the human differences supporting their categories.

Plato was the only race theorist who admitted that the differences were fictional, proxies for real differences that had nothing to do with their proxies.

After Plato, those who proposed race-like theories of human inequality were no longer ashamed to do so. Aristotle simply took historical and contemporary Greek status and role differences for granted. Rather than describing an ideal state as Plato did, Aristotle is famous for his historical beginning to political theory in Book I of *Politica* or *The Politics* (Aristotle 1941). According to Aristotle, the basic union is that of male and female, for the sake of reproduction. Barbarians may not distinguish between women and slaves, because they have no “natural ruler,” but society is hierarchical for the Greeks. Where there are relationships between man and woman, and master and slave, the family arises. The family supplies “everyday wants” and when several families are united, a village appears, often ruled by an elder or king. Several villages united form a community and if it is self-sufficient, the state originates as a natural end or purpose of human life in its best form (Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 1252a–b).

However, for Aristotle, the basic unit of the state remains the household and a “complete” household consists of slaves and freemen. Aristotle notes that some believe the rule of a master over slaves is unnatural and the result of law, but he defends the naturalness of slavery as part of the management of a household, which requires “instruments.” The slave is a kind of instrument, a “living possession” of the master: “The master is only master of the slave; he does not belong to him, whereas the slave is not only the slave of his master, but wholly belongs to him.” Aristotle’s division between master and slave is not merely a matter of social roles, arising by law or accident, or as for Plato, justified by a myth. Rather, the person who is a slave is *by nature* a slave—there is something inherent in such a person which makes him or her suitable for slavery. In addition to being the possession of another, a slave lacks the universal human capacity for **deliberation** or the ability to develop virtues, and **phronesis** or practical reasoning. Thus, in lacking deliberation, the slave is not a moral being, and in lacking phronesis, the slave cannot be a political agent. But the slave can perceive deliberation and phronesis in others and benefit from not having **autonomy** or being in charge of her own life. Given these differences between slaves and their masters, the main activity of the slave is physical labor (Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 5, 1252a–b, 1254a–b, quotes pp. 1128 and 1131).

Aristotle’s description of the qualities of slaves does not convincingly stem from human traits that exist independently of the condition of slavery. That is, anyone who was enslaved might not be allowed to develop virtues or decide what action to take, and she might be forced to physically labor.

The inherent traits Aristotle ascribes to slaves are more plausibly the result of their enslavement. Moreover, Erick Raphael Jiménez identifies a proto-racist aspect to Aristotle's analysis of slavery in his description of Asians compared to Greeks, in terms of the influence of geography and climate on character traits. Jiménez argues that insofar as the majority of slaves during Aristotle's time were Asian, his analysis of slavery can be read as a justification for an existing practice that otherwise defied the principle that deliberation and phronesis were universal human traits. Jiménez quotes Aristotle:

Those people who live in cold climates, as in Europe, are full of *thumos* or spiritedness, but lacking in intelligence and art. Hence they are generally free, but being without a constitution they cannot rule their neighbors. And Asians have intelligent and technical souls, but they lack thumos; hence they are always being ruled over and enslaved. But Greeks, being in the middle of these places, partake of both of them; for they have thumos and are intelligent. Hence they are always free and governed in the best way, and would be capable of ruling the world if they happened to form one city. (Jiménez 2014, quote p. 71, from Aristotle, *Politics*, VII.7, 1327b19–35, p. 1286)

Aristotle's use of geography and climate to compare traits of the members of human groups was taken up in full-blown biological theories of race during the modern period, as we will soon see. But to continue this history of slavery as an institution that would only later meld with theories of race, we should note that in both ancient Greece and Rome, slaves had a status close to animals. In Greece, slaves were referred to as “andropoda” or “man-footed beings,” analogous to “tetrapoda,” meaning “four-footed beings” or animals. In Rome, the differences in status were formal and official and slaves in tort law were treated the same as domestic animals (Finley 1983, p. 99). By 529–534 AD, Roman law in the *Code of Justinian* proclaimed, “Now the main division of the law on persons is this, that all human beings are either free or slaves” (Justinian 2014, p. 24).

The stigma of slavery was hereditary during the modern period, when inherited physical traits such as the dark skin of Africans, could serve as a proxy or symbol for slave status. By comparison, slaves in the ancient world were more easily freed and their heirs blended in with the rest of the population over several generations. Despite Aristotle's designation of slave work as physical labor, slaves in both ancient Greece and Rome practiced a variety of occupations, from crafts to policing in Athens, to teaching and medicine in Rome (Finley 1983). Thus, along with the practice of slavery in the ancient world, a certain rough human equality seems to have been

widely acknowledged and taken for granted. Except for Aristotle's views, slavery was mainly a matter of social status, not a matter of the identity of persons who were slaves or anything they were intrinsically believed to be.

Ideas of Race by Christian Theological Philosophers

Christian theological philosophers displayed a need to justify slavery as a practice of inequality, but their arguments were weak. St. Augustine simply said, "Christ did not make men free from being slaves," which gave slavery the legitimacy of not having been prohibited in scripture or by the Catholic Church of his day (Noonan 1995, p. 191). Saint Thomas Aquinas, relying on a general principle of human equality, endeavored to show how slavery could be just by relegating it to merely external physical matters. Aquinas' primary authority was not the Christian bible or the Church, but another philosopher, the Roman stoic, Seneca (4 BC–65 AD) (Seneca was pagan advisor to the Emperor, Nero, who forced him to commit suicide (Kamp 1934). Seneca claimed that the whole person is not enslaved, but only his or her body, so that the slave's soul belongs only to the slave.

Aquinas claimed that pertaining to "the internal movement of the will," only God had to be obeyed. This meant that decisions and choices concerning nutrition, reproduction, marriage, and sexual activity were up to the slave. That is, according to Aquinas, the owner of a slave controlled only the slave's physical actions (Aquinas 1988, pp. 242–4). It is difficult to believe that Aquinas was so naïve as to imagine that slaves did have the kind of autonomy he posited. During Aquinas' period, slave owners could feed, breed, punish, and kill their slaves, as they wished (Melzer 1993, pp. 209–27). More likely, Aquinas was talking about what he thought should be the case, that slavery should be like the employment of free people who had private lives when they were not working.

Locke's Racism in Practice but Not in Theory

The core of John Locke's political philosophy was his posit of fundamental, God-given rights to "life, liberty, and estate (property)," which could not be violated by legitimate government. Locke assumed that these rights were restricted to European male property owners of some wealth and status, but he did not go out of his way to identify the groups who were excluded: the

poor, women, indigenous peoples, or African slaves. While occupying the post of Secretary to the Council of Trade and Plantations, Locke owned stock in the slave-trading Royal African Company. By the time that Locke, as Secretary of the Lords Proprietors of the Carolinas, helped revise the fundamental constitution of that colony, black chattel slavery was established in the American colonies and the revised Carolina constitution allowed for the practice, including the power of life and death over slaves by their owners (Armitage 2004, p. 207). However, in his primary work in political philosophy, *The Second Treatise of Government* (Locke [1689] 1991), published in the same decade he worked on the Carolina constitution, Locke generally treated slavery as a great evil.

Locke argued for the legitimacy of enslavement of the captives of a just war, as a condition of labor that those enslaved tacitly consented to, instead of being put to death (Locke, *Second Treatise*, IV, 23–24, 1689, pp. 284–5). But otherwise, freedom was an absolute right for Locke. He wrote:

This *freedom* from absolute, arbitrary power, is so necessary to, and closely joined with a man's preservation, that he cannot part with it, but by what forfeits his preservation and life altogether. For a man, not having the power of his own life, *cannot*, by compact, or his own consent, *enslave himself* to anyone, nor put himself under the absolute, arbitrary power of another to take away his life, when he pleases. (Locke, *Second Treatise*, IV, 23, 1689, p. 284)

Locke insisted that those who had the fundamental rights of life, liberty, and estate would not be expected to approve of a form of government that violated those rights, which would be the same as enslaving them. Insofar as government exists under the consent and for the convenience of those governed, when God-given freedom is taken away by government, the people have a right to rebel:

And thus the community perpetually retains a supreme power of saving themselves from the attempts and designs of any body, even of their legislators, whenever they shall be so foolish, or so wicked, as to lay and carry on designs against the liberties and properties of the subject. For no man, or society of men, having a power to deliver up their preservation, or consequently the means of it, to the Absolute Will and arbitrary dominion of another; whenever anyone shall go about to bring them into such a slavish condition, they will always have a right to preserve what they have not a power to part with; and to rid themselves of those who invade this fundamental, sacred, and unalterable law of self-preservation, for which they entered into society. (Locke, *Second Treatise*, XIII, Sec. 149, Locke 1689, pp. 366–7)

William Uzgalis argues that Locke was innocent of racism, because just-war enslavement was not the same as colonial slavery, and as a principle of liberty, Locke objected to government violation of the rights of those who had consented to be governed. Uzgalis claims that Locke easily could have, but did not, use then-contemporary arguments by influential and highly regarded political theorists to justify either colonial slavery or the seizure of American Indian lands. Uzgalis therefore concludes that despite Locke's investments and participation in the Carolina constitution, his political philosophy was not racist (Uzgalis 2017). Leaving aside Locke's investment in the Royal African Company and his tacit approval of slavery in Carolina, and focusing only on Locke's political philosophy, it could be objected that the property-ownership of Locke's male British political subject had the effect of a racist exclusion of both black slaves and American Indians (among others). But it would be anachronistic to accuse Locke of racism in anything like the meaning of the word in subsequent centuries, because it is not clear that his acceptance of slavery was a bias against nonwhites, *per se*.

Nowhere in his writings does Locke discuss human races or suggest that there is a natural racial hierarchy. It does not seem to have occurred to him to think critically about the oppressive practices toward non-Europeans in his day, even though he does think in accord with general principles of fairness, which could be applied to what came to be considered racial difference. For instance, in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, Locke argues against religious discrimination by comparing it to the injustice of discrimination based on physical appearance. Thus:

Suppose this business of religion were let alone, and that there were some other distinction made between men and men, upon account of their different complexions, shapes, and features, so that those who have black hair (for example) or gray eyes, should not enjoy the same privileges as other citizens; that they should not be permitted either to buy or sell, or live by their callings, that parents should not have the government and education of their own children; that all should either be excluded from the benefit of the laws, or meet with partial judges; can it be doubted but these persons, thus distinguished from others by the colour of their hair and eyes, united together by one common persecution, would be as dangerous to the magistrate, as any other that had associated themselves merely upon the account of religion? (Locke 1963 *Letter Concerning Toleration*, p. 52)

This is a curious passage because Locke does not say that it would be wrong to deprive people of the privileges of citizenship based on their appearance, but rather that it should not be done because "common persecution"

would unite “these persons” to pose a danger to the government. Locke here provides a purely pragmatic or instrumental argument against what we would call racial bias, today.

There is little if any scholarly evidence that the idea of human races was in circulation during Locke’s time. Samuel Johnson defined “race” as family lines or animal breeds. And in the 1694 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française*, “race” was a line or lineage for both humans and animals (Hudson 1996). However, even if “race” as it came to be understood was a term in circulation when Locke wrote, there is a strong metaphysical basis for the absence of discourse about human races in Locke’s thought. Locke’s **nominalism**, inclined him to skepticism about the reality of many **natural kinds**. For Locke, the **essences** of things, or their qualities that make them what they are and from which their other qualities flow, are **nominal essences**, created by the mind, existing in the mind, and projected onto reality. Locke even went so far as to claim that whether a creature is a human being or an animal was a matter of decision. His example for this was “monsters,” babies born with severe deformities, who he thought could be designated as either sheep or humans. That Locke did not simply assert the humanity of such individuals suggests that he did not hold the biological principle that animals can reproduce only their own kind (Locke 1975). Racial taxonomies that were developed later depended on exactly the idea of real racial essences, even though knowledge and acceptance of the biological principle that humans had to give birth to other humans did not preclude various kinds of “dehumanization” based on nonwhite racial categorization.

Ideas of Human Races After Biology

By 1700, the British slave trade was well underway and recognized as an important part of the colonialist economic system. Slaves were typically taken from the West Coast of Africa to the Caribbean or American colonies, from which the agricultural products of slave labor would be shipped back to England. Profits from the slave trade created a favorable export balance for England in competition with Spain (MacInnes 1934; Davies 1957). The existence of African slavery before there were ideas of human races underscores the primacy of economic and political motivations for slavery, compared to prejudice or discrimination based on racial differences.

The development of systematics in the science of biology was used to justify slavery in the age of Enlightenment, when principles of human dignity and equality were otherwise espoused. The taxonomies of biology that later

influenced anthropology afforded sophisticated frameworks in which moral, political, aesthetic, and intellectual distinctions among human races could be drawn. Hume, Kant, Hegel, Mill and Nietzsche had well-developed ideas of human racial difference that in some cases not only reflected general views in circulation when they wrote, but made perspectives that would now be considered racist, more emphatic, as well as more influential because written by famous philosophers.

Pre-modern theories of slavery proved to be place-holders for fully developed theories of race, and black chattel slavery became the paradigm case in the New World. When David Hume considered human history and civilization in the mid-eighteenth century, he could insultingly refer to racial differences in an almost offhand way. Aaron Garrett and Silvia Sebastiani emphasize Hume's ongoing assumption that blacks were naturally inferior to whites, as evident in multiple versions of a footnote in his chapter "Of National Characters" in *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*. The version of this note in the 1777 posthumous edition of Hume's *Essays* began, "I am apt to suspect the negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation" (Garrett and Sebastiani 2017; Hume 1875a, b, p. 249).

Hume's Explicit Racism

Hume first referred to racial differences in the 1754 edition of his *Essays* during a public intellectual debate about whether the human species had one origin—*monogenism*—or several corresponding to each race—*polygenism*. Eighteenth-century monogenists believed that differences in climate, geography, and food caused racial differences, which they did not think were permanent but could change over a few generations, when people changed environments. The polygenists believed that Africans, Asians, and Indians were permanently inferior to whites, because their inferiority was part of their original, unchanging racial identities. As a doctrine, polygenism posited strong racial differences and in keeping with this, in the first version of Hume's infamous footnote, he referred not to different human races, but *species*, a more general taxonomic division than race, which does not allow for interbreeding:

I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There

never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. (Hume 1964, 252, n.1)

Hume developed a general thesis that differences in human groups or “national characters” were *moral*, the result of history, custom, and psychology, rather than physical factors. According to Hume, cultural differences had cultural causes, because of the strong human tendency toward imitation of those nearby and a near-universal sentiment of sympathy. However, this moral/cultural nature of causes of human difference apparently did not apply to groups living under extremes of temperature—particularly the inhabitants of Africa—and it is when Hume is discussing exceptions to moral causes of difference in temperate climates that his footnote appears. It is puzzling that Hume draws such strong differences based on race, because in his essay “Of the Populousness of Ancient Peoples, written before 1754, when the harshest version of the infamous footnote first appeared, Hume also refers to the uniformity of the human species:

Stature and force of body, length of life, even courage and extent of genius, seem hitherto to have been naturally, in all ages, pretty much the same. The arts and sciences, indeed, have flourished in one period, and have decayed in another... . As far, therefore, as observation reaches, there is no universal difference discernible in the human species. (Hume 1875b, p. 382)

Garrett and Sebastiani relate Hume’s defense of extreme polygenism to his desire to develop a theory of human nature and culture in terms of human history. Richard Popkin has discussed the infamous footnote as “Hume’s Racial Law,” noting that it cannot be explained in terms of conformity to a prevailing consensus, because Hume had plenty of objections and criticisms from both monogenists and those such as James Beattie who were more open-minded about the achievements and abilities of non-Europeans (Popkin 1977–1978). Beattie noted that Europeans had only been civilized for about 2000 years and that Hume did not know enough about Negro civilizations to draw the generalization he did (Beattie 1997). Hume could have preserved both tolerance and consistency in his moral theory, by at least suggesting that as members of the human species, “n”egroes (the word had a small ‘n’ until about 1930) also developed distinct cultures from moral causes, even if those moral causes were influenced by extremes of climate. But despite numerous opportunities to do that, he did not change his assessment. I think we can say without anachronism that Hume’s views of human races were deeply prejudiced, because of the radical change in the

methods he used to describe the histories of blacks and whites. Also, as Garrett and Sebastiani point out, his prejudice or racism was not limited to blacks, because he wrote that the difference between European whites and Amerindians was as great as the difference between European whites and animals (Garrett and Sebastiani 2017)!

Kant's White Supremacist Raciology and Dignitarianism

Immanuel Kant is best known by philosophers for his work in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. In 1755, he received a license to teach Philosophy in Königsberg, his home town, and his most popular courses from which he made a living for the next 40 years, were anthropology and geography. According to Kant, anthropology comprised the histories and studies of human culture, morality, and psychology; geography was made up of the studies of biological racial taxonomy. The effect of this division was that studies of nonwhites were relegated to geography. Kant's cultural analyses in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* remain philosophically valid, because of its focus: "what man makes, can, or should make of himself as a freely acting being" (Kant 1996, p. 3). But Kant's 'geographical' views of human races made him the leading raciologist of the eighteenth century and were highly influential for what became the social science of anthropology, over the nineteenth century (Count 1950, pp. xx–xxi; 704–5, n.2, 1946).

Kant did not argue for the existence of human races but simply accepted received opinion in the same way Hume did: "The reason for assuming the Negroes and Whites to be fundamental races is self-evident" (Kant 1950, p. 19). Overall, Kant put forth and advanced **ethnological** Eurocentric theses about differences in human reason, morality, and taste, e.g., his often quoted, "The white race possesses all motivating forces and talents in itself" (Kant 1994, p. 117). In his more detailed analysis of human history, Kant posited a somewhat transcendental or at least nonempirical taxonomy of human races, arguing from the existence of mixed-race individuals to pure-raced parents, all of whom were descended from the same human "stem." That is, unlike Hume, Kant was a monogenist and his definition of races, besides hybridity resulting from interbreeding, included physical traits that are constant over generations in different environments. However, Kant also recognized *sports*, who do not generate hybrids in interbreeding, and *varieties*, or those that maintain resemblances but are not races; there were also special *strains*, or deviations that generate hybrids, but disappear after environmental change (Kant 1950, p. 17).

These rather elaborate and now-antiquated distinctions show that Kant struggled for clarity in reconciling the idea of race with known facts about human physical differences at the time, but they did not preclude his unfounded and bigoted assumptions about nonwhite inferiority. Kant was very outspoken about his characterization of blacks as intellectually inferior, as in another often-quoted remark, “This fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid” (Kant 1965, pp. 110–1). Kant wrote about differences among the anthropological “national characters” of the French, Spanish, English, and German “distinctive feeling of the beautiful and the sublime,” and he chauvinistically exalted the Germans. In considering Africans, however, his discourse changed from anthropology to race in a geographical sense, with acknowledgment of Hume:

The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of whom have even been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praise-worthy quality, even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color. (Kant 1994, pp. 55–6)

Finally, while Kant did not explicitly exclude Africans and other nonwhites from the moral domain of autonomous agents and subjects, his rule-based formulation of the *categorical imperative*, his most general moral principle, implied their exclusion. Kant’s moral agent and subject were obligated to act under a general principle that he could will everyone else would follow (Kant 1994, pp. v–xi). He believed that women did not have sufficient rationality to act morally, or to appreciate the sublime and, of course, he thought that blacks lacked both reason and taste.

Nevertheless, Kant had at least one other formulation of the categorical imperative that yields a simpler emphasis on human dignity: Act so that you treat everyone, including yourself, as an end and never a means. The rationale for this formula of “the end in itself” is that a rational being regards his own existence as intrinsically valuable (Kant 1994, 36, n.21, Sec. 2). Kant’s distinction between goods of exchange that have prices and human beings who have dignities also supports an egalitarian interpretation of his moral system (Kant 1994, pp. 73 and 77).

The **dignitarian** (intrinsic worth) aspect of Kant's moral system inspired twentieth century human rights doctrines, from the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to a number of post-World War II constitutions for newly formed governments. Nevertheless, the aspirational influence of Kant's moral thought is somewhat irrelevant to understanding just how serious Kant was about his bigoted, chauvinistic remarks and whether they should be considered an integral part of his moral and political philosophy, as well as his theory of race. Toward answering these questions, Bernard Boxill has shown how Kant's teleology was related to his moral philosophy, of which his views on race were an integral part, and Robert Bernasconi has analyzed Kant's dehumanizing attention to the Khoikhoi.

On a political level, Boxill examines how Kant's racist views are compatible with other aspects of his thought insofar as he was concerned with the progress toward perfection of humanity as whole. This **teleological** development would, according to Kant, require that weaker groups perish. Boxill argues that even though Kant may have condemned colonialism and slavery in his later years, he displayed no real concern for their victims, as human beings (Boxill 2017).

Bernasconi observes that Kant was the first to define "race" as a term for large groups of people with heritable difference, in his 1775 essay, "On the Different Races of Human Beings" (Kant 1950). Bernasconi compares Kant's discussions of the Khoikhoi, also known as the Hottentots, with that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau discussed the culture and perspectives of the Hottentots, whereas Kant simply treated them as objects without subjectivity (Bernasconi 2014). This was damaging to any attempt to include nonwhites in the moral universe, because Kant was the preeminent theorist of moral dignity who based intrinsic human worth on the fact that a person's life was subjectively valuable to that person. Kant's **racialism**, or belief in the existence of human races, was thus indistinguishable from his **racism** or weighted comparison of races in terms of superior and inferior human worth (Appiah 1990).

Hegel's Geographical Racism

In contrast to Kant, Hegel's reliance on geography was directly tied to Western history insofar as nonwhite racial categories were imposed on people in Africa, Asia, and the Americas during the so-called "Age of Discovery." By the time Hegel addressed race in the early nineteenth century, the effects of colonialism had concretely changed ways of life in many non-European parts of the world: lands were taken, cultures disrupted, inhabitants brutalized,

tortured, killed, enslaved, or subjected to hostile foreign rule. But more than that, geography for Hegel was an expression of abstract *spirit* and he wrote African people out of human history, on that basis:

Africa Proper is the characteristic part of the whole continent as such. We have chosen to examine this continent first, because it can well be taken as antecedent to our main enquiry. It has no historical interest of its own, for we find its inhabitants living in barbarism and slavery in a land which has not furnished them with any integral ingredient of culture. From the earliest historical times, Africa has remained cut off from all contacts with the rest of the world; it is the land of gold, forever pressing in upon itself, and the land of childhood, removed from the light of self-conscious history and wrapped in the dark mantle of night. Its isolation is not just a result of its tropical nature, but an essential consequence of its geographical character (Hegel, 1997).

If Africans and their descendants have suffered the most severe and enduring racism in modernity, Hegel was undoubtedly a major architect of the fictional subhuman characteristics that were ascribed to them in justification of such treatment.

J.S. Mill's Racial Exclusions

John Stuart Mill's classic proclamation of freedom of speech, *On Liberty*, survives today as a defense of the need to allow even the most heinous views free expression, so that those with rational and benevolent opinions are continually required to remember and restate why they hold them. Mill's advocacy of freedom of speech was not based on the intrinsic value of freedom of expression but on the utilitarian benefits to society when the most enlightened are prepared to give reasons for their beliefs. However, as Thomas McCarthy points out, Mill qualified his principles of liberty with paternalism, so that they would not apply to everyone. Mill began *On Liberty* with the qualification that the principles therein were "meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties," and not to "those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered in its nonage... Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement and the means justified by actually effecting that end." John Stuart Mill, like his father James, was a career administrator in the East India Company that administered the affairs of the British government in India (McCarthy 2009, p. 168). We can see that public and personal history constricted and biased his humanism.

Nietzsche's Racial Eugenicism

Mill's views on the maturity of human races can be viewed as a legacy from the metaphor of childhood that Hegel used to describe Africans. Nietzsche, however, was not so much concerned with the conventions of European white supremacy in his discussions of race, as he was with a vision of reactionary overthrow of democratic and egalitarian principles. Bernasconi notes that although Nietzsche was positive about Jews, who were considered a nonwhite race in the late nineteenth century, he defended both slavery and colonialism and was very pejorative about blacks. Bernasconi points out that Nietzsche advocated the creation of a pure, blonde, European race, through breeding—he was a racial **eugenicist**. Furthermore, Nietzsche's view of race, which some of his apologists have seen as a matter of spirit only, was belied by his claim that “it is not in the least possible that a human being might *not* have the qualities and preferences of his parents and ancestors in his body” (Bernasconi 2017).

Conclusion

Plato inadvertently introduced the idea of race by proposing to tell some groups of people that they were inferior to other groups, by birth. Aristotle did not have an idea of race but accepted slavery as a natural institution and believed that Asians, the majority of those enslaved in his time, had character traits that made them suitable for that status. The Romans, like the Greeks, viewed slaves as household property, along with domestic animals, but they did not identify slaves by race. Slavery was accepted by the Church founders and Saint Aquinas, and although there was a sense that it required moral justification, their qualifying arguments were weak. John Locke justified the type of slavery that could be imposed on the losing side in a just war, but for normal government, he rejected slavery as a violation of fundamental human rights.

Hume was the first canonical philosopher to mention human races and explicitly assert nonwhite inferiority. Kant cited Hume as an authority for black inferiority, but also developed his own complex system of race and a white supremacist perspective of racial differences in reason, morality, and aesthetic taste. Although Kant was a monogenist and thought that all races derived from the same stem, he posited different racial essences as determining degrees of intellectual capacity and moral worth. Hegel was as derogatory about nonwhites, especially Africans, as Hume and Kant, but he

believed that geography or environment was the main determining factor of racial differences. Despite his overall liberalism and endorsement of representative government, John Stuart Mill restricted freedom of expression to European individuals and groups who were advanced or “mature”. Nietzsche took evaluative racial hierarchies for granted. He attributed an historical decline in European vitality to race-mixing and advocated the creation of a new, fierce, blond race.

The history of ideas of race in the canon of Western philosophy was not emancipatory to those non-European groups who were enslaved, oppressed, and exploited over the centuries of colonialism. However, the point of exploring this history is not to blame or castigate revered philosophers. Rather, the task is to determine the extent to which their ideas about race were integral parts of their thought and philosophical systems that traditionally have been more central to philosophical scholarship than the subjects of racialism or racism. It is also important to recognize their influence on subsequent scientific and popular ideas about race. Even if the racism(s) of these thinkers is an integral part of their philosophical systems, some believe it remains conceptually possible to expand their domains to include non-whites and non-Europeans in erstwhile unfairly advantaged communities that contained the privileged subjects in the history of moral and political philosophy. For instance, contemporary universalist **dignitarian** thought is deeply connected to Kant’s ideas about the intrinsic value of human individuals (Rosen 2012).

Glossary

autonomy—self-rule, being in charge of one’s own life.

biological racial determinism—idea that inherited human racial traits determine social, psychological, physical, and cultural traits.

deliberation—for Aristotle, the intellectual activity of practical wisdom that allows one to practice or develop virtues.

dignitarian—pertaining to the intrinsic value of human individuals.

essences—qualities of things that make them what they are and cause their other qualities.

ethnology—nineteenth-century studies of the history of human cultures that related cultural differences to inherited racial traits.

eugenics—practice and ideology of improving the quality of humanity by regulating who can have children, and with whom.

identity—what a person is, naturally or in society.

intrinsic worth (dignity)—valuable in itself (to itself).

monogenist(ism)—belief that all human groups, including races, had the same origins.

moral—adjective connoting human culture, ethics, psychology, and studies thereof.

nominalism—philosophical doctrine that the distinguishing marks of a certain type of thing or of all types of things are matters of language and human decision and convention, rather than what actually exists in nature or in the external world.

natural kind—a type of thing that exists on its own in nature, without human invention.

Philosophy of Race—descriptive and normative philosophical inquiry into racial differences and injustice related to them.

polygenist(ism)—belief that human groups, especially races, had different origins.

phronesis—for Aristotle, practical reasoning about how to act.

racialism—belief that there are human races or that humankind is divided into races.

racism—negative assessment of some human races and their members, compared to others.

species—most common division in biological taxonomy; members of a species share its defining traits and can breed amongst themselves but not with members of other species.

systematics—biological naming and classifying living things as individuals and groups, in relation to one another.

teleology—determination or causation by an end goal.

thumos—(Greek) spiritedness.

Essay and Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think it's important to avoid anachronism in discussing ideas resembling race before the modern period?
2. What are the main differences between Plato and Aristotle's views of who should be enslaved?
3. Do you think Locke's failure to extend fundamental rights to women, the poor, and non-Europeans means that his political philosophy was not based on his avowed principles of liberty and freedom?
4. What are the implications of the fact that Africans were enslaved before a biological concept of human races were developed?

5. Hume was a polygenist and Kant was a monogenist. Explain how their assessments of racial differences were or were not related to their different beliefs about human origins.
6. Explain and critically evaluate the difference between Kant's claim that Africans lacked intelligence and reason and that they lacked taste.
7. How did Kant's reliance on racial essences and Hegel's on geography influence their views of human races?
8. What are the implications of John Stuart Mill's restrictions of liberty to Europeans?
9. In what ways was Nietzsche a racist? Was he also a racist?
10. How might a philosopher's views on race be relevant to other aspects of that thinker's work? How are nonracial views held by a philosopher related to that thinkers' views on race?

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