



BOOK REVIEW

Huaping Lu-Adler, *Kant, Race, and Racism: Views from Somewhere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. pp. xvi + 401. ISBN 9780197685211 (hbk) \$110.00

In the last two decades, a lot of ink has been spilt over Kant's writings on race. The commentary ranges from the biographical (was Kant racist, in what sense, at what point, and is the question even tenable non-anachronistically?) to the conceptual (how Kant's race-thinking might intersect with his theoretical and practical philosophies, if at all), to the interpretive (how to square anthropological/teleological and critical/transcendental modes of thought), to the contextual (situating Kant's racial theory within the period's intellectual and political currents), to the disciplinary (what do we do with this?). Its span is predictably broad, from a defensive insistence that Kant's racial theory has no bearing on his 'real' Critical philosophy to treating the critical project as irretrievably impugned by his Eurocentrism.

The debate has moved through a few phases, beginning in the late 1990s and early 2000s when writings by Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, Charles Mills, Robert Bernasconi, Mark Larrimore, Thomas Hill and Bernard Boxill, Allen Wood, and Robert Loudon put Kant's racial theory on philosophy's map. Next was Pauline Kleingeld's 2007 postulation of Kant's 'second thoughts' on race, which sparked lively exchanges on his race-thinking's relation to his late-life cosmopolitanism and to his views on empire, slavery, and colonialism.

Views from Somewhere marks a new stage in these debates. This is a landmark book that is both unavoidable and indispensable for anyone keen to think or write about Kant and race. Quite simply, if you have something to say on the subject, it will now have to be in relation to what Lu-Adler has written here. And what she has written is nothing short of breathtaking in its scope, ambition, and originality. Let me explain what I mean by each of these.

In terms of scope, *Views from Somewhere* resets the exegetical bar in its meticulous reconstruction of the historical and intellectual contexts surrounding Kant's treatments of race. Chapter 4 traces the evolution of natural history, from Bacon and Boyle in the seventeenth century through the later works of Linnaeus and Buffon, within which Kant situated his account of race. Chapter 3 tracks his writings on race through his own corpus and in relation to his shifting philosophical commitments, from desultory observations in the 1750s to his burgeoning views as a 'philosophical naturalist' (p. 121), to the race essays of the 1770s and 1780s, to the theoretical sophistication of the third *Critique*. Lu-Adler is not, of course, the first to analyse Kant's racial theory in relation to the period's biological sciences, on one hand, and critical system, on the other – exemplary work by Bernasconi, Stella Sandford, Alix Cohen, and Jennifer Mensch comes to mind. But her treatment is especially wide-ranging and persistently attentive to the limits of Kant's claims about race (concerning the epistemic capacities of pragmatic anthropology, physical geography,

and Critical philosophy, as distinctive forms of inquiry) as well as her own (in, for instance, carefully demarcating the racist and racialist dimensions of Kant's raciology – pp. 54–74). By interpreting Kant's approach to race from the standpoint of an investigator of nature (*Naturforscher*), Lu-Adler draws a consistent through line across four decades of race-writings, ties them to his Critical philosophy, and reconciles – to the extent that they can be – the teleological and transcendental forms of judgement at whose juncture humanity sits. This is as careful, comprehensive, and compelling a treatment of Kant's writings on race as I have encountered.

In terms of ambition, *Views from Somewhere* performs the felicitous task of pushing past the literature's central impasse: that is, of determining whether or not Kant was racist, in what sense, at what point, and with what implications. Lu-Adler moves the needle in two ways. First, she shows the ready compatibility of Kant's racial exceptionalism and moral universalism as claims concerning distinctive 'domain[s] of application' (p. 51). Second, she suggests these are not the right questions to ask at all. Rather than speculate on what might lurk in Kant's heart of hearts, an attitudinal and inevitably speculative question, we ought to conceptualise racism in *ideological* terms, as a set of social practices and beliefs upholding the uneven distribution of social goods and maintaining the privilege of some groups over others (p. 279). Drawing on an innovative synthesis of Tommie Shelby's and Sally Haslanger's accounts of ideology, Chapters 1 and 2 reconfigure the terms of discussion. Instead of broaching the unanswerable question of what Kant *really* thought about particular races, we should focus on 'what roles he, as a social actor, might have played in shaping the beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, and habits of mind of other relevant agents' (p. 96). What is significant is not Kant's own beliefs or the particular contents of his raciology. It is his capacity, as an influential philosopher, public figure, and teacher, to produce and disseminate racist ideologies shaping present and future social relations. By 'writing and lecturing repeatedly about race', Lu-Adler avers that Kant 'made himself a crucial part of the "semiotic net," to borrow Haslanger's term, underpinning the incipient formation of modern racist ideology' (p. 100). This shifts the terrain, attending to the *effects* of Kant's views rather than their substance or motivation.

Finally, in terms of originality, *Views from Somewhere* is a marvellously genre-busting text that reaches well beyond Kant himself. To begin with, as the introduction and 'forward-looking' conclusion stipulate, the book is driven by antiracist commitments. The interpretive work deliberately serves the broader purpose of showing how philosophers might redress racism within the discipline. Charles Mills' influence looms large here, particularly in Lu-Adler's 'programmatic ideas' on 'how we might move forward with Kant's philosophy' and in her reflections on the normative and pedagogical aims of a 'liberal Kantian scholar' (pp. 335–7). This is a self-consciously motivated piece of philosophy, in the best possible sense. Chapter 5 also ventures outside Kantian territory, pressing Lu-Adler's 'ideological' approach into an analysis of the racial dynamics in two German novellas of the period. This lucidly captures how Kantian 'race concepts [. . .] may be used as symbolic anchors for how one orients oneself and relates to others in a world where powers and resources are unequally distributed along racial lines' (p. 245). Chapter 6 stretches still further into disciplinary and pedagogical questions raised by histories of Western philosophy. While the book's linkages between the exclusionary features of Kant's

philosophical history and those of the discipline are, to me, somewhat tenuous, the larger point concerning the racial character of canon construction remains.

All these achievements, of course, come at a cost. From the textual standpoint, by subsuming Kant's race-thinking under the schema of natural philosophy from the 1750s to the 1780s, Lu-Adler risks smoothing out important conceptual shifts from the 1770s. The book suggests a consistent parsing of moral philosophy, pragmatic anthropology, and physical geography under the umbrella of Kant's natural philosophy. These comprise three 'levels of discourse' (p. 71) addressing a single concept of humanity at different levels of abstraction – as, respectively, rational agents, imperfectly realised free-acting agents, and spatio-temporally located agents. Physical geography thus provides information about 'racial and other purported human differences', while pragmatic anthropology considers humanity 'only as a species, in abstraction from the concrete, geographically varied conditions of human existence' (p. 72).

This does not seem quite right, for two reasons. First, while Kant's pragmatic anthropology is undoubtedly oriented by a (regulative) teleology of human progress, it does not operate in abstraction from concrete conditions of existence. It aims precisely to investigate how embodied rational agents might integrate their moral ends *in light* of those conditions. The conditions do not belong to a different order of investigation – to geography – but are themselves the object of pragmatic anthropology. Geography and anthropology do not treat the same subject at different levels of abstraction but different subjects altogether. Each answers distinctive questions and speaks to distinctive facets of human existence, and each remains contained within distinctive epistemic limits. Second, the book's emphasis on natural philosophy's continuity as an explanatory framework obscures significant transformations in Kant's race-thinking in the mid-1770s. In this period, he pulled his investigations of physical geography and pragmatic anthropology apart, advanced the theoretical architecture scaffolding his mature racial theory, waded into controversies in the biological sciences, and began developing the teleological standpoint anchoring his philosophy of history. These distinguish Kant's earlier *race-thinking* from his later racial *theory*. Where his perorations on race from the 1750s and 1760s are mostly borrowed, unsystematic, and limited by physical geography's remit (as a descriptive endeavour), the racial theory evolving out of the 1770s has a different conceptual basis grounded in natural history (an explanatory endeavour) and teleological judgement.

A second set of questions touches on treating racism in ideological terms, rather than as a matter of individual intentionality. I am entirely persuaded that we should address Kant's role in perpetuating racist ideology but less so that we should 'move beyond' the 'individualistic or atomistic approach' (p. 77). Despite our inability to peer into Kant's heart of hearts, there are good reasons to *also* analyse his views of race. The trouble is that if we set aside his intentions and read his racial theory only in relation to its ideological function, it is not clear why we should care about Chapters 3 and 4's expository work, which so carefully connects it to Kant's interlocutors and Critical philosophy. In fact, it is not clear why we should care about Kant at all, beyond his being an especially well-positioned propagandist. If we are solely concerned with Kant's role as an ideologist, the *contents* of his race-thinking dissolve into irrelevancy.

All that matters is that he had a bigger pulpit from which to spread racially problematic views than those of lesser figures such as Blumenbach, Buffon, or Meiners. We end up with a death-of-the-author kind of reading, to which Lu-Adler comes close on pages 102, 254, and 334, where she designates Kant's intentions as 'indeterminable but also irrelevant' (p. 102). The book's resistance to the 'atomistic' approach generates a tension between reading Kant as philosopher and as exponent – between the 'representational' account of race in Chapters 3 and 4 and its 'ideological' treatment in Chapter 5. But surely, those must be connected. Critics fight over Kant's racial theory because they are invested in the *substance* of his theoretical corpus. It only makes sense to care about how race impacts his moral philosophy if one imagines that that philosophy might impart valuable insight into our current condition.

Finally, a question about the book's anti-racism. If one's priority is to advance anti-racism, why adopt Kantian liberalism as the framework to do it? Interpreting Kant and furthering anti-racism are both worthwhile enterprises, but it is not clear that the former has particular traction for the latter. Lu-Adler shows how a suitably modified Kantian liberalism can be made *compatible* with antiracist politics, but it is not clear what it *adds* to them or why these are the resources one should appeal to. The book advocates a liberalism based on corrective justice and reparations. But claims to racial redress have long emanated from more radical sources – Du Bois, Fanon, Naoroji – so I am not sure what the liberal footwork contributes. Why not instead turn to philosophical traditions outside not just Kantianism but the hegemonic canon of Western philosophy whose exclusionary tendencies are so sharply exposed in Chapter 6? If at least part of philosophy's racial myopia is sustained by its self-referentiality, why not disregard disciplinary borders and consider less familiar vantage points?

These are, of course, provocations drawn from *Views from Somewhere's* own insights; it is a measure of the book's success that it invites us to reach beyond it. In its totality, *Views from Somewhere* exemplifies what philosophy might be: publicly minded, politically conscious, and pedagogically self-reflexive, without for that giving up on argumentative exactitude, analytical rigour, and textual sensitivity. It is not uncommon for reviews to conclude, after the obligatory complaints, with the chestnut that no book can be all things. This one comes close.

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