



A Critical Assessment of the Kleingeld – Bernasconi Debate On Kant's Racism

Jelena Govedarica

Research Associate at the Institute for Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade ✉ 

Milica Smajević Roljić

Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade ✉ 

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ENG Abstract: This paper offers a critical evaluation of the arguments that Kleingeld and Bernasconi used to support their claims regarding the idea that Immanuel Kant held racist beliefs. Firstly, we will criticize the views on which they agree, aiming to emphasize our understanding of Kant's thoughts on race. Secondly, we will assess the significance of Kant's draft for *Towards Perpetual Peace* when considering the debate over Kant's racism, and show that Bernasconi's interpretation – according to which Kant presented racist views in the third *Critique* and in his writings on history – is problematic. Although we will not systematically present our understanding of Kant's thoughts on race, our critique of Kleingeld's and Bernasconi's claims will reflect our basic views: Kant was not a racist, and he never advocated for slavery and colonization. Kleingeld is right to insist that we must interpret Kant's thoughts on race diachronically, as it is clear that his views evolved over the course of his life, but did not fundamentally change.

Keywords: slavery, colonialism, race mixing, physical geography, anthropology.

Summary: Introduction. 1.1. Discriminatory Statements from Physical Geography and Anthropology Lectures. 1.2. Slavery Endorsement and the “immediate drive to activity”. 1.3. Race Mixing. 2.1. Published and Unpublished Parts of *Towards Perpetual Peace*. 2.2. Bernasconi on the Source of Contradiction in Kant's Philosophy. Conclusion.

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Introduction¹

At the center of the contemporary examination of Kant's views on race is the debate between Pauline Kleingeld and Robert Bernasconi². In her famous article “Kant's Second Thoughts on Race” (2007), Kleingeld argues that Kant defended racist views based on racial hierarchy “until at least the end of the 1780s” (Kleingeld 2007, p. 575). At the beginning of the 1790s (most likely after the publication of “On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy,” and before the completion of *Toward Perpetual Peace*), Kant completely abandoned his previously held racist beliefs. This radical change in Kant's

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² For the past few decades philosophers have focused on a stark contrast between Kant's racism, his views on slavery and colonization, and, on the other hand, his universal moral theory, which affirms human dignity and the duty of respecting every human being as an end in itself. There have been numerous interpretations of Kant's position, and most of them aimed to show that Kant was, as Kleingeld puts it, either an inconsistent universalist or a consistent inegalitarian (Kleingeld 2007: 576). The debate between the positions of Pauline Kleingeld and Robert Bernasconi not only illustrates these two poles in contemporary discussions, but contributes greatly to a better understanding of Kant's views on race, slavery and colonialism. Both Kleingeld and Bernasconi have repeatedly and eloquently written about Kant's racism, and their views are still very influential; their discussion is conducted at a high conceptual and textual level, which makes it not only a good overview of the main interpretative challenges, but also a good opportunity to question a standard “racist” reading of Kant's problematic statements. Due to the very specific topic of this paper and its limited length, we will not acknowledge many philosophers who have written about Kant's views on race. That said, one particularly intriguing new debate is worth mentioning, if only as a topic for a future study: the debate between Huaping Lu-Adler and Pauline Kleingeld. Lu-Adler criticized Kleingeld's interpretations in her articles about Kant's racism and her recent book *Kant, Race, and Racism: Views from Somewhere* (cf. Lu-Adler 2023). Kleingeld questioned Lu-Adler's main claims in her critical review of Lu-Adler's book (cf. Kleingeld 2024). For readers who are not familiar with the literature on Kant's racism, we would recommend the extensive bibliography in Lu-Adler's book.

view of race made his race theory compatible with his theory of cosmopolitan law and moral theory in general, which, according to Kleingeld, was not the case before the 1790s. Thus, the main thesis that Kleingeld defends is that Kant did not advocate the same notion of race throughout his career, but his position underwent a radical change in the mid-1790s.

In his text “Kant’s Third Thoughts on Race” (2011), Bernasconi criticizes Kleingeld’s interpretation and attempts to show that it does not provide an accurate account of Kant’s position. It is tempting to believe, Bernasconi thought, that toward the end of his life Kant changed his views on race, primarily because some of his statements about different races sound shocking, disappointing, and inconsistent with the rest of his philosophical system. Bernasconi finds this understanding of Kant’s position comforting for those who try to defend Kant, but not at all credible (cf. Bernasconi 2011, p. 291). Even though Kleingeld is neither the first nor the only person to argue that Kant had changed his position, Bernasconi directs his criticism toward the arguments offered by Kleingeld, most likely because he considered them the most influential and because she explicitly criticized his views.

In this paper, we will offer a critical evaluation of the arguments that Kleingeld and Bernasconi used to support their claims³. In the first part of the paper, we will criticize the views on which they agree, with the aim of emphasizing our understanding of Kant’s theory of race. Although their positions differ significantly, these two authors interpret many of Kant’s controversial statements about race in a very similar way, which is why they claim that Kant was a racist. While we do not dispute that many of Kant’s frequently cited statements are discriminatory, derogatory, insensitive, and – most importantly – incorrect, given that they are based on false and prejudicial empirical reports, we believe that the accusations of racism are excessive (and thus anachronistic), and that claims that Kant supported slavery and colonialism are untenable.

In the second part of the paper, we will assess the significance of Kant’s draft for *Towards Perpetual Peace* for the debate over Kant’s beliefs surrounding race. We will also show that Bernasconi’s claim that Kant presented racist views in *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and in his writings on history does not hold. Although we will not offer a systematic presentation of our understanding of Kant’s thoughts on race, our critique of Kleingeld’s and Bernasconi’s claims will reflect our basic views: Kant was not a racist, nor did he ever advocate for slavery and colonization. Kleingeld is right, however, to insist that we must interpret Kant’s theory of race diachronically, as it is clear that his relationship to evidence became increasingly critical over the years, that the concessions he made to “satisfy the taste” of the contemporary public became less prominent, that his opinions about nomads and people living in the state of nature changed, and that his views on race evolved, but did not radically change.

1.1. Discriminatory Statements from Physical Geography and Anthropology Lectures

Controversial statements from Kant’s Physical Geography and Anthropology lectures are usually cited as evidence that Kant explicitly affirmed racial hierarchy and that he was a racist. Before we analyze some of them, we have to stress three important points. Firstly, it is often forgotten that these are student notes from Kant’s lectures, rather than a text *written and published* by Kant himself. Therefore, these texts must be taken with a pinch of salt and cannot by themselves be taken as proof of anything, let alone to assert such a strong claim – that Kant was a racist. Even more importantly, in these notes, there is no clear distinction between Kant’s beliefs and the opinions of others that he presented during his lectures, albeit without referring to the sources of information, which indicates that these texts should not be understood as an accurate reflection of Kant’s beliefs⁴. That said, the student notes we have today are valuable because they provide an insight into the lectures’ structure, general content, and the way that Kant modified them over the years, rather than because they provide solid proof of the claims that can only be found there in that form.

Secondly, we must take into account Kant’s own confession about the chief purpose of his comments regarding the difference in practical or cognitive capacities between races, which we find more frequently in the lecture notes than in his published works. Namely, in his letter to Johann Jacob Engel on 4th July 1779, Kant wrote: “[...] the attached principles of a moral characterization of the different human races will serve to *satisfy the taste* of those who do not particularly pay attention to the physical aspects.”⁵ As we can see from Kant’s own words, “moral characterization” never constituted an integral part of his physiological theory of race, as it was simply added to draw the audience’s

³ In her article “Kant’s Second Thoughts on Race,” Kleingeld criticized claims put forward by Bernasconi in his writings on Kant’s race theory (most notably in “Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Racism”). Bernasconi replied to Kleingeld in the article “Kant’s Third Thoughts on Race” and, in return, criticized her views. Kleingeld then addressed Bernasconi’s criticism in her article “Kant’s Second Thoughts on Colonialism.” Although, many authors have presented their views on the Kleingeld–Bernasconi debate and their solutions to the issues that were discussed, we will not address them here as they would provoke many new comments and increase the length of this article.

⁴ Werner Stark demonstrated these points convincingly in the example of Rink’s edition of *Physical Geography*. He cited excerpts from the travel literature Kant used with either no or minor changes and without mentioning the source of information, which proved that many of the views presented during the lectures were not Kant’s at all (cf. Stark 2011a, p. 78). Student notes from the lectures are *not* stenographical reports, and what we have today is certainly not (exactly) what Kant had said (cf. Stark 2011a, p. 73). Stark also showed that one of the most controversial statement that is usually taken as clear evidence that Kant affirmed racial hierarchy (LPG 9: 316) is actually the result of Rink’s intervention (Stark 2011b, p. 96).

⁵ As cited in Kleingeld 2007, p. 579 (italic added).

attention to what he thought was an innovative race theory. Since lectures are events attended by a wider audience, during his Physical Geography and Anthropology lectures in particular, Kant made sure that he “satisfies the taste” of his listeners, without weighing the possible implications of every word he uttered.

Thirdly, when evaluating the significance of statements that, upon closer analysis, seem to be added to the discussion through motives that have nothing to do with the systematic and thorough analysis that Kant is famous for, we must take into account certain populist concessions that Kant had to make when his academic career was still in its formative stages. At the beginning of his career, when he introduced a new subject called “Physical Geography,” created the syllabus, and selected various sources, without using a prescribed textbook – for which he had to obtain special approval from the Prussian Ministry of Education (cf. Church 2011, p. 40n18), Kant depended on the students who paid to attend his lectures, both existentially and professionally. These lectures were a huge success, and Kant continued to teach Physical Geography – and, from 1772, Anthropology, which was originally part of his Physical Geography course – until the end of his career, 49 times in total (cf. Reinhardt 2011, p. 104). His book *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* was also a huge success, and “satisfied the taste” of a very wide audience.

These facts, together with the influence of moral sentimentalism, especially Hume’s opinions and uncritical acceptance of reports about the way people live on other continents, heavily contributed to the tone and content of discriminatory statements that we find in Kant’s early works. Although we have no wish to absolve Kant of responsibility for his shameful comments, we wish to underline the need to take all these facts into account when we interpret the meaning and value of his individual statements⁶. These statements should be acknowledged and properly understood, but their significance should not be exaggerated, nor should they be interpreted radically so as to call into question the coherence and plausibility of Kant’s entire philosophical system.

With this in mind, let us examine some of the passages cited by Kleingeld and Bernasconi to illustrate Kant’s racist beliefs. The first one is from Kant’s Physical Geography lecture from 1782, which Kleingeld used to support her thesis that Kant endorsed slavery:

The Mandinka are the very most desirable among all Negroes up to the Gambia river, because they are the most hardworking ones. These are the ones that one prefers to seek for slaves, because these can tolerate labour in the greatest heat that no human being [Mensch] can endure. Each year 20,000 of this Negro nation have to be bought to replace the decline of them in America, where they are used to work on the spice trees and in general on the entire *établissement*. One gets the Negroes by having them catch each other, and one has to seize them with force. (as cited in: Kleingeld 2014, p. 47).

This comment, however callous it may sound, is Kant’s *description* of slavery and slave owners’ practices. It conveys what he believed were the facts surrounding the profitability of different slaves. On so many levels these words are terrifying, particularly because they reflect a lack of any emotion. Yet, it does not follow from this statement that Kant believed that people of any race *should* be enslaved and used only as a means and not at the same time as an end in itself, or that the institution of slavery itself is permissible or justified (cf. Boxill 2017, p. 46). When criticizing Kant’s views, we must ignore contemporary associations and aversions in order to appreciate the difference between normative and descriptive judgments and the fact that the former do not follow from the latter. Since in no single quote that we know of does Kant explicitly advocate for slavery or question its moral impermissibility, we should interpret such comments as factual statements without moral implications.

The second quote is taken from Kant’s lectures on Physical Geography from 1782, and serves as a central illustration of Kleingeld’s thesis that Kant endorsed colonialism before the mid-1790s:

These peoples [viz., in India] deserve a better fate than their current one, because it is a very manageable and easily governed people! The current fate of India depends as little on the French as on the English, but this much is certain, that if they were to be ruled by a European sovereign, the nation would become happier. (As cited in: Kleingeld 2014, p. 46)

This quote undoubtedly has very problematic implications, and what is puzzling to anyone familiar with Kant’s moral philosophy is the distinctly un-Kantian, consequentialist argumentation put forward. We believe that this statement should be understood as only a passing comment that has no prescriptive content. The intended meaning, in our opinion, is that the “current fate” of the people of India is bad because of rulers who rule badly, not that the people themselves are bad, and that another type of government would result in a “happier” life for the populace. In his later works, Kant claimed that the form of government not only directly affects people’s lives, their well-being, and happiness, but also may induce their moral progress, because respect for the rule of law results in more frequent actions that are in accordance with the *virtus phaenomenon* (cf. R 6: 47)⁷. The interpreta-

⁶ Kant never offered a systematic theory in favour of white supremacy.

⁷ Kant’s works are cited according to the English translation of *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Royal Prussian (later German) Academy of Sciences (Berlin: Reimer, subsequently Walter de Gruyter, 1902–): *The Cambridge Edition of The Works of Immanuel Kant*. Abbreviations used: A = *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*; CF = “The Conflict of The Faculties”; CPR = *Critique of Pure Reason*; CJ = *Critique of the Power of Judgment*; DCHR = “Determination of the Concept of a Human Race”; DHR = “Of the Different Races of Human Beings”; HR = “Review of Herder’s Ideen”; IUH = “Idea for a Universal History”;

tion of the above quote as a factual statement with no normative consequences is more consistent with the views expressed by Kant in his published works than his support for colonialism (as well as interventionism and paternalism, inherent to it). The crucial problem facing interpretations that are completely inconsistent with Kant's moral theory lies in the following questions: If Kant believed that colonialism and slavery were permissible in the case of non-white races, why did he not explicitly argue more extensively in favor of this thesis in his published works, or at least during his lectures? Why did he not state that these institutions are good, desirable, or justified? We believe that ignoring such common sense questions that spring to mind for anyone familiar with Kant's philosophy is a major drawback of radical interpretations of his views.

Bernasconi, on the other hand, cites a passage from Kant's lectures in *Anthropology (1777-1778)* in support of the claim that Kant not only advocated for racial hierarchy, but also that his philosophy of history actually presupposes the extinction of non-white races, "particularly the extinction of the race of Native Americans." (Bernasconi 2011, p. 296) This outcome should be interpreted as something instrumentally good; although it is not good in itself, it is good because it serves the goal of the moral progress of humanity as a whole (cf. Bernasconi 2002, p. 160; Bernasconi 2011, p. 296). In order to clarify what Kant reportedly said and Bernasconi's interpretation of these assertions, we will cite this controversial paragraph in full:

We find nations that do not appear to have progressed in the perfection of human nature, but have come to a standstill, while others, as in Europe, are always progressing. If the Europeans had not discovered America, the Americans would have remained in their condition. And we believe even now that they will attain to no perfection, for it appears that they will all be exterminated, not through acts of murder, for that would be gruesome! but rather that they will die out. For it is calculated only a twentieth part of all the previous Americans are still there. Since they only retain a small part, while the Europeans take so much away from them, there will arise internal struggles between them, and they will be in friction with one another. (LA 25: 840)

The first thing we need to note is that this quote refers to nations, not races. This is the case in many of Kant's other statements that allegedly promote white supremacy. In accordance with Kant's concept of race, the comparison of races would be meaningful only if the criteria of comparison are physiological in nature, and the meaning of the phrase "a better race" is that one race is better adapted to the conditions of the given environment than another one. Secondly, here, as in most other quotes that illustrate the racial hierarchy that he allegedly advocated, Kant compares nations according to the level of cultural progress, civilization, and type of state constitution. As in the case of the infamous passage that we analyzed elsewhere (cf. Govedarica, Smajević Roljić 2024), the term "perfection" refers to the degree of the development of arts and sciences in a certain population, rather than something inherent to one race because it is fundamentally superior to others. Thirdly, based on travelogues that Kant had read that informed him not only about the way of life and social organization of the Native Americans, but also about the consequences of the gruesome actions of the colonizers, he made an empirical prediction: unless something radically changes, and that change would be a consequence of free, moral actions of the colonizers, the extinction of the American natives would be a "natural" (in the sense determined by the causality of nature, necessary) consequence of the given state of affairs. Kant did not say that this *should* happen because it would be good or desirable in any sense. He only states that such an outcome can be expected if the behavior of the Europeans does not change. This brings us to the final point – Kant held the Europeans responsible for the contemporary state of affairs and possible fatal consequences, which is why he explicitly criticized their actions in his legal and political writings.

Another of Bernasconi's paraphrases is noteworthy. Finding fault with Kant's critique of slavery and colonization in *Towards Perpetual Peace*, Bernasconi says:

[...] even this comment directed against the cruelty of the slave trade marks a departure for Kant in contrast with his much earlier insistence that Black slaves had to be treated harshly: for example, in Rink's edition of the *Physical Geography* Kant records that all inhabitants of the hot zones have a thick skin and so must be hit not with sticks but whipped with split canes. (Bernasconi 2011, p. 303)

In one page-long chapter, titled: "Some Peculiarities of the Black Color of Humans," Kant lists the physiological characteristics of black skin (most of it is simply nonsense that he took from various literature and which he presented systematically). At the end of the chapter, he conveys a report describing the punishment of slaves in an extremely factual, emotionally detached manner, with the aim of illustrating his theory about the physiological characteristics of the skin. In the sentence Bernasconi refers to, Kant reportedly states:

Like all the inhabitants of the torrid zones, the Moors have a thick skin, and for this reason when they are punished they are whipped not with sticks but with split canes, so that the blood may find a way out and not suppurate under the thick skin. (PG 9:313)

As we can see, Bernasconi's interpretation, although it partially conveys Kant's words, completely misses the intended meaning: Kant is not *insisting* that Black slaves *had to be treated harshly*. Rather, he wants to

LA = *Lectures on Anthropology*; LDPP = *Lectures and Drafts on Political Philosophy*; LPG = *Lectures on Physical Geography*; MM = *Metaphysics of Morals*; OFBS = *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*; PP = *Toward Perpetual Peace*; TP = "On the Common Saying: That May be Correct in Theory, But It Is of No Use in Practice"; TPP = "On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy"; WE = "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?"; R = *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*; CBHU = "Conjectural Beginning of Human History".

point out that Moors have thick skin. He does not say, nor imply, that slavery is permitted or desirable, nor that the slave trade is acceptable or allowed, and he certainly does not say that Black slaves have to be treated harshly or inhumanely.

1.2. Slavery Endorsement and the “immediate drive to activity”

Kleingeld and Bernasconi both believe that Kant agreed with the anti-abolitionist ideas and endorsed slavery because he cited Tobin’s text in his essay *On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy*. They also claim that highly contested differences in the level of “an immediate drive to activity” among the races, in a footnote of the same essay, is the obvious example of the racial hierarchy that Kant allegedly advocated. This difference has particular significance in as much as it has normative consequences and supposedly represents a “moral characteristic” by which some races are considered to be inferior to others.

Responding to Forster’s ironic objection that “Providence” was short-sighted in failing to foresee the possibility of subsequent racial adaptation (“a second transplanting,” TPP 8: 173) in response to climate change during migration⁸, Kant briefly states his position (TPP 8: 172-176). He insists on the common descent of human beings represented in a first couple and their offspring, who possess all the original predispositions of humanity, and therefore *in potentia* were able to adapt to all possible climatic conditions. As people in “the earliest times” populated the entire Earth and lived in a certain climate “over long periods of time,” four different races were formed with those predispositions which were perfectly adapted to the region where they lived. This reflects the purposiveness of nature in creating different races of human beings. Kant then goes a step further in claiming that nature, by making each race perfectly adapted to a specific climate, has *hindered* migration, especially the transition of people from warm regions to colder climes (TPP 8: 174). Kant illustrates this thesis in the following way: “Indians and Negroes” have never attempted themselves to move to the northern regions,

[b]ut those who were driven there have never been able to bring about in their progeny (such as the Creole Negroes, or the Indians under the name of the gypsies) a sort that would be fit for farmers or manual laborers. (TPP 8: 174)

Kant’s argumentation that supports this thesis is placed in a controversial footnote that Kleingeld sees as an unequivocal confirmation that Kant advocated racial hierarchy (cf. Kleingeld 2007, p. 581-582). Both Kleingeld (cf. Kleingeld 2014, p. 49-50) and Bernasconi (cf. Bernasconi 2011, p. 308) interpret the surrounding text and the footnote itself as proof of Kant’s endorsement of slavery.

The footnote begins with Kant’s reservation that the remark he just made does not in itself prove anything, but that it is nevertheless not unimportant. To explain the remark’s significance, Kant cites evidence from an anti-abolitionist text, but unlike today’s readers who know that the text was written by James Tobin, Kant was apparently unaware of this. Questioning Kleingeld’s interpretation that Tobin’s text promotes slavery, Bernasconi claims that Tobin himself categorically denied this and that he presented himself as merely an opponent to Ramsey’s arguments (cf. Bernasconi 2011, p. 308). Tobin, whom Kant believed to be a dependable source of information as he described him as “a knowledgeable man,” opposed former Reverend James Ramsey’s advocacy of freeing slaves and using them as free labor, arguing

[...] that among the many thousand freed Negroes which one encounters in America and England he knew no example of someone engaged in a business which one could properly call labor. (TPP 8: 174n)

Since Kant considered Tobin, the owner of a plantation and the slaves who worked on this land, a reliable source, Kleingeld claims that Kant

[...] endorses a pro-slavery text, citing with approval a critique of a proposal to free black slaves, with the argument that they will never be good labourers unless they are coerced into activity. (Kleingeld 2007, p. 574)

Leaving aside for a moment the validity of the claim that the goal of Kant’s argument is to prove that black slaves must be coerced into activity in order to be good workers, we think that the argument according to which Kant’s reference to Tobin’s text should be interpreted as in agreement with anti-abolitionist ideas is problematic. We would argue that the context of the discussion does not suggest that Kant supported Tobin’s ideas, as he does not analyze anti-abolitionist claims, nor does he present arguments that would justify slavery. Rather, he simply cites an empirical report that supports the hypothesis he introduces as part of his *biological* theory of the origin of races. The fact that Kant’s source is Tobin’s text has nothing to do with Tobin’s polemic with Ramsey, nor is the question of the legitimacy of slavery mentioned at all, because it is of no significance to Kant’s polemic with Forster⁹. Kant’s critics could argue that Kant was aware of the public debate over the moral impermissibility of slavery, but he chose not to participate in it. In our opinion, the reason for Kant’s silence about slavery is that this essay is *thematically* not an adequate place to offer arguments

⁸ This objection is part of Forster’s criticism of Kant’s insistence on monogenetic origin of humanity. It should be stressed that Forster believed that black people are another *kind* of people (which Kant firmly denied, cf. TPP 8: 100; DHR 2: 431), and he also advocated paternalism, cf. Eberl 2019, p. 403.

⁹ Bearing in mind the fact that slavery in Kant’s time was not viewed as absolutely morally impermissible and legally forbidden, as it is today, Kant’s use of the empirical examples taken from Tobin’s text was probably not as problematic for Kant as it is for us. This is supported by the fact that Forster never claimed that Kant endorsed colonialism or slavery.

about the moral impermissibility of slavery¹⁰. Kant highly valued systematicity and methodological precision, so the proper place to condemn slavery would center around his writings on ethics and law. In these works, as Kleingeld confirms but Bernasconi denies, Kant condemned slavery and colonialism. Therefore, the fact that Kant did not explicitly denounce slavery here does not imply that he endorsed it¹¹.

In the controversial footnote, Kant mentions Tobin's testimony that freed slaves do not want to take up "an easy craft which previously as slaves they had been forced to carry out" as free labour, and instead choose, among other things, fishing and hunting, "in a word, [becoming] tramps." Cold climate conditions have no bearing on the fact that freed slaves are "disinclined for labor," as they pursue other work outdoors in the cold weather. Commenting on this, Kant says:

Should one not conclude from this that, in addition to the *faculty* to work, there is also an immediate drive to activity (especially to the sustained activity that one calls industry), which is independent of all enticement and which is especially interwoven with certain natural predispositions; and that Indians as well as Negroes do not bring any more of this impetus into other climates and pass it on to their offspring than was needed for their preservation in their old motherland and had been received from nature; and that this inner predisposition extinguishes just as little as the externally visible one. The far lesser needs in those countries and the little effort it takes to procure only them demand no greater predispositions to activity. (TPP 8: 174n)

It is difficult to escape the impression that Kant deliberately wishes to remain ambivalent and vague here, because although he introduces a new hypothesis – that races differ not only by physiological characteristics, but also by a characteristic he calls "an immediate drive to activity" – its nature is quite unclear. He does not say unequivocally that it is a natural predisposition (*Anlagen*), which would be an unchangeable and necessarily hereditary characteristic of one race of human beings, but that it is *especially interwoven* with certain natural predispositions, which suggests that this drive is *not itself* a natural predisposition. On the other hand, since an immediate drive to activity is "independent from all incentives" and Kant describes it as a hereditary "inner predisposition," it can apparently have some (undefined) consequences on the actions of individuals. Furthermore, the fact that Kant placed this hypothesis in a footnote (rather than in the main part of the text, where he presented his biological theory of race), is also significant. If he was convinced that there was some relevant hereditary difference between human beings, especially if this difference has consequences for the "moral characteristics" of certain races, why is it that Kant neither here, nor in his earlier writings on race, offered an elaborate theory that would clarify and support it?¹² If his intention was to articulate racial hierarchy, he would certainly have insisted on this thesis and at least made an effort to prove it or explain how environmental conditions (climate, water, soil) can permanently change (decrease or increase) the intellectual, mental, or moral characteristics of a certain race¹³. Instead, Kant only explains how these conditions affect the color of people's skin or other physiological traits. One plausible explanation would be that this controversial hypothesis was unimportant to him, as Kant was mainly interested in defending his theory about the monogenetic origin of human beings and emergence of different races, as well as explaining the empirical reports that were available to him.

Kant claims that a lack of or decrease in an immediate drive to activity is a natural, necessarily hereditary characteristic that arose as a result of the adaptation of the race to the environmental conditions of the "old motherland." He does not claim that slaves *should not* be freed because then they would no longer be inclined to do what they used to do, nor does he say that members of the black or red race are lazy and do not want to do anything, but that they do not want to do that which they were previously forced to do. Kant does not question the possibility of freed slaves being, for example, excellent hawkers, innkeepers, or lackeys, which are the occupations they supposedly choose. Therefore, Kleingeld's claim that the goal of Kant's argument is to prove that black slaves must be "coerced into activity" in order to be good laborers, along with Bernasconi's interpretation according to which Africans are "no longer capable of working except when forced to do so by others" (Bernasconi 2002, p. 158), do not follow from Kant's words.

However, we still need to answer the following questions: What is the meaning and intention behind this unusual digression in Kant's essay and why does he mention Tobin's testimony if he does not wish to participate in the (anti)abolitionist discussion? If we put aside the important question of the precise definition of an immediate drive to activity, it is obvious that Kant highlights the occupations that freed slaves want or do not want to do. It is therefore plausible that he considers Tobin's testimony convincing as it supports the belief that Kant had at the time that the hunter-gatherer lifestyle characterizes societies that are politically at a lower level of development (i.e. nomads or people living in a state of nature). Since he believes that the form of political organization is directly related to the cultural and civilizational progress of society, it is one of the most important criteria for assessing the level of development of a population. Therefore, it seems to us that Kant's primary intention

¹⁰ The fact that Kant paid considerable attention to this kind of consistency is explicitly acknowledged in the Preface of his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, cf. A 7: 120.

¹¹ This is not the only example of this type of argument in Kleingeld's articles, cf. Smajević Roljić, Govedarica 2024.

¹² Kleingeld also highlights this fact: "In neither the articles on race nor the anthropology lectures, however, does he make any attempt to explain how the alleged intellectual and agential characteristics of the races are related to the physiological aspects of race." (Kleingeld 2014, p. 49)

¹³ In her article "Kant on Lazy Savagery, Racialized," Lu-Adler discussed the implications of Kant's statements concerning an immediate drive to activity. Even though she offered some solid arguments, we think that she exaggerates the significance of Kant's statements and that her conclusions are too radical (cf. Lu-Adler 2022).

with this biological hypothesis was to offer a theoretical explanation of contemporary empirical reports, which agreed that among the red and black races, there are no developed states, nor civilizational and technological achievements that could be found in European and Asian nations. Eberl also emphasizes that Kant was interested in whether the freed slaves in Europe took up by themselves activities that were typical for the region in which they found themselves (namely, agriculture). If not, and this is exactly what Tobin's testimony suggests, their choice of occupation is in accordance with the original adaptation to climatic conditions in which farming or agriculture were not necessary for survival (cf. Eberl 2019, p. 405-407).

1.3. Race Mixing

Kleingeld and Bernasconi both believe not only that Kant was opposed to race mixing, but that his views on this topic evolved over the years. However, while Kleingeld holds the belief that Kant's negative opinions on this matter underwent a radical change as a consequence of the positive change in his thoughts on race, Bernasconi believes that Kant's initially favorable views about race mixing changed for the worse when he articulated his race theory. Kant's attitude towards race mixing is very important for Bernasconi, because he treats it as one of the central arguments in favor of the claim that Kant was a racist (Bernasconi 2002, p. 149). An additional reason to discuss this matter is that it neatly highlights the difference in Kleingeld's and Bernasconi's interpretations of the important passage from *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (A 7: 320): while Bernasconi believes that this passage shows that Kant was against race mixing in his mature writings, Kleingeld's interpretation of the same passage serves to support her thesis about the anti-racist radical change in Kant's views.

According to Bernasconi, race mixing is central to Kant's race theory in two ways. Firstly, "one can only establish the existence of distinct races by mating across races." (Bernasconi 2011, p. 299). This is certainly true, as Kant claimed that all races belong to one human species, "to a single phylum, from which, notwithstanding their differences, they originated," and that two people of different races can produce fertile offspring which will share racial characteristics from both parents (cf. DHR 2: 430). Secondly, Bernasconi believes that, under the influence of his race theory, especially the thesis about unfailing heredity of physiological as well as "mental or moral characteristics," Kant had changed his formerly favorable views about race mixing:

In lectures on moral philosophy in the early 1770s Kant in a rare early use of the term *Racen* argued that nature intended the races to combine with each other. However, when introducing his racial theory, Kant suggested that race mixing was a disturbance of nature. This would seem to be because he now attributed to nature providential insight in creating the races. (Bernasconi 2011, p. 299)

In order to understand the meaning of the phrase "disturbance of nature," we will quote Kant's statement Bernasconi is referring to:

When Nature can work undisturbed (without transplanting or foreign mixing) through many generations, then she always produces finally a lasting sort, which marks ethnic groups forever and would be called a race if what is characteristic did not appear too insignificant and were not too difficult to describe to ground a special division on it. (DHR 2: 431)

We believe that the term "Nature" here refers to the phenomenal world as a systematic unity, including phenomenal human actions determined by laws of nature. Accordingly, "undisturbed nature" represents the world in which everything unfolds in a predictable manner with no room for freedom because every event is determined by the previous state of affairs. By contrast, "disturbances of Nature" are events caused by the free will of human beings, such as a decision to leave the region to which one is perfectly adapted, or produce offspring with a person of another race. In the quote above, we see that Kant mentioned migrations (e.g. transplanting) and "foreign mixing" as examples of disturbances of nature (note that Kant is not referring to race mixing, but instead to the mixing of populations of the same race and ethnic groups, which would create what he calls "varieties"). Colonialism and the slave trade would constitute violent interferences, as they also disturb the way that nature works on her own. Hence, when Kant implied that something could be a "disturbance of nature," he did not mean that it would be abnormal, nor that race mixing is negative or forbidden because one race is superior to another. He explains his biological theory about the origin and persistence of different races, according to which "Nature" is always disturbed by the influence of something foreign to a given environment or represents an intervention of the free will of persons. In line with this interpretation is the following passage from Kant's third essay on race:

With respect to the varieties, nature seems to prevent the melting together because it is contrary to its end, namely the manifoldness of the characters; by contrast, as regards the differences of the races, nature seems at least to permit the melting together, although not to favor it, since thereby the creature becomes fit for several climates but not suited to any one of them to the degree achieved by the first adaptation to it. (TPP 8:166)

The reason behind Kant's belief that "nature" does not "favor" "the melting together" of races is purely biological and, as such, does not have any moral implications, nor imply any racist judgments¹⁴.

¹⁴ It could be said that even this biological argument (according to which race mixing decreases the adaptive value of the offspring) is racist, but that would be an anachronistic reasoning. Although this argument is racist today, for Kant it was

We believe that Bernasconi's interpretation of the "disturbance of nature" thesis carries racist undertones that we do not see in Kant's text. Elsewhere, he says that

[...] to avoid race mixing was merely to act in conformity with nature. For Kant, the present division of races was permanent and indissoluble, so long as all race mixing was prevented. It seems to have been Kant's view that if Providence introduced the division of races, that meant that they should be retained. (Bernasconi 2002, p. 157)

Bernasconi's use of the word "Providence" does not fit well with the scientific, biological discussion of the emergence and development of races, as Kant uses this concept when he discusses something from a moral point of view (for example, historical events)¹⁵. The "providential insight" that Bernasconi mentioned in the first quote and which Kant uses in the context of his race theory is purposiveness, which is the only way to explain the perfect adaptation of race to the region of Earth in which it was formed. Purposiveness serves as a regulative idea that guides our research in natural history¹⁶. In favor of this interpretation is the following quote, taken from Kant's first essay on race:

This care of Nature to equip her creature through hidden inner provisions for all kinds of future circumstances, so that it may preserve itself and be suited to the difference of the climate or the soil, is admirable. [...] Chance or the universal mechanical laws could not produce such agreements. (DHR 2: 434)

Bernasconi thinks that Kant's "disdain for race mixing" (Bernasconi 2002, p. 159) is clearly demonstrated in the following quote:

Should one propose that the races be fused or not? They do not fuse and it is also not desirable that they should. The Whites would be degraded. For not every race adopts the morals and customs of the Europeans. (as cited in: Bernasconi 2002, p. 158)

The fact that Kant here mentions "morals and customs of the Europeans" suggests that by "degraded" he meant the regression of the very criteria that, in our opinion, he used when he compared and ranked races (the advancement of culture, civilization, state constitution, arts and sciences [cf. Smajević Roljić, Govedarica 2024]). This statement sounds somewhat sinister, but we believe that it expresses Kant's fear that the "fusion" of races would hinder the successful social, civilizational, and political assimilation of people who do not live the way Europeans do. The ultimate outcome of this "fusion" would certainly be the loss of authenticity, freedom, and political autonomy of many populations¹⁷. It would lead to despotism that Kant called "the graveyard of freedom" (PP 8: 367). Bernasconi, however, interprets this quote differently:

Kant saw race mixing as leading to a degradation or pollution of Whites, a loss of some of their talents and dispositions. (Bernasconi 2002, p. 159)

Kant does not mention "talents and dispositions" here, but rather "morals¹⁸ and customs," which is why the more convincing interpretation is that he focused on negative consequences in the political and social sense. Additionally, "degradation" and "disturbance" in the context of Kant's theory of race must be interpreted only in the sense that a person becomes "fit for several climates but not suited to any one of them to the degree achieved by the first adaptation to it." (TPP 8: 166-167).

Let us now turn to the question of Kant's view about race mixing in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. In order to assess the validity of the two opposing interpretations, we will first examine Kant's own words and then Bernasconi's and Kleingeld's understanding of their meaning. In a very short chapter "On the Character of the Races," Kant refers to Christoph Girtanner's book *On the Kantian Principle for Natural History* as a source of information on race theory consistent with his principles. Kant then adds the following comment about *varieties* within one race:

Instead of *assimilation*, which *nature intended in the melting together of different races* [italic added], she has here [with varieties] made a law of exactly the opposite: namely, in a people of the same race (for example, the white race), instead of allowing the formation of their characters constantly and progressively to approach one another in likeness – where ultimately only one and the same portrait would result, as in prints taken from the same copperplate – rather to diversify to infinity the characters of the same tribe and even of the same family in physical and mental traits. (A 7: 320)¹⁹

just an attempt to explain the differences found among human beings. Perhaps it would be racist if Kant was also affirming polygenism, but he repeatedly claimed that there is only one kind of human being, and that ontologically we are all the same – the adaptive value of *all races* decreases when race mixing occurs.

¹⁵ There are more nuanced differences between "Nature" and "Providence" in Kant's works, but this will suffice for our purposes. For further reading on this topic, see: Kleingeld 2001.

¹⁶ Kant wrote about the way in which the teleological observation of nature presupposes the mechanical laws that govern nature, as well as the idea of nature as a systematic unity of empirical cognitions in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (cf. CPR A687/B715 – A692/B720), before he published "Determination of the Concept of Human Race" and "On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy."

¹⁷ This point of view is completely parallel to the reasons that led Kant to later prohibit interventionism within the framework of his legal theory (cf. PP 8: 346-347).

¹⁸ "Morals" (in the plural form) signify customs, culture, and civilization.

¹⁹ Before commenting on this passage, Bernasconi cited the last sentence of the chapter "The Character of Nations," in which he apparently sees some negative implications: "This much we can judge with probability: that the mixture of tribes (by extensive conquests), which gradually extinguishes their characters, is not beneficial to the human race – all

Bernasconi's interpretation of these words is as follows:

Kant explained that it is in the mixing of races that there is an extinction of characteristics. [...] Races were defined in such a way that it is only in the case of race mixing that the diversity at which nature usually aims is frustrated. Kant took this as confirmation that nature opposed race mixing. (Bernasconi 2002, p. 157)

On the other hand, Kleingeld interprets the same passage in the following way:

[...] racial assimilation does not lead to universal uniformity, because it goes hand in hand with the emergence of an infinite number of varieties. (Kleingeld 2007, p. 591.)

A remarkable difference between these two interpretations demonstrates once again that fairly unambiguous words can be understood in a completely different manner depending on the thesis being asserted. While Kleingeld tries to show that Kant was not a racist in his later years, Bernasconi shapes his interpretation to fit his conviction that Kant remained a racist. Needless to say, we concur with Kleingeld's understanding of the passage. It should be said that Kant's comment about varieties – that nature “made a law of exactly the opposite” – echoes his warning against family or close relatives interbreeding, because it ultimately ends in infertility (cf. A 7: 321), as well as his comment in the same work that “in the sexual instinct,” nature strives “for the diversity of subjects [...] so that all the variety which nature has implanted in their germs will develop.” (A 7: 179)

Although we share Kleingeld's understanding of this passage, we do not think that Kant was opposed to race mixing in his early works and that the contrast between these positions proves that he radically changed his views on race. To support this, Kleingeld cites a passage from Kant's Physical Geography lecture: “[t]he end of Nature would be lost if half-breeds became common.” (as cited in: Kleingeld 2007, p. 591.) It is commendable that she does not interpret this quote as proof of Kant's racism, but simply as a position opposite to the one he later expressed in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. However, in accordance with our previous interpretations of Kant's views, we would argue that the “end of Nature” refers to the perfect adaptation of the organism to the region in which a certain race was formed and that this is exactly the purpose of “Nature” while creating different races. This purpose “would be lost” because “half-breeds” would not be perfectly adapted to any climate.

2.1. Published and Unpublished Parts of *Towards Perpetual Peace*

The discussion about the importance of published and unpublished parts of *Towards Perpetual Peace* was initiated by Kleingeld in her article “Kant's Second Thoughts on Race.” She said that in his article “Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Racism,” Bernasconi erroneously claimed that Kant never spoke openly against chattel slavery, nor the slave trade (cf. Bernasconi 2002, p. 150-152). To prove this assertion, she briefly discusses Kant's repeated and explicit criticisms of slavery in his preparatory notes for *Toward Perpetual Peace* on the grounds that it is a violation of cosmopolitan right (cf. Kleingeld 2007, p. 587-588). She also offered valid arguments to prove that Kant was categorically opposed to chattel slavery in his published version of *Towards Perpetual Peace* (cf. Kleingeld 2007, p. 588) and *Metaphysics of Morals*, (Kleingeld 2007, p. 588n31), a claim that Bernasconi questions.

In “Kant's Third Thoughts on Race,” Bernasconi responds to Kleingeld's criticism and gives his assessment of the meaning and value of what Kant did and did not include in the published version of *Towards Perpetual Peace*. To begin with, he states that the “context of the discussion” in which Kant was explicitly opposed to the slave trade and chattel slavery is “an attack on certain seafaring civilized peoples who saw no limits on their conduct other than those that arise from their lack of power.” (Bernasconi 2011, p. 301-302) We believe that this is incorrect, because Kant's criticism of the actions of “certain seafaring civilized peoples” is only the criticism of *one of several examples* of inhospitable behavior that Kant gives to illustrate the violation of the third form of public right. Hence, the context of the discussion is in violation of the cosmopolitan right. In that first example, Kant says:

Compare this [respect for the cosmopolitan right of people] to the actual behavior of civilized, especially coastal people on the seas, one sees that they recognize no limitation to their presumptions except whatever their own powerlessness prevents them from doing, and all the foreigner's goods, indeed even the person of the foreigner himself, are treated like booty thrown into their hands by nature. (DPP 23: 173)

The second example of cosmopolitan right violations concerns the African people:

Trade in negroes, which is in itself already an offense against the hospitality of black peoples, will be even worse for Europe in its consequences. (DPP 23: 174)²⁰

so-called philanthropy notwithstanding.” (A 7: 320) It is important to emphasize that here Kant is talking about “tribes” and not “races,” and that the essence of his comment is that the distinctive characters of various tribes should be preserved and not destroyed “by extensive conquests.” We understand his reference to “so-called philanthropy” as an implicit criticism of the consequentialist argumentation that is often offered to justify colonialism, which Kant explicitly criticizes elsewhere (MM 6: 353). Therefore, this comment is not only not racist, but critical of the colonization and cultural assimilation to which it aspired.

²⁰ Bernasconi misunderstands this quote, translating it as follows: “The trade in Negroes that is in itself a violation of the hospitality of peoples among Blacks is even more of a violation for Europe because of its consequences.” (Bernasconi 2011, p. 302, italic added). Kleingeld nicely sums up the meaning of Kant's words: “[...] his point is not that the slave trade

In the third example, Kant condemns Europeans' conduct in America:

The lands of America had barely been discovered before the inhabitants were pushed aside or swindled to make room for settlements, still worse the inhabitants were themselves in part made into slaves as goods without owners, and in part forced out of their territory and wiped out by internal wars through which they were made unhappy because driven by jealousy and concern for the supremacy of one part in a multitude of long wars, because of which the commercial inhabitants grew in power at a manifold of new opportunities. (DPP 23: 174)²¹

The last example concerns Asia, where Europeans' contact with the indigenous population

[...] began with separate, peaceful settlements and resulted in the subjugation of a substantial part of the old inhabitants, but even worse the internal wars, from which only China and Japan were spared. (DPP 25: 174)²²

From these examples of violations of the third form of public right, which he mentioned one after the other in the same passage, Kant draws the following conclusion:

The principles that allege conformity with the right of possession applied to newly discovered lands that are believed to be barbaric and inhabited by unbelievers, as goods without owners, acquired without the assent of the inhabitants and even with their subjugation, are completely opposed to the cosmopolitan right to limited hospitality. (DPP 23: 174-175)

Based on these examples and the conclusion, it is clear that Kleingeld's interpretation is in accordance with the meaning and intention of Kant's words. Kant did condemn slavery, colonization, and actions of Europeans that resulted in gruesome crimes and violence. Bernasconi, however, is unsure whether Kant's arguments against slavery and slave trade are sufficient, since he believes that Kleingeld's critique has two key flaws. The first is that Kant did not include all criticisms of the slave trade he mentioned in the draft of the published version of his work (cf. Bernasconi 2011, p. 302). The second problem regarding Kleingeld's view about Kant's radical change of heart is that during his Physical Geography lecture from 1792, Kant

[...] already called the trade in Negroes "morally reprehensible." So far as I am aware this lecture course is the only occasion where we know that Kant *publicly* condemned the slave trade, and he did so in the context of a reassertion of his hierarchical view of race. (Bernasconi 2011, p. 304)

Before we address the first flaw and discuss Kleingeld's answer to the second, we have to stress that Bernasconi obviously believes that the statements we find in student notes from Kant's lectures (which are *not* Kant's words) are more convincing proof than Kant's words from his preparatory notes. This conviction is not unusual among authors who claim that Kant was a racist, as most of them find confirmation for this claim precisely in student notes from his lectures in Physical Geography and Anthropology. Looking impartially at the facts surrounding the works that Kant published, especially the fact that he never published a book entitled: "Physical Geography," we can conclude that this subject – and everything he lectured about in that course (including racist comments he reportedly made) – were not philosophically relevant to Kant. If they were, it would probably be fairly easy and opportune for him to publish such a work (as the subject "satisfied the taste" of the public). Instead, Kant's authentic work that we have at our disposal is *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, and this book, as Kleingeld also claims, offers strong evidence that Kant (at least from the mid-1790s) was not a racist. Since the draft for *Toward Perpetual Peace* was written by Kant himself, we cannot doubt the authenticity of the words and ideas we find there.

In our opinion, a commonsensical answer to Bernasconi's first objection (why Kant did not include every criticism of the slave trade in the final version of the work) would be that the subject of slavery, the slave trade, and the behavior of Europeans on other continents was not the central theme of the entire essay, nor the part where Kant writes about the third form of public right. The illustrations he mentions in his preparatory notes would be an extensive digression that diverts the attention from the already short exposition of the legal principles of cosmopolitan right²³. If he decided to keep these illustrations in the published version, the entire conception of that part of the work would be disrupted, and the emphasis would be shifted from public right and pacifist political principles to anti-abolitionist and anti-colonialist argumentation.

is less bad than these other wrongs, or that it causes greater wrongs to Europe than to blacks, or that it is somehow less bad because it has other wrongs as its effects. The point is, rather, that the violations of the cosmopolitan right of blacks that are perpetrated by the slave trade, which Kant calls wrong in itself, lead to *even more* wrongs against blacks." Kleingeld 2014, p. 62n22.

²¹ This passage is reminiscent of the comment Kant reportedly made that Native Americans will "die out" (see Chapter 1.1). Because our interpretation of that passage is in line with what Kant explicitly said here, it is plausible to assume that he wanted to convey the same idea during his lecture, and we see no reason to interpret that prediction in a racist way and then argue that Kant radically changed his views.

²² In the published version, Kant explained that China and Japan denied Europeans access to their territory and that is why they were spared, cf. PP 8: 359.

²³ Bernasconi himself had a similar impression when he said: "For all we know Kant might simply have feared that announcing his opposition to the African slave trade would distract from other causes to which he was more committed." Bernasconi 2011, p. 303. It was more important for Kant that the reader's attention stay on cosmopolitan right as a third form of public right than on illustrations of the legal principles he promoted. To avoid any misunderstanding, we do not want to say that this argumentation is not as important as cosmopolitan right – we simply believe that it would change the intended focus of the work.

With the second objection (that during his lectures on Physical Geography, Kant had already asserted that the slave trade was morally reprehensible, but at the same time still advocated for racial hierarchy), Bernasconi argues that Kant's condemnation of slavery and the slave trade in his legal writings does not prove that Kant no longer held racist views (cf. Bernasconi 2011, p. 304). In "Kant's Second Thoughts on Colonialism," Kleingeld answers:

[...] it is crucial that although Kant calls the slave trade morally reprehensible, he regards it as, *nevertheless*, on balance, *acceptable* in the case of blacks. In later texts, by contrast, Kant rejects the slave trade because it is a violation of the cosmopolitan right of blacks, without claiming that it is nevertheless a tolerable fate for blacks. It is no longer 'wrong, *but defensible* all things considered', but simply *wrong*. This is a decisive difference. (Kleingeld 2014, p. 62)

In "Kant's Second Thoughts on Race," Kleingeld explained in more detail why violations of the cosmopolitan right of blacks sufficiently support the claim that Kant was (at least from the mid-1790s) not racist. In short, the very fact that Kant considers the inhabitants of other continents (members of the non-white race) as capable of signing contracts and having cosmopolitan rights demonstrates his non-racist perspective. With this, Kant confirmed that non-white races have equal legal and moral status of persons whose interests must be protected (cf. Kleingeld 2007, p. 587).

2.2. Bernasconi on the Source of Contradiction in Kant's Philosophy

Because we consider Kleingeld's interpretation of Kant's mature position regarding race, slavery, the slave trade, and colonialism to be an accurate representation of his ideas and intentions, we will not analyze it further. We agree with Kleingeld that Kant's thoughts on race have changed over time – but not radically, because we do not believe that Kant was ever a racist. What prompted these gradual changes we may never know, but in addition to the reasons mentioned by Kleingeld (e.g. intensive work on his legal philosophy, the influence of the French and Haitian Revolutions, modifications of his biological theory; Kleingeld 2007, p. 591-592; 2014, p. 64-65), at the end of this chapter, we will briefly suggest one more reason.

On the other hand, we do not agree with Bernasconi's opinions about Kant's mature position regarding race and history. He believes that the contradiction between moral universalism and racism in Kant's philosophy cannot be resolved, and that this contradiction should be understood as

[...] the tension between a philosophy of history rooted in his account of natural history that authorized violence and a moral perspective that questioned much of this same violence. (Bernasconi 2011, p. 311)

In our opinion, Kant never "authorized" violence, because even when he considered war and conflict as bad occurrences that can have good consequences, Kant never said that war should be waged because of these positive effects. He accepted the fact that wars have always been fought, and he understood this fact as a "natural" occurrence, because violence, like radical evil, is inherent to humans as natural beings. However, as they are also rational and free beings, people must overcome this fact of their nature in order to become moral. This means that wars, conflicts, violence²⁴, and inequality are natural consequences of the innate predispositions of human beings when their actions are determined by "pathological" motives – until people begin to determine their will according to the principles of reason. Hence, in all cases in which Kant presents a realistic view of human nature, his point is never that it *should remain* that way, but that people can and must change their condition by subjecting themselves to "the coercion that reason itself prescribes to them as means, namely to public law" (TP 8: 310). We believe that Kant's philosophy of history and his moral philosophy are not mutually inconsistent, but different ways to interpret reality, which can be viewed both as what it is (at a certain point in history) and what it can and should be.

Bernasconi believes that Kant's claim according to which humanity's perfection (the development of "predispositions whose goal is the use of reason") can only be achieved in the species and not in the individual (cf. IUH 8:18), involves a hidden assumption that perfection could only be achieved through racial hierarchy. Since non-white races, especially Africans and Native Americans, supposedly lack the skills required to achieve perfection, the white race would be the only one to eventually reach it. In this scenario, non-white races would be treated only as a means to achieve the perfection of the white race and the constitution of the moral whole, which means that racial hierarchy presupposes that non-white races are not full persons²⁵. Bernasconi argues that this thesis is supported by Kant's claim that skill (together with discipline) is the condition for developing culture as the ultimate end of nature regarding the human species (cf. CJ 5: 431). This means that Kant's racism is also prominent in *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, as

[...] it is impossible not to suspect sinister tones underlying Kant's claim that "Skill cannot very well developed in the human race except by means of inequality among people." (Bernasconi 2011, p. 309)

However, looking closely to the specific part of Kant's text that Bernasconi is referring to (CJ 5: 432), especially to Kant's reference to the lower and upper classes, it is clear that the "inequality" Kant has in mind is

²⁴ Violence does not necessarily have to be physical, as people can impose their will on others and deny them their freedom with persuasive rhetoric. With this in mind, the change in Kant's attitude to nomads is clearly visible in the following passage: "[...] if these people are shepherds or hunters (like the Hottentots, the Tungusi, or most of the American Indian nations) who depend for their sustenance on great open regions, this settlement may not take place by force but only by contract, and indeed by a *contract that does not take advantage of the ignorance of those inhabitants with respect to ceding their lands*." MM 6: 353 (italic added).

²⁵ Interestingly, Bernasconi argued against the thesis that non-white races are not full persons (cf. Bernasconi 2011, p. 293).

class inequality. Inequality is the consequence of an inherently human characteristic – self-love, which Kant sees both as a catalyst of human development and the cause of constant conflict. Self-love, which involves comparison, has nothing to do with differences in race; it belongs to every human being by virtue of their humanity, for it is a second element of the original disposition of human beings (cf. R 6: 26-28). Although it is certainly possible that due to this inequality, many people do not develop all their skills, it also has nothing to do with race as it happens to all races in every part of the world. Fleischacker stresses one additional important point:

As he does elsewhere, Kant links what he calls “perfection” to the development of skills or talents in CJ, but he calls here for everyone to develop whatever skills they happen to have, rather than praising any particular set of skills, and he gives priority to the development of the will over the development of skill. [...] even if Kant links perfection to the development of skill in CJ, there is no hint in that book that he thinks white people achieve perfection while all other human beings participate in it only vicariously. (Fleischacker 2023, p. 12).

Arguing in support of the thesis that Kant advocated racial hierarchy in the third *Critique*, Bernasconi adds:

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Kant asked about the purpose of the Greenlanders, the Lapps, the Samoyeds, and the Yakuts, among others. (Bernasconi 2011, p. 310)

This interpretation again conveys Kant’s thoughts incorrectly; he does not contemplate the purpose of these peoples (not races) in the sense of why they exist at all, but rather asks why (any) people would live in such harsh conditions (cf. CJ 5: 369). Continuing his interpretation, Bernasconi says:

In negotiating the question of human purposes Kant conceded that the question of why a people should have to exist was not always easy to answer. (Bernasconi 2011, p. 310)

Kant raises this question in the context of explaining external purposive relations to ends (the relationship between means and ends in the world as a whole), and there is nothing inherently racist in this question. Kant says that all other beings on Earth serve human beings and are subordinate to them, but that with regard to human beings, no purpose can be found that would be analogous to this one. People are not a means to any further purpose, but an end in themselves.

Further analyzing the role of inequality, Bernasconi interprets Kant’s statement from *Conjectural Beginnings of Human Nature* erroneously. He says that Kant

[...] acknowledged the role of inequality as ‘that source of so many evils, but also of everything good’, beginning with the first colonists. If, as seems likely, this is a reference to the first migrations that led to the origin of the different races that Kant had outlined eleven years earlier in his essay on the human races, then it means that the essay provides an indispensable insight into how Kant thought the inequality of human races in the light of his other concerns. (Bernasconi 2011, p. 310-311)

Kant never mentioned race in this essay, although it might seem that his hypothesis about the origin and development of races would fit well into the speculations about the earliest history of humanity. The most plausible explanation of this fact, in our opinion, is that Kant simply did not believe that race differences had any role to play in the phases that marked the development of humanity in history (such as the awakening of reason, legality and morality, the constitution of state). Kant saw the main source of inequality and conflicts (which eventually produced the overall historical development) in the different lifestyles of the people in the earliest times: a nomadic, pastoral lifestyle was pictured as hostile to the sedentary lifestyle that farmers were leading (cf. CBHU 8: 118-120). So, Kant was interested in differences in people’s lifestyles, the level of their cultural and civilizational advancement, and their type of political constitution, as he believed that these differences (unlike race) have normative consequences.

This interpretation of Kant’s thoughts about the earliest human history, together with the interpretation of the controversial difference in the level of an immediate drive to activity that we have offered, supports the thesis that in this period of his career, Kant believed that a lack of firm legal and political structure in the lifestyle that nomads or people living in the state of nature had is in a normative sense inferior to a civil state. Because of that, his comparison of different races in this period resulted in statements that the black and red races were inferior to the yellow and white races, and that the white race was the most advanced²⁶. We believe that this kind of discriminatory comparison, which is certainly racist in the modern context, does not sufficiently support the claim that Kant was a racist, as he never tried to offer an elaborate theory that would affirm the fundamental superiority of the white race. Kant never claimed that non-white races are not persons or that they can be used only as a means and not, at the same time, as an end in themselves. In his mature writings on legal philosophy and ethics, Kant sees nomads’ lifestyle and the lifestyle of people living in a state of nature as different, but not inferior, to the lifestyle of Europeans. We believe that Kant’s change of attitude towards these groups caused the absence of derogatory comments about their lifestyle. Instead of discrimination, he demanded recognition of the moral and legal personality of these people – at the level of the individual persons as well as nations, whose collective political autonomy must always be respected. He assigns equal rights to these populations and demands preservation of their way of life and their property.

²⁶ Considering that the nomadic peoples were mostly non-white, it is not surprising that the change in Kant’s attitude toward the nomads reflects a change in his comments about other races (cf. MM 6: 266; Muthu 2003, p. 187-188).

Although his thoughts on these matters changed over the years, we believe that the thesis about a radical change in mindset is not valid for the simple reason that Kant never advocated racism, despite the fact that many of his comments were discriminatory and shameful.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to question a shared conviction of many authors who claim that Kant was a racist: the belief that theory of race was very important for Kant. Kleingeld for example says:

He [Kant] wrote several essays on the topic in the 1770s and 1780s [...] His draft notes and the lecture notes taken by his students provide us with many additional materials. [...] Evidently, Kant considered the issue to be of considerable interest and importance. (Kleingeld 2014, p. 48)

However, did Kant really consider the issue of race to be as important as it is to us today? He published three essays on race over the course of thirteen years, with race being a popular subject of debate at the time, not only in the scientific community but also in wider intellectual circles. Kant wanted to get involved in this discussion, believing that he could make a modest contribution²⁷ to the fundamental questions of biological theory, which was then in its infancy. It is also true that Kant spoke about race during his lectures on Physical Geography and Anthropology for almost his entire professional career, primarily because these were his most popular lectures, and the topic of race, especially the “moral characterization” of different races, “satisfied the taste” of the public, who were generally not so interested in science.

It is significant that during the two decades (1770-1790) from which the writings in which most of his discriminatory statements originate, Kant did not publish extensive works either on Physical Geography or Anthropology. This tells us that Kant probably thought that these subjects had little philosophical importance. Instead, during the aforementioned period, Kant published *Critique of Pure Reason*, which he prepared for a very long time and is widely regarded as his defining work, given the topic that concerned his fundamental interests, the significance and innovativeness that he believed this topic possessed, and the influence of this work on the subsequent development of philosophy. He also published other works that were vital for his philosophical system: *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* and *Critique of Practical Reason*, as well as important essays such as “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?”, in which he advocated for anti-paternalism, and two essays on the philosophy of history: “Idea for a Universal History” and “Conjectural Beginning of Human History,” which give the greatest importance to the moral (both ethical and legal) progress of humanity, without racial discrimination.

Taking this into account, the thesis that it was important for Kant to theoretically establish a racial hierarchy and that race plays a significant role in his philosophical system does not seem very convincing to us, because race theory has no normative implications and cannot jeopardize the universality of his moral philosophy. To this one could object that gender differences are also biological, but this does not mean they have no normative consequences. If we put aside Kant’s discriminatory, insulting, and condescending comments about women, within his legal theory, women are only passive citizens whose scope of rights is very narrow. This is precisely the point: the difference in normative implications that exists between these two biological categories – gender and race – indicates, in our opinion, that Kant was not a racist. If he thought that racial differences have normative consequences, that some races are fundamentally inferior, and that some racial groups have inferior “mental or moral capacities”, which include the ability to develop and perfect the skills necessary to become an independent person, or “his own master” (cf. TP 8: 295), then Kant would grant them the status of passive citizens. However, he did not mention racial distinctions in his legal or ethical theory, nor did he ever claim that non-white races do not have equal rights as white people. This omission would be very strange indeed if he was a racist.

In Kant’s published works, discriminatory racial statements occupy a very small part of the text²⁸. This, of course, does not mean that they are unimportant or should be dismissed, but it does mean that Kant never intended to theoretically establish a racist, discriminatory ideology that would systematically argue in favor of white supremacy – showing that he was not a racist. He repeatedly and explicitly stated that his main intention was to affirm monogenism (against polygenism, which was gaining importance, and which was often used to theoretically justify the supremacy of the white race, cf. Govedarica, Smajević Roljić 2024)²⁹, and to formulate a natural history that would explain the empirical differences between people that were reported by many sources. On the other hand, Kant’s indifferent descriptions of the institution of slavery and slave owners’ practices are extremely disturbing, as we wonder how Kant – who formulated moral theory in the center of which is the concept of dignity, among others – can show such disinterest for the suffering of many human beings about whose fate he reported in a factual, emotionally detached manner. Bernasconi’s passing comment³⁰, in our opinion, explains this inconsistency well; Kant was simply not interested in anti-slavery and

²⁷ Elsewhere (cf. Govedarica, Smajević Roljić 2024), we highlighted a fact that we find very important, but is repeatedly ignored: Kant’s interest in race theory was very limited, which is why he refused to write an extensive work on race when Leipzig publisher Breitkopf suggested him to do so. Replying to the offer, Kant wrote: “ [...] since the history of nature is not my study but *only my hobby*, and my principal aim with respect to it is *to use it* to correct and extend our knowledge of mankind. [...] I could indeed contribute something to a general section of the history of nature, namely *some general ideas rather than their detailed application*” (as cited in Geismann 2022, p. 28).

²⁸ Kleingeld also admits that much, cf. Kleingeld 2014, p. 48-49.

²⁹ It is interesting that Bernasconi also stresses this, cf. Bernasconi 2011, p. 293.

³⁰ “There is also every reason to believe on the basis of *The Metaphysics of Morals* that had Kant bothered to think more about the practice of slavery in the Americas as a condition inherited across generations, he would have been as outspoken in condemning it as he was about some of the abuses associated with colonialism. This failure perhaps can be

anti-colonial activism, even though he argued against slavery and colonialism in his works on ethics and law. However, it is one thing to criticize him for not writing everything that we would have liked him to have written, and it is quite another to claim that he was a racist based on statements that were neither unusual nor radical for the era in which he lived.

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put down to a level of indifference on his part." Bernasconi 2011, p. 312 This objection can be directed not only at many individuals today, but also at states that tolerate brutal violations of human rights that they themselves promote when it is in their interest. It is true that Kant was not ready to engage too actively and publicly to defend some of his views, but it is also undeniable that he never advocated immoral actions.