

***Key Texts in the History and Philosophy of the German Life Sciences, 1745-1845:
Generation, Heredity, and Race***

Edited by Jennifer Mensch and Michael Olson (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2025)
750 pgs. / ISBN 978-1-3501-0410-5.

Abstract:

The goal of this anthology is to create a go-to reference for students and researchers on this topic, one that offers enough historical background information for newcomers to get their bearings, while also providing the kind of scholarly apparatus required for specialist work. The collection opens with a general introduction outlining the themes and stakes of the volume as a whole, with additional short historical introductions provided for each chapter. The point of the individual introductions will be to situate the authors and texts within their broader intellectual context while also highlighting connections to the other texts in the volume, with a continuous editorial apparatus for each of the chapters, an annotated names index, a bibliography for further reading, and a comprehensive index rounding out the work.

Detailed Synopsis:

The **aim of this collection** is to create a curated set of key German source texts from the eighteenth-century life sciences devoted to theories of generation, heredity, and race. The criteria for inclusion stem from our sense that there is an argument to be made for connecting three domains of inquiry that have heretofore remained mostly distinct in both their presentation and scholarly analysis: i) life science debates regarding generation and embryogenesis, ii) emerging philosophical and anthropological theories regarding the nature of racial typology, and iii) the role of empire in supplying the ethnographic materials in use as evidence for the various investigations and theories being proposed. The *Key Texts* volume thus has three sections. The **first section** is devoted to selections from theorists working to create an account of the processes guiding generation and embryogenetic development. Given that at the time there were few ways to definitively prove that babies received contributions from both parents in their creation, mixed-race children became increasingly valuable sources of evidence for those insisting on joint inheritance. Although this sets up the **second section** of the volume—since one can trace a clear facet of racial biometric science out of this original set of enquiries—the bulk of section two is devoted to the many different accounts created at the time to understand and delineate racial differences. The **third section** is focused on ‘race and empire’ in order to situate the scientific texts of the previous sections in their socio-historical context. By including these pieces, it is our aim to remind readers that scientific curiosity over the nature and origin of racial diversity did not develop in a vacuum but indeed existed in full knowledge of the exploitation and dispossession of human beings. The ‘materials’ for this research program were in many cases either directly taken from black and brown human beings caught up in Europe’s colonial projects or were provided by the data gathered during large-scale voyages of exploration. The material basis of this type of research was rarely reflected upon by any of the theorists in sections one and two of the volume, a fact that has led many historians of science to focus on these theories without attention to the socio-historical context; we are deliberately trying to avoid this and indeed to deepen our own readers’ appreciation of the fact.

Research Translation and Engagement Activity: [here](#)

Methodology:

The texts we propose to include in this volume fall into three categories: German texts in the public domain, which we will translate ourselves; existing translations that are now in the public domain; and existing translations of texts owned under copyright that we have received permission to reproduce. Although we will treat each of these categories of texts according to their specific requirements, they will be linked by a consistent critical editorial apparatus that clearly communicates the ideas and debates unifying the volume as a whole. The editorial apparatus of the volume directs readers toward relevant historical sources, renders implicit references and incomplete citations explicit and complete, and generally orients readers toward the broader significance of important but obscure passages in the original texts. While we do not aim to produce a ‘critical edition’ according to the strict definition of what those entail, we do hope to produce the most accurate and reliable version of the texts we have chosen. For example: we are using William Smellie’s 18th-c. translation of Buffon, but we are completing footnoted references, adding explanatory references where necessary, identifying passages where Smellie has silently synthesized texts from 1749 and 1777, and tracked key terms across their translation from French into both English and German since it was Abraham Kästner’s German translation that many of our authors would have known. Thus while one can easily go onto Google Books or ‘Eighteenth Century Collections Online’ and find Buffon in English, our presentation will be full of ‘value-added’ material of the kind required for both responsible pedagogy and quality research.

Relation to existing literature:

There is a strong market for scholarly anthologies of texts in the history of the eighteenth-century life science—particularly with respect to the history of the concept of race—and we believe the present volume will make a unique and valuable contribution to that market. Existing anthologies have come in two forms, appearing in succession. The first form collects photomechanical reproductions of key texts, sometimes in translation and sometimes in the original languages, and offers valuable supporting materials (in the form of introductions and notes) to orient readers to the broader intellectual landscape from which the text was drawn. Anthologies following this model include John Lyon and Phillip R. Sloan (eds.), *From Natural History to the History of Nature* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), Shirley Roe (ed.), *The Natural Philosophy of Albrecht von Haller* (Arno Press, 1981), and Robert Bernasconi (ed.), *Concepts of Race in the Eighteenth Century* (Thoemmes, 2001). These volumes have made important texts available to modern audiences, but they are now out of print and difficult to track down.

A second wave of anthologies has come onto the market since the earlier generation of texts made up of reprints. These include Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Andrew Curran, *Who’s Black and Why?* (Belknap, 2022), Jon M. Mikkelsen (ed. and trans.), *Kant and the Concept of Race: Late Eighteenth-Century Writings* (SUNY, 2013); and Robert Bernasconi and Tommy L. Lott (eds.), *The Idea of Race* (Hackett, 2000). These volumes replace photomechanical copies with continuous text and various degrees of editorial apparatus. Mikkelsen’s volume provides a model for what we aim to achieve with our own introduction and explanatory notes; it is an excellent resource. That said, our volume complements, rather than competes against the Mikkelsen volume in two ways: first, because it provides the key texts for understanding 18th-century generation theory; second, insofar as our volume adds a significant number of key authors and texts.

A new online collection, ‘Theories of Race,’ has been put together by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Andrew Curran as part of a suite of options for students and educators. As mentioned above, their [translation](#) of submissions to a French contest on the origin of ‘blackness’—*Who’s Black and Why?*—aims at a scholarly edition with good editorial notes and an introduction. They seem to have partnered with a company to put together a nice website with a [timeline](#) of race theory from the 17th-19th century. More importantly they have, as a free resource, put together a set of forty-six [readings](#) on the topic of race, which includes an [Introduction](#) for the collection as a whole and shorter ones for each of the chapters. With very few exceptions, all of the source [texts](#) collected are sourced from google or other free-to-use sources.

As with the Mikkelsen volume, we see our *Key Texts* project as complementing rather than competing with the ‘Theories of Race’ online resource. **The main point of distinction is our volume’s focus on German theories between 1745-1845.** Out of 46 chapters the online resource has 5 German theorists included: one chapter on Kant (Mikkelsen’s translation of Kant’s 1777 essay on race); one chapter on Herder (Churchill’s translation of Herder’s 1784 *Outlines*); one chapter on Meiners (Mikkelsen’s translation of Meiners’ 1790 essay on deviant forms); one chapter on Blumenbach (Bendyshe’s translation of Blumenbach’s 1795 *Varieties*); and one chapter on Soemmering (Guenebault’s 1837 English translation of Virey’s 1801 French translation of a selection taken from Sommering’s 1785 essay on comparative anatomy). There are two additional selections from German writers—Haeckel, Virchow—but these texts fall outside our 1745-1845 timespan. The online resource also includes Buffon (Smellie’s 1780 English translation of Buffon’s entry on the variety of mankind).

As a general resource, the online site is good for both a general and academic but non-specialist audience since there is no additional work being done for readers with respect to the resources themselves. For example, of the resources included on the online site we also have Kant’s 1777 essay (but now translated by Mike with extensive apparatus), Blumenbach’s *Varieties* (also translated by Bendyshe, but now with numerous additional notes and corrections), Soemmering’s comparative anatomy (translated directly from the German by Mike, with extensive apparatus), and Buffon’s entry on the Varieties (also translated by Smellie, but taken from his final 1791, 3rd edition, and checked against Kästner’s 1752 German translation (with notes made regarding key translator choices made between the Smellie and Kästner), and against Buffon’s 1777 Supplement, including numerous additional notes and corrections throughout).

The volume we propose here thus aims to build upon existing anthologies in two ways. **First** and most importantly, the collection of texts and editorial apparatus we have planned for this volume are intended to present the continuity between debates in generation theory in the middle of the eighteenth century and later debates surrounding emergent scientific theories of race in their socio-historical context. While other volumes address important aspects of debates in generation theory or in race theory, they do not connect these issues in either their presentation of source materials or their introductory remarks. This volume aims to stand alone as a complete introduction to German theorists on the topic. **Secondly**, rather than including photomechanical reproductions of public domain texts, our volume will assist readers new to the topics at hand by providing substantial historical and conceptual introductions and notes to the texts. This, combined with the comprehensive index and embedded original pagination, will make this volume an invaluable resource for the history

of the eighteenth-century life sciences and their foundational role in the history of the concept of race.

For those scholars and graduate students working on the intersecting fields of philosophy and science, this volume will provide invaluable primary source material gathered together in one volume. There are a number of excellent collections of essays devoted to issues of generation theory, hybridity, or race in 18th-century thought, but there has not yet been a corresponding volume available with the source texts themselves. The time is ripe for a new collection like the one proposed here. Recent collections of primary source materials from women writers such as Blackwell and Zantop's *Bitter Healing: German Women Writers 1700-1830* (Nebraska, 1990), Ezekiel's translation of *Poetic Fragments* by Karoline von Günderode (SUNY, 2016), and Nassar and Gjesdal's *Women Philosophers in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 2021), now pair with Dyck's collection of essays on *Women and Philosophy in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 2021) and form a natural basis for a class devoted to the topic.

A volume of primary source texts like the one proposed here will pair naturally with edited **collections** such as: *Reproduction, Race, and Gender in Philosophy and the Early Life Sciences* (SUNY, 2014), *The German Invention of Race* (SUNY, 2006), *Race* (Blackwell, 2001), *Reading Kant's Geography* (SUNY, 2011), *A Cultural History of Hybridity* (Chicago, 2012), *The Problem of Animal Generation in Early Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2002), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race* (Oxford, 2017), and *Heredity Produced* (MIT, 2007). And it will provide primary materials in support of arguments made in **monographs** like Wheeler's *The Complexion of Race* (UPenn, 2000), Curran's *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment* (Johns Hopkins, 2011), Meijer's *Race and Aesthetics in the Anthropology of Petrus Camper* (Rodopi, 1999), Roger's *Life Sciences of Eighteenth Century French Thought* (Stanford, 1997), Smith's *Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference: Race in Early Modern Philosophy* (Princeton, 2015), Zammito's *The Gestation of German Biology* (Chicago, 2018), Lu-Adler's *Kant, Race, and Racism: The View from Somewhere* (Oxford, 2023), and Julia Jorati's forthcoming *Slavery and Race: Philosophical Debates in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford).

Overview of intended audience:

The expected market for the book includes academics and graduate students interested in exploring not just the philosophical stakes of the life sciences in the eighteenth century but a series of key texts for understanding the history of the concept of race. Recent politics notwithstanding, there is in fact widespread enthusiasm among academics for bringing critical race theory into philosophy, history, and political science classrooms; this background reality provides substantial opportunity for this volume to be adopted for classroom use. Graduate seminars on Kant's political and historical thought as well as his understanding of teleology and the life sciences would benefit from the translations and critical editorial work we propose here. The same would be true for courses in the history of race and racism, the history of the life sciences, and the history of anthropology.

The clearest audience for a general anthology of key texts in the eighteenth-century life sciences will be scholars working in areas adjacent to the field, including history of philosophy and science, anthropology, critical race theory, and American studies. Kant studies in particular offers an audience primed to delve deeper into this topic, since recent years have witnessed increasing interest among Anglophone scholars in Kant's engagement

with the life sciences and its relevance to his more familiar ‘critical’ philosophy. A comprehensive anthology of important eighteenth-century texts in English with a robust editorial apparatus will, we believe, make an important and popular contribution to a range of scholars.

The audience for this anthology will not, however, be limited to scholars already working in the field. There is burgeoning interest in the history of the concept of race, philosophies of race and difference, and critical race theory across the Anglophone world, as recent trends in hiring and publishing clearly indicate. A crucial dimension of the research and training that supports these fields is the historical study of race. As young academics take up new positions and begin teaching courses that reflect their research interests, a general anthology of the historical sources underpinning modern conceptions of race will become an important teaching resource as well.

The multidisciplinary nature of the contents of the volume will, in short, be reflected in a multidisciplinary audience. The completeness of the texts we propose to include, and the historical and conceptual context provided by our introduction and notes, will ensure that this volume will be an important resource for a wide range of people—students and scholars new to the field as well as advanced scholars looking for an English edition of key resources—working across great number of disciplines.

Rights and Permissions:

Nearly two-thirds of the works included in this volume will be new translations, with fifteen representing key texts in the history of the life sciences that will be translated into English for the first time. All of our translations will include in-text references to original-language pagination for the sake of scholarly reference and will be supported by historical notes connecting them to the broader intellectual landscape. By re-translating a handful of **Kant essays** previously translated into English (5, 6, 16, 18, 20, and 22) we will ensure continuity with respect to key terminology (e.g., *Gattung*, *Geschlecht*, *Abartung*, etc.) across the volume and provide a robust apparatus regarding Kant’s context and connections to other authors in the volume. Although the Cambridge edition of the works of Immanuel Kant have become standard references in English-language scholarship, the editorial apparatus with respect to these particular texts contains gaps and can be profitably augmented. By placing Kant in the context provided by the surrounding texts, moreover, the volume will provide a new vantage point for understanding Kant’s role in the life science discussions of his day.

Projected Final Word Count:

We expect the volume, including introductions, indices, and scholarly apparatus, to be approximately 400,000 words. This is in keeping with similar primary-text **anthologies**, such as *Philosophy and Science: An Historical Anthology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), *The History and Philosophy of Science: A Reader* (Bloomsbury, 2018), *Classics of Political and Moral Philosophy* (Oxford, 2011), and *Early Modern Philosophy: An Anthology* (Broadview Press, 2021), **reference works** like *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race* (2017), *The Bloomsbury Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century German Philosophers* (2016), and *The Cambridge Kant Lexicon* (2021), and **teaching resources** like *Teaching Race in the European Renaissance* (ACMRS, 2023).

Planned Illustrations:

We plan to have one illustration for each chapter since we will use these to meaningfully complement the scholarly apparatus. All illustrations will be drawn from the public domain or have permissions granted through the purchase of rights.

Funder Information:

The project has benefitted from significant support via the Australian Research Council's 'Discovery Project' grant scheme awarded to Jennifer Mensch 2019-2023 (DP190103769). Additional funding for the project has been generously provided over the years by the School of Humanities and Communication Arts at Western Sydney University, Marquette University, and the Journal of the History of Philosophy's Kristeller-Popkin Travel Fellowship awarded to Michael J. Olson (2019).

Table of Contents:

We propose the contents of the volume to be as follows, noting in advance the inclusion of two French theorists, Maupertuis and Buffon, given their singular importance for most if not all subsequent German discussions:

Introduction (approximately 5000 words)

Part One: Generation Theory (approx. 127,500 words)

1. [1745] Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis, "Concerning the Origin of Animals," *Earthly Venus*, translated by Simone Brangier Boas. (approx. 16,000 words)
2. [1749] Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, "General History of Animals: Recapitulation," in *Natural History, General and Particular*, trans. William Smellie. (approx. 2000 words)
3. [1752] Albrecht von Haller, Preface, in *Universal History Treated According to All Its Particular Parts* [German edition of Buffon's *Natural History*], trans. Antje Kühnast. (approx. 6000 words)
4. [1761] Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis, "Essay on the Formation of Bodies, Translated from the Latin by a Friend of Natural Philosophy," trans. Michael Olson. (approx. 8000 words)
5. [1763] Immanuel Kant, "What can be inferred from our argument to the advantage of one or the other of the two orders of nature," in "The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God" (1763), trans. Michael Olson. (approx. 2000 words)
6. [1766] Immanuel Kant, "A tangled metaphysical knot which can either be untied or cut as one pleases," in "Dreams of a Spirit-Seer," trans. Michael Olson. (approx. 6000 words)
7. [1781] Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, "On the Formative Drive and the Business of Generation," trans. Michael Olson. (approx. 13,000 words)
8. [1789] Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, "Attempt at an Answer to the Prize Question Assigned for the Third Time by the Imperial Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg," trans. Michael Olson. (approx. 4000 words)

9. [1789] Caspar Friedrich Wolff, “On the Properties and Essential Force of Vegetable and Animal Substance,” trans. Michael Olson. (approx. 60,000 words)
10. [1790] Immanuel Kant, “On the necessary subordination of the principle of mechanism to the teleological principle in explaining a thing as a natural purpose” and “On conjoining mechanism to the teleological principle in explaining natural purposes as natural products,” in *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar. (approx. 4000 words)
11. [1817] Johann von Goethe, “Our Objective Stated,” in *Natural Science in General; Morphology in Particular*, trans. Bertha Mueller. (approx. 4000 words)
12. [1817] Johann von Goethe, “My Discovery of a Worthy Forerunner” and “Caspar Friedrich Wolff on Plant Formation,” in *Natural Science in General; Morphology in Particular*, trans. Bertha Mueller. (approx. 1500 words)
13. [1820] Johann von Goethe, “Bildungstrieb,” in *Natural Science in General; Morphology in Particular*, trans. Bertha Mueller. (approx. 1000 words)

Part Two: Heredity and Race (approx. 193,000 words)

14. [1745] Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis, “Varieties in the Species of Man,” in *Earthly Venus*, trans. Simone Brangier Boas. (approx. 7000 words)
15. [1749] Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, “Of the Varieties of the Human Species,” in *Natural History, General and Particular*, trans. William Smellie. (approx. 12,000 words)
16. [1757–1759], Immanuel Kant, “Differences of Form and Color of Human Beings in Various Parts of the Earth,” in *Lectures on Physical Geography*, trans. Michael Olson. (approx. 1000 words)
17. [1766] Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, “Of the Degeneration of Animals,” in *Natural History, General and Particular*, trans. William Smellie. (approx. 6000 words)
18. [1775/1777] Immanuel Kant, “Of the Different Races of Human Beings,” trans. Michael Olson. (approx. 8000 words)
19. [1785] Samuel Thomas Soemmerring, “On the Physical Difference of the Negro from the European” (selection), trans. Michael Olson. (approx. 7000 words)
20. [1785] Immanuel Kant, “Determination of the Concept of a Human Race,” trans. Michael Olson. (approx. 7000 words)
21. [1786] Georg Forster, “Something More on the Human Races,” trans. Jon Mikkelsen. (approx. 12,000 words)
22. [1788] Immanuel Kant, “On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy” (selection), trans. Michael Olson. (approx. 9000 words)
23. [1795] Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *Contributions to Natural History* (selections), trans. Antje Kühnast. (approx. 6000 words)
24. [1795] Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *On the Natural Variety of Mankind* (selections), trans. Thomas Bendyshe. (tr. Emended; approx. 42,000 words)
25. [1796] Christoph Girtanner, *On the Kantian Principle for Natural History: An Attempt to Treat this Science Philosophically* (selection), trans. Michael Olson. (approx. 57,000 words)

26. [1815] Christoph Meiners, *Investigations into the Difference in Human Natures (the Differences of Human Types) in Asia and the Southern Countries* (selection), trans. Michael Olson. (approx. 7000 words)
27. [1826] G.W.F. Hegel, “The New World” and “Africa,” in *Lectures in the Philosophy of World History*, trans. Dennis J. Schmidt. (approx. 7000 words)
28. [1845] Alexander von Humboldt, “General Review of Natural Phenomena: Races,” in *Cosmos*, trans. E.C. Otté. (approx. 5000 words)

Part Three: Race and Empire (approx. 54,200 words)

29. [1775] Christoph Meiners, “Some Observations on the History of the South Sea Islanders,” trans. Michael Olson. (approx. 4700 words)
30. [1780] Georg Forster, “O-Tahiti” (selection), trans. Antje Kühnast. (approx. 9000 words)
31. [1786] Georg Forster, “New Holland and the British Colony in Botany Bay” (selection), trans. Robert King. (approx. 10,000 words)
32. [1790] Christoph Meiners, “Historical Report on the True Character of the Slave Trade and the Servitude of the Negroes in the West Indies,” trans. Michael Olson. (approx. 10,000 words)
33. [1791] Georg Forster, “On Christoph Meiners’ Anthropological Treatises in the *Göttingen Historical Magazine*,” trans. Michael Olson. (approx. 8000 words)
34. [1795] Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, Letter to Sir Joseph Banks,” in *On the Natural Variety of Mankind*, trans. Thomas Bendyshe. (approx. 2000 words)
35. [1797] Johann Gottfried Herder, “Negro Idylls,” in *Letters on the Advancement of Humanity*, trans. Michael Olson. (approx. 3500 words)
36. [1826] Alexander von Humboldt, “Political Essay on the Island of Cuba” (selection), in *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of America, during the years 1799–1804*, trans. Thomasina Ross. (approx. 7000 words)

Names and Contact Information:

Jennifer Mensch, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Western Sydney University:
j.mensch@westernsydney.edu.au; (ORCID: [0000-0002-5352-8517](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5352-8517))

Michael Olson, Teaching Associate Professor of Philosophy, Marquette University:
Michael.olson@marquette.edu; (ORCID: [0000-0003-3264-1454](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3264-1454))

Mike Olson’s Online Project Description: [here](#)