

Manchester Lit & Phil

Philosophy Forum



Summary and questions on

The Darkness at the Heart of the Enlightenment: Kant's Racism by Professor Keekok Lee

Focus paper for the Manchester Lit & Phil Philosophy Forum

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We like to think of the Enlightenment as a glorious period where ideas were driven solely by rationality and evidence. But of course it's not as easy as that. The history of human ideas is blemished with personal and cultural beliefs we find repulsive today. Immanuel Kant – arguably the greatest 18th century European philosopher and source of so many ideas in modern philosophy, neuroscience and psychology – was alas no exception.

Dr Keekok Lee – philosopher, author and Honorary Research Professor/Fellow at the University of Manchester – guides us through the ethical minefield of how we can maturely face up to the past by looking at Kant's racism.



The Western world **morally struggles with aspects of its past and the controversial legacy of it today**. It needs much discussion! Kant, that supreme advocate of moral absolutism, is here revealed by Keekok as deeply prejudiced. **Be warned that some of his utterances are quite shocking and ridiculous to a modern ear**. Her paper is a fascinating and rich glimpse at Europe's historical intellectual relationship with the rest of the world, especially China. The following attempts to quickly summarise main themes and pose **discussion questions** about them.

1 Introduction

Q1 How much do you think that Coloniality – thinking Western thought superior to that of the rest of the world – is prevalent in the UK today?

In the paper, racism is categorised as:

- **Grand Intellectual Racism:** the relegation of non-European forms of thinking to an inferior status (“Philosophy is not to be found in the whole Orient”, Kant)
- **Systematic Colour Racism:** the positive correlation of cognitive ability with skin colour
- **Common Street Racism:** everyday racist remarks.

Q2 Do you think that is a useful categorisation?

**2+3 Where Did Europe Get Its Enlightenment Ideas From?
What Was the Impact of the Chinese Philosophy Tradition on The Enlightenment?**

The paper condemns the “all-European native model” – the notion that Enlightenment ideas sprung solely from Europe – as an historical fabrication. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, mainly via Catholic Jesuit missionaries, Eastern ideas became influential, especially in French secular circles. This was largely due to the diminishment or absence of the supernatural in Chinese philosophy. That atheism, however, was the very reason those ideas became anathema to many in Protestant Europe including Germany and England. Kant's metaphysics made sure it had room for God! (For an interesting African antecedent of the European Enlightenment: Dag Herbjørnsrud, 2017, [The African Enlightenment](#), Aeon.)

Besides the absence of God, the other European fault-line concerned the attitude to the natural world: dynamic and holistic vs mechanical and analytical, with representatives Leibnitz and Newton respectively (although this admittedly is a convenient simplism). Chinese thinking was more aligned with the former. There are still strong echoes of this in the modern schism between Continental and Analytical philosophical traditions.

Q3 Do you think Enlightenment ideas were:

- entirely ‘home-grown’?
- influenced by other civilisations?

4+5 Dissecting Kant's Racism

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

Kant's denunciations demonstrated all three of the above types of racism. The racist condemnation of all people beyond Europe displays eye-popping arrogance and ignorance as the paper demonstrates vividly with quotes in paragraph 4.3. Kant didn't just *follow* the cultural racism ubiquitous in 18th century Europe ... he was *evangelistic*. His use of Systematic Colour Racism fed into the larger development of Pseudo-scientific Racism including Eugenics. We all know where that led in the 20th century!

Q4 How should we approach Kant's ideas today?

- Can we judge him and his work by present day standards?
(FYI: Keekok avers in paragraph 5.4 that "... one cannot deny the deep-seated nature of racism within the structure of Kant's philosophical thinking *in general* ...")
- Or can we separate his wheat from his chaff, ignoring the awkward bits?
- Or must we reject all of his writings?



Kant had a strong tendency to universalism: his moral diktats applied in *all* circumstances for *all* people. This is reflected in the comparatively liberal internationalism of his political philosophy. Yet this supreme advocate of reason contradictorily advocated a very strong form of racism.

Q6 Does this **inegalitarian inconsistency** demonstrate that his **moral universalism was conveniently ignored when it conflicted with his racial prejudices**?

Q7 How much do you think that what Keekok calls the '**Modern Western Epistemological Paradigm**' – the belief in white Western superiority featuring all three types of racism – is prevalent today?

Q8 Do you **think differently** now about the Enlightenment?



"The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."

L. P. Hartley, 1953, *The Go-Between*

or

"The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living."

Karl Marx, 1852, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

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Your notes