Can a Philosophy of Race Afford to Abandon the Kantian Categorical Imperative?

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Recently, philosophy has been enriched by the new emancipatory perspectives of feminism and philosophy of race. However, both of these philosophies share an uneasy relationship to our philosophical tradition. They have both disclosed the sexism and racism that are embedded in our tradition and have attempted to rethink the merit of our tradition. Unfortunately, criticism has often been confused with critique. As a result of this confusion, there has been too great a willingness to reject certain traditional texts, principles, and ideas that may be necessary for an effective emancipatory philosophy and politics.

In this paper I will attempt to show that the rejection of Kant’s categorical imperative is counterproductive to any philosophy based on emancipatory interest. Many of the opponents of Kant’s categorical imperative have refuted nothing more than a straw man version of Kant’s moral theory. Knowledge of Kant’s negative opinion of blacks has led many philosophers of race to dismiss the entire Kantian project without considering the way in which Kant’s moral philosophy can be of assistance to the development of an emancipatory philosophy.

In the first part of this paper I will argue that although Kant was a racist, it is not clear that racism is necessarily embedded in the categorical imperative. The second part of this paper will be an analysis of Kant’s categorical imperative as a universal moral principle. I will try to make clear how the categorical imperative functions, and in part III of this paper show how the categorical imperative is a useful principle in the fight against racism.

I. Kant’s Categorical Racism

The term “categorical racism” as used by Victor Anderson in Beyond Ontological Blackness is defined thus:

Categorical racism appropriates a species logic in which every individual member of a species shares essential traits that identify the member within the species. No accidental or particular instances of individuation (historical, economic, manners, or customs) can disconnect the individual member from the species for the individual necessarily or categorically belongs in the species if it shares all essential traits identifying the species.

Racism, sexism, and many other forms of domination can be said to be based on what Anderson has called “species logic.” Anderson claims the Enlight-
enment and Romantic cultures of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Scotland, Germany, and France developed a philosophy of difference that differentiated European consciousness from others.\textsuperscript{4} “European intellectuals sought to disclose European genius as an explanatory category for the progressive, historical movement of the modern age.”\textsuperscript{5} Anderson and others are right in their claim that Kant’s racist attitude is based on a form of “species logic.” Indeed, the Enlightenment itself is permeated with racist attitudes and attempts to scientifically justify such attitudes.

In \textit{On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought}, Tzvetan Todorov examines the development of scientific racism in the French Enlightenment. Scientific racism is based on “species logic” insofar as it attempts to prove the inferiority of non-European races and thereby ranks groups of people in such a way that Europeans are viewed as the highest manifestation of humanity, whereas other groups are relegated to a subhuman status. In such a scheme, Europeans embody the universal, the ideal of humanity.\textsuperscript{6} This notion has led many contemporary theorists to reject the notion of the ideal humanity or universal values since these values are by and large European. The problem may be stated in terms of the following propositions:

- Proposition 1. Europeans embody the highest principles and values of humanity, and are the most intelligent of the species.
- Proposition 2. All other races are subhuman to the extent that they do not fully embody the intelligence and values that are characteristic of humanity in its highest form.
- Proposition 3. Other races do embody an undeveloped human essence that must be cultivated and perfected.
- Proposition 4. Since Europeans embody the most perfected form of humanity, they will determine the course of history (the progress of humanity).
- Proposition 5. Non-European races should submit themselves to the ideal, the cultured, the bearers of history, the white European male.

These five propositions sum up categorical racism and are consistent with Kant’s attitude in \textit{Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime}. In this text Kant makes several claims about the inferiority of African people. One of the passages cited by Anderson and also discussed by Cornel West\textsuperscript{7} reads as follows:

The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality, even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in
the world. So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color.8

This passage shows that Kant is guilty of “categorical racism.” That is, all people of African descent are relegated to one single category and devalued as a group. No consideration is given to possible individual differences, historical circumstances, etc. People of African descent are thought to be by nature inferior to whites. That Kant was a racist is by no means contested here. The issue that I want to raise is whether universal values and principles should be abandoned because of his racism.

In “Talkin’ That Talk,” an essay written as a response to Tzvetan Todorov’s essay “Race Writing and Culture,” Henry Louis Gates writes:

As I try to show in my book, Black Letters and the Enlightenment, racism and—dare I say it?—logocentrism marched arm in arm to delimit black people in perhaps the most pernicious way of all: to claim that they were subhuman, that they were “a different species of men,” as Hume put it so plainly, because they could not “write” literature. Did Kant stop being a racist, stop thinking that there existed a natural, predetermined relation between “stupidity” and “blackness” (his terms) just because he wrote Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals? Hardly! Indeed, one might say that Kant’s Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime functions to deconstruct, for the black reader, Kant’s Foundations, revealing it to be just one more example of the remarkable capacity of European philosophers to conceive of “humanity” in ideal terms (white, male), yet despise, abhor, colonize, or exploit human beings who are not “ideal.”9

Gates continues his attack on Todorov by suggesting the Todorov has “reproduced an ideology of egalitarianism and universalism which seeks to bracket the soundings of the critical voice of the Other.”10 Another attack on Kantian universal principles comes from Lewis R. Gordon in Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism. Gordon writes:

A straightforward problem is Kant’s requirement that in order to respect human beings we must look beyond human beings to abstract versions of them as rational beings. The whole point of antiracism is, however, to demand that members of the disrespected race be respected as they “are,” in the flesh, so to speak.11

This attack on universalism is quite common in race and feminist literature. Such literature sets itself up as a critical “other” that keeps in check oppressive universal principles constructed by white males.

Although it is necessary to approach any values that claim universal validity with caution, it is also necessary that we maintain a posture of critical self-reflection. It appears to me that much of what parades as critique is an uncritical criticism. The adoption of a new language (the so-called language of critique) does not assure one of a genuinely critical stance. The attack
on universalism may be as uncritical as a thoughtless universalism. Many of
the opponents of universalism seem to be unaware of the consequences of
their position. That is, how is any theory that advocates equality, emancipa-
tion, justice, fairness, etc., possible without some universal standard? In the
remainder of this paper I will show that a critical philosophy of race requires
a universal principle, and that the Kantian categorical imperative provides
such a principle.

II. Thinking beyond the Particular:
The Categorical Imperative as a Universal Moral Principle

The criticisms of Kant’s categorical imperative put forth by the above-
mentioned theorists seem to be based on a fundamental misunderstanding
of the point of such a principle. The categorical imperative is generally dis-
missed because of its universal status alone. In the literature on race one
would be hard pressed to find a careful analysis of what Kant was up to in
the *Grounding*. Kant’s actual arguments are never addressed. The validity and
usefulness of a universal principle such as the categorical imperative must be
determined by a close examination of the theoretical context in which the
principle was developed. The conspectus of this paper does not allow for a
thorough analysis of the categorical imperative and its many formulations.
Here I will examine only the demand of universality made by the categori-
cal imperative, and I will attempt to show that such a demand is not anti-
thetical to emancipatory theories of race, but rather, is a necessary ingredient
of such theories.

Some years ago there was a debate among Kant scholars as to whether
the categorical imperative was descriptive or prescriptive. By “descriptive”
I mean that the categorical imperative merely described the workings of pure
practical reason. On this account the *Grounding* would be something like a
phenomenology of moral consciousness. It merely describes what happens
when moral decisions are made. By “prescriptive” I mean that the categori-
cal imperative is presented as a principle that ought to be employed in the
act of moral decision making. The case can be made that both are present in
the *Grounding*. However, it is not my intention here to defend such a claim. I
simply want to show that on both accounts, the demand for universalizabil-
ity is necessary and can be helpful in an emancipatory philosophy of race.
I will first examine the demand for universalizability on the descriptive
account. The prescriptive account is the same, with the exception that it does
not describe the nature of moral decision making but prescribes a principle
for moral decision making. In the very act of making a moral decision there
is an appeal to some universal principle. To this extent, moral decision
making requires a moment of self-transcendence. This notion of self-
transcendence is an inseparable, essential aspect of moral decision making.

The recognition of the act of self-transcendence in the act of moral deci-
sion making is captured in the Kantian notion of duty. On the descriptive
account of the categorical imperative we simply recognize that every act of
moral decision making entails an appeal to duty. There are everyday acts that
do not require an appeal to duty. Such acts are merely prudent. For example,
if I want a nice lawn then I will mow it. Such a decision employs a hypothetical imperative. I have no moral duty to mow my lawn since I have no duty to have a nice lawn. However, I do have a duty to not torture other human beings. Not only do I have a duty to not torture other people, it seems clear to me that no one should torture other people. Therefore, I will not torture others. My decision to not torture others may make me unhappy, since I may enjoy torturing others. Nevertheless, I have a duty to not torture others, therefore, I must overcome this urge to torture others; I must transcend my sensual desire.

For Kant, moral decision making requires an appeal to a principle that is higher than my own particular maxims. My subjective maxim (seek pleasure at all times) must be held in check by some higher principle. This higher principle demands that I transcend my own personal desires if these desires conflict with morality. The categorical imperative is the principle whereby I transcend the particularities of my own sensual nature and consider what I ought to do rather than what I want to do. That is, I must broaden my perspective by considering the perspective of other rational beings.

A. Universal Principles and Concrete Situations: A Possible Rebuttal?

One of the most popular criticisms of Kant’s moral philosophy is that it is too formalistic. That is, the universal nature of the categorical imperative leaves it devoid of content. Such a principle is useless since moral decisions are made by concrete individuals in a concrete, historical, and social situation. This type of criticism lies behind Lewis Gordon’s rejection of any attempt to ground an antiracist position on Kantian principles. The rejection of universal principles for the sake of emphasizing the historical embeddedness of the human agent is widespread in recent philosophy and social theory. I will argue here on Kantian grounds that although a distinction between the universal and the concrete is a valid distinction, the unity of the two is required for an understanding of human agency.

The attack on Kantian formalism began with Hegel’s criticism of the Kantian philosophy. The list of contemporary theorists who follow Hegel’s line of criticism is far too long to deal with in the scope of this paper. Although these theorists may approach the problem of Kantian formalism from a variety of angles, the spirit of their criticism is basically the same: The universality of the categorical imperative is an abstraction from one’s empirical conditions. Kant is often accused of making the moral agent an abstract, empty, noumenal subject. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Kantian subject is an embodied, empirical, concrete subject. However, this concrete subject has a dual nature. Kant claims in the Critique of Pure Reason as well as in the Grounding that human beings have an intelligible and empirical character. It is impossible to understand and do justice to Kant’s moral theory without taking seriously the relation between these two characters. The very concept of morality is impossible without the tension between the two.

By “empirical character” Kant simply means that we have a sensual nature. We are physical creatures with physical drives or desires. The very
fact that I cannot simply satisfy my desires without considering the rightness or wrongness of my actions suggests that my empirical character must be held in check by something, or else I behave like a Freudian id. My empirical character must be held in check by my intelligible character, which is the legislative activity of practical reason.

It is through our intelligible character that we formulate principles that keep our empirical impulses in check. The categorical imperative is the supreme principle of morality that is constructed by the moral agent in his/her moment of self-transcendence. What I have called self-transcendence may be best explained in the following passage by Onora O’Neill:

In restricting our maxims to those that meet the test of the categorical imperative we refuse to base our lives on maxims that necessarily make our own case an exception. The reason why a universalizability criterion is morally significant is that it makes our own case no special exception (G, IV, 404). In accepting the Categorical Imperative we accept the moral reality of other selves, and hence the possibility (not, note, the reality) of a moral community. The Formula of Universal Law enjoins no more than that we act only on maxims that are open to others also.16

O’Neill’s description of the universalizability criterion includes the notion of self-transcendence that I am working to explicate here to the extent that like self-transcendence, universalizable moral principles require that the individual think beyond his or her own particular desires. The individual is not allowed to exclude others as rational moral agents who have the right to act as he acts in a given situation. For example, if I decide to use another person merely as a means for my own end I must recognize the other person’s right to do the same to me. I cannot consistently will that I use another as a means only and will that I not be used in the same manner by another. Hence, the universalizability criterion is a principle of consistency and a principle of inclusion. That is, in choosing my maxims I attempt to include the perspective of other moral agents.

B. Is the Categorical Imperative a Racist Principle?

The above criticism of Kant by Gordon oversimplifies Kant’s position. Gordon’s criticism is based on the possibility that one can hate humanity yet still act out of duty towards humanity. This is true. I do not have to care about a person to treat him in a way that is demanded by the moral law. The result, it seems, is love for some abstract idea of humanity and no love for concrete individual people. This criticism, however, is a bit misguided. It imposes on the categorical imperative a binary opposition between concrete and abstract humanity. The real opposition, or better yet, apposition is between subjective and objective maxims. What is generally taken to be abstract in Kant’s moral philosophy is its emphasis on objectivity. But this emphasis on objectivity is not an attempt to dismiss concrete humanity, but rather to include humanity in general in our moral decision-making processes.
Most criticisms of the objective status of the categorical imperative are based on the assumption that objective principles are abstract and therefore empty. However, although objective principles of the Kantian sort require an act of abstraction, they are far from empty. Critics of Kant’s moral philosophy believe that the categorical imperative is empty because it lacks empirical content. However, this criticism misses the point. Many critics of Kant’s moral philosophy often read Kant’s *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* out of its philosophical context. That is, all of Kant’s critical writings are permeated with a view of the structure of human consciousness that must be considered when reading his moral philosophy. As early as the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant makes a distinction between our empirical and intelligible character, which forms the basis of his moral philosophy. It is that part of consciousness (intelligible character) that legislates by means of principles that is taken to be empty by critics of Kant. However, what does empty mean here? It seems that “empty” merely means nonempirical. For Kant, moral principles are intelligible content and are produced by rational thought.

Lewis Gordon criticizes Kant on the basis that Kantian morality requires that we look beyond human beings to some abstract version of them as rational beings. If Gordon is right, then Kant’s moral philosophy denies the possibility of morality to the extent that morality requires a sensual nature (embodiment). For Kant, human beings are finite, sensual, concrete, empirical, rational beings. Like many other critics of Kant, Gordon overlooks Kant’s emphasis on human finitude (embodiment). Kant clearly states that although we are members of the intelligible world, we are also members of the world of sense. However, I take it that what is problematic for Gordon is the idea that the other person is worthy of respect on the basis of his or her membership in the rational world. This may be offensive to race-conscious persons because one can be hated as a member of a particular race but treated in a respectful manner because one is a rational being. However, it seems to me that racism is based on a failure to recognize members of other races as rational agents worthy of respect.

Gordon’s criticism of Kantian morality expresses two fears that are characteristic of contemporary criticisms of Kant. First, Kant’s notion of the objectivity and universalizability of moral principles is abstract and does not consider the concrete, historical situation of the moral agent. Second, the Kantian notion of rationality is a Eurocentric concept, that is, it applies to white European males. The first of these concerns is expressed in the following passage:

Kant can, for instance, have a moral misanthrope who can hate humanity to his heart’s content as long as he acts fundamentally from duty-in-itself. That is because the moral law ultimately stands above, in the sense of having priority of value over, human beings. For the humanist who wishes to remain Kantian, the only way out is to situate humanity on a meta-ethical level above the moral law as its constituter, which defeats the whole point of its categorical formulation. It wouldn’t even work to make this meta-ethical level an identity-relation between humanity and the Moral Law, for then humanity would have to be shown to be
essentially constituted in virtue of its form, a task that would be destined to fail in any encounter with embodiments of rationality that are regarded as contingent. One would have to argue not only that there is a human nature, but also that rationality is identical with that nature; in other words, not only that human being “is” rational being, but also that rational being is human being, a conclusion that Kant clearly rejects.

Gordon continues:

Rationality is a relation in this scheme from “above” to “below.” The racist has no problem with abstract humanity, which he both regards as “above” and concedes is already manifest by himself and his group.

The first of the above passages contains several instances of a fundamental misunderstanding of Kantian moral philosophy. The second draws a conclusion that is true of a racist, Eurocentric attitude but is not necessarily true of Kantian moral philosophy. My response to Gordon will begin with an analysis of four interpretive problems found in the first of the above passages. After making clear Kant’s position, we must see if such a position is inherently racist, or if Kantian moral philosophy can be used to combat racism. The four interpretive problems that I will discuss are first, the problematic notion of duty; second, the priority of the moral law over humanity; third, the problem of the constitution of the moral law; and finally, the problem of the identity of rationality and human nature.

1. Duty Is Not Just for Duty’s Sake

To critics, one of the most revolting concepts in Kant’s moral philosophy is the concept of duty. According to many interpreters the Kantian concept of duty is a cold, calculating, inhuman concept. Kant doesn’t help matters by claiming that we ought to do our duty for duty’s sake. Indeed, it seems as if there is some inhuman, abstract principle that all humanity must submit to, hence, denying our humanity. However, the concept of duty is much more complex and much richer than it appears. The concept of duty arises out of what many critics of Kant claim that Kant denies. That is, the concept of duty is not derived from some abstract notion of rational humanity, rather, it is based on our concrete, finite existence, which includes rationality. The concept of duty is derived from our recognition of two conflicting feelings that are constitutive of morality. We feel that we are free and yet we are limited. This tension between freedom and necessity permeates Kant’s entire critical philosophy. Indeed, it is Kant’s preoccupation in all three Critiques and the Grounding. Hence, Kant’s moral philosophy must be read in the context of Kant’s entire critical project. To discuss the Kantian concept of duty separate from some discussion of his notion of freedom could only lead to a misrepresentation of Kant’s moral philosophy, since freedom is the key concept in Kant’s moral theory. The notion of duty must be understood in its relation to freedom, rationality, and willing.
For Kant, rational creatures are simply creatures that are not entirely determined by sensuous impulses. Morality is as function of rationality to the extent that as moral agents we strive to make our sensuous impulses conform to some higher principle. It seems obvious that at times our sensuous impulses must be restricted. It may be argued that even racism is based on one’s failure to control one’s sensuous impulses, that is, one’s impulses or desire to dominate and oppress another group. If the racist is to cease being a racist, he must change his or her way of thinking about those of a different race, that is, he must choose another way of being. This choice is based on some higher principle, such as that it is wrong to discriminate against others of the basis of racial difference. This principle takes on an objective, universal status when the former racist concludes that “all persons ought not discriminate against others on the basis of racial (physical) difference.” This principle is a maxim that determines the behavior of the person invoking the maxim. To the extent that such a principle should apply to all persons at all times it is a duty.

One may retort, “the above maxim determines the behavior of the one who holds such a maxim but it does not change the way that one feels about people of other races, that is, one may decide that it is wrong to discriminate against blacks but may still hate blacks.” There are two approaches that one may take in addressing this rebuttal. First, one may point out that this maxim is still subject to a higher principle, for example, “it is wrong to hate people on the basis of racial difference.” This principle is still problematic to the extent that although one may know that it is wrong to hate others on the basis of racial difference, one may still hate others of different races. However, Kant makes it clear that morality is not based on what we like or find desirable. Morality often comes into conflict with our feelings and desires. What is right may not be what we find pleasant, hence, duty is the obligation to do what is right even if one does not find it pleasant. For example, duty is my recognition of my obligation not to torture my neighbor even if such an act would bring me great pleasure. Feelings are not bound by the moral law in that I have no control over them. However, I do have control over the way in which I respond to my feelings.

This brings us to the second way in which one may address the above rebuttal. In the *Grounding*, Kant claims that the only thing that is good without qualification is a good will. The cultivation of a good will is the central theme of the *Grounding*. We hope that right action will follow from a good will, but this opens up a whole new set of problems. In recognizing that the will is the only thing that is good without qualification, Kant recognizes that although we are not completely determined by the sensible impulses, we are, indeed, influenced by them. That is, as members of the intelligible world we are capable of transcending the sensible world to the extent that we can will what is not the case but ought to be the case. For example, even in the absence of justice in the sensible world we can envision a just society and strive to produce such. However, as members of the sensible world there are many limitations and contingencies that interfere with our ability to produce a just society. As finite, imperfect beings, our reality does not measure up to our concept of what ought to be the case. Even the person who wills a nonracist
society may from time to time find himself harboring racist feelings. Yet this person still feels duty-bound to transform society on the basis of the rational, ideal, abstract principle of a nonracist society.

Gordon’s criticism also seems to imply that one should do good not from duty but from love of humanity. This seems to make emotion primary. If this is the case, not only does Gordon misunderstand Kant, but he misunderstands the nature of morality in general. Kant’s emphasis on duty is due to his recognition of the instability of feelings or emotion. Not that one should shun feelings, but feelings and emotions tend to fluctuate. For example, one may feel kindly disposed to members of another race today and ill disposed to the members of that race tomorrow. Since feelings are subject to change sporadically, they cannot be the basis for morality. Kant does recognize that there are moral endowments such as moral feeling, love of one’s neighbor, conscience, and respect that one has no obligation to have. However, there are duties that may lead to the acquisition and cultivation of these moral endowments. For example, Kant claims that love is a matter of feeling not of willing. I cannot love someone by merely willing that I love someone. Nevertheless, “benevolence as conduct, can be subject to a law of duty.”

Kant writes:

*Beneficence is a duty. If someone practices it often and succeeds in realizing his beneficent intention, he eventually comes actually to love the person he has helped. So the saying “you ought to love your neighbor as yourself” does not mean that you ought immediately (first) to love him and (afterwards) by means of this love do good to him. It means, rather, do good to your fellow man, and your beneficence will produce love of man in you (as an aptitude of the inclination to beneficence in general).*

But why is duty important? Is there some end toward which duty propels us?

2. *Humanity as an End*

This brings us to our second interpretive problem, that is, that many critics of Kant have lamented that Kant makes humanity subject to some external, inhuman moral principle. Gordon raises this very point. The general tone of the *Grounding* can lead one to conclude that some abstract moral law has priority over human beings. However, the truth is that there is nothing that has priority over humanity.

A more careful and consistent reading of Kant’s texts reveals that the moral law serves humanity. It is the function of the moral law to perfect humanity. The perfection of humanity is a theme that runs through many of Kant’s works. The moral law as developed in Kant’s philosophy must be understood in terms of freedom and the perfection of humanity. One may retort that it is the idea of the perfection of humanity that undergirds categorical racism or species logic to the extent that for Kant and other eighteenth-century white European males, they were the most perfect members of the human race and they held the key for the further perfection of the human race. Although this may be true at one level of analysis, it is not sufficient grounds
for rejecting the idea of the perfection of humanity. If the term “perfection” is offensive we may instead talk about the improvement of humanity.

It seems reasonable to say that all persons interested in emancipation, justice, radical politics, etc., are interested in the improvement of humanity. Philosophers of race, feminists, and critical social theorists work under the assumption that humanity in its present state is not what it ought to be. The goal of emancipatory movements and theories is to bring into existence a state of affairs that ameliorates the human condition. Hence, we may reject the idea that a certain group represents humanity in its most perfect form, but it would be self-defeating to reject the idea of the perfection (improvement) of humanity in general.

3. The Constitution of the Moral Law

The problem of situating humanity above the moral law as its constituturer is no problem at all. In the *Grounding* Kant performs a conceptual analysis of morality. He seeks to discover the necessary features of moral judgments. To this extent his project is descriptive and not merely prescriptive. Kant’s analysis is transcendental to the extent that he seeks to discover the necessary conditions for morality. It is the conditions for morality that Kant discovers that are often treated superficially by his critics.

One of the necessary conditions for morality is autonomy. Bernard Carnoix claims that “the idea of autonomy will provide us with a key to the explanation of the transcendental possibility of the categorical imperative.” By autonomy Kant simply means freedom of the will. However, this freedom is not spontaneity but is a law-governed freedom. Autonomy is the property that the will has of being a law unto itself. To be autonomous is to have the capacity to will or attempt to produce a state of affairs. For example, when a racist decides to be a nonracist, he or she resists his or her inclinations to remain racist. In a racist society one may be pathologically or psychologically predisposed to racist attitudes and behaviors. We act autonomously when we are affected by impulses and inclinations but refuse to be determined by them. In acting autonomously we give ourselves a law such as: “Although I’ve been raised to be a racist, no one should be a racist, therefore, I will resist my inclination to be a racist.” The person who realizes or decides that racism is wrong constructs or constitutes a law whereby he or she will govern his or her actions and attitudes. This person freely wills that racism become extinct. The law that this person gives to himself is categorical in that it is universal, that is, it is not a subjective but an objective maxim that should apply to everyone.

4. The Identity of Rationality and Humanity

The problem entailed in this fourth interpretive problem (i.e., the problem of an identity-relation between humanity and the moral law) is in Kant’s philosophy not an identity-relation between humanity and a moral law that is external to the human being. Rather, Kant’s philosophy discloses a division or disunity within human consciousness. However, the two sides of human
consciousness must constitute an identity-relation to the extent that they are
two sides of one and the same consciousness or two poles of one and the same
consciousness.31 The very concept of morality is produced through the striv-
ing of consciousness to unify itself. It is in a single consciousness that the laws
of freedom and the laws of nature are in conflict. If according to Kant, human-
ity was constituted solely in virtue of its form (as Gordon suggests), this
tension between the laws of freedom and the laws of nature would not be
possible, hence, the very concept of morality would be null and void. It is
precisely because we are embodied rationality that there is in human con-
sciousness a disunity that our rational or intelligible character seeks to unify.
The moral law is the principle whereby we seek consistency and unity in the
production of and arrangement of maxims.

In the above I have already responded to the third problem discussed by
Gordon. Human nature is not identical to rationality but is partially consti-
tuted by rationality. The human being can be moral only to the extent that
the human being is partially rational but seeks to be fully rational. Pure ratio-
nality is a goal which we can only approximate but never achieve because we
remain tied to our sensual nature.

III. The Categorical Imperative as
First Principle of a Philosophy of Race

There are two dangers to be confronted in this section. First, in the early
twenty-first century it is not fashionable to speak of first principles. Second,
it may seem a bit bold to suggest that the moral philosophy of a racist should
serve as a first principle for a philosophy of race. The problem of first prin-
ciples in contemporary philosophy cannot be discussed within the conspec-
tus of this paper. However, there must be some point of reference, some
Archimedian point that holds together the multiplicity of perspectives, if any
type of solidarity is to be acquired. The second problem should be less prob-
lematic in light of the above discussion or internal critique of Kant’s moral
philosophy. What is left for us to do here is to attempt to think in terms of
how the categorical imperative may actually be applied to the problem of
racism.

Whereas most criticisms are aimed at the formulation of universal law
and the formula of autonomy, our analysis here will focus on the formula of
an end in itself and the formula of the kingdom of ends, since we have already
addressed the problem of universality. The latter will be discussed first.
At issue here is what Kant means by “kingdom of ends.” Kant writes: “By
‘kingdom’ I understand a systematic union of different rational beings
through common laws.”32 The above passage indicates that Kant recognizes
different, perhaps different kinds, of rational beings; however, the problem for
most critics of Kant lies in the assumption that Kant suggests that the
“kingdom of ends” requires that we abstract from personal differences and
content of private ends. The Kantian conception of rational beings requires
such an abstraction. Some feminists and philosophers of race have found this
abstract notion of rational beings problematic because they take it to mean
that rationality is necessarily white, male, and European. Hence, the systematic union of rational beings can mean only the systematic union of white, European males.

I find this interpretation of Kant’s moral theory quite puzzling. Surely another interpretation is available. That is, the implication that in Kant’s philosophy, rationality can only apply to white, European males does not seem to be the only alternative. The problem seems to lie in the requirement of abstraction. There are two ways of looking at the abstraction requirement that I think are faithful to Kant’s text and that overcome the criticisms of this requirement. First, the abstraction requirement may be best understood as a demand for intersubjectivity or recognition. Second, it may be understood as an attempt to avoid ethical egoism in determining maxims for our actions.

It is unfortunate that Kant never worked out a theory of intersubjectivity, as did his successors Fichte and Hegel. However, this is not to say that there is not in Kant’s philosophy a tacit theory of intersubjectivity or recognition. The abstraction requirement simply demands that in the midst of our concrete differences we recognize ourselves in the other and the other in ourselves. That is, we recognize in others the humanity that we have in common. Recognition of our common humanity is at the same time recognition of rationality in the other. We recognize in the other the capacity for self-determination and the capacity to legislate for a kingdom of ends.

This brings us to the second interpretation of the abstraction requirement. To avoid ethical egoism one must abstract from (think beyond) one’s own personal interest and subjective maxims. That is, the categorical imperative requires that I recognize that I am a member of the realm of rational beings. Hence, I organize my maxims in consideration of other rational beings. Under such a principle other people cannot be treated merely as a means for my end but must be treated as ends in themselves.

The merit of the categorical imperative for a philosophy of race is that it contravenes racist ideology to the extent that racist ideology is based on the use of persons of a different race as a means to an end rather than as ends in themselves. Embedded in the formulation of an end in itself and the formula of the kingdom of ends is the recognition of the common hope for humanity. That is, maxims ought to be chosen on the basis of an ideal, a hope for the amelioration of humanity. This ideal or ethical commonwealth (as Kant calls it in the Religion) is the kingdom of ends.

Although the merits of Kant’s moral theory may be recognizable at this point, we are still in a bit of a bind. It still seems problematic that the moral theory of a racist is essentially an antiracist theory. Further, what shall we do with Henry Louis Gates’s suggestion that we use the Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime to deconstruct the Grounding? What I have tried to suggest is that instead of abandoning the categorical imperative we should attempt to deepen our understanding of it and its place in Kant’s critical philosophy. A deeper reading of the Grounding and Kant’s philosophy in general may produce the deconstruction suggested by Gates. However, a text is not necessarily deconstructed by reading it against another. Texts often deconstruct themselves if read properly. To be sure, the best way to under-
stand a text is to read it in context. Hence, if the *Grounding* is read within the context of the critical philosophy, the tools for a deconstruction of the text are provided by its context and the tensions within the text.

Gates is right to suggest that the *Grounding* must be deconstructed. However, this deconstruction requires much more than reading the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* against the *Grounding*. It requires a complete engagement with the critical philosophy. Such an engagement discloses some of Kant’s very significant claims about humanity and the practical role of reason. With this disclosure, deconstruction of the *Grounding* can begin. What deconstruction will reveal is not necessarily the inconsistency of Kant’s moral philosophy or the racist or sexist nature of the categorical imperative, but rather, it will disclose the disunity between Kant’s theory and his own feelings about blacks and women. Although the theory is consistent and emancipatory and should apply to all persons, Kant the man has his own personal and moral problems. Although Kant’s attitude toward people of African descent was deplorable, it would be equally deplorable to reject the categorical imperative without first exploring its emancipatory potential.

**Notes**

1 I follow Seyla Benhabib (who draws on Marx) in pointing out this distinction between “critique” and “criticism.” She writes: “Critique refuses to stand outside its object and instead juxtaposes the immanent, normative self-understanding of its object to the material actuality of the object. Criticism privileges an Archimedian standpoint, be it freedom, or reason and proceeds to show the unfreedom or unreasonableness of the world when measured against this ideal paradigm” (*Critique Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, 33). My purpose in evoking this distinction here is to show that many critics of Kant reject Kant’s moral theory on the basis of an external critique or criticism. However, such a procedure fails to do justice to the theory and leads to an unnecessary dismissal of the categorical imperative. This problematic rejection of Kant’s highest moral principle is exacerbated by the fact that there is textual evidence that Kant was a racist and sexist. However, a critique gives us the grounds for rejecting Kant’s racism and sexism while preserving what I take to be Kant’s indispensable contribution to moral theory and any emancipatory philosophy.


3 Anderson’s use of the term “species logic” is a bit confusing but need not be. The term “species” can be used to distinguish the human species from other species, and it can be used to distinguish types within a species. Anderson makes use of the latter function of the term. However, in racist literature there is a blurring of these two functions of the term. One may argue that it is to this blurring of the functions of the term “species” that the term “species logic” applies. That is, although the human race is a particular species, in racist literature there is a hierarchy within the species that almost accounts for a plurality of species types within a species. Hence, there is the more human and the less human.

4 Ibid., 51–52.

5 Ibid., 52.


10 Ibid.


18 Kant, *Grounding*, 61.

19 One possible objection to my thesis in this paper is that the Kantian notion of rationality excludes women and nonwhite races. This is true on the basis of Kant’s own racism and sexism. However, it seems to me that Kant’s notion of rationality is itself not wrong. Kant is wrong only to the extent that he thinks that it applies only to white European males.


21 Ibid., 69.

22 Kant, *Grounding*, 7.


24 Ibid., 203.

25 Ibid.

26 Here I am thinking of the notion of purposiveness that Kant develops in the *Critique of Judgment* and in “Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History.”


29 Kant, *Grounding*, 49.

30 For a discussion of this notion of a pathological and psychological predisposition, see Henry Allison’s *Kant’s Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 55. See also A534/B562 in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*.

31 To say that the two sides of consciousness constitute an identity-relation is not to say that they are identical to each other. They are quite distinct. However, the individual subject is the unity of two conflicting feelings, that is, the feeling of necessity (our empirical character) and the feeling of freedom (our intelligible character). Herein is the Kantian distinction between theoretical and practical reason.

32 Kant, *Grounding*, 39.

33 The criticism of Kantian rationality, universality, and autonomy is quite extensive in feminist philosophy. Much of this criticism has emerged since the publication of Carol


35 Gates does not clarify what he means by the term “deconstruct.” It is clear from many of Gates’s works that he has been influenced by Derrida and perhaps some of his American followers. John D. Caputo (one of Derrida’s leading American interpreters) says of deconstruction: “The very meaning and mission of deconstruction is to show that things—texts, institutions, societies, beliefs, and practices of whatever size and sort you need—do not have definable meanings and determinable missions, that they are always more than any mission would impose, that they exceed the boundaries they currently occupy. What is really going on in things, what is really happening is always to come. Every time you try to stabilize the meaning of a thing, to fix it in its missionary position, the thing itself, if there is anything to it, it slips away. A ‘meaning’ or a ‘mission’ is a way to contain and compact things, like a nutshell, gathering them into a unity, whereas deconstruction bends all its efforts to stretch beyond these boundaries, to transgress these confines, to interrupt and disjoin all such gathering” (Jacques Derrida and John Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1997, 31–32). Deconstruction pits itself against any theory that purports to have achieved unity and closure in its analysis of a given object. Kant’s universal moral principle is the target here. To deconstruct Kant’s universal moral principle is to show that such a principle is not complete, nor can it be complete. Any attempt to bring closure to a system is characterized by an exclusion of others. For Gates, Kant’s moral theory and his understanding of rationality applied only to white, male Europeans.
Categorical imperative, in the ethics of Immanuel Kant, a rule of conduct that is unconditional or absolute for all agents. For further discussion of the role of the categorical imperative in Kant’s moral philosophy, see Immanuel Kant: The Critique of Practical Reason and Ethics: The Continental tradition from Spinoza to Nietzsche: Kant. Read More on This Topic. Kant. His distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives. He called any action based on desires a hypothetical imperative, meaning The Editors of Encyclopaedia BritannicaThis article was most recently revised and updated by Brian Duignan, Senior Editor. Learn More in these related Britannica articles: ethics: Kant. His distinction “Can a Philosophy of Race Afford to Abandon the Kantian Categorical Imperative?” JOURNAL of SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY, Vol. 33 No. 1, Spring 2002, 17–32. Whereas most criticisms are aimed at the formulation of universal law and the formula of autonomy, our analysis here will focus on the formula of an end in itself and the formula of the kingdom of ends, since we have already addressed the problem of universality. Some feminists and philosophers of race have found this abstract notion of rational beings problematic because they take it to mean that rationality is necessarily white, male, and European. 33 Hence, the systematic union of rational beings can mean only the systematic union of white, European males. I find this interpretation of Kant’s moral theory quite puzzling.