

## Not Those Who “all speak with pictures”: Kant on Linguistic Abilities and Human Progress

### 1. Introduction

“Human beings could do nothing we recognize as distinctly human without language.” This view, according to Avi Lifschitz, had become “almost a commonplace” by the late eighteenth century (2012:1). “Artificial signs,” in particular, were generally taken to play a “central role . . . in the unfolding of human culture” and this recognition “may explain the manifest preoccupation with language in eighteenth-century thought” (3).

Against this backdrop, we may expect Kant to have something special to say about language and its relevance to culture. After all, his writings and teachings often showcase critical and innovative engagements with major philosophical developments at the time. Yet he does not appear as a notable voice in Lifschitz’s book-length treatment of language and Enlightenment, which features the German scene. The same may be said of Timo Kaitaro’s more recent monograph, *Language, Culture and Cognition from Descartes to Leves* (2022). Even scholars who specifically set out to investigate the linguistic dimension of Kant’s thought tend to work with the few “seductive hints concerning the use and nature of language” that he supposedly offered “on the rarest occasions” (Schalow and Velkley 2014:3). In so doing, they rarely put Kant in conversation with the relevant background debates. Even when they do, they tend to portray him as merely repeating what most of his contemporaries already agreed about language (e.g., Forster 2014).

In short, there is a common assumption that Kant said almost nothing about language directly and that what little he did say turned out to be unoriginal and uncritical. Kristi Sweet spells out this assumption when she laments that, given the centrality of language in philosophical discourse during the second half of the eighteenth century, “it almost begs credulity that Kant remained silent on the matter” (2019:153). It is simply untrue, however, that Kant was silent about the matter of language. To the contrary, he said quite a bit about language, directly as well as indirectly (Lu-Adler 2023). Much of what he said show that, far from uncritically absorbing already established views, he was often advancing his own views on still unsettled questions and doing so for reasons that are deeply rooted in his unique philosophical system.

I will demonstrate this point by studying Kant’s take on the relation between language and human progress. My analysis centers on a cluster of remarks that point to Kant’s following thesis: the “Orientals” have only a symbolic or pictorial language, “a child’s language of humanity” (V-Anth/Mron, 25:1233), wherefore they are incapable of either advanced culture or true morality (the final end of humanity). As the title of my chapter suggests, Kant ties a people’s linguistic wherewithal to their ability for cultural and moral progress. Superficially, this aligns with what Lifschitz identifies as the core thesis of the Enlightenment view of language, that “all cultural phenomena are constructed and maintained by language” (2012:194). The important question for Kant, however, is *what kind* of language can actually play such a constitutive role. His answer is that it must be discursive—as opposed to symbolic (qua intuitive)—language (section 2.1).

To see how controversial this answer must be in Kant’s time, we can compare it with other well-known views about language and progress, such as Leibniz’s and Rousseau’s. Both of these thinkers see something particularly valuable in what they take to be symbolic language of the “Orientals” (section 2.2). Kant, by contrast, is consistently dismissive of everything “Oriental.” He seeks to fend off any potential intrusion of the “Oriental” language partly because he takes its pictorial form to indicate a feeble understanding and a lack of “genius” and “spirit,” which by his analysis define the unique “Occidental” talent (section 3). Meanwhile, he sees discursive language—language made of words as opposed to images—as a Western (Greek) innovation and as essential to humanity’s

progress toward its (moral) destiny, because it alone can facilitate the formation and communication of universalizable concepts and principles so central to advanced culture and morality (section 4).

## 2. On symbolic language and progress: introducing a controversy

### 2.1. Kant's separation of symbolic and discursive languages

Kant sometimes explicitly targets what other eighteenth-century writers might have been saying about language. Take these passages for instance.

Hence it would be ridiculous for us, who have a more masculine language, to exchange this for the child's language of the Oriental peoples and also to start speaking in sheer pictures [*Bildern*], as some writers urgently admonish us to do. (V-Anth/Mron, 25:1233; see V-Anth/Fried, 25:656)

He who can only express himself symbolically still has only a few concepts of understanding, and the lively presentation so often admired in the speeches presented by savages ... is nothing but poverty in concepts and, therefore, also in the words to express them. (Anth, 7:191)

These passages make three related points. First, Kant treats symbolic language or language of *Bildern* as a primitive form of language, associating it with a low level of understanding (as marked by a meager possession of concepts). Second, he attributes an entirely different type of language, one that is more "masculine," to the civilized Occidental peoples.<sup>1</sup> He is thereby alluding to a language made of *words* as opposed to symbols. Call it "discursive language." Third, if most eighteenth-century philosophers saw language as constitutive of cultural progress (à la Lifschitz 2012), it was not always clear what kind of language fit the bill. To Kant, it must be discursive language.

In Kant's view, language—insofar as it connects with thought—consists of *words* (its matter) and grammar (form).<sup>2</sup> Words are contrasted with *symbols*, the latter being sensible images;<sup>3</sup> cognitions through symbols are therefore *intuitive*.<sup>4</sup> This Kantian view marks a critical departure from the dominant Leibnizian-Wolffian practice of treating symbolic and intuitive cognitions as diametrically opposed.<sup>5</sup> This departure is also a crucial feature of Kant's account of cognition in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. On this account, "thinking," which defines the faculty of understanding (as opposed to sensibility), is essentially discursive (A131/B170). What does it mean to call something "discursive"? The familiar answer is that a cognition is discursive (as opposed to intuitive) if it is possible only through concepts.<sup>6</sup> But Kant also characterizes discursivity in terms of the need for "words" (V-Lo/Wiener, 24:893). This may explain why he holds that "without [words] one simply could not judge at all" (Log, 9:109; see V-Lo/Wiener, 24:934). Provided thinking is judging (A68–9/B93–4), it follows that "without words one cannot think at all" (V-Lo/Pölitz, 24:588). That is, thinking is impossible without a *language made of words*. We may call it "discursive language," the opposite of what Kant calls "symbolic language" (V-Anth/Fried, 25:536). Although he may subordinate both under a more general notion of language as means of representation, he often only has the discursive type in mind when he speaks of "language" simpliciter. This seems to be the case, for example, when he claims that "only through [language] are we in a position to make concepts for ourselves" (V-Anth/Pillau, 25:845), that is, to think.

Importantly for Kant, language is not innate, but *acquired*.<sup>7</sup> Discursive language in particular must be "something that arises gradually" (V-Anth/Pillau, 25:845). Kant does not explicitly say how it was acquired. He simply treats its possession as a prerequisite for humanity's continued progress toward its cultural and moral ends. He suggests this much in the "Conjectural Beginning of Human History" (1786), where he distinguishes mere speaking and discursive discourse: if the former is simply a matter of uttering sounds to make one's existence known to other creatures, to discourse (*reden*) is to speak according to connected concepts; only then can one think. Kant attributes this discursive

skill to the human being not in the natural state of complete crudity but “in his *fully formed state*,” that is, “after [he] has already taken a mighty step in the skill of making use of [his] powers.” Only with this assumption of a linguistically and thereby cognitively skilled human being, Kant submits, can we “consider the development of what is moral in his doing and refraining, which necessarily presupposes that skill” (MAM, 8:110–11; see Anth, 7:155). In short, humanity’s *progress* toward its final (moral) destiny is premised on having discursive language (more on this in section 4).

As it is the case with anything that is acquired under contingent historical conditions, not all humans will develop discursive language. That Kant holds this view is clear from his contrast of Eastern and Western modes of speaking. He describes the East as “the land of sensation” (V-Anth/Fried, 25:552). “All the oriental peoples,” he asserts, “speak with pictures [*Bildern*]” and “in this respect they are like the first human beings who also used pictography.” That is, they still have a “child’s language” (V-Anth/Mron, 25:1232–33). Given the constitutive role of language in understanding, this means that they are still in “the childhood of the understanding” (R1486, 15:710), being capable only of “symbolic” or sensible cognitions (V-Met-L<sub>1</sub>/Pölitz, 28:238). In other words, their alleged linguistic primitivity suggests to Kant that “nature has failed them with regard to the faculty of judging from concepts.” By contrast, the Occident is the land “of sound and pure reason,” where people “judge determinately through concepts” (V-Anth/Fried, 25:552). That is, “the Westerners abandoned sensibility much sooner and have raised themselves up to the concepts of the understanding” (V-Anth/Mron, 25:1233). In particular, the ancient Greeks were the first to free themselves “from the jumble of images” and to discourse (*reden*) “by means of concepts” (V-Anth/Fried, 25:536), whereby they were able to cultivate “rational cognition” *in abstracto* (V-Met-L<sub>2</sub>/Pölitz, 28:535; see Log, 9:27).

This claim of a radical linguistic-cum-cognitive divergence between the East and West will turn out to have profound implications from Kant’s perspective. It purportedly affects not only a people’s ability to obtain such prized *cultural* achievements as sciences (including philosophy) and fine arts but also their capacity to develop true *morality*. Kant, as we shall see in sections 3 and 4, holds that the “Orientals” are incapable of either precisely because they lack the requisite discursive skills. Such is his exclusionary view of progress.

## 2.2. An instructive digression: Leibniz and Rousseau on language

The assumption that Eastern (written) languages are symbolic or pictorial was apparently common at the time. We can leave it intact for the sake of argument. The more interesting question is how it interacts with Kant’s conceptions of progress and of treasured achievements like philosophy, fine arts, and true morality. Only thanks to these conceptions does his claim about “Oriental” languages become practically significant, leading to the exclusionary view of progress that I sketched at the end of section 2.1. To demonstrate this, it will be instructive to put Kant in conversation with some of his predecessors, particularly Leibniz and Rousseau.

We may count Leibniz among the “writers” who Kant criticized, as I quoted him at the beginning of section 2.1, for wanting to exchange the Occidental “masculine” language for the Oriental type. In the *New Essays on Human Understanding* (first published in French, 1765), Leibniz takes Chinese characters—*caractères*, also rendered as “symbols”—to indicate the possibility of creating a “Universal Symbolism,” whereby “in place of words we used little diagrams which represented visible things pictorially and invisible things by means of the visible ones which go with them.” What Leibniz finds appealing about this “pictorial symbolism” is that “it would literally *speak to the eye*” and so could be easily learned by the widest population. It would therefore allow all peoples on earth to communicate with one another. Additionally, it would “be of great service in enriching our imaginations and giving us thoughts which were less blind and less verbal than our present ones are” (1996:IV.vi.2, 398–99; see III.i.1, 274).<sup>8</sup> Thus, as one commentator on Leibniz’s abiding interest in

Chinese language puts it, he was driven by hopes for “universal civilization” and for an “intellectual harmony [between] the East and West” (Lach 1945:455; see 436–38).<sup>9</sup>

As for Rousseau, his most impactful contribution to the Enlightenment debate about language is a “conundrum” about its origin (Lifschitz 2012:78–87, 165–87).<sup>10</sup> He posed it in the “Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men” (first published in French, 1755): “which is the more necessary, an already united Society for the institution of Languages, or already invented Languages for the establishment of Society” (2017:149)? This puzzle about origin aside, Rousseau has much to say regarding the evolution of languages, especially in connection with the issue of progress. In the “Essay on the Origin of Languages” (first published in French, 1781), he distinguishes three ways of writing. The first language is figurative, which depicts objects (Egyptian language is a representative example). This is contrasted with the “characters” of Chinese written language, which is “possible only once the language is fully formed and an entire people is united by shared Laws.” Finally, there is the analytic (alphabetic) language of the Europeans, which must have been invented by those engaged in commerce. These ways of writing, Rousseau surmises, correspond to three states of human existence: “The depiction of objects suits savage peoples; signs of words and propositions, barbarian peoples, and the alphabet, civilized peoples” (2017:256–57). The trajectory toward the more analytic modern languages, though, is also seen as a process of regrettable *losses*. One can detect this sentiment in the following passages.

With so many fancy grammars we no longer understand the symbols of the Egyptians. What the ancients said in the liveliest way they expressed not in words but in signs; they did not say it, they showed it. (2017:249)

By a natural progress all lettered languages must change character and lose force as they gain in clarity, ... the more one insists on perfecting grammar and logic the more one accelerates this progress, and ... in order to cause a language to grow rapidly frigid and monotonous one need only establish academies among the people who speak it. (2017:265)

Thus, as Lifschitz puts it, Rousseau seems to “lament the loss of an early, innocent immersion in the senses” and the development whereby “man became deaf to nature and to moral sentiments” (2012:35–6). This reading is consistent with Rousseau’s view of savagery in the “Discourse.”

The example of the Savages ... seems to confirm that Mankind was made always to remain in it ... and that all subsequent progress has been so many steps in appearance toward the perfection of the individual, and in effect toward the decrepitude of the species. (2017:166)

In short, what “civilized men” at the same time “ruined Mankind” (2017:168). In the case of language, it is certainly the case that we owe “many ideas ... to the use of speech” and that “Grammar exercises and facilitates the operations of the Mind” (2017:144). In particular, “general ideas can enter the mind only with the help of words, and the understanding grasps them only by means of propositions” (2017:148). So, *individual* humans’ further progress depends on having a language with a rich vocabulary of general words and a refined grammar. The question, however, is whether such progress is truly desirable for *humanity*. Rousseau has suggested a pessimistic answer.

Meanwhile, this brief excursion into Leibniz’s and Rousseau’s views reveals a larger point about the Enlightenment preoccupation with language. Investigating the development of language and its implications for humanity’s future is not a mere speculative exercise. It is partly the Occidental man’s struggle to figure out where he is in the world (especially vis-à-vis the “Orientals”), where he should be heading next, and what it takes to get there. Language, insofar as it is bound up with

humanity's historical development, must be integral to those reflections. This helps to explain why Kant constructs an "Oriental" linguistic other as the opposite of what, in his view, the Occidental man must make of himself (section 3) and promotes discursive language, a Western invention in his view, as uniquely suited to assist humanity's progress toward what he takes to be its cultural and moral destinies (section 4). The result will be an uncompromisingly exclusionary view of progress: there will be no Leibnizian call for the East-West harmony and no Rousseauian regrets about the loss of a livelier connection with the world, but only an unyielding call for the Occidental man to work toward a future that, presumptively, only his sort is equipped to fulfill.

3. Know your place in the world: the point of constructing an "Oriental" linguistic other  
I have mentioned Kant's view that "Orientals" are incapable of either advanced cultural achievements or true morality due to their merely sensible mode of cognition, as indicated by their symbolic language. This view is not just casual musing about faraway peoples. It has a special function in the articulation of a Kantian worldview. To whatever extent Kant thinks that humanity is destined to progress toward its cultural and moral ends, he believes that only the Occidental man can play an active role in pursuing those ends. A schema of the "Oriental" (linguistic) other helps the Kantian Occidental man to see what he is not, so that he can firmly attend to what he must become. Clarifying this point will help to explain why Kant would deplore any perceived admiration for symbolic languages. To him, such languages evince a deficiency in various prerequisites of moral development, such as morally appropriate feelings and the skills to form, understand, and communicate concepts and principles *in abstracto*.

To elaborate, we may begin with Kant's "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime" (1764), particularly the section "On national characters in so far as they rest upon the different feeling of the sublime and the beautiful" (GSE, 2:243–56). Insofar as "the characters of mind of the peoples are most evident in that which is moral," Kant considers a people's feeling regarding the sublime and the beautiful from this perspective (2:245).<sup>11</sup> He begins with Westerners, presenting the Italians and the French as most distinguished in the feeling of the beautiful and the Germans, the English, and the Spaniards, in the feeling of the sublime (2:243). All things considered, what feelings and inclinations the Occidental man has, he also has the capacity to interweave them "with so much that is moral" and thereby make them "proper" (2:254).

As for those "in the Orient" (2:252), Kant attributes to them "false taste" but "no conception of the morally beautiful" (2:254). He says, for instance, that the Arabs have an "inflamed power of imagination [which] presents things to him in unnatural and distorted images." The East Indians allegedly have "a dominant taste for grotesqueries," whose religion in particular consists of none other than unnatural "images of idols." And the "verbose and studied compliments" of the Chinese, Kant scoffs, are but "ridiculous grotesqueries" (2:252).

Having argued that the European man "alone" can make his feelings and inclinations morally appropriate (2:254), Kant ends the essay with a brief history of "the taste of human beings." This history begins with ancient Greeks and Romans, who "displayed clear marks of a genuine feeling for the beautiful as well as the sublime in poetry, sculpture, architecture, legislation, and even in morals." This feeling purportedly became "degenerated" during the medieval period. Then, in his own time, Kant sees a happy ascendance of the human genius as if by "paligenesis" or rebirth, whereby "the proper taste for the beautiful and noble blossom in the arts and sciences as well as with regard to the moral." His special wish for this period of history is that "the as yet undiscovered secret of education should ... raise the moral feeling in the breast of every young citizen of the world into an active sentiment" (2:255). Given the context, by 'citizen of the world' (*Weltbürger*) Kant is not referring to every individual on earth. Rather, he is addressing the Occidental man who has emerged from the "Observations" as the sole agent capable of true moral character—over against portraits of the

“Orientals” (as well as the American “savages” and African “Negroes”) and of the female sex.<sup>12</sup> This man is a *Weltbürger* because, as Kant puts it in his first essay on race (1775), the world is “the stage of his destiny.” To be an effective player on this stage, he must gain pragmatic world-knowledge (*Weltkenntniß*), which Kant sought to offer through his twin courses on physical geography and anthropology, whereby “the accomplished apprentice” will learn much about the “whole ... in which everyone takes his place” (VvRM, 2:443).<sup>13</sup>

Thus, if Kant’s Occidental male *Weltbürger* must know his place in the world, he gains this knowledge partly through contrasts with others. Kant makes this suggestion in no uncertain terms in the *Menschenkunde* (student notes on anthropology from around 1781–82). He describes the “four races on earth” in terms of their capacity for culture, giving his audience an overview of what provisions nature has given to—or deprived of—each race. Among the nonwhites, Kant claims, “the American people acquires no culture” for lacking the requisite driving force (*Triebfeder*) and passions; the “Negro race” can acquire “a culture of slaves” by virtue of possessing the sort of drives and passions that “allow themselves to be trained” (in the same sense that animals are trainable); the race represented by “the Hindus” can acquire some culture of arts but no sciences, due to their inability for abstract thoughts. By contrast, “the white race contains all incentives [*Triebfedern*] and talents in itself.” Therefore, Kant adds emphatically, this race “must be considered in a bit more detail” (V-Anth/Mensch, 25:1187).

Accordingly, much of what Kant says in the *Menschenkunde* is intended as “information concerning [this white race]” (25:1187). Such information includes, inter alia, inner characteristics like “talent, temperament, and character; that is, natural gifts, the way of sensing, and the way of thinking” (25:1156–76). The students need to learn about these because “the human being is formed according to talent, he is made polite (civilized) according to temperament, and he is moralized according to character.” Take talent for instance, which consists of “natural aptitude, or the capacity to learn, and spirit or genius.” To ascribe talent to someone is at the same time to indicate his “natural vocation,” for which “nature has equipped one subject more than another” (25:1157). To the “Occidental” whites (25:1188) who were Kant’s actual audiences, his ensuing summary of racially differentiated natural provisions must sound like a straightforward illustration of this point about how nature has equipped various humans unequally.

Through this contrast with imagined *others*, the Occidental man would come to believe this much about himself: nature has generously endowed his sort with all the drives and talents that make it uniquely able to propel humanity toward its final end. Susan Shell captures this point well with her following comment on Kant’s raciology.

In the absence of an *image* of cosmopolitan perfection ... the arrested development of the nonwhite races provides tangible evidence that European man, at least, is heading in the right direction. The non-European peoples (especially those of Africa and of America) contribute to the achievement of man’s moral destiny on Earth, less directly than in the manner of an inner wasteland, providing an historically emergent humanity with ... a means of measuring its progress. (Shell 2006:69)

But Shell’s reference to African and American peoples as especially noteworthy examples of non-Europeans obscures the fact that Kant sees the “Orientals” as representing a *singularly realistic threat* to his vision of progress. His fear of the appeal of the “Oriental” way is palpable in the first passage that I quoted at the beginning of section 2.1. His response is to drive a sharp wedge between the Eastern and Western ways of being, to denigrate the former as contrary to the natural destiny of humanity, and to present the Occidental man as distinctly prepared for that destiny.

Now the question is, why does Kant single out the “Oriental” *language* for disparagement? On the surface, this is because it epitomizes his image of the far East as “the land of sensation” (V-Anth/Fried, 25:552). This matters, though, only because it implies something deeper. Given the entanglement of language and thought, having a merely symbolic language suggests to Kant a deficient understanding.

Who speaks by means of symbols indicates that he lacks understanding. In the case of such nations having a symbolic language, the correct concepts of the understanding are very difficult. If they could represent something for themselves by means of concepts, then they would not need any images. All Oriental peoples are like this; they represent all their concepts by means of images. (V-Anth/Fried, 25:536; see V-Met/Mron, 29:757–58; R451, 15:788–89)

That “all the oriental peoples ... speak with pictures and do not have spiritual and abstract words such as we have” additionally “indicates a weak cultivation of their spirit [*Geist*]” (V-Anth/Mron, 25:1232–33; see R1372, 15:598; V-PG/Hesse, 26.2:227–36). Insofar as their pictorial language bespeaks a narrow orientation toward the sense (*Sinn*) as opposed to the idea (*Idee*), Kant also takes this to mean that they have no genius (R765, 15:333). These supposed deficiencies in turn raise a question: “has [the Oriental people, as represented by the Chinese and Hindus,] come to the bounds of its destiny?” Kant surmises that the answer is yes, “since it lacks spirit” (V-Anth/Pillau, 25:840; see R1371, 15:579).

The claim that the “Orientals” lack genius or spirit is particularly important. We already saw that in the *Menschenkunde* Kant treats these as part of “talent,” which he reserves for the white race. This reservation makes sense when we look at how he characterizes genius and spirit in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Genius, he says, consists in a certain “union” of imagination and understanding. He does not dismiss imagination per se, of course. It is just that imagination must be either used objectively and directly for cognition “under the constraint of the understanding” or applied “subjectively, for the animation of the cognitive powers, and thus also indirectly to cognitions.” This is where genius and spirit come into the picture:

genius really consists in the happy relation ... of finding ideas for a given concept on the one hand and on the other hitting upon the expression for these, through which the subjective disposition of the mind that is thereby produced, as an accompaniment of a concept, can be communicated to others. The latter talent is really that which is called spirit, for to express what is unnameable in the mental state in the case of a certain representation and to make it universally communicable, whether the expression consist in language, or painting, or in plastic art—that requires a faculty for apprehending the rapidly passing play of the imagination and unifying it into a concept. (KU, 5:316–17)

This account suggests that without genius or spirit there can be no discursive language (insofar as this involves concept formation), no beautiful painting, and no fine (plastic) art (as opposed to mechanical imitation). This view spells out the rationale behind Kant’s claim about the Chinese in the “Observations” decades earlier that “even their paintings are grotesque and represent marvelous and unnatural shapes” (GSE, 2:252). It also explains why in his view Easterners, who have plenty of buildings that are “rich in gold and precious stones,” nevertheless have no true architecture: for a building to count as architecture, “a concept must lie at the basis, if it is to have taste and the complete approval of our soul”; but Easterners are incapable of the requisite concept, in whose case everything remains a mere play of imagination (V-Anth/Fried, 25:552; see R840, 15:374). That is, they lack the “spirit” to make their passing imagination comprehensible and universally communicable by unifying it into a concept.

If Kant thus believes that Easterners lack discursive language and, with it, advanced cultural achievements because they have no genius or spirit, he apparently also fears that their pictorial language can in turn *hinder* genius and spirit. He claims: “Those who imitate [the Oriental] manner of writing in our times, greatly wrong the understanding” (V-Anth/Fried, 25:536). If “the merit of the Occident is to judge determinately through concepts,” Kant seeks to protect “this advantage of Occidental talent”: it “must not be ruined by analogies and images, for it would otherwise be the degeneration of Occidental taste” (25:552). It is unsurprising, then, that he wants to defend the West’s “masculine language” against the corrupting impact of “the child’s language of the Oriental peoples” (V-Anth/Mron, 25:1233). If the East is allegedly stuck in the childhood of humanity, Kant’s Occidental man is to realize that his destiny lies in the future and that he must do everything to preserve and develop the “genius,” “spirit,” and all the other “talents” that make his sort singularly suited—and hence obliged—to work toward humanity’s moral end. Guarding his discursive language and, with it, his superior manner of cognition is part of the deal. Kant’s theory of “signs,” when read in conjunction with his account of progress, will help to deepen this message.

#### 4. On discursive language as a *sine qua non* of progress

We just saw that Kant characterized “spirit” in terms of the ability to render a mental state *universally* communicable. This emphasis on universality holds the key to understanding his view that discursive language is necessary for progress.

According to Kant, humanity’s final destiny is moralization. “The human being,” he says, “is destined by his reason to live in a society with human beings and in it to *cultivate* himself, to *civilize* himself, and to *moralize* himself by means of the arts and sciences” (Anth, 7:324–25).<sup>14</sup> Moralization revolves around the ability to act from respect for the moral law. Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) presents this moral vision a priori. Meanwhile, he acknowledges that, in reality, “in moralization we have done almost nothing.” He nevertheless claims to “have reason to hope for it” (V-Anth/Mensch, 25:1197–98; see IaG, 8:26; Päd, 9:451). To substantiate the hope that humanity will eventually realize its moral end, Kant turns to anthropology: the system of morals, which must first be set forth a priori as a pure philosophy, “needs anthropology for its *application* to human beings” (GMS, 4:412). What is taken into account in this regard, as Kant later puts it in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), is “the particular *nature* of human beings.” The anthropology that investigates this nature would

deal only with the subjective conditions in human nature that hinder people or help them in *fulfilling* the laws of a metaphysics of morals. It would deal with the development, spreading, and strengthening of moral principles (in education in schools and in popular instruction), and with other similar teachings and precepts based on experience. (MS, 6:217)

The question that drives this anthropological investigation is how “the human being, as an animal endowed with the *capacity of reason* (*animal rationabile*), can make out of himself a *rational animal* (*animal rationale*)” (Anth, 7:321).

Importantly, ‘the human being’ in this context refers to the human *species*, not an aggregate of all individual humans. With this distinction, Kant can give a generic account of the conditions for *humanity* to progress toward its moral destiny while holding that only *Occidental white men* actually satisfy all those conditions to act as the agents of progress. Specifically, he can grant that “innate to human nature are germs [*Keime*] which develop and can achieve the perfection for which they are determined” and that “a savage Indian or Greenlander” has “the same germs as a civilized human,” but in the same breath deny that, with the Amerindians and Greenlanders, those germs would be “developed” (V-Anth/Fried, 25:694; see Lu-Adler 2022a).



This kind of denial is not—contra Catherine Wilson’s claim about “Kant’s racism”—“curiously at odds with his universal *Keime* theory” (Wilson 2014:205). Nor is it true that, just “because [Kant] believes that the entire species progresses in perfection,” he must—as a matter of logical entailment—include every group of humans as agential participants “in the realm of ethics” (Louden 2000:105). For Kant, it is one thing to uncover “what kinds of germs lie latent in *humanity*” as such, so as to hasten their development through education among other means; but it is another to consider *human beings* as embodied beings and hence as differentiated by racial among other naturalized markers (V-Anth/Mensch, 25:1195, modified translation). In the latter case, Kant studies human beings according to their material conditions—for example, in terms of “those tendencies ... that are derived from the [climate] zone in which they live, the diversity of their prejudices and way[s] of thinking” (EACG, 2:9; see PG, 9:183–375; V-PG/Holstein, 26:3–5).

In these terms, Kant can say of language that, first, humanity needs discursive language to progress culturally and morally and, second, only the Occidental whites possess the talent for this kind of language. We have already seen evidence that he subscribes to the second proposition. Now we take a closer look at the first. For this, we turn to Kant’s theory of signs, which explains why he thinks that *only* discursive language can assist humanity’s continued progress.

We begin with a passage from the Jäsche Logic (published in 1800 under Kant’s name with his authorization). In it, Kant distinguishes the matter or object of cognition and its form, namely the way in which one cognizes the object. He then uses an imaginary “savage” to illustrate how the form makes all the difference.

If a savage sees a house from a distance, for example, with whose use he is not acquainted, he admittedly has before him in his representation the very same object as someone else who is acquainted with it determinately as a dwelling established for men. But as to form, this cognition of one and the same object is different in the two. With the one it is *mere intuition*, with the other it is *intuition* and *concept* at the same time. (Log, 9:33)

The last sentence is crucial. On Kant’s theory of cognition, while it is necessary to have sensible intuitions, it is just as essential to make given intuitions “understandable (i.e., to bring them under concepts).” For “intuitions without concepts are blind” (A51/B75). This is because a concept is by definition “a universal ... or *reflected* representation (*repraesentatio discursiva*)” (Log, 9:91), by which “one cognizes that which many things have in common” (V-Lo/Blomberg, 24:909; see 9:93–5). Bringing given intuitions under concepts is also what makes them comprehensible and *universally communicable*. Otherwise, even if one can grasp some sensible features of the world intuitively, the impression gained thereby would remain “locked inside” if one could not bring it to concepts (V-Anth/Mron, 25:1377). Indeed, in this case one may not even be able to understand what one is sensing: “One does not understand a thing until one can communicate it to others” (V-Lo/Dohna, 24:781).

What makes one’s thoughts universally communicable is the use of *words*, the proper function of which is “to signify a thought exactly.” For this reason, Kant thinks “the character of words is an object worthy of the philosopher’s consideration” (V-Lo/Blomberg, 24:294). Words are signs and pertain to the faculty of characterization or signification.

[This is] the faculty of generating representations by certain others as means, ... which have no validity in themselves, but which yet serve to produce in us other representations. E.g., the word Rome produces the representation of a city in Italy. Language also rests on this. (V-Met/Mron, 29:881; see Anth, 7:191)

By ‘language’ in this passage, Kant is evidently talking about discursive language, made of words. The strength of words lies in their arbitrary connection to the objects of representation, to which they bear no resemblance: they are more stable precisely because they are not bound to sensibility. Kant makes this point through a contrast with merely symbolic significations.

The symbol ... serves only the immediate cognition of the understanding, but with time it must fall away. The cognitions of all oriental nations are symbolic. ... but with discursive cognition the signs are not symbols <*symbola*>, because I do not cognize the object in the sign but rather the sign produces only the representation of the object for me. E.g., the word table is no symbol, but rather only a means for producing the representation of the understanding through association. (V-Met-L<sub>1</sub>/Pölitz, 28:238; see R1486, 15:709–10)

Symbols, as Kant sees them, are only sensible images of objects formed through the power of imagination. Words, by contrast, signify concepts formed by the understanding. A merely symbolic mode of signification is inferior in an important sense: images, the material of which comes from senses, are “not so universally communicable as concepts of understanding.” If others cannot understand what is being conveyed through mere images, this is because the speaker “himself does not think about what he says, and therefore others also do not understand him” (Anth, 7:168–69). Thinking in the strict Kantian sense, as we saw in section 2.1, necessarily involves *concepts*. These in turn appear to the mind by means of *words* (as suggested by the last sentence of the long passage just quoted). In short, we humans cannot form thoughts or make them “comprehensible other than by clothing them in words” (V-Mo/Collins, 27:323; see Log, 9:109; V-Lo/Pölitz, 24:588; V-Lo/Wiener, 24:934).

Whether one can signify by means of words, then, not only indicates the level of one’s understanding but also affects one’s (epistemic and moral) relations to others. For Kant, vivid symbolic presentation only suggests “poverty in concepts.” If “the best way of signifying thought is through language, the greatest instrument for understanding ourselves and other,” only *discursive* language can serve this function. Mutual incomprehension happens when there is a “lack of the faculty of signification, or its faulty use (when signs are taken for things, and vice versa).” In this case, not having a common language means that people cannot form a moral community where everyone could act on the basis of *universalizable* conceptions of what is right, just, and so on: such a community is possible only if one can articulate and communicate one’s concepts by a shared discursive language (Anth, 7:191–93). Even the communication of feelings, if two people are to have “reciprocal enjoyment of their humanity,” purportedly depends on having such a language. For “the mutual disclosure of thoughts is ... truly the ground for the communication of feeling.” Without thoughts, Kant contends, we would have no feelings of “a moral [as opposed to instinctual] kind.” To disclose one’s feeling properly—as “correct and not instinctual”—is to do so by way of imparting thoughts (V-Mo/Vigil, 27:678). Once again, this is possible only if one can cloth one’s ideas in words.

These points about the need for discursive language, coupled with Kant’s view about the absence of any such language beyond the Occident, help to shed further light on his suggestion in the “Observations” that all Easterners lack *moral* feelings. By his analysis, everything is reduced to mere sensibility in their case. If they cherish honor, for instance, they “sought their honor ... in authority, thus from sensibility and not from concepts,” whereas the Westerners do so from a “true concept” of honor (V-Anth/Fried, 25:552). Kant traces this and other supposed discrepancies between the East and West to an “essential difference”: only the Westerners can think and act in accordance with concepts and principles *in abstracto* (25:655). This alleged difference affects everything from philosophy to moral character. Regarding philosophy Kant contends, against the prevailing view at the time (Park 2013:69–95), that it could only have begun with the Greeks. For this people “first attempted to

cultivate cognitions of reason, not with images as the guiding thread, but *in abstracto*.” Other peoples “like the Chinese and some [East] Indians” admittedly also deal with the objects of reason (e.g., God), but “only *through images in concreto*” without investigating “the nature of these things in accordance with concepts and rules *in abstracto*” (Log, 9:27; see V-Lo/Wiener, 24:800–1). For the same reason, Kant asserts that these peoples are incapable of true moral character.

A capacity to act in accordance with concepts and principles is required for character. All Oriental nations are completely incapable of judgment in accordance with concepts. It is a big difference to judge a matter according to shape, appearance, and intuition, and to judge [it] according to concepts. All Oriental nations are not in the position to explain a single property of morality or of justice through concepts. (V-Anth/Fried, 25:655)

Thus, if Kant is hopeful about “the future . . . in which the human species is represented in the remote distance as finally working itself upward toward the condition in which all germs nature has placed in it can be fully developed and its [moral] vocation here on earth can be fulfilled” (IaG, 8:30), by his final analysis only the Occidentals are equipped to work toward such a future as agents. After all, moralization presupposes an actual capacity for grasping moral concepts and principles *in abstracto*, a capacity that Kant has denied to the “Orientals.”

Thus, the practical implications of purported linguistic differences are clear to Kant. Contrary to Leibniz and Rousseau (section 2.2), he would issue this advice to his Occidental audiences: stay away from the “Oriental,” merely pictorial languages, which can only tie you to sensibility, degrade your taste, hurt your spirit, and make you incomprehensible either to yourself or to your fellow *Weltbürgern*; you need to distance yourself from such childish languages resolutely, because it is your calling to develop all the germs nature has placed in humanity, so that its vocation here on earth can be fulfilled through you—and you alone. What we are hearing, as Ian Almond puts it while discussing Kant’s anxiety about the Islamic Orient, is “Kant’s Occidental concern for the sanctity of the boundary—his desire for it to remain unbreached by the swarms of the Orient” (2009:38). This perfectly captures the exclusionary impulse of Kantian progress, which, as Inder Marwah (2022) puts it, is in the end only (Occidental) “white progress.”

## 5. Now what?

In this chapter, we have learned that Kant ascribes two radically different kinds of language—symbolic or pictorial (qua intuitive) and discursive languages—to the “Oriental” and “Occidental” peoples respectively (section 2.1). By his analysis, having a merely symbolic language suggests that the “Orientals” lack understanding—and hence the ability to form concepts and think *in abstracto*—as well as genius and spirit (section 3). Meanwhile, he establishes discursive language as a prerequisite of the continued progress of humanity, primarily because only by means of words—as opposed to symbols—can one think (not just intuit), signify one’s thoughts exactly, and make them universally communicable. Without such a language, one would not be able to make one’s feelings moral or develop a true moral character. In short, humanity would not be able to obtain its cultural or moral ends without discursive language (section 4).

When we piece together these points, we get what I called Kant’s exclusionary view of progress, according to which the Occidental whites alone are equipped with the requisite discursive skills and other talents (including genius and spirit) to accomplish advanced culture and pursue humanity’s moral destiny (section 3). The “Orient,” with its “childish language,” is consigned to the childhood of humanity (section 2.1). In holding this view, Kant has departed from some of his predecessors—such as Leibniz, whose vision of the future of humanity includes an East-West harmony facilitated by a

“universal symbolism,” and Rousseau, who exalts a livelier connection with the world mediated by a pictorial language (section 2.2).

If Kant thus emerges as an independent voice in the Enlightenment discourse on language, the picture is not a flattering one. How should one respond? A conventional response might be to treat his remarks about the “Orientals” as mere personal prejudices—much like his racist and sexist claims—and then draw a line between them and his core philosophy (whatever this means), claiming that the latter is “stronger than his prejudices” (Louden, 2000:105). Kant’s philosophy cannot so easily get off the hook, however. My analysis has shown that his philosophy is what gives meaning to his statements about the nature of the “Oriental” language. The exclusionary view of progress emerges only when we take into account his anti-Leibnizian conceptualization of symbolic language as merely intuitive, his view that humanity is teleologically oriented toward the unique sort of moralization that he envisioned in the *Groundwork*, and his view that reason must lead the way in humanity’s progress toward this supposed moral end, wherefore only discursive language can facilitate such progress.

These parts of Kant’s philosophy were controversial then and must be treated as such now. The unsettling way in which he connected language and progress has made it even more urgent to interrogate them critically—not just as an intellectual exercise but as a way of measuring his philosophy against experienced realities. We still live in a linguistically and culturally diverse world. Can Kant’s philosophy even tolerate, which would already be a condescending posture, the myriad non-Western ways of being, knowing, and signifying that would be incomprehensible from his ultra-rationalist perspective? To make this question a bit more concrete, consider Minna Salami’s critique of what she calls “Europatriarchal Knowledge,” according to which “*all* worthy knowledge is rational and logical” and “emotions—central as they are to life—are incapable of explaining existence (2020:12, 17). Salami sees a “sensuous” alternative in nearly all non-Western traditions. These traditions do not disregard intellectual skills but *prioritize* emotional intelligence, whereby one can experience one’s being holistically as an “interbeing” with the entire sentient nature (2020:36). As Audre Lorde puts it, rationality “serves feeling” and so becomes “meaningless” if it does not honor the places that feeling takes us, which is “what happens with the worship of rationality and that circular, academic, analytic thinking” (2007:100–1). How much of Kant’s philosophy would have to be jettisoned or heavily revised if its expositors today cannot simply shut down what Lorde calls “the Black mother within each of us—the poet” who says “I feel, therefore I can be free” (2007:100)? Would we still have a recognizably Kantian philosophy if we seriously pursue such a question?<sup>15</sup> This, I must admit, is a conundrum.

#### Bibliography

- Almond, Ian. 2009. *History of Islam in German Thought: From Leibniz to Nietzsche*. London: Routledge.
- Aravamudan, Srinivas. 2011. *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Bianchi, Silvia de. 2018. “The Stage on which Our Ingenious Play is Performed: Kant’s Epistemology of *Weltkenntnis*.” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 71: 58–66.
- Battersby, Christine. 2007. *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*. London: Routledge.
- Couturat, Louis. 2012. *The Logic of Leibniz*. Translated by Donald Rutherford and R. Timothy Monroe. Unpublished.
- <http://philosophyfaculty.ucsd.edu/faculty/rutherford/Leibniz/couturatcontents.php>.
- DeSouza, Nigel. 2012. “Language, Reason, and Sociability: Herder’s Critique of Rousseau.” *Intellectual History Review* 22: 221–40.

- Forster, Michael. 2014. "Kant's Philosophy of Language?" In *The Linguistic Dimension of Kant's Thought*, edited by Frank Schalow and Richard Velkley, 81–104. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Germana, Nicholas. 2017. "The Colossal and Grotesque: The Aesthetics of German Orientalism in Kant and Hegel." In *Gendered Encounters between Germany and Asia*, edited by Joanne Cho and Douglas McGetchin, 23–39. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Harfouch, John. 2017. "Does Leibniz Have Any Place in a History of Racism?" *Philosophy Today* 61: 737–55.
- Hsia, Adrian. 2001. "The Far East as the Philosophers' 'Other': Immanuel Kant and Johann Gottfried Herder." *Revue de Littérature Comparée* 297: 13–29.
- Kaitaro, Timo. 2022. *Language, Culture and Cognition from Descartes to Lewes*. Leiden: Brill.
- Lach, Donald. 1945. "Leibniz and China." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 6: 436–55.
- Leibniz, 'Gottfried Wilhelm. 1989. "Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas (1684)." In *Philosophical Essays*, edited and translated by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber, 23–7. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. 1996. *New Essays on Human Understanding*. Edited by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lifschitz, Avi. 2012. *Language and Enlightenment: The Berlin Debates of the Eighteenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lorde, Audre. 2007. *Sister Outsider*. New York: Crossing Press.
- Louden, Robert. 2000. *Kant's Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lu-Adler, Huaping. 2022a. "Kant on Lazy Savagery, Racialized." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 60: 253–75.
- Lu-Adler, Huaping. 2022b. "Kant and Slavery—Or Why He Never Became a Racial Egalitarian." *Critical Philosophy of Race* 10.2 (forthcoming).
- Lu-Adler, Huaping. 2023. "Kant on Language and the (Self-)Development of Reason." *Kant Yearbook* 15.
- Marwah, Inder. 2022. "White Progress: Kant, Race and Teleology." *Kantian Review* 27 (4).
- Park, Peter. 2013. *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon, 1780–1830*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 2017. *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*. Translated and edited by Victor Gourevitch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Salami, Mina. 2020. *Sensuous Knowledge: A Black Feminist Approach for Everyone*. London: Zed Books.
- Schalow, Frank, and Richard Velkley (eds.). 2014. *The Linguistic Dimension of Kant's Thought*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Stark, Werner. 2011. "Kant's Lectures on 'Physical Geography': A Brief Outline of its Origins, Transmissions, and Development: 1754–1805." Translated by Olaf Reinhardt. In *Reading Kant's Geography*, edited by Stuart Elden and Eduardo Mendieta, 69–85. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Sweet, Kristi. 2019. "Review of *The Linguistic Dimension of Kant's Thought: Historical and Critical Essays*." *Kantian Review* 24: 153–57.
- Wilson, Catherine. 1998. "Savagery and the Supersensible: Kant's Universalism in Historical Context." *History of European Ideas* 24: 315–30.
- Wolff, Christian. 1752. *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und die Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt*. Renger.
- Yab, Jimmy. 2021. *Kant and the Politics of Racism: Toward Kant's Racialised Form of Cosmopolitan Right*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Zammito, John. 2014. “What a Young Man Needs for His Venture into the World: The Function and Evolution of the ‘Characteristics’.” In *Kant’s Lectures on Anthropology: A Critical Guide*, edited by Alix Cohen, 230–248. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> This claim about masculinity is a central feature of German Orientalism (Germana 2017). For studies of Kant’s Orientalism, see Hsia 2001; Battersby 2007:68–84; Almond 2009:29–52.

<sup>2</sup> Log, 9:12–13; V-Lo/Wiener, 24:790–91. Also see V-Lo/Blomberg, 24:24; V-Lo/Pölit, 24:502; V-Lo/Busolt, 24:609; V-Lo/Dohna, 24:693–95.

<sup>3</sup> V-Anth/Mron, 25:1293–94; V-Anth/Fried, 25:536; V-Met/Mron, 29:757–58; V-Met-L<sub>1</sub>/Pölit, 28:238; R1486, 15:709–10.

<sup>4</sup> KU, 5:351–53; Anth, 7:191; V-Met/Dohna, 28:674.

<sup>5</sup> Leibniz 1989:23, 25; Wolff 1752:173–81. On symbolic cognition in the German tradition following Leibniz, see Lifschitz 2012:39–64; Kaitaro 2022:41–50.

<sup>6</sup> A68–9/B93–4; A230/B283; Anth, 7:191; V-Lo/Dohna, 24:703; Log, 9:58, 91. More on the discursive-intuitive distinction in general, see V-Lo/Blomberg, 24:279–80; V-Lo/Dohna, 24:767; R220, 15:84.

<sup>7</sup> MAM, 8:110; V-Anth/Fried, 25:675–76; V-Anth/Mensch, 25:1195–96; V-Anth/Mron, 25:1417.

<sup>8</sup> Cited by book, chapter, and section numbers, followed by the pagination marked on the margins of the English translation of Leibniz’s *New Essays on Human Understanding*. On Leibniz’s general account of universal language and universal characteristic as the backdrop for understanding his view on Chinese (and Egyptian) hieroglyphs, see Couturat 2012 (no continuous pagination), Chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>9</sup> In presenting Leibniz’s view this way, I do not wish to romanticize it. To complicate the picture, see Harfouch 2017, which puts Leibniz in the tradition of orientalist, linguistic racism.

<sup>10</sup> See Lu-Adler 2023, where I construct Kant’s account of the origin of discursive language by putting him in conversation with his famed student Johann Gottfried Herder. On Herder’s response to Rousseau’s conundrum, see DeSouza 2012.

<sup>11</sup> On Kant’s notion of “character,” which is also pivotal to his raciology, see Yab 2021:135–87.

<sup>12</sup> The preceding section is “On the difference between the sublime and the beautiful in the contrast between the two sexes” (GSE, 2:228–43), which makes clear that Kant’s references to the European *man* are literal (also see V-Anth/Mensch, 25:1188–94; Anth, 7:303–6). On his treatment of “savages” and “Negroes” respectively, see Lu-Adler 2022a and 2022b.

<sup>13</sup> On Kant’s notion of *Weltkenntnis*, see Bianchi 2018. On its pedagogical relevance, see Zammito 2014. Kant lectured on geography annually for forty years, from the summer semester of 1756 to his retirement in 1796. A course on anthropology branched off from it in the early 1770s, and Kant taught the two courses in alternate semesters ever since (Stark 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Also see V-Anth/Fried, 25:471–72; V-Anth/Pillau, 25:735; V-Anth/Mron, 25:1211, 1367–68; V-Anth/Busolt, 25:1436.

<sup>15</sup> Inder Marwah (2022) asks a similar question after showing the centrality of teleology to Kant’s racist worldview.