

The Darkness at the Heart of the Enlightenment: Kant's Racism ("Philosophy is not to be found in the whole Orient")

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 This paper focuses on the privileged status enjoyed by Kant in the **Enlightenment** while ironically exploring the key role played by racism in Kant's thoughts. It attempts to show that Kant through his racism has pioneered a new paradigm of epistemology, of what constitutes "proper/authentic" knowledge in Philosophy¹ and Science for the Age of Modernity. His racism introduces a hierarchy of epistemologies, with Modern Western Epistemology on the pedestal marked "superior/proper" on the one hand and non-European/non-Western systems of knowledge marked down as "inferior/sub-standard" on the other. As we shall show later, the philosophers which followed in his footsteps included the following: Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Derrida and Ryle. This hierarchical epistemological relationship is today called Coloniality or the Colonial Matrix of Power – see, for instance Mignolo (2008, 2011, 2015, 2021a and 2021b); Mignolo and Walsh (2018). In other words, Coloniality is defined in terms of the belief that Western knowledge, whose apotheosis is Western Philosophy is the only system of knowledge or expression of rationality in the world, and that it occupies the top of a hierarchy of knowledges (as will be shown is Kant's view in this discussion). Historically, Western Philosophy and knowledge followed military might or show of force in one form or other, such as achieved under British Imperialism.² This process of military strength and superiority resulted in many cases in the establishment of either formal colonies or informal colonies (China, being an instance of the latter). As such, colonialism and Coloniality marched hand in hand. However, even when empires, such as the British Empire, had been formally dismantled by 1997, the perception of Western knowledge superiority may yet form part of the mind-set of the former colonised Others. In other words, Coloniality has been internalised by non-Western Others.³
- 1.2 I would like here to spell out the relationship between Modern Western Philosophy and racism in Kant's writings where his concept of racism may be implicated in three different

¹ For the purpose of this discussion, I shall confine myself to Philosophy alone and ignore Science for two reasons: (a) limitation of space; (b) Science as theory and practice is embedded within a philosophical framework, with the framework changing historically from one period to another. For instance, European medieval science was conducted within the philosophical framework of Aristotelianism whilst Chinese science down the millennia was conducted within the framework of *Yinyang* philosophy as presented by this well-known symbol:



In the pair of polar contrasts, *yin* and *yang* are simply regarded as different, but equal, and not that *yang* is superior to *yin* and *yin* is inferior to *yang*. The polar contrasts complement each other, forming a harmonious Whole.

² See Laycock, 2012 and Estes, 2012. The numbers mentioned by Laycock may be contested but they do give an indication of the prevalence of British or English military might and presence, whether fleeting or more permanent.

³ This is the Coloniality undercurrent which could have impelled Mahbubani, 2001/2018 to use the provocative title, *Can Asians Think?* He first used that title in an article published in *The National Interest*, No. 52, Summer 1998. In a nutshell, he put it as follows in 1998, repeated in the 2018 re-publication of the article: "The most painful thing that happened to Asia was not the physical but the mental colonisation. Many Asians (including I fear, many of my ancestors from South Asia) began to believe that Asians were inferior beings to the Europeans. Only this could explain how a few thousand British could control a few hundred million people in South Asia. If I am allowed to make a controversial point here, I would add that this mental colonisation has not been completely eradicated in Asia, and many Asian societies are still struggling to break free." (2018 Edition, 19-20)

May I be so bold as to say that this paper is an attempt to expose a crucial provenance of "this mental colonisation", that source being none other than the darkness at the heart of the 18th century European Enlightenment Project itself.

ways: First, Modern Western Philosophy necessarily embodies racism. This is **Grand Intellectual Racism**, the crucial sense, alluded to, for instance, in Mignolo as well as van Norden (2017a and 2017b). Second, Kant's version of Modern Western Philosophy, as a racist paradigm of knowledge, excludes non-European systems of knowledges on the grounds that rationality is a matter of skin pigmentation, the whiter the skin colour of a people, the more rational they are – this is **Systematic Colour Racism** which amounts to a version of Pseudo-scientific Racism. Third, Kant is shown also to have made common-or-garden racist remarks against Chinese people (amongst others), remarks which ordinary racists on the streets who are not part of the intelligentsia, not especially well educated are prone to make or are associated with – this is **Common Street Racism**.

1.3 I need to pause here to recount an episode from my biography to reinforce the charge of racism made here against Kant. In the early 1960s, as a young philosopher at the University of Singapore, I was awarded a Commonwealth scholarship for two years to study for the BPhil degree in philosophy at Oxford. Professor Gilbert Ryle (author of *The Concept of Mind*) who, using the language of today's university administration would be called the Director of Studies of such a degree programme. In that capacity, I got a letter from him requesting me to see him in his study in Magdalen College, of which he was a Fellow. I duly knocked on his door on the appointed day and time. The door was not fully shut. Hence having knocked, I proceeded to push it open to let myself in. To my immense surprise, he did not greet me with "Hello", "Good morning" or "Come in". Instead, he said by way of greeting me with this remark: "There is no such thing as Chinese philosophy" or words to such effect. I was gob-smacked and puzzled but as I was savvy enough not to contest his utterance, he just dropped the subject matter once I had entered the room, and the meeting was confined to bureaucratic, administrative issues to make me aware that the programme had two parts to it, the submission of a dissertation and the sitting of three papers at a written examination at the end of the two years of study. So mystified was I by his remark that I spent the next forty years, if not more, trying to work out the provenance of that thought. I finally tracked it down to Kant whose dictum was: "Philosophy is not to be found in the whole Orient". In all likelihood, Ryle was just simply recycling Kant's verdict. The recycling of this mantra turned out to have a long history, beginning with Hegel, followed by Husserl, Heidegger, then Ryle himself to be taken up later by Derrida.⁴

1.4 Of the philosophers just mentioned who joined with Kant in his denigration of Chinese Philosophy, as far as I can tell, Ryle is associated with only Grand Intellectual Racism as outlined above, not with Systematic Colour Racism and certainly not with Common Street Racism. Ryle was known to admit foreign students for postgraduate degree programmes in Oxford from the continents of Africa, Asia and elsewhere whom he treated with respect and kindness on a personal level.⁵ Husserl, on the other hand, appears to uphold Grand Intellectual Racism.⁶ Like Kant, Heidegger could be indicted of all three varieties, although towards the end of WWII, he wrote a rather curious piece using *The Zhuangzi* as his starting point.⁷ Hegel has made remarks to make him fall into Systematic Colour

⁴ Derrida's contribution to this long-standing tradition of sneering at Chinese philosophy will be taken up in some detail later.

⁵ Michael Kremer, University of Chicago in private communication, has said (February 2022) he is working on a biography of Ryle, if I understand him correctly.

⁶ See Yu, 2019; Gros, 2021.

⁷ See Heubel, 2018.

Racism and Common Street Racism⁸ but one could not be too sure that he would qualify under Grand Intellectual Racism in his dialectical philosophy, although a case has been made that he would.⁹

- 1.5 Bearing this preliminary outline in mind, let me go on to address the following inter-related themes in the detailed critical examination of Kant's thoughts over his lifetime: What is The Enlightenment or The Age of Reason? Why did it happen at the time it did? Why did Europe at that time need The Enlightenment? Where did Europe get its Enlightenment ideas from? Or which source inspired them to work out such ideas? What was the line of transmission in general? What was the precise line of transmission for Kant? The role of the **Jesuits** and later that of the **trio of China lovers (Leibniz-Wolff-Bilfinger)** will be looked at. What was the impact of the Chinese Philosophy Tradition on Enlightenment thought in general? What was their impact on Kant, and on Kant's **Racism**?
- 1.6 I shall be arguing that the three forms of racism identified make Kant a prime upholder of Coloniality.

2 Where Did Europe Get Its Enlightenment Ideas From?

- 2.1 Where did Europe get its Enlightenment ideas? Did it draw only from indigenous intellectual resources to do so? For Kant, and since Kant, the answer was and has been "yes" – the Enlightenment was an all-European project, pure and simple. But as events and evidence during Kant's own lifetime and the generation before (such as Leibniz) show, this is a historical fabrication. However, once Kant had pronounced on the matter, Western philosophical/intellectual history was re-written to conform with the "all-European native model", until of late – literally the detailed work on the matter came to light, as far as I can ascertain, in English, only two or three decades ago when the record was, to an extent, put straight.¹⁰
- 2.2 If the Enlightenment did look elsewhere for new ideas and inspiration, where did these come from? Conveniently, here entered the Jesuits who began their intensive religious activities in India and China, with the real prize waiting in the capital of China (Pekin/Beijing), the anticipated and fervently prayed for conversion of the Emperor of the Ming dynasty to Christianity/Catholicism.¹¹ Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) could be said to form the first wave of the Jesuit mission to China, gaining a foothold in the mainland of the Middle Kingdom in 1583 before eventually settling in Pekin in 1601. He never left China to return to Europe – he stayed for nearly thirty years, and became an "honorary Chinese", with the emperor in the end granting him a plot in the capital city for his burial. This mission, beginning in earnest with Ricci's arrival in 1601 lasted till the Qing Kangxi emperor banned the Jesuits from China in 1721, in response to a decree of Pope Clement XI in 1704, which condemned the Chinese practice Europeans called "ancestor worship"

⁸ He said that Black Africans were a "race of children that remain immersed in a state of naiveté". In *The Philosophy of Right* (1821), he claimed that there is a 'right of heroes' to colonise those who lived in "a condition of savagery and unfreedom" to lead them into progressive world of European Enlightenment. That work is full of such comments and remarks.

⁹ Alpert, 2020 argues that "colonial racism informs the very concept of dialectics", a historical entwinement which must be recognised for what it is and should not be overlooked. Adegbindin, 2015 argues that Hegel does qualify as he "denies rationality to Africans".

¹⁰ The philosopher and historian of ideas, Robert Bernasconi has in the last several decades done an immense amount of work (in English) on Kant's contribution to the study of race; his writings have inspired the present discussion of the issues raised by his work in Kantian scholarship. Kant's preoccupation with race was lifelong beginning as early as 1764 and ending in 1792.

¹¹ See Schönfeld, 2006a, 72; Standaert, 2002.

as pagan and totally unacceptable to Christian-Catholic beliefs. The period of contact lasted well over a hundred years, spanning the last four decades of the Ming dynasty (1364-1644) and into the first seventy years or so of Manchu Qing rule (1644-1911). The goal of such a mission is too well known to be rehearsed here, nor is it necessary to detail what the priests took with them to China, namely, Western scientific learning and gadgets to impress the elites, especially the emperor, to pave the way, ultimately, to accepting their real gift to the Chinese, namely, the Christian-Catholic religion.

- 2.3 However, what is not perhaps so well-known is that this intellectual exchange was not a one-way street, but a two-way transaction, as the Jesuit missionaries could be said to have started a university discipline which, today, is called sinology – the scholarly study of Chinese culture and civilisation. They sent letters back to Europe about Chinese society as they encountered it, as well as published matters pertaining to Chinese culture and civilisation, including its science and its philosophy. The most relevant to this study are the works of Philippe Couplet (1622-93),¹² François Noël (1651-1729), published in 1711 his volume containing quotations of Chinese philosophers relating to their notion of “the Supreme Being”, their duties in family/social life, their understanding of the rites honouring their ancestors. Antoine Gaubil’s (1689-1759), Jean-Joseph-Marie Amiot’s (1718-93), and Pierre-Martial Cibot’s (1727-80) were responsible for a huge collection in 16 volumes which dealt with a wide range of topics and subjects covering music, literature, history, the sciences, philosophy, significantly using Chinese primary sources in many cases. There is also the amazing work of Jean-Baptiste du Halde (1674-1743) in four volumes published in 1735 about the geography, history, politics of China; the work was amazing because he never went to China. He simply extracted, collated and compiled the writings of 27 other fellow Jesuits.¹³
- 2.4 These volumes apart, another very significant source of information came from the letters written by the Jesuits and published by them in different editions from 1702 to 1776. These were no mere tittle-tattle about the work of missionaries abroad but were seen as serious ethnographic material. Du Halde’s volumes based on them won the praise of Voltaire and Montesquieu. Indeed, Leibniz even said that the contribution from the mission in China should be considered a very important contribution to the Enlightenment and a constituent part of that project, for its objectivity, its precision and the extensive range of subjects covered. Du Halde had also included translations of actual Chinese texts, including essays written by Song dynasty scholars. These translated texts turned out to influence literary figures, political activists as well as journalists, opinion-makers, the “commentariat” in the West, and in that way, influenced the course of political development in England and the USA, amongst others.
- 2.5 These works, constituting a clear line of transmission from the Jesuits to Europe would have been available to Kant. As he was a philosopher, it would be reasonable to assume that he would have been exposed to the understanding of the Chinese Philosophy Tradition thus transmitted as well as to the writings of that famous trio of German China admirers, namely, Leibniz-Wolff-Bilfinger.

¹² He edited a volume, with a long introduction, comprising of the translation of three canonical *Rujia* texts in 1687, called *Confucius sinarum philosophus/Confucius, the Chinese Philosopher*.

¹³ See Camus, 2007 for details of painstaking scholarly works, including dictionaries and grammars.

3 What Was the Impact of the Chinese Philosophy Tradition on The Enlightenment?

- 3.1 How did Europe receive ancient Chinese philosophy, science, literature and other cultural ideas, concepts and practices? One needs to divide (western) Europe into the French *philosophes* and the German thinkers.
- 3.2 The French were keen to regard the Chinese as an attractive alternative model of society against which they could test their own ideas/hypotheses about the new Europe. What did they find so attractive in this alternative model? Well, it was obviously because they realised that the Chinese had very much earlier on in their history undertaken their own Enlightenment project, so to speak, which began during the Eastern Zhou dynasty, if not earlier, namely, the so-called Spring and Autumn (770-476 BCE) and Warring States (475-221 BCE) periods. Their elites in their texts had long made it known that a supernatural entity called God/god(s) was neither possible nor relevant to the human project of organising society at any level, whether political, administrative, military, moral and spiritual, cultural and aesthetic, and so on. In other words, for them, humans must simply use their own reasoning faculty, given the type of consciousness they uniquely possessed, to arrive at truths in all these domains of theory and practice. Chinese society, at least at the level of high theory and amongst the elites, that is, the educated, had since the Zhou dynasty (1046 BCE - 256 BCE) been secular; for them, too, secularism and human reason as the epistemological authority (not religious authority) went hand in hand. Hence, Chinese secular society beckoned like a beacon to the Europeans, especially the French; hence, too, the European Enlightenment conceived of secularism and Reason going hand in hand.
- 3.3 The French *philosophes* were all atheists, like their Chinese counterparts. However, the German philosophers and thinkers were more attached to theology – for instance, Leibniz was neither an atheist nor doubter of the faith. Furthermore, religion in Germany had a stronger grip on people than in France – the form of Protestantism which was in the ascendancy in Prussia at that time was Pietism and as this essay will show later its reach was extensive including academia. Certainly, the trio Leibniz-Wolff-Bilfinger did not devote their energies so much to secularism as to the pursuit of Chinese philosophical ideas in three other domains, namely, in the dynamic conception of Nature, in the “dialectics” (the harmonious Wholism of polar contrasts such as *yin* and *yang* through the concept of *Yinyang*), in Humanism/Reason. Leibniz (1646-1716) was much preoccupied with the first two domains while Christian Wolff (1679-1754) and Georg Bernhard Bilfinger were with all three, though Bilfinger was the most systematic and sustained. The first had implications for science *via* the interface between philosophy and cosmology; the second had methodological implications for doing science and philosophy; the third concerned moral philosophy.
- 3.4 Kant learned from Bilfinger to advance his own thinking in all three domains of his own philosophy, cosmology, science and moral philosophy. In the very briefest of terms, one can say that Kant sided with Leibniz in accepting the Chinese conception of Nature as dynamic against the Cartesian and later Newtonian one that Nature is static and mechanistic – to put things very simplistically, motion (except for Newton’s awkward business about gravitation) could be understood in terms of the Billiard-ball Model, of one billiard ball hitting against another billiard ball, thereby imparting motion to the second ball, with the chain reaction carrying on. Leibniz held that there was a live-force (the term used

today would be energy) in the universe against the dead force (momentum) advocated by the rival mechanistic view.

3.5 Kant began his career by siding with Leibniz but then ran into trouble, not as serious as that faced by Wolff and Bilfinger, but trouble nevertheless.¹⁴ He failed to get the equivalent of the Master's degree as well as his post-doctoral qualification (*habilitation*) because the dynamic conception of Nature had implications unacceptable and unwelcome to Pietist theology. As a result, he got nowhere trying for an academic appointment, never mind a chair in philosophy which he had been expecting to get with his numerous works. Kant had to disappear into the "wilderness" obtaining some sort of humble living as assistant instructor and assistant librarian at Königsberg Castle, where he had plenty of time to mull over his failures to get to where he really wanted to go. In his nadir, so he said, he read Bilfinger's 1728 essay which showed him the way out of his intellectual impasse. In that essay, Bilfinger set out the Chinese "dialectics", the harmony of polar contrasts, such as the *yinyang* pair. He reconciled the static Newtonian worldview with the dynamic conception of Leibniz. However, in his public face, he praised Newton sky-high. He duly got his chair in metaphysics and logic and then entered his golden decade, the Critical Decade (1781-1790), from whence he was acclaimed either as the greatest Enlightenment philosopher or indeed, even the greatest philosopher of all times, out-shining Plato, and Aristotle. Yet strange to tell, after the Critical Decade, in the last decade of his life, he returned to his pre-Critical days of the Leibnizian/Chinese conception of dynamic Nature. Hence, there was continuity rather than rupture between his first work to his late work, *Opus Postumum*.¹⁵ If so, one could perhaps be justified in concluding that Kant was prepared to compromise his intellectual integrity to gain and retain a place in orthodox academia, by suppressing his deeply held conviction that Nature was dynamic, not static. In mitigation, one could say that he was just learning from the experience of Wolff and Bilfinger that capitulation to Newtonian mechanism and Pietist theology was the only way to avoid persecution and to secure academic survival.

3.6 Kant was keen to acknowledge Bilfinger, but a puzzle arises: why did he not acknowledge the provenance of Bilfinger's own writings, of which Bilfinger made no mystery, but openly proclaimed for all to see that he got them from the Chinese *via* the Jesuit transmission? It is not easy to work out a satisfactory answer other than to say that Kant had already become convinced that Chinese thought was sub-standard and therefore, it was best not to attribute Bilfinger's "dialectics" to the Chinese. This answer itself raises another puzzle – what was the basis of such a conviction? There is no doubt that Kant was convinced of the inferiority of Chinese thinking as shown by what he said about Confucian morality, that it was nothing more than an empirical body of experience, custom and practices, the exemplary actions or otherwise of virtuous or villainous agents down the ages:

...their morals and philosophy are nothing more than a daily mixture of miserable rules that everybody knows already by himself", "that the entirety of Confucian

¹⁴ Wolff for his China-speech of 1721 was sacked from his university post at Halle in 1724, given 48 hours to quit Prussia on pain of death by hanging. When Wolff persisted in defending Chinese ideas (1726), he attracted more attacks. Eventually, he realised the only way to escape such relentless persecution was to recant, which he did, as he presumably felt he had no choice. (See Schönfeld, 2006a; Fuchs, 2006: "Asian accommodation over value, nature and law had become academically unacceptable".) Bilfinger, for his China-book of 1721, was also sacked from his university post at Tübingen, and had to leave, but was found a job by Wolff at the Academy at St Petersburg.

¹⁵For details in the key notions of this work, see Edwards and Schönfeld, 2006; Schönfeld, 2006b.

morals consists of ethical sayings that are intolerable because anyone can rattle them off.¹⁶

Kant pronounced that the Chinese were neither self-critical nor sophisticated enough in their thinking to work out how their actions could come to be guided by principles; hence they remained totally beyond the pale of the moral law. Their actions were the result of neither rational reflection nor respect for the moral law; they were simply blindly acting out of obedience to custom and practice. (See Reihman 2006, 58-59.) In the same text, Kant also offered a similar explanation for why the Chinese “never get very far in those sciences at which one arrives through concepts.” He held that “Philosophy is not to be found in the whole Orient”. The relevant passage cited by Ching, 1978 is reproduced here to give a fuller tenor of Kant’s tone:

Philosophy is not to be found in the whole Orient.... Their teacher Confucius teaches in his writings nothing outside a moral doctrine designed for the princes ... and offers examples of former Chinese princes ... But a concept of virtue and morality never entered the heads of the Chinese.

...

In order to arrive at an idea ... of the good [certain] studies would be required, of which [the Chinese] know nothing.¹⁷

3.7 Such sneering language, as above, is found in his *Physical Geography*, a collection of his lectures on geography which took place every summer between 1756 and 1796, a span of time which preceded before and ended after his Critical Period (1781- 1791).¹⁸

3.8 In *Observations on the Feeling for the Beautiful and Sublime* 1764 (OBS), Kant had this to say about other aspects of Chinese culture:

What trifling grotesqueries do the verbose and studied compliments of the Chinese contain! Even their paintings are grotesque and portray strange and unnatural figures such as are encountered nowhere in the world. They also have the venerable grotesqueries because they are of very ancient custom, and no nation in the world has more of these than this one. (AK 2: 252)

3.9 Kant, despite knowing about the Jesuit-Leibniz-Wolff-Bilfinger line of transmission, saw fit to sneer at and denounce the Chinese Philosophy Tradition. One may plausibly argue that Kant can be charged with Grand Intellectual Racism, arguably, the deepest and most cutting form of racism as it leaves modern Western civilisation standing on a pedestal as the sole successful candidate in the entire history of Humankind’s attempts to construct systems of knowledge. This, indeed, is a very bold claim.

¹⁶ Ching, 1978.

¹⁷ Ching, 1978 says the original text is from Kant, *Physical Geography* in Glasennapp, 104.

¹⁸ This volume of Kant’s work, from the bibliographical point of view, has a complex and complicated history; hence it has attracted scholarly controversies some of which still remain unresolved. The problems may be summarised quickly under two headings: first, the fact that Kant never wrote it himself, but that it was based on compilations of lecture notes taken by various students as Kant lectured the subject over forty years; second, although Kant sanctioned the Rink edition as the official version, nevertheless, scholars had/have found this edition to be unsatisfactory – see Stark, 2011a for a brief discussion. (The author will return to this issue towards the end of this essay.)

4 Dissecting Kant's Racism

- 4.1 So far, this study has made clear that in his climb up the academic ladder, Kant feared offending Newtonians and their mechanistic worldview, which could account for his hostility to the Chinese Philosophy Tradition and its concepts and ideas. One needs, however, to look at another aspect of Kant's corpus of work to account for his hostile attitude, and that is the role of racism concerning non-European others and their cultures which had a long history in his career of thinking. It is important to emphasise that racism is constitutive of Coloniality. Furthermore, we need to look at Kant's own role in the articulation and propagation of racist sentiments, ideas and concepts. As noted, I have posited Grand Intellectual Racism to be the deepest and most cutting form of racism; it is at the same time deeply entwined with Systematic Colour Racism as well as Common Street racism. All three forms mutually reinforce one another.
- 4.2 To see these varieties of racism at work, we have to refer back to Kant's *Physical Geography* (and to a lesser extent, his lectures on anthropology which ran at some stage parallel to those on geography). *Physical Geography* is significant, as those lectures lasted every summer for forty years, which demonstrated that the theme of race was a recurring one in Kant's thought, and not a one-off, said in haste and without reflection.
- 4.3 Below are examples of racist sentiment which could be found in Kant's writings over a long academic career:

In hot regions, people mature earlier in every sense, but do not reach the perfection of the temperate zones. Humanity is in its greatest perfection in the race of the whites. Yellow Indians have somewhat less talent. Negroes are far lower, and at the bottom lies a portion of the American peoples. (*Physical Geography* (AK 9:316)
In so far as Negroes have a capacity for culture it is only slave culture, while "the white race contains all impulses and talents in itself" (From lectures on Anthropology, AA, XXV/2, 1187; Bernasconi 2002, 148).

All the races will be wiped out (Americas and Negroes can not rule themselves. They are only good as slaves), except the Whites.... All the revolutions in the world have come from the white race. Our (ancient) history of humanity goes dependably on the white race..." (AK 15, 878-80).

Blacks, born slaves "... would be men without personality ..." (AA, VI, 214 – the introductory section of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, 1797; Bernasconi 2002, 152.)

...the fact that someone was completely black from head to toes was clear proof that what he said was stupid...(OBS 1973, 113)

- 4.4 The "evidence" above appeared to have been used as premises by Kant to build his scheme of Systematic Colour Racism, a form of pseudo-scientific racism which commits itself to a hierarchy of races, of which Whites occupy the topmost rung. Skin pigmentation was the fundamental determinant of race, with people who had the lightest skin colour (the White people) at the top and those with the darkest skin pigmentation (the Black people) at the bottom. Crucially, Kant correlated skin pigmentation with other moral and intellectual characteristics – the lighter the skin pigmentation the more superior such a people would be, and the darker the skin pigmentation, the more inferior (relative to White

people). To spell it out more frankly and brutally, white skin colour went hand in hand with the possession of talents/intelligence, black skin colour with their lack. People between these two extremes of skin colour possessed or lacked talents in proportion to the degree of skin pigmentation they possessed.

4.5 Mignolo 2018 (in Mignolo and Walsh) writes:

The mutation of colonial and imperial differences also transformed the racial configuration upon which both were created and manufactured. Once secularism displaced theology, racial configurations mutated from purity of blood and religious conflicts to skin color and “civilizing” ranking. Carolus Linnaeus’s descriptive classification of skin colors by continents (Yellow in Asia, Black in Africa, ed in America, and White in Europe) was taken up by Immanuel Kant, who metamorphosed Linnaeus’s descriptive classification into a racial ranking. Kant’s ranking mirrors the ranking that we saw in the maps of the seventeenth century. The reconfiguration of racism in turn served well to establish a racial world order based on colonial and imperial differences.

4.6 Kant was dead against inter-breeding of the races, as inter-breeding would wipe out characteristics peculiar and inherent in each race, such as its skin pigmentation as well as the characteristics of a moral and intellectual kind, which went with the skin pigmentation. Europeans breeding with either Native Americans or Blacks would degrade “the good race” without lifting up “the bad race” proportionately. “It is not good that they intermix, Spanish in Mexico” (AA, XV/2, 878/Bernasconi 2002, 154, 165n36). As the Whites contained “all impulses and talents”, race mixing would compromise those characteristics. “The Whites would be degraded. For not every race adopts the morals and customs of the Europeans” (Lectures in Anthropology, AA, XXV/2, 1187/ Bernasconi 2002, 158).

4.7 Kant also recruited Hume, recycling Hume’s remark that all people of colour were inferior to “the whites” (“Of National Characters” in *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* 1758)¹⁹ which Kant invoked twice in 1764 and 1792.

4.8 Given the kind of evidence cited above, could Kant be defended on the grounds that the reader has misconstrued the nature of Kant’s writing, failing to distinguish between a “racial project” and a “racist racial project”? On such a view, the former is simply an empirical account or record of the racist beliefs/attitudes of the people being studied, whereas the latter amounts to approving and advocating them.²⁰ However, in his racist remarks about black people, Jews and Chinese, they were cast as universal statements about all black people/Jews/Chinese without regard to qualification. This shows that his remarks could not be understood as (false) empirical assertions but as an expression of his own racist sentiments/attitudes to non-White Others.²¹ In other words, Kant could be said to be guilty not only of Grand Intellectual Racism but also of Systematic Colour Racism, which amounts to a kind of pseudo-scientific racism, as already observed. The concept of race was crucial to his thinking but Kant was aware that it did not correspond

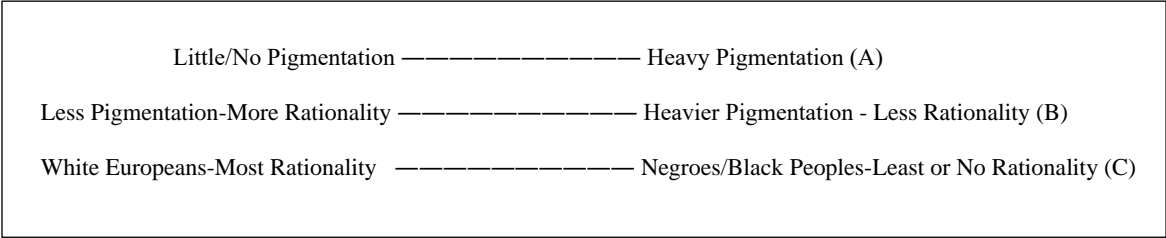
¹⁹ It would be fair to charge Hume as guilty of Grand Intellectual Racism and also of Common Street Racism although he appeared not to have embarked on Systematic Colour Racism.

²⁰ See Mikkelsen 2013, 35-36; 3, 301n7 where he writes: “A racial project can be defined as *racist* if and only if it *creates or replaces structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race...*”

²¹ Kant’s anti-Semitic remarks can be found in Section 46 of “On Mental Deficiencies in the Cognitive Power” in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* about Jewish merchants; his anti-Chinese comment about Chinese merchants as cited by Reihman 2006, 63n18.

to anything in the world, although it was necessary from the viewpoint of natural history as constructed by himself in terms of skin pigmentation.²² He appeared to have posed this question to himself: what could be the purpose of the changes in skin pigmentation generating different races? He implied the following answer: it could be the lot of the Whites whose skin pigmentation rendered them the most perfect bearer of rationality, intelligence and superiority to bring the world out of chaos into order, to deliver enlightenment to and impose Reason on the darker skinned inferior races who were of themselves incapable of Reason and Enlightenment. In other words, it is to play the White Man's burden, to save the world.

4.9 Kant's concept of Systematic Colour Racism/Pseudo-scientific Racism could be presented as follows when Spectrum A is superimposed on Spectrum B to create Spectrum C as shown in Text-box 1 below:



Text-Box 1

As the Chinese are pigmented, occupying say the mid-point of Spectrum A, they lack, not so much total rationality as Black peoples but sufficient rationality to be capable of doing philosophy, as philosophy embodies the highest expression of rationality in the human species.

4.10 From the exploration so far, one may conclude that Systematic Colour Racism is crucial to Kant's notion of Grand Intellectual Racism, as the latter follows from the former, although, all three forms of racism, Grand Intellectual Racism, Systematic Colour Racism and Common Street Racism are intimately entwined and mutually reinforcing.

5 Kant's moral universalism and racist racial project: are they reconcilable?

5.1 Kant is celebrated for his celebration of the use of reason in moral thinking/ethical theorising. In politics, he is celebrated for his liberal internationalism. Yet Kant could be charged with having undertaken a "racist racial project" and not simply a "racial project." As earlier clarified, a "racial project" in this context implies that it is an empirical enquiry about racist attitudes and sentiments amongst people, whereas a "racist racial project" is one which articulates and postulates racist attitudes and sentiments systematically. Is there then a way by which Kant's universalism in his moral philosophy and liberal internationalism in his political philosophy can be reconciled? The answer is yes, if Kant

²² AA VIII, 163; TPP of 1788.

is interpreted as undertaking simply a “racial project” but the answer is more complicated if the answer is otherwise.

- 5.2 Four responses may be distinguished: Deny any ultimate inconsistency, by claiming that in the end Kant had changed his mind later in his career about the matter of race.²³ Accept that there was inconsistency, but explain it away by saying that the racist assertions have nothing to do with the universalism of his moral philosophy – the former is just a distraction, which perhaps Kant, as a serious philosopher had, nevertheless, got to do to earn his keep by holding on to students who wanted something more “lightweight” than heavy stuff in “real” philosophy. Hence Kant indulged in populist lecturing while keeping the serious stuff to his Critical works which is the “real” Kant. Argue that Kant is inconsistent; but all the same, the universalist strand is the dominant one.²⁴ Finally, argue that Kant is a consistent egalitarian as the racist strand trumps the universalist strand.²⁵
- 5.3 The denial of ultimate inconsistency, the first response, does not survive critical scrutiny as it makes a special pleading on behalf of Kant’s three Critiques which has far-reaching consequences for the history of philosophy. If accepted, this would mean that any philosophical works in the Western Philosophy Tradition written before and after the three Critiques would have to be condemned as sub-standard as they do not and cannot conform to the “standards” of the Critiques. Plato, Aristotle, the whole ancient Greek tradition would have to be written off. The same fate would befall Hegel, Phenomenology, Positivism, Wittgenstein. Not only that, Aristotelianism of medieval philosophy would also have to be discounted. Another victim is the scholarship of “Arab” philosophers.²⁶ Without Arabic philosophy, the history of Western philosophy would not be as we know it today. However, Arabic philosophy would fall under the same axe as the Chinese Philosophy Tradition if the three Critiques remain on that pedestal of “knowledge.” Is there anyone in the real world of philosophy prepared to let their discipline bite the dust in this way?
- 5.4 In other words, given the evidence, one cannot deny the deep-seated nature of racism within the structure of Kant’s philosophical thinking in general and in his moral philosophy, in particular. Once this centrality is grasped, we do not need to spend more time on the second and third responses except to conclude that Kant was an inconsistent egalitarian. This conclusion is not surprising if one interprets Kant as constructing the project of the Modern Western Epistemological Paradigm/MWEP in which Grand Intellectual Racism, Systematic Colour Racism as a form of pseudo-scientific racism, and Common Street Racism are constitutive parts. Kant’s MWEP thus construed is his contribution to the project of Coloniality.

²³ Kleingeld, 2007 and Muthu, 2003 are representatives.

²⁴ Loudon, 2011a, 159, n117 says others see himself as upholding this position.

²⁵ Bernasconi, 2002; Mills, 2005; Brandt, 1991 may be said to be representatives.

²⁶ Al-Kindi (c 891-c873), born in Kufa and educated in Baghdad (under the Abbasid Caliphate) oversaw the translation of Greek scientific and philosophical texts into the Arabic language. He also wrote original treatises on aspects of philosophy ranging from metaphysics, ethics, logic, mathematics, psychology, medicine, pharmacology and so forth. He was a polymath. He functioned as a bridge between Hellenistic philosophy and Islamic thought in terms of natural theology. He laid the groundwork for those who followed such as Ibn Sina/Avicenna (980-1037), a Persian polymath, considered to one of the most significant thinkers of the Islamic Golden Age and a father of early modern medicine.

It is important to point out that this term “Arabic philosophy” simply refers to the fact that the *lingua franca* of scholarship in the Islamic world was Arabic and not that the philosophers themselves were Arabs in ethnic origin – they lived and worked in what today we would call Iran, Iraq, Uzbekistan. They were ethnically and linguistically diverse in their mother tongues and included Jews.

6 Conclusion

- 6.1 Kant did not pioneer Common Street Racism as many Western philosophers and other revered thinkers had done so before Kant and have done so since Kant. Hume, whom Kant admired, stands convicted as a racist precursor (in this sense) of Kant. Readers may be surprised to find that Einstein, acknowledged to be one of the greatest scientific intellects, if not the greatest of them all, as well as notable humanist and denouncer of racial inequality and discrimination confined racist remarks to his diary during his trip, east of Suez (Palestine, the rest of the Middle East, Ceylon/Sri Lanka, China and Japan) in the early 1920s.²⁷
- 6.2 However, unlike Hume, who might have implied Common Street Racism, Kant went further to construct Systematic Colour Racism, giving racism a form of pseudo-scientific basis. He did this by erecting his racist hierarchy on the criterion of skin pigmentation, linked to rationality, which in turn determines the moral and intellectual grading of the various peoples in the world. The people with the least pigmentation were the most brilliant and talented in all ways, and hence, fit to dominate those with more pigmentation. One could argue that makes Kant the pioneer of pseudo-scientific racism, as all attempts to construct “scientific racism” turn out to be pseudo-scientific, spuriously deploying “science” and its implied authority to hide and sustain what is effectively an explicitly political, ideological project. Indeed, I argue that such has been central to Coloniality.
- 6.3 Crucially, Kant also pioneered Modern Western Philosophy and Grand Intellectual Racism, which have been foundational to Coloniality, in the sense identified by Mignolo 2011 and 2018 (as “epistemic racism”) and by van Norden 2017a and 2017b; this is also expressed by Mahbubani first in 1998, later in 2001 as well as 2018. (Hume, too, is indicted on this count.)
- 6.4 It is plausible to argue that Kant was so engaged with racism (Grand Intellectual Racism, Systematic Colour Racism and Common Street Racism) that he seemed to have failed to notice the well-documented **Jesuit transmission** of knowledge between West and East under his very nose. This transmission was, in reality, a two-way, not one-way affair and thus could be said to have begun the academic discipline, we call sinology today. In Germany, the work of the Jesuits was carried on further by the trio **Leibniz-Wolff-Bilfinger**; as things turned out, Bilfinger could be cast as playing the lead role in the trio as his understanding of Chinese philosophy appeared to have influenced Kant in three key domains: the conception of dynamic nature, “dialectics” (harmony of opposites) and humanism, even though it is true that Kant did not see fit to give credit where credit was due.

²⁷ <https://www.history.com/news/albert-einstein-racist-xenophobic-views-travel-journal>. His travel diaries were published in English for the first time by Princeton University Press in 2018. His unflattering remarks about the “natives” he saw on his trip, however, did not include the Japanese who were spared. Not only were they spared, but Einstein also thought them both admirable and lovable: “Pure souls are nowhere else among people. One has to love and admire this country” – see Rosenkrantz, 2018; Roos, 2018. On the other hand, he described the Chinese as a “peculiar herd-like nation often more automatons than people.” “It would be a pity if these Chinese supplant all other races. ...For the likes of us the mere thought is unspeakably dreary.” What is at once most offensive as well as ludicrous and gratuitous is his remark about how Chinese men could possibly find their womankind appealing as sexual partners: “...I don’t understand what kind of fatal attraction Chinese women possess which enthral the corresponding men to such an extent that they are incapable of defending themselves against the formidable blessing of offspring”. A charitable interpretation would say that the above is evidence that Einstein is guilty only of Common Street Racism; however, a less charitable interpretation, could argue that the evidence is grounds for saying that he is on the way to being guilty of Grand Intellectual Racism. A people who was “often more automatons than people” could surely not rise to that highest level of rationality required for doing philosophy. Einstein might not have philosophy in mind but as a scientist he certainly would have science in the forefront of his consciousness.

- 6.5 The knowledge and information transmitted about the Chinese Philosophy Tradition, its science and culture were of such high quality that it provoked a profound response from European elites, affecting their thinking at numerous levels – philosophy, politics, and the inter-face between politics, culture, and philosophy. The Chinese Philosophy Tradition helped them to grope towards a new society based on secularism (at least in France, which fed into the French Revolution itself, and even today still has profound implications for the French nation in terms of its concept of *laïcité* whose implications for French society many Anglophone commentators fail today to grasp). The rise of secularism in general necessarily went hand in hand with an emphasis on the use of human reason as suggested by the alternative Chinese model, rather than theological concepts and religious institutions to order and conduct human affairs and human thinking.
- 6.6 In other words, as this paper has briefly shown, the ancient Chinese had long had their **Enlightenment**, as early as, if not earlier than the Eastern Zhou dynasty. By the time of the Spring and Autumn period, during which Kongzi/Confucius is said to have lived and taught, secularism had long been in place, as all the major philosophical texts of the period and later tended to be secular in orientation and humanist in character. The Chinese Philosophy Tradition, especially as found in Rujia (pioneered by Kongzi and his followers) is premised (implicitly or explicitly) on the repudiation of the existence of supernatural entities (such as God/gods), of theology as the epistemological/ metaphysical authority. Instead, it relies entirely on the powers of human reasoning alone assisted by observation of natural phenomena to arrive at its conception of Nature on the one hand, and of the good society, the good life, the good man/person on the other, as well as on the place of Humankind in relationship to the Cosmos.
- 6.7 Kant may justifiably be said to have systematically pioneered racism as part of Modernity. His view about racism had long preceded his Critical Period and continued after it; furthermore, he referred to it consistently in his summer lectures for forty years. He constructed a racist hierarchy of peoples based on a hierarchy of rationality which for Kant rests on a hierarchy of skin pigmentation. Nor was Kant averse to invoking Dualism in reinforcing his racist hierarchy as it suited him to use it in constructing such a hierarchy, although to be fair, he attempted to apply it in a slightly nuanced manner.
- 6.8 Racism is constitutive of not only of Modernity but also of Coloniality. Under the logic of Coloniality, the “cultural/epistemic Other” is necessarily inferior in all domains of their theory-and-practice, as they lack sufficient rationality, the highest level of which only the blondest type of the White European Male possesses.
- 6.9 Kant’s contempt for the Chinese Philosophy Tradition expressed as Grand Intellectual Racism is, therefore, not just a random sentiment from “the top of his head,” so to speak, but a long-held conviction. To labour a point, Kant’s poor opinion of the Chinese Philosophy Tradition was based on his undeniable Systematic Colour Racism which led him to regard the Chinese to be intellectually as well as morally inferior to white Europeans. **“Philosophy is not to be found in the whole Orient”** is but the conclusion of a long chain of deductive reasoning resting on racist premises. The chain of reasoning could also be applied to the ancient Greek philosophy tradition presided over by the two intellectual giants, Plato, and Aristotle who as southern Europeans would not be as light-skinned as Kant himself and, hence, their philosophy would and could not be as good as his three Critiques. In the same spirit, Arabic philosophy in the ancient Islamic world

tradition would have to be relegated to the same status as the Chinese Philosophy Tradition, as some of those philosophers were people whose skin pigmentation would not be as white as Southern Europeans, never mind that of Nordic Europeans.

- 6.10 Kant's strategy of emasculating/annihilating the "philosophical Other" was exceedingly successful, as he had begun a fashion in Modern Western Philosophy. His mantra was hymned by Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Gilbert Ryle, Derrida,²⁸ that is to say, through the next two centuries, namely, the 19th and the 20th. Of course, one would remind readers in case they need reminding, that these two centuries coincided with the rise of a series of industrial revolutions in the UK-Europe, when Europe's new economic might fuelled a new era in imperial history, this time in the age of steam, sailing much further afield than across the Atlantic, to the Middle East, India, South East Asia and the Far East, with European flags ruling the waves, imposing European/Western values – religious, political, social, economic, scientific, philosophical – through European/Western imperial military/economic might. Alas, Kant's strategy of Coloniality has left a very malignant legacy in Europe which can be felt even today in Germany. Of late, the co-chair of the Alt-Right Party in Germany (AfD), Fruake Petry was reported to like to quote Kant. Members of Petry's circle had also registered the Immanuel Kant Foundation in order to be able to draw state subsidies once the AfD had/has members returned to Parliament.²⁹
- 6.11 One should end with a short positive note on the impact of the Chinese Philosophy Tradition in the West outside the domain of academic philosophy as taught in universities. History shows that especially in its political thinking, Chinese philosophy did significantly affect some Western elites. Political activists, journalists, essayists, opinion makers as part of the commentariat of the time, who having imbibed the spirit of the secular, meritocratic culture/ideology of China since the Han dynasty, if not earlier, advocated a change in their own societies in a similar, though not identical, direction.³⁰ Perhaps, it is

²⁸ In 1992, Cambridge University decided to bestow an honorary doctorate on Derrida, but this provoked a storm of protest including a letter sent to the university containing a list of so-called "Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophers" signed by the distinguished Quine and others not distinguished at all, who held that Derrida's method of doing philosophy called Deconstruction did not constitute doing philosophy which met "accepted standards of clarity and rigour", and claimed that he used what amounted to "tricks and gimmicks similar to those of the Dadaists". The letter concluded with these words (Barry Smith *et al.*, 1992): "... where coherent assertions are being made at all, these are either false or trivial. Academic status based on what seems to us to be little more than semi-intelligible attacks upon the values of reason, truth, and scholarship is now we submit, sufficient grounds for the awarding of an honorary degree in a distinguished university." Their paradigm of "philosophical goodness" appeared not to be based so much on Kant's method but on Frege's. However, in spite of such controversy, the University's relevant body balloted in favour of bestowing the honour on Derrida. There is an ironic twist to this tale (see van Norden, 2017b). Derrida was invited in 2001 to lecture in China at Fudan University, Shanghai. At a banquet laid on by his hosts, Derrida apparently uttered the same mantra as Ryle had done to me some four decades earlier. It was not clear what the basis of Derrida's negative assessment of the Chinese Philosophy Tradition was. Whatever that might be, he lacked sufficient insight to appreciate that what he was doing to his Chinese hosts was exactly the same hand dealt him by his critics over the Cambridge incident. There is irony in this tale.

²⁹ See Meaney, 2017; *The Guardian*, 2017.

³⁰ For instance, in 18th century England in particular and even in the USA in its formative years, such elites had not shared Kant's prejudice. For a fascinating account of the influence of this aspect of Chinese Enlightenment thought, see Powers, 2018. As illustrations, take two instances mentioned in Powers, 2018, 196, 171-172. The first refers to a bust of Confucius in plaster relief in the main building at Shugborough Hall, Staffordshire, England, c 1747. This bust appears to be a replica of the portrait of the Chinese sage which formed the frontispiece to Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, 1735. Shugborough Hall was built by Lord Anson who during his service in the English Navy had visited China. While the English elites of the time fell for Chinoiserie such as building a Chinese pavilion as part of their garden landscape, it is more unusual for a bust of Confucius to be sharing pride of place with Apollo in their stately homes. As Powers points out, Apollo, the sun god in his chariot, would stand for enlightened thought; by making Confucius share the same space occupied by three other distinguished European classical figures including Apollo, Lord Anson was paying similar respect to the iconic figure of Chinese civilisation and culture. The second instance concerns intellectual elites (outside philosophical academia) such as Samuel Johnson, Philip Stanhope (the 4th Earl of Chesterfield) and others who were all influenced by Du Halde's inclusion of the translation of some key Chinese texts. The publication called *The Craftsman* (a.k.a. *The Country Journal* or *The Craftsman: Being a Critique on the Times*) to which Johnson contributed advocated the Chinese anti-hereditary, meritocratic system of government, a view and attitude much informed by reading du

fair to say that MWEP has not triumphed without qualification. However, having admitted this much, nevertheless, one should point out immediately that Coloniality prevails as that influence of the Chinese cultural-philosophical tradition upon the West is hardly ever acknowledged in the wider public domain.

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Halde 1735. The Chinese system of government, since Han times, was based on selecting men who combined both talents/merit and virtue/excellent moral characteristics, including very importantly concern for the welfare of the people. This philosophy followed *The Mengzi* 《孟子》, which expounded *renzheng* 仁政, a conception of political rule and form of governance informed by *ren*, the all-encompassing *Rujia*/Confucian virtue. Recall that *Ren* 仁 is often translated as “benevolence” but also more lately in sinology literature as “co-humanity.” Finally, by the middle of the 19th century, the West (first France, then England) had established the civil service examination borrowed from the Chinese, who had practised such a system (*keju* 科举) to select public officials on the basis of merit and moral excellence since 165 BCE – see Bodde, 1948.

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