Kant and Forster on the Unity of Mankind

Abstract

In 1786 Georg Forster published a widely read critique of Immanuel Kant's theory of race. Since then, the dispute between Forster and Kant on the unity of mankind has been widely discussed in light of both Forster's essay and Kant's decision to write a lengthy response to Forster in 1788. In this discussion I widen the frame for considering the two positions by focusing on Kant's lectures on Physical Geography. In these notes Kant emerges as an ethnographer asking many of the same questions posed by Forster himself, a man who had become famous since his time spent onboard James Cook's second voyage to the South Pacific (1772-1775). Placing Kant's ethnography in closer conversation with Forster reveals the many similarities (and some well-known differences) between the two. By including some of Forster's other writings from the 1780s in an assessment of their debate, a much fuller picture can be had regarding natural historical investigations into the unity and difference of mankind at the time.

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Kant's debate with Georg Forster on human diversity has attracted scholarly interest from the start. Forster himself sought initial reactions to the affair from friends and colleagues in Göttingen and Jena, and Kant's own reflections on the matter seem to have changed course in response to Forster's intervention (Zammito 2012). Since then, interpreters of the dispute have typically relied on a tight set of documents produced between 1784-1788: Kant's reviews of the first two parts of Herder's *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1785), Kant's second essay on the concept of race (1785), Kant's *Conjectural Beginning of Human History* essay from early 1786, Forster's response to Kant in late 1786, and finally, Kant's rejoinder to Forster in 1788. When discussing these texts, scholars have at times turned to Kant's first essay on race from 1775/77 to broaden the background understanding of the issue (Weingarten 1982, Strack 1996, Bernasconi 2012, Kleingeld 2012). And they have looked also to the more famous critical works, attending to Kant's arguments in the Appendix of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) as the appropriate precursor for understanding Kant's systematic position on unity and diversity (Euler 2012; see also Sandford 2018), or to the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) for his continued reflection on the matter (Bernasconi 2006, Gray 2012b, Lu-Adler 2023). Moving beyond Kant and Forster, commentators have focused on Buffon (Mensch 2024c), Voltaire (Niekirk 2024), Herder (Zammito 2007, Sikka 2011, Jarzomb 2025), and Blumenbach (Zammito 2006, Mensch 2018) for making sense of Kant's position in the debate, with Forster's connection to Soemmerring, and Kant's to Girtanner, noted by all. For scholars primarily interested in Forster, the dispute has been located most often within considerations of Forster's role as an ethnographer (Lüsebrink 1994, Uhlig 2010, Gray 2012a, Vermeulen 2015; see also Karyekar 2013, 2025), but also of him as a translator (Mensch 2024a, Mensch 2025; see also Martin 2006, Tautz 2006), as a stadialist thinker (McInerney 2013, Heringman 2019), or indeed as someone

simply anxious to improve his professional situation by way of it (Uhlig 2004, Goldstein 2019, Kontje 2022).

With all these investigations in mind, it is entirely reasonable to ask if more work on the topic is required: what more could possibly need to be said at this point? The question is a fair one, but it strikes me—as someone who has already spent a fair bit of time on the topic myself—that we are still missing the bigger picture here. As a Kant specialist I have long accepted my field’s preference for Kant’s ‘side of the story.’ But as historians of science like John Zammito like to remind us Kantians, different kinds of conclusions might be profitably reached if one takes a vantage point less anchored by Kant (Zammito 2012). With that advice in mind, therefore, my proposal in the following is that the debate between Kant and Forster will be better understood if we cast a wider net for understanding their respective positions, one pulling from the lesser-known parts of each man’s corpus. The result might not challenge a long-confirmed ‘takeaway’ regarding Kant’s response to Forster in 1788, but it should meaningfully add to our understanding of Kant’s long-standing commitments in that essay, and more importantly perhaps, it will open a window onto Forster’s own evolution in his approach to questions regarding the unity and diversity of mankind. The study here can thus be counted as a contribution to the history of science as much as it will be an account meant for students of Kant.

Given that most of the literature so far has naturally focused on Kant’s essays on race, the discussion has prioritised Kant’s specific concept of race and then Forster’s critique of the workability of the concept in light of his first-hand experience as an ethnographer. But what if we reverse the roles? If we begin instead with a selection of notes taken during Kant’s lectures on Physical Geography, what we find in fact is that Kant was regularly engaged in ethnographic (albeit ‘armchair’) discussions along the lines taken by many scholars at the time. Forster’s experiences on board James Cook’s second voyage to the South Pacific (1772-1775) were the basis of his own natural historical works, but insofar as he spent much of the succeeding twenty years after his return from the voyage translating, summarizing, and offering corrective commentaries on the works produced by travellers, naturalists, and other armchair ethnographers, there is a sense in which Forster was as much awash in secondary literature as was Kant. As for Forster’s own account of racial difference, if we switch perspectives again and focus instead on Forster’s own evolving concept of race, then we discover a sense of how much Kant’s work might have pushed Forster to rethink the issue in the 1780s. It is with this in mind that Ludwig Uhlig argues that Forster’s 1786 essay must be seen as only one stage in Forster’s developing account (Uhlig 2010, p. 167).

In the following discussion therefore I am going start my investigation with some time spent on Kant’s lectures before turning to the main questions at the heart of his dispute with Forster, namely, 1) whether ‘race’ can serve as a meaningful category in natural history, and 2) whether attention to human differences can help us to decide if the human races are monogenetic or rather, like so many of the related species observed by Forster during his journey to the South Pacific, the product of multiple, local creations. To get a better sense of Forster’s own position here I will look at a number of his works from the 1780s.

Kant’s Lectures on Physical Geography

Physical Geography belongs to a group of courses taught by Kant every year from the beginning of his career to his retirement from teaching some forty years later in 1796 (Naragon

2006, 2023). As a new course without a suitable textbook, the materials were gathered by Kant himself and as can be gleaned from the student notes, much of this material was simply repeated by Kant without too much editorialising, especially in the early years (Stark 2011, Kant 2009, pp. V-LXX). That said, two things should be stated at the outset here: first, given the wealth of options, Kant was deliberate in the selections he made; second, while the lectures are not transcripts, only student notes (though a few were taken by paid notetakers), they do represent what the students heard in the lectures, that is, they represent in a significant sense a student’s ‘takeaway’ message from the day’s lecture. And Kant was by all accounts an entertaining and successful lecturer, with the Physical Geography course popular from start. Always voracious in his reading habits, Kant’s set of materials for inclusion in the course grew, as did his own developing set of interests in relation to the topic. In outline the course had a neat balance between an examination of material objects and forces more or less in line with the four elements—earth (geology), air (the winds), water (the seas, shipping), and fire (volcanoes, earthquakes)—before moving to a discussion of the plants, animals, and humans inhabiting the ‘four parts of the world’; a discussion clearly inflected by humoral theory when it came to linking geography and temperament in the case of humans (Mensch 2017). After ten years or so, however, Kant’s interests were increasingly moving toward a consideration of the shaping effects produced by culture—though he had always included some discussion of Montesquieu’s considerations of government versus climate as formative forces since he first started to lecture on the topic—so that Kant’s 1765 course announcement for the year described the lectures as most properly understood as encompassing ‘physical, moral, and political geography’ (2:312). By 1772 the course had simply become too big to fit in one semester and from that year on Kant offered a companion course on Anthropology, a course that was to become just as popular over time, and which he continued to teach every year until retirement. We are lucky today to have comprehensively edited volumes of many of the student notes taken in Kant’s lectures on both Physical Geography and Anthropology, with a good selection of the Anthropology lectures available in English translation as well.

Despite the breadth of topics covered in the Physical Geography course, for our purposes here I am going to just look at Kant’s discussion of human differences, but here we need one more prefatory remark on the nature of this course. There is a fulsome history to recount on the point I want to make (Vermeulen 2006, 2015), but in brief, the field of anthropology, which today gets easily divided between cultural and physical anthropology, was only nascent in mid eighteenth-century Germany. Apart from naming disputes—should it be called *Völker-Beschreibung*, *Ethnographia*, *Völkerkunde*, or *Weltkunde*?—there were disciplinary skirmishes as well. If the focus was on the language, culture, and history of a people, did it belong to the historians? What about the morphology, phenotype, and other physical considerations to be taken into account in the assessment of peoples, did this suggest rather that it was best studied by the anatomists and physiologists at work in the medical faculty? Investigations in natural history were at a zenith in terms of popularity, spawning at the same time complementary philosophical works on the natural history of mankind, with specific attention paid by philosophers to the historical development of political states, and the emergence of various theories regarding something like a transcultural ‘universal history’ of the species through a series of designated stages. When Kant came to create a course on Physical Geography, in other words, he was entering fluid conceptual territory and could pull from travel narratives as much as he did from Buffon’s natural history volumes, the philosophical historians of the Scottish Enlightenment, and

Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* (the last having been translated by Buffon's German translator, A.G. Kästner, into German by 1753). Thus while I have said that I want to try to think of Kant as an 'ethnographer' in this portion of the investigation, the fluidity of the topic and the veritable wealth of resources at Kant's disposal must be held in mind and, in fact, Forster himself, while he is understood first and foremost as an ethnographer, he too was influenced by many of the same writers and ideas as Kant, and in some places by Kant's own philosophy of history (e.g., Forster 2007).

In Kant's earliest lecture notes on Physical Geography available to us from from 1757-1759 (for the complicated publication history of these notes see Naragon 2006), there is an opening discussion of the location of human differences according to how these appear at different latitudes. Hair type, skin color, and facial shape are thus used to differentiate peoples located from north to south, with those in the band running across the temperate zone described as the 'biggest and most beautiful' (26.1:86). The next section identifies 'Some curiosities of the Black Color of Human Beings' with a then-typical list of 'facts' like the fact that Europeans do not turn black after many years spent in the tropics, or the fact that albinism appears in African populations. There is an explanation of naming conventions linked to offspring—'mulattoes,' 'tercerons,' 'quaterons,' 'quinterons,'—and some 'biological' details like: African babies are born 'white'; Moors, like all inhabitants of the Torrid zone, have thick skin (26.1:88-89). This is followed by a section on the cause of blackness, a source of much speculation at the time, with contemporary explanations ranging from the biblical to the physical. The remainder of the lecture notes in this section consider the connection between climate and the physical and temperamental character of a people, with attention to elevation as an extra factor complicating latitude-based analyses. Kant goes on to look at culturally driven changes to the look of a people viz. piercings, foot-binding, and tattoos; he briefly considers foodstuffs; and finally, he compares people according to 'taste,' by which Kant means the sense organs: hearing (music), taste (food), seeing (beauty), etc. Reading these lectures today, it is clear that most of the 'instruction' being offered here to students was not only inaccurate, it was actively harmful insofar as these young listeners would have been henceforth burdened by a learned set of prejudices when it eventually came to navigating their own paths in the world (the most developed account of Kant's influence in this vein is in Lu-Adler 2023, see also Mensch 2024b).

With a view to our focus in this discussion on Kant's later dispute with Forster, I want to identify two early points of importance. First, Kant is already choosing to borrow the French word 'race' (26.1:91) over any attempt at a German equivalent, which is significant since at the time '*Rasse*' was not in use, with '*Geschlecht*' as the most likely alternative (Mensch 2024c). As the notes put it, 'if you select from the many chicks born to the same parents only those that are white and then put them together, you will eventually get a white race [*Race*] that does not easily strain out [*anders ausschlägt*] (26.1:91)'. Second, Kant is clearly interested in cases of what we would today call reproductive isolation—as just seen, he dwells on the result of breeders selecting for certain traits—as a basis for creating reliably heritable features. In anticipation of Kant's more developed view, moreover, the lectures treat character itself as a heritable trait: 'Although a nation slowly conforms to the temperament of the climate to which it has moved, occasionally traces of its previous places of residence are found for a long time. The Spanish still have traces of Arabian and [Moorish] blood' (26.1:97).

In Herder's notes taken while sitting in Kant's Physical Geography course in 1764, these sections follow much the same outline (on Herder's unique importance as a note taker see

Naragon 2015). Herder records new attention being paid by Kant to the facial shape of the Calmuckians as something unique and thus important for identifying members of the group (Kant 2020b, ms. 1), and this is connected, as Herder has it, to the issue of whether a nation is isolated or mixed. Geographic isolation is key to the avoidance of race mixing which means that if unmixed groups can be identified, then 'the original color of the climate' can be determined (Kant 2020b, ms. 3). This argument brings Kant to the example of breeders, with Herder naming Maupertuis as a key source of information on the topic. When it comes to discussion of the source of black skin in particular, we discover an innovation on Kant's part with respect to his discussion of inheritance. For Kant now uses the verb '*ausarten*' to describe physiological changes to a group in a manner that is somehow different than the process captured by the example of selectively bred white chickens. The breeder culls [*ausmerzung*] undesirable traits from the reproductive pool and thus creates a state of reproductive isolation akin to that experienced by groups cut off by geological features like mountain chains or deserts. The production of a heritable trait like whiteness or blackness or albinism, however, is now said to be the result of something else (Kant 2020b, ms. 4). But what?

Here we can see Kant's consideration of a central difficulty for theorists at the time, namely, understanding the external driver of variation. Is it connected to geographic location (and thus to factors like climate and food, as Buffon had argued)? If so, then is it important to know the origin site of a group in order to track a difference between an *ur*-type and its variants? Or is it something else, something like the reproductive selection being undertaken artificially by the breeders? If this is so, then is the difference caused primarily by reproductive isolation, regardless of location? Or perhaps is it geographic isolation and reproductive selection working together, but if so, in what way? The student notes make clear that all of this remained unresolved.

What about the *internal* drivers for variation, that is, the physiological capacity on the part of an organism for adaptive change or 'degeneration' from its *ur*-type? Conjectures as to the physiological grounds for change like this were intimately tied at the time to theories regarding the processes of generation and embryogenesis (this set of problems was taken to be distinct from the problem of understanding the inheritance of traits). Kant was familiar with both Buffon's theory of 'internal moulds' and Maupertuis's explanation 'via the laws of desire and aversion' as the keys for understanding fetal formation, but Kant rejected each of these accounts as effectively too far-fetched (2:115). Kant did agree with them, however, when it came to rejecting arguments that sought to get out of the explanatory difficulty by asserting God's role in the formation of all human individuals at the point of creation. Like the French naturalists, that is, Kant took the fact of joint inheritance to be immediate proof against the ovist or animaliculist versions of preexistence theory he had come across, even if he rejected the French theorists' various 'epigenetic' efforts to explain the actual process by which the fetus came to be somehow joined together from the contributions made by its mother and father.

In Kant's own notes made for presenting the issue to his Metaphysics students in 1769, he brought two of the issues we have been discussing together: the formation of the fetus and its inheritance of a trait used for racial identification. Noting that according to the 'ovist' theory of preexistence the child would carry the mother's traits regardless of the father, and that according to the 'animaliculist' theory the child would carry the father's traits regardless of the mother, Kant decided that there was actually something quite 'practical' to the theory:

> For in the first case the man has only to look at the character and race [*Race*] of the woman, in the second case, not at all, rather the woman has only to look at the race [*Race*] of the man. According to epigenesis you have to look at both: first, in terms of the possibility of an alternative [e.g., an adulterous paternity], second, regarding the mixing [*Mischung*] (17:416).

In 1764, however, Kant was still mulling over the problems separately since the discussion of mixed-race children there continued to be devoted to naming conventions. In the remainder of Herder's notes from that year's discussion, the topics and references continue to be familiar from the 1757-59 discussion of the differences in mankind, but there are new names: Hume is mentioned now viz. his comments on 'negroes' in his essay 'Of National Characters' (Hume 1985, p. 208; see also Dabhoiwalla 2024). And there are many more examples added to the differences between national characters. This last change makes sense given that 1764 is the year Kant published his first enduringly popular piece of writing, the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*.

In the last part of this text Kant is interested in the way different national characteristics appear when considering a people's feelings of beauty and sublimity. Kant opens the discussion with a look at examples of manners, morals, and religious feeling at work in a number of European nations, before moving to a briefer set of closing remarks on the peoples outside of Europe. This part of the text is a bit of a mix, with references to nation states like Japan and China, ethnic groups like 'the Arabs,' regions—the 'savages of North America'—and finally also to a race-based group when discussing the 'Negroes' of Africa. Here Kant includes a summary of Hume's account of 'Negroes' in the aforementioned essay by him, but now with Kant's takeaway conclusion that in comparison to the European, 'So essential is the difference between these two types [*Menschengeschlechtern*], that it seems to be just as great with regard to the capacities of mind as it is with color' (2:253). Kant is by contrast at pains in two early footnotes not to offend his European readers, emphasizing that no nation is without people who can transcend their *national* character (2:244)—suggesting, for example, that if a Dutchman say, does not like being called 'a very phlegmatic German,' then they should simply strive to rise above their national character and make an exception of themselves (2:245). For our purposes here the critical passage comes at the end of the text. Reflecting on Europe's history of Crusades and a knightly culture of tournaments and duels, Kant concludes that,

> During this period, religion together with the sciences and morals was distorted by wretched grotesqueries, and one notes that taste does not readily degenerate [*ausarten*] in one area without exhibiting distinct signs of its corruption in everything else that pertains to the finer feeling. […] Finally, after the human genius had happily lifted itself out of an almost complete destruction by a kind of palingenesis, we see in our own times the proper taste for the beautiful and noble blossom in the arts and sciences as well as with regard to the moral… (2:256).

This reflection is striking insofar as the rebirth of taste that took place in Europe—presumably during the Renaissance—followed a period in which cultural degeneration had spread like a contagion across the arts and sciences. This is analogous to the way in which Kant had been discussing racial types in the Physical Geography course in two ways. First, the degeneration that

occurs has created a uniquely different type (a race, the Crusaders), second, the result affects not just one trait, like skin color or facial shape, it affects everything: character, temperament, taste, etc.

In the next set of lecture notes I want to consider, the Kaehler manuscript from 1775 (26.2:502-523), we discover a significant change in the amount of time and detail being devoted to questions regarding the geographic origin of the races, patterns of migration and the related uncertainty regarding the racial lineage of certain groups, and finally of the physiological processes explaining the way in which external impacts, like cold weather or humidity, translate into morphological changes like flat noses or black hair. Opening this semester’s discussion with a reference to Buffon’s distinction between species [*Gattung*] and variety [*Varietaeten*], Kant links the former to the ability to produce fertile offspring, and the later to its variability in the reproduction of traits. Proof of a mere variety would be the instance of a blue-eyed woman mating with a brown-eyed man and producing children with either blue or brown eyes. Kant takes the different races to belong to the same species in alignment with Buffon’s criterion, but in the case of mixed-race offspring, a black African and a white European pair will produce neither black nor white offspring, but a mixture of the two. This sort of blending versus the binaries of blue or brown, seems to be unique to racial inheritance according to Kant. As such, he clearly takes it to be an important clue for understanding the origin and migration patterns of people and, given the link he draws between racial types and temperament, we can assume its importance for him as well in determining the nature of a given person in say a business deal or political negotiation. In the lecture he is already clear regarding the role it should play in marriages, since ‘If it has been observed that mules are very treacherous animals, it may well be that the mixing of races impairs abilities and temperament [*Gemütscharacter*], and therefore when marrying one must look not only for the sameness of race but also at whether the ancestors were of the same race’ (26.2:507).

In this lecture Kant describes four principle races from which all other human variation seems to flow: white Europeans ‘up to the wall of China’; greenish-yellow or brown Indians in Indonesia and the surrounding islands; reddish brown Mongols who are beardless, have a special body and facial structure, and who have spread across America and include the copper-red Calmucks; and black ‘Negroes’ in Africa, New Guinea, and the surrounding islands. With this laid out, the next task is to turn to the familiar list of terms for referring to mixed race people according to the proportion of one or another race, sort of like a pie might be divided into one quarter this, or one eighth that.

Now however the process is described by way of appeal to degeneration, with the vocabulary demonstrating an effort to distinguish between the kind of change created by reproduction (like the chicken breeders), and the kind of change that somehow leads to a dead end for the reproductive line. Describing the way a fourth generation ‘Quarteronen’ will no longer visibly resemble a portion of its *ur*-category and thus seem to have passed over to one race entirely, the notes explain that this is called ‘a degeneration [*Abartung*], whereas those that cannot reproduce further are called varieties [*Varietaeten*], degenerations [*Ausartungen*]’ (26.2:506). Note the introduction of the word ‘*Abartung*’ here. Although Buffon’s essay on degeneration, *De la dégénération des Animaux*, had appeared in 1766, Kästner’s German translation was not published until 1772. By this point Kästner, who had been translating Buffon for Gund und Holle since 1750, had settled on his vocabulary. In his 1752 translation of Buffon’s entry on the varieties of mankind, for example, ‘dégenere’ was translated as ‘aus der Art

geschlagen.' In Kästner's 1772 translation, however, *dégénération* is translated as '*Abartung*' and *variété* is '*Abänderung*' (on this point see Mensch 2024c).

Recall here what we saw in the discussion of Herder's notes. There Kant is interested in distinguishing the breeder's means for creating a specific trait from the still-unclear way geography and therefore local climate might be creating traits. By 1775 he seems ready to identify the former process of change or degeneration as a case of '*Abartung*' in line with Kästner's translation choice. Notice however the modification being made to Buffon's theory by Kant. Buffon was very interested in the way in which geography and thus food can drive morphological changes in a species, but for all his attention to degeneration he used race and breed interchangeably (and thought skin color was more or less irrelevant as a distinguishing characteristic in humans given its seamless gradations across latitudes; see Mensch 2013, pp. 25-50, 95-104). By 1775 Kant appears to have taken up Buffon's criterion for species membership (a criterion Buffon in fact weakened over time in the interest of building webs of affinity between animal families) and brought it to bear on the question of whether the races are members of the same species. This focus on interfertility and the degeneration, the '*abarten*' that occurs in the production of blended children, is distinct from the process by which each of the four races were themselves produced from the one original 'Adam.' In the Herder notes Kant introduces '*ausarten*' to describe the process of initial racialisation in the species, but in the Kaehler notes, as we just saw, it appears to refer to something else, to perhaps an infertile hybrid, or perhaps rather a variety that is no longer close enough to the parent species as to be reproductively compatible with it, creating thereby a new species line altogether (though neither Kant nor Buffon admitted such a thing to be in fact possible). This is not the last appearance of the issue in the notes. Two pages later we see Kant speculating on the Japanese and Chinese peoples as blends produced over generations from the racial mixing of Mongols and Indians (with sparse facial hair as the main clue), and wondering about other combinations or degenerations [*Austartungen*] (26.2:508). And on the very next page Kant takes up an entirely new discussion of the physiological means by which the four race types were formed from the start, a process of degeneration [*degeneriren*].

Leaving these vocabulary issues to the side for the time being, I want to highlight two further discussions of interest in terms of Kant's subsequent debate with Forster. The first is focused on the work done to understand the physiological processes undergone by the species in the creation of the four types. Kant follows theorists like Maupertuis in thinking that white must be the base race (the existence of albinos in every human group was decisive here), but he admits the challenge in understanding how the other three races might have developed. Perhaps it is the action of the cold on the skin, making a group look ruddy, which turns into an indelible trait (26.2.:510)? Or could it be that the heat of the sun drives bile into the blood, and this colors the skin and becomes an indelible trait, or maybe instead the sun creates evaporation in the body, and that turns into a race-determining trait (26.2:511)? Moving on from these puzzles, Kant takes up the second discussion I want to highlight. For Kant turns next to the issue of migration patterns. In Kant's description of the four races he notes that the so-called 'true blacks' are found in Africa and New Guinea but nowhere in between. How could this have come about? Kant knows that deserts are understood to be former seas in some cases, and he accepts that large forces like floods, volcanoes, and earthquakes can not only reshape the landscape significantly but force largescale human migrations. In this lecture he suggests that the two 'Negro' populations saved themselves from drowning by retreating to the mountains and remained

separated ever since (26.2:511). The reverse happened in the case of the Bering Strait, since this thin strip of land was surely the explanation for similarities in not just the animals but the humans in northeast Asia and North America (26.2:512). What about the peoples of the South Pacific? Kant seems unsure, with the notes advising that we must wait to find out if the inhabitants are red or olive since the former would indicate an American (i.e., Mongol-Calmuckian) origin and the latter an Indian one. This closes the discussion, with Kant moving on to consider whether soil affects character, listing Hume as a 'no' vote in light of the many examples of character differences he had cited (e.g. Athenians and Thebans) on similar soil, and Montesquieu as a 'yes,' but only so far as we can know the original soil on which a race has been formed (26.2:513).

The Kaehler manuscript was bound together with a copy of Kant's first public account of race insofar as it was included as part of that semester's course announcement (Naragon 2006). It was modified by Kant for publication in 1777—Kant removed the specific class information at the start of his discussion and added a number of paragraphs at the end—in J.J. Engel's 'Philosophy for the World,' volume 2. The text was authorised by Kant for separate republication in 1795, 1797, and 1799, but Engel's second volume itself was published in a second edition in 1787, and a third in 1801. In the 19th century Engel's collection (and Kant's essay in it) was published repeatedly in series produced by *Miniatur-Bibliothek*, *Familien-Bibliothek*, *Groschen-Bibliothek*, and finally in 1872 as part of Reclam's famous *Universal-Bibliothek* (Kaffenberger 2010).

Kant's essay, 'Of the different races of human beings' (2:427-243), covers the same topics raised by him over the years in the portions of the lecture notes we have been reviewing, but as a published text written by Kant himself it is of course much clearer. The vocabulary around degeneration, for example, will be clearly articulated in comparison to the notes in the 1775 manuscript. Thus, after opening with the familiar nod to Buffon's definition of species membership, Kant moves immediately to the issues that concern him most: the monogenesis of the human races from one pair, and the problem of understanding the formation and stability of the four races. Kant's solution to the problem of understanding the *internal* drivers for variation discussed earlier is to argue that there must have been some original grounds for change built into the species—he calls these 'germs' and 'predispositions'—which made it possible for the earliest groups of humans to adapt to *external* drivers like climate and food in a given location. As he puts it, 'only the phyletic formation can degenerate into a race' [*nur die Stammbildung kann in einer Race ausarten*] but once this has occurred, 'it resists all transformation because the character of the race has then become prevailing in the generative power' (2:442). As in the Herder notes, '*ausarten*' is the verb reserved for racial formation. Picking up on the efforts listed in the Kaehler notes to understand the physiological processes enabling change, Kant offers a fresh explanation of the effect of cold on the body in the essay, explaining that

> 'The human being, transposed to the glacial zone, had to gradually degenerate [*ausarten*] into a smaller stature because in the latter—with the power of the heart remaining the same—the circulation of the blood occurs in a shorter time; thus the pulse becomes faster and the warmth of the blood increases. […] If, however, a northern people are compelled over long periods of time to withstand the influence of the cold of the glacial zone, then even greater alterations must happen within it (2:436). […] Thus there gradually comes about the beardless chin, the

> flattened nose, thin lips, blinking eyes, the flat face, the red-brown color together with the black hair, in a word the *Calmuckian facial formation*, which takes root over a long series of generations in the same climate until it becomes a persistent race which preserves itself even if such a people afterward acquires new residences in milder regions' (2:437).

The races themselves are referred to as subspecies or '*Abartungen*' and are not to be confused with the instability in trait transfer experienced by mere '*Varietäten*.' We should note too that Kant uses '*ausarten*' also for the case of what we would today call speciation, explaining that 'if the subspecies [*Abartungen*] could no longer provide the original formation of the phylum, then it would be called degeneration [*ausarten*]' (2:430), which makes sense of the puzzling comment in Kaehler noted earlier. As in the lectures, Kant offers a description of the color and primary location of the four races, arguing that it is possible to derive all the remaining heredity ethnic characters from them either as the result of blending or—and this is new—as a result of a people's being an 'incipient race' [*angehende*] due to their having migrated too soon for racial formation (adaptation) to have finished (2:432). He has, moreover, a new schema for framing the specific color adaptations, with a nod back to the humoral theory invoked in the 1757-59 lecture, telling readers that it is a humid cold which produces the white Europeans, dry cold the copper-red Mongol-Calmuck-American group, humid heat the black Africans in Senegambia, and finally the dry heat giving rise to the olive-yellow Indians (2:441).

Ethnography and Race in the Fifth Part of the World

Where do the people of the South Pacific fit into Kant's neat division of races according to their four parts of the world? In the Kaehler notes Kant seemed to be waiting for news regarding their exact colour. In the 1775 course announcement, however, he is more confident, asserting now that Pacific islanders have facial hair, which detaches them from the Calmuckian line and suggests instead their 'origination from the Malayans, just like those on the Sunda Islands [Indonesia]; and the type of feudal government which was encountered on the island of *Tahiti*, and which is also the usual political constitution of the Malayans, confirms this surmise' (2:433). This is interesting news of political structures being shared by populations widely distant from each other. It demonstrates Kant's awareness of the information included in Hawkesworth's compilation of the notes taken during the British expeditions to the South Pacific between 1767-1772, published in 1773 and then translated by Johann Friedrich Schiller (the philosopher Schiller's second cousin) into German in 1774. Kant could have had equally recent reportage on Tahiti from the 1774 German translation of Bougainville's 1772 narrative, but it is more likely that he would have learned about that volume only indirectly from the many positive reviews received by its translation into English in 1772, an edition produced with corrective footnotes and amended maps by J.R. Forster and his son Georg.

It is important now to recall, if only briefly, some of the broader historical circumstances at play in these years as we move closer to the Kant-Forster debate. The first genuine 'world' war began as a territorial fight between Britain and France in 1754 but quickly expanded to include not just countries on Continental Europe—e.g., the King of Spain supported his cousin in France alongside Austria and Russia, Prussia allied itself with Hannover and thus Britain—but their offshore colonial possessions as well. Thus while students growing up in North America

learn about the 'French-Indian War' (1754-1763), they might well do so without quite realising that this was just another theatre in Europe's 'Seven Years War'. With the resumption of peace after the Treaty of Paris in 1763 (Britain having won French and Spanish territories on the American mainland), money was broadly directed by governments everywhere to rebuilding, to the resettlement of displaced populations, and to the search for new resources abroad. In this vein the German-born Empress of Russia, Catherine the Great, for example, offered resettlement opportunities to people interested in populating the Volga River area. In 1765 J.R. Forster was hired by emissaries to undertake an early survey of the new colonies in order to produce a report for the Russian authorities. Forster took his 10-year-old son Georg with him on the trip and as the pair travelled 2500 kilometres to the settlements from their home in Pomerania, Forster taught his son how to collect, draw, and describe natural specimens according to Linnean terminology. Georg was quick with languages, like his father, and when he moved with him to London the following year, one of his first tasks was translate a Russian travel narrative into English.

When J.R. Forster agreed to undertake a translation of Bougainville's voyage narrative into English in 1771, it was a strategic decision on his part insofar as Forster hoped to use it in support of his bid to be hired on one of Britain's scientific expeditions (Uhlig 2004, pp. 40-42). The Treaty of Paris notwithstanding, rivalry between Britain, France, and Spain had continued unabated in their respective search for new territories in Southern Seas, and Forster did his best to position Bougainville's voyage as a challenge to British hegemony. In the end, Forster got what he wanted: a decision by Parliament to fund another major expedition into the South Pacific led by the newly famous James Cook, and a job for himself and his son as naturalists on Cook's ship. Cook had only just returned from his first expedition (1768-1771) to watch the transit of Venus in Tahiti, when he set out with his men (and the Forsters) on a second voyage in 1772 (this time in search of a fabled southern continent, and without having had the chance to see yet Hawkesworth's version of his first trip). Cook's successful return to England in 1775 was as celebrated as his first had been, a bit of good news for Parliament amidst the endless problems created by colonists in America who had been complaining since the end of 1763 about the increasing tax burden they faced as Britain paid off the costs of the war. When Britain began its work to hold onto the rebellious colonies in 1776, sides were slowly taken again, with Hessian conscripts eventually sent over to fight for England, and the French coming to the Americans' aid. Bougainville fought alongside the Americans, leading a successful victory at the Battle of the Chesapeake in 1781. James Cook was not so enjoined. Sent off by the British on a third voyage to the Pacific (1776-1780), this time in search of a Northwest Passage, he died in Hawaii in 1779.

Each of the Forsters produced travel narratives of their time aboard Cook's ship after their return to England in 1775. Forster senior was contractually limited as to the contents of his narrative. While he had hoped to write the official scientific account, Cook had been so unhappy with Hawkesworth's compilation that he had insisted on penning the voyage narrative himself. In practice this meant that the vast bulk of J.R. Forster's narrative was devoted to ethnographic descriptions of the peoples encountered on the trip. Georg Forster, however, only 17 at the start of the voyage, had signed no such contract and at his father's urging, hastily set about composing an account of the voyage that would cover the trip as a whole. Published in English in 1777, Georg translated his *Voyage Round the World* into German in two volumes, published in 1778 and 1780, before translating his father's account into German for him in 1783. The works were

best sellers and led to J.R. Forster's appointment as a Professor of Natural History in Halle, and Georg's serial appointments in Kassel, Vilnius, and Mainz. With an appointment in Kassel, Georg Forster was only a day's ride from Göttingen, home to many of the day's leading scientists and scholars, and with a famously well-stocked university library run by the classicist (and Georg's future father-in-law), C.G. Heyne. The 26-year-old Forster was thus a rising star in natural history when he and Lichtenberg began to publish a new journal edited by them, the *Göttingisches Magazin der Wissenschaften und Litteratur* in 1780, with the second issue containing the latest, sad news regarding the death of James Cook. Forster's own area of expertise was on display from the start, with an essay by him on Tahiti.

Forster's essay perfectly encapsulates not just his strength as an observer of nature but also his own sense of duty to its accurate description. The occasion for the essay was a short piece on the island by a Spanish naturalist that had been sent to Forster's father by the director of Madrid's botanical gardens in 1778 as a gift. In 1780 Georg Forster prepared a translation and commentary on it for the inaugural issue of his journal with Lichtenberg. This method—a translation with a preface, corrective and elaborative notes, all accompanied by a reflective assessment—was practiced again and again by Forster in these years. In this piece Forster opens with a reminder to his readers of the difficulty involved when it comes to assessing people, places, and cultures that are impossible to know firsthand. It is for this reason that he wants to provide readers with the Spaniard's perspective on Tahiti, for 'everyone has their own way of seeing; national character, national politics, education, climate (and whatever else?) are like so many tiny membranes on the eye, each of which refracts the light rays differently, even though the anatomical scalpel is unable to find them' (GFW 5:35). The point is sound, but once the translated text is finished Forster moved on to a careful analysis where his own perspective was clearly meant to be the more accurate one. The point of Cook's second journey had been to search for a southern continent, but since the Antarctic winters made the seas impassible, Cook and his men had spent their winter months over the course of two years in Tahiti as they waited for the southern ice to recede. Forster was thus on solid ground when it came to his analysis of the text. He was, moreover, describing aspects of the island—geology, flora, fauna, the inhabitants and their manner of dress, food stuffs, cultivation practices, etc.—that had all been covered at length by him already in his *Voyage Round the World*.

From that text we can summarise some main points that we now know were also occupying Kant's mind in his lectures on Physical Geography. Like Kant, Forster presumed a connection between location and temperament, with people like the Tahitians in the tropics meeting expectations as the friendliest inhabitants, the warriorlike Maori familiar as denizens (like the Europeans) of a temperate zone, and the seemingly immiserated Fuegians clinging to bare existence in the freezing 60th latitude at the edge of the southern pole. The only problem with the schema was that experience did not support it. Forster, like all travellers, noted the friendliness of the Polynesian islanders, but these peoples were in the same latitude as the Melanesians to the west of them. The Tannese, Malakulans, and other natives in the New Hebrides islands (i.e., the Vanuatu archipelago) were almost uniformly suspicious of foreigners and unwilling to trade with visitors or allow any contact with female members of their community (in stark contrast with the Tahitians). Was it possible then that the explanation lay in the soil, in the natural abundance of a given locale? The barren wastes of southern Patagonia certainly suggested as much. But no, while the Fuegians had struck Forster as understandably enfeebled by their miserable circumstances, the inhabitants of New Caledonia, a continental

remnant containing none of the extravagant life found on the volcanic islands, were both hostile and full of good health. And on Tanna, itself a volcanic island, the natives were no more welcoming of Europeans for it. It was experiences like this which led Forster to consider a different possibility: perhaps what mattered most in the making of a people's constitution was the *original* soil from which they sprang. This might explain the resilience of the New Caledonians. But it would also mean that natural historians would have to track migration patterns if they were to provide a complete ethnographic account (Forster 2000, pp. 590-592, see also Thomas 2021 for an overview of the islands and current thinking on migration histories). In this kind of investigation two things stood out to Forster. First, the Melanesians appeared to be darker and more slimly built in comparison to the Polynesians (and to the Maori south of them in New Zealand). Second, whereas there were multiple points of not just shared cultural practices but linguistic patterns and terms throughout the Polynesian islands, the Melanesians spoke entirely different languages, even when they were near to each other.

In the 1780-piece Forster repeats much of this, rehearsing the problems facing naturalists for understanding the source of so many differences and similarities encountered in the South Sea islands, but also resisting the urge to definitively rank them according to European scales of 'civilization' or, as his father had done in his own account of the voyage, according to their class or 'bloodline.' Were the Malakulans perhaps then *more* to be praised for their success in surviving on foraged roots and fruit than the Islanders blessed with natural resources? Should the Polynesians be credited especially for their foresight in bringing breadfruit and other crops and animals with them for cultivation when populating the islands? 'In which case should we admire the human spirit more' asks Forster, 'There the inventor, here the survivor? In both, unfathomable wisdom of the human disposition is revealed!' (GFW 5:52).

It is not clear that Kant would have read any of Forster's works at this point, given the well-known time it was taking him that year to finish the *Critique of Pure Reason*. There is a passing mention of J.R. Forster already in the Messina lecture notes on Physical Geography (26.2:664), but this is in the context of a discussion of New Holland's coast having been surveyed during the first of Cook's voyages and reported on by Hawkesworth, and in the notes it seems that Forster's results have not yet been made available (the notes are tentatively dated as 1776). In Kant's 1782 Physical Geography course captured in the Döhnhof notes, there is a lengthy discussion of Cook's experiment with malt and sauerkraut for the prevention of scurvy (26.2:820, 26.2:1014, an absolute scourge in an era of long expeditions and only made worse by uncertainties when determining longitude), and a description of Sydney Parkinson's depiction of the Fuegians included in the Hawkesworth compilation (26.2:843, on the history of this depiction see Chambers 2016, pp. 72-75). In Kant's 1785 Physical Geography course, however, there seems to be much greater facility with the information connected to Forster. In these notes Kant is now ready to remove the Calmuckians from the list of primary races based on evidence regarding the instability of their trait transfer in mixed race children, and he refers to Forster's reportage on 'negroes' with beards in the South Seas (Kant 2016, ms. 68, see also Bernasconi 2012, p. 196). The New Zealanders are held up for their distinctive tattoos, and the New Hollanders are said to be hunter gatherers, living on roots and molluscs, with only modest huts for their dwellings, though these facts are somehow all thought to be linked to the coldness of the climate inhibiting their development much like the Fuegians. Finally, Kant reports on the breadfruit, aware that it was not indigenous to the islands but seemingly brought by migrating populations with the purpose of cultivation (Kant 2016, ms. 72).

Of course, none of these remarks would have been known to Forster in Kassel. 1785 was a busy year for him: he had gotten married to Therese Heyne and was in the process of moving his household to Vilnius in order to take up what he hoped would be an expanding position as a professor in natural history and head of a scientific institute (Uhlig 2004, pp. 194-215). First, however, he had to get a medical doctorate since the position was housed in the medical faculty. His father arranged for this to happen in Halle and Forster set to work on a Latin dissertation 'Concerning the Edible Plants of the Islands of the Southern Ocean,' which counted as a reasonable topic given medicine's long reliance on the medicinal properties of plants.

Forster's dissertation opened with a Preface containing his most recent views on the peoples of the south Pacific, but one bit of background must be added before I can summarise the results (GFW 95-103, see also Uhlig 2010, pp. 152-154). In 1784 Forster's closest friend, the anatomist Samuel Soemmerring (also spelled Sömmering, with one or two 'r's), had undertaken a series of dissections leading him to conclude that Africans were anatomically closer to apes than Europeans. Results like these, however, had immediately raised alarm bells among his friends and colleagues, with Forster and Blumenbach each writing to him regarding the potential for such arguments to be used by the opponents of abolition (Lilienthal 1990, Uhlig 2004, 197-198). Soemmerring's 1785 publication of his results opened with a glowing dedication to Forster, and accordingly included numerous attestations to support the human nature and abilities of the 'Negro' race, including a lengthy excerpt from Montesquieu's satirical rehearsal of the so-called grounds upon which blackness was supposed to create fitness for slavery (Montesquieu 1989, p. 250, see also Curran 2011, pp. 130-137, Jorati 2024, pp. 206-218). Soemmerring listed those in favour of the theory that Africans were descended from a different ancestor than the rest of the races—Volaire, Kames—and then all those against such a notion: Camper, Blumenbach, Buffon, Beddome, Zimmerman, and J.R. Forster (Soemmerring added in 'Kant' in a marginal notation to his own copy). All that said, the anatomist insisted that the skeletons revealed an irrefutable difference, calling on J.R. Forster's description of the Malakulans in support of this conclusion. It was, however, a difference in race for Soemmerring, not kind, with him concluding,

> [T]hat the Negro is not just human but of the same species [*species*] as us; that he transitions into Abyssinian, Hottentot, etc. through imperceptible nuances of formation, color, etc. just as other human varieties flow into each other through just as imperceptible transitions; and that he clearly must have experienced the same influence on the body in Senegal that dogs, when they are brought there from other regions, are known to degenerate into Negroes of their own species in a short time (Soemmerring 1785, p. 80).

Indeed, Soemmerring was keen to emphasise that details of classification aside, on which there might be disagreement, everyone—'Linnaeus, Buffon, Goldsmith, Erxleben, Kant, Blumenbach, Hunter, Zimmermann'—agreed that Africans stood in a classificatory category of their own, adding however, 'I completely agree with my friend *Blumenbach* that the great chasm between the ape, the chimpanzee, or the less human-like orang-utang, etc and the human being is established precisely by the upright gait' (Soemmerring 1785, p. 77). The chasm between human and ape, in other words, was far greater than any gap discovered by the anatomist in his comparison of the skeletons of Europeans and Africans.

Reading this from our own historical vantage point, the problem with these considerations (and the legitimate political concerns they raised for Forster and Blumenbach), seems obvious, since a search for the grounds that could explain differences in the look and shape of members in the group *homo sapiens*, is entirely different from a paleontological investigation into the branching history of hominids. With few fossils, and only anatomically modern humans to work with, there was no ability for the conflation of these two separate investigations to have been untangled at the time (and in fact it continues to be debated, for example, whether *homo erectus* is indeed the ancestor of the various hominid branches, including our own *homo sapiens*). And whereas ethnographic attention to culture and language could certainly be used to support reasonable hypotheses regarding the migration patterns of modern humans, such considerations were themselves chronically hampered by a misconstrued connection between these features of a given people and their physical (i.e., 'racial') characteristics. This was as true for Kant as it was for Forster.

As Forster began work on his dissertation in Vilnius he had received a copy of Soemmerring's piece but otherwise the mail from Göttingen and Halle was irregular in a way he had never known before. It was thus only a few weeks after he had sent his completed dissertation off to Halle in the Spring of 1786 that he received a large packet of mail which included both Kant's review of Herder's *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* and Kant's second essay on race, seemingly instigated by having reviewed Herder's work. (A month later Forster received another large packet that included copies of Kant's essays 'Idea for a Universal History of Mankind' (1784) and 'Conjectural Beginning of Human History,' (1786), another essay seemingly inspired from having reviewed Herder). In Kant's published review of Herder, after complaining about the inconsistent information coming from travel writers who did not understand what to look for or what to write about—are the Mongolians bearded or not? Both possibilities had been upheld in the literature—Kant had summarised his sense that 'The division of the human species into races [*Racen*] is not favoured by our author [i.e., Herder], primarily not that division grounded on inherited colors, presumably because the concept of a race is for him not distinctly enough determined' (8:62). In that November's issue of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, Kant had a response to his former student ready, publishing a new essay: 'Determination of the Concept of a Human Race' (8:89-106).

In the Preface to his dissertation, Forster starts out with a broad introduction to the issue at hand, identifying Malaysia as the migration point of origin for the Polynesians (GFW 6.1:95). The migration pattern of the Melanesians is separate, according to Forster, for these members of 'the black race' stemmed from New Guinea, with Forster repeating facts about the shared languages among the Polynesians and the complete heterogeneity of the Melanesians and their potential offshoots, the New Hollanders (GFW 6.1:96). Comparing the two, Forster dismissed the role played by climate or food since these were essentially similar, deciding instead that their differences came from their respective points of origin, explaining that,

> The different human families each have their own indestructible and, as it were, imprinted form, recognizable by different characteristic signs that resist the climate, and are not weakened by a change in food, but are propagated unchanged in constant succession from the parents to the last descendants unless the lineage is contaminated by some mixture (GFW 6.1:96).

All that said, Forster insisted that nothing certain can be ever determined regarding the precise origin of any of the human varieties [*varietatum*] (GFW 6.1:97). Forster next goes on to survey in some detail the physical features of the South Sea islanders in terms of skin color, temperament, stature, facial features, and musculature, before describing their clothing, diet, cooking habits—how they use brine for pickling, the different ways of roasting breadfruit—social constants in the practice of monogamy, the islanders' widespread polytheism, and finally, their hygiene and medicinal practices. As Forster gets close to the end of the Preface and its list of the 54 edible plants to be discussed in the dissertation itself, he returns to the two branches, listing the puzzles created if one limits oneself to their current geographical location for understanding the differences between the Melanesians and the Polynesians.

With the dissertation sent off to Halle for his father to review, Forster began work preparing for the lectures he would be teaching in the coming academic year. Reading the pieces by Kant seems to have led Forster to break off work in order to write a response. Kant's 1785 essay on race, while repeating many of the assertions made in the 1777 essay on race, still sought to at least amplify the points he took to be key in the matter. The most important of these was the actual definition of race, which Kant had outlined in the earlier essay (2:430) but rephrased now with an emphasis on the trait stability of the racial traits since only these were deemed to be 'unfailingly hereditary' (8:100). What about Kant's innovative solution to the problem of understanding the species' physiological grounds for racialisation? Kant repeated his notion of germs and dispositions as the species' implanted provisions for adaptation (8:97-98). And he continued to reject any suggestion that the races might be different kinds of humans, pointing as usual to their interfertility (8:100). In his survey of the races and their jointly produced national types, Kant remarked on the uncertainty surrounding the Pacific Islanders: were they descended from Papua New Guinea? (8:101). And as for the Polynesians, they might well be white (based on Carteret's reporting), but the only way to test their true color (i.e., race) would be to look at mixed race children in this group in order to then identify what racial traits had bred true; only a test like this could provide the necessary evidence needed when looking for a racial *ur*-type (8:92).

Forster framed his response to Kant as a letter to Biester, the editor of the journal in which Kant had published his essay, though Forster published his one piece in the friendlier Weimar journal, the *Teutscher Merkur*. As one could have anticipated, he immediately fastened on Kant's scattered remarks on the Pacific islanders, using them to both correct Kant (the reference to Carteret had been errant), and to repeat much of what Forster thought about the phenotypic profile of the region. At the heart of Forster's piece, however, was his now-considered belief that it was simply impossible to know with any certainty at all a given group's origin, let alone the grounds for racial adaption over time (Forster 2013, p. 152-153). Remarking on his experience of the graduated change in colors in the island groups he had visited during his journey with Cook, Forster disagreed that even an experiment like the one proposed by Kant could produce meaningful results, pointing Kant instead to a work like Soemmerring's for something like a real difference between the human groups. And as for Kant's attachment to monogenesis, Forster seems to have thought that it amounted to nothing more than a sentimental attachment to biblical teaching, since the facts simply could not be established either way (Forster 2013, p. 157, 159, 165). If we were to abandon this fruitless search for origins, and recognise the manifold cases of interfertility between *separate* species (e.g., in botany), however, we could stick with Linnaeus's definition of species as a group whose membership is determined

by the constancy of its traits. Well then, Forster reasoned, according to Kant's own determination of the concept, he seemed to have proven the case against monogenesis himself, for given the supposed 'unfailing heredity' of racial traits, it was hard to see on Kant's theory why the races *shouldn't* be counted as separate species. And what would this matter anyway, Forster asked? Monogenesis had certainly never prevented the mistreatment of Africans caught up in the nets of European slave traders (Forster 2013, p. 165).

With his response to Kant out of the way, Forster returned to the task of writing his natural history lectures for the year, and as Ludwig Uhlig rehearses them, Forster continued to think through the issues he had raised in his response to Kant. The innovation in Forster's 1786-87 lecture course turned on his introduction of a new taxonomical category, the 'exempla' (the course was in Latin), which referred to groups that could be traced to probable sites of origin and whose characteristics were indelible (GFW 6.2: 1673, Uhlig 2010, p. 163). Trying to pick out sites that were geographically remote from each other, and characterised by distinctive phenotypic and cultural features, Forster came up with seven probable locations that could be linked to seven races, though he admitted that not only would it never be certain as to how any of these groups were originally formed or even came to their respective sites at all, but that at the borders of their zones there would be much overlapping of peoples due to interbreeding, and that there might in fact turn out to be more or less races based on subsequent investigations (6.2: 1692, 1697, Uhlig 2010, pp. 164-165). None of this, of course, could have been known to Kant, and thus when he replied to Forster's critique two years later, he used his time instead to insist on the definition of race he had used before and to repeat the importance of holding on to the monogenesis of the human species in light of not only its interfertility, but the unique ability of genuine racial traits to blend together in mixed race children (Mensch 2024c). The two men, in other words, could come to no agreement given their respective commitments.

As we come to the end of this survey, it is remarkable to consider the similarities between the two programs of investigation undertaken by Kant and Forster, and yet this makes perfect sense given the kinds of questions being raised and the available means each had for answering them. Looking back at some of these now, it is possible to deliver some answers. Can attention to human differences reveal the monogenesis of the human race? As we just saw, there could be no agreement between them on this point. Is geography important for determining racial characteristics? Here Kant and Forster agree that it is, and that the current location of a given group is less important than knowing their original location, since that alone would have been the place in which indelible traits could have developed. What about the concept of race itself, did it add anything of value in natural historical investigations? Kant certainly thought it did: it could teach the naturalist what to look for in their travels, it could conceivably teach diplomats what to expect in their negotiations, and it would be absolutely useful when it came to marriage proposals. Forster, however, for all his attention to the difference between the Melanesians and the Polynesians, and his arrival at a concept of 'exempla' in the 1786-87 course in Vilnius, does not in the end seem to have been wedded to the problem in the same way that Kant was. Forster was more interested in the cultural transmission of practices and languages that could tell a story of human migration patterns than he was in the physical features of a people. Race, for Forster, was more arresting as a political problem in relation to not just the slave trade, but the racist attitudes expressed by so many academics and thinkers in his day. His critique of Christoph Meiners, for example, was not just that the Göttingen philosopher was inaccurate in his claims, it was that he was incorrigibly racist (Forster 1791, Gray 2025, Olson 2025).

In Forster's response to Kant he had explicitly connected the issue of mankind's monogenesis—a putative moral imperative founded upon biblical teaching—to the immoral treatment of African slaves at the hands of the whites. Did Kant take this aspect up in his response to Forster? To Kant's shame, he did not, offering instead a defence of his characterization of the African disinclination to work outside of slavery (8:174). Forster never responded directly to Kant's riposte, but it is suggestive perhaps to close our account with a few words from Forster's 1788 essay 'On Delicacies' (published by his friend Lichtenberg in 1789). In this essay Forster playfully opens with the comment that 'however many times teleology is misused in natural science, however often it amounts to a mere play on words,' we should not allow it to convince us that we have no right to happiness in the enjoyment of tasty foods (GFW 8:169). 'What is delicious?' Forster asks his readers, drawing them into an account of the relativity of tastes in times and places, and implicitly critiquing therefore European presumptions regarding their superiority of taste. Certainly, Forster seems to suggest, no claim to superiority could be made once those tastes were viewed from a moral point of view (Vorpahl 2018). For 'we trade in negroes so that we can enjoy a few delicacies, such as sugar and coffee,' in fact,

> The delicacies of our part of the world maintain activity and commerce throughout the human race. The entire trade of the West Indies and Africa, and a large part of the trade in the Mediterranean, is based on the enormous consumption of foreign delicacies in the north; and it is a fact as reliable as it is worrying for the future that the gold and silver from the mines of Peru and Mexico pass from hand to hand in order to secure tea from China (GFW 8:174-175).

Looking at the state of the world today, Forster's words would have been of as much benefit for Kant's ears as they are now for our own.

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