

Review of *Kant and the Concept of Race: Late Eighteenth-Century Writings*, translated and edited by Jon M. Mikkelsen (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2013)

Jon M. Mikkelsen, Professor Emeritus in the Philosophy and Religion Department at Missouri Western State University, has produced a volume of translations of eighteenth-century German texts that Anglophone students of Kant's thought, and of biological and racial thought of the eighteenth century, should find useful. Specifically, this volume is a great help to researchers trying to understand what Kant was up to in writing and publishing three essays on the topic of human races. Included in this volume are Mikkelsen's translations of Kant's three essays on race. Also included are his translations of the (pseudo-)scientific writings on race of four of Kant's contemporaries: namely, an excerpt of Eberhard August Wilhelm Zimmermann's *Geographical History of Human Beings and the Universally Dispersed Quadrupeds* (1778-83), Georg Forster's essay "Something More About the Human Races" (1786), Christoph Meiners's essay "Of the Varieties and Deviate Forms of Negroes" (1790), and excerpts of Christoph Girtanner's work *Concerning the Kantian Principle in Natural History* (1796). By placing Kant's essays in historical context, or in dialogue with contemporaneous texts on the topic of race, Mikkelsen is trying to fill a need for explanation of the racial ideas of one of the most influential philosophers of the modern period. In addition to a selected bibliography and index, the reader is provided with 73 pages of introduction with 178 notes, additional introductory remarks at the head of each translated text, and a 65-page historical "chronology" (chronicle) of events between 1619 and 1859. In making so much more information available beyond Kant's texts, Mikkelsen shows that he is more than a

mere translator of Kant; he is also positioning himself as a contextualist-historical interpreter of Kant's writings on race.

The first note to the "Translator's Introduction" contains a quotation of a passage in Kant's third *Critique*, which is supposed to give expression to "the problem central to the controversies addressed by the present volume, namely, whether or not Kant ever resolved the tension in the critical system occasioned by the conflicting demands of his fully developed moral philosophy and his career-long concern with formulating a properly naturalistic concept of race."<sup>1</sup> That this is the central problem one is told again on page 14 in reference to Robert Bernasconi's essay "Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Racism."<sup>2</sup> As Mikkelsen tells it, "how, if at all, Kant's by now well-documented interest in and contribution to the widespread discourse of his time on topics of race dating from the 1760s through the 1790s can be reconciled with the development of his philosophy of history and his moral and political philosophy of the 1780s and 1790s." Although never laid bare, Mikkelsen is working from a settled interpretation in gesturing to readers the way to a solution of this central problem. Mikkelsen's settled interpretation must be reconstituted by an interrogative reading of his introductory remarks and notes that purport, at most, to offer views on Kant's texts "with respect to the contribution that knowledge of them might make to contemporary reevaluations of the Critical philosophy. . . ."<sup>3</sup>

For those not familiar with this part of his philosophical output, in the 1770s and 1780s Kant published three essays on the topic of human races: "On the Different Races of Man" (1775; rev. 1777), "Determination of the Concept of Race" (1785), and "On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy" (1788). In these essays Kant affirms that

there is one human species, but names and briefly describes four basic races, many more half-races, and one or two incipient races. He lays out the causes internal and external of racial characteristics and also establishes skin color as the prime characteristic. These race essays were in addition to his regularly repeated lecture courses on anthropology and physical geography, through which students learned his system of racial classification and heard his racist pronouncements about Amerindians, Negroes, and Hindus.

In the historiography of science, there is a dominant narrative about the life sciences of the eighteenth century. It is nicely exhibited in the historical essays by Phillip Sloan.<sup>4</sup> It is also what gives orientation to Mikkelsen's own discussion of Kant and race. There were progressive steps in the development of modern natural history according to Sloan and Mikkelsen. From Linnaeus to Buffon, natural history was reconceptualized as a historical and geographical description of nature, taking as its objects the relations of organisms to one another in time and space through material reproduction. Sloan declares the resulting science to be a "genuine developmental history."<sup>5</sup> He uses the phrase "the Buffonian revolution" in characterizing this step in the history (progressive development) of natural history.<sup>6</sup> Sloan's warrant for the characterization ("revolution") is that Buffon redefined *species* as a "constant succession and uninterrupted renewal of the individuals constituting it"--this as opposed to a logical division of similar individuals, based on morphological criteria (viz., Linnaeus's conception of species).<sup>7</sup> With his species concept, Buffon was able to explain variations within species. In "On the Degeneration of the Animals" (1766), Buffon explained *varieties* or *races*--he was inconsistent in his use of these terms--as degenerations of the species caused by differences in food and climate after migrations of individuals out of their species' place of geographical origin.<sup>8</sup>

Buffon's contributions are called achievements as a matter of course (as a matter of narration) and are to be understood as advancing biological knowledge, which is to be taken as coming closer to modern biological knowledge.

There are yet other steps in this narrative scheme. After the step from Linnaeus to Buffon, biological science must go through two more steps: the step from Buffon to Kant and, then, the step from Kant to Girtanner. (I will discuss the step from Buffon to Kant, but will leave off discussing the step from Kant to Girtanner.) Again, after Buffon, Kant comes onto the scene—the scene is neither Paris nor Königsberg, but the field of the history of science. He “was able to achieve a significantly greater rigor of analysis than Buffon ever achieved. and with this made a rigorous distinction of taxonomic concepts as applied in the domain of *Naturbeschreibung* [natural description] from their function in *Naturgeschichte* [history of nature].”<sup>9</sup> “With a rigor lacking in Buffon, Kant then developed the distinctions to be made within a common stem in terms of degrees of genealogical relationship.”<sup>10</sup> Here, Sloan is referring to Kant's clarification of Buffon on the question of race, which Kant is said to have performed in his race essays.<sup>11</sup>

The narrative is the argument, Hayden White has said about the narrative mode of historical writing.<sup>12</sup> In the case of historical writing about Kant's natural history of human races, the narrative is an argument about motives. In seeking scientific knowledge about races, Kant was motivated by scientific knowledge. But it is inane to state this as a point when one's narrative takes care of it.

This is what Mikkelsen argues about Kant's motives: “Kant's special interest among his contemporaries for constructing and defending a concept of race was not motivated primarily by an agenda that can be simply described as either explicitly or

implicitly ideological.”<sup>13</sup> He rehearses the familiar narrative, but with added emphases. Invoking Buffon four times more often than Kant does (I counted through all three of his race essays), Mikkelsen explains that Kant was merely doing natural history by the best (Buffonian) standards of the field at the time. The (scientific progress) narrative automatically precludes the possibility of economic or political motivations or of groups acting on such motivations (such as Whites in a colonial society or Europeans in an imperialist world system) precisely because this narrative of the history of science is not about any groups or their economic or political interests.

Mikkelsen wants his readers to understand that “[w]e can clearly see how much we owe to Buffon and his defenders--including Kant--for making the case for this viewpoint, without which the historical development of the biological sciences as we know them today would clearly not have been possible.”<sup>14</sup> I am concerned that, after Mikkelsen, still others will come along to paint Kant’s work on race with the science whitewash. They can do this by rehearsing the story that Kant, with a cool scientific attitude, was addressing some problems left over from Buffon’s work in natural history and solved them, and by so doing helped to advance biological science. The historical record itself will have to be the antidote to this fatuous narrative. The historical record itself shows that Buffonian natural history did not supersede Linnaean natural classification; on the contrary, most contemporary and most subsequent taxonomists continued to use Linnaean principles of classification. The Linnaean divisions (Kingdom, Order, Class, Genus, and Species) are still in use at biology departments today. Secondly, Buffon and Kant were not pioneers of historicism in biological thought if historicism means evolutionary thinking (viz., species transformism).<sup>15</sup> Buffon and Kant were both

preformationists; they believed that species were fixed. In this respect, Buffonian natural history was not any more of a step toward evolutionism than Linnaean natural classification was.<sup>16</sup> Finally, the suggestion that Kant's theory of race prepared the ground for modern genetic science is bizarre and exposes Mikkelsen's project as an apologia for Kant's racism.

*By Peter K. J. Park*

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<sup>1</sup> Mikkelsen, 299-300 n. 1; the quoted passage: "the concept of freedom should make the end (*Zweck*) that is imposed by its laws real in the sensible world, and nature must . . . be able to be conceived in such a way that the lawfulness of its form is at least in agreement with the possibility of the ends (*Zwecke*) that are to be realized in it in accordance with the laws of freedom. . . ." (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 63.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Bernasconi, "Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Racism," in *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays*, ed. Julie K. Ward and Tommy L. Lott (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 145-66.

<sup>3</sup> Mikkelsen, 2 and 3.

<sup>4</sup> Phillip R. Sloan's publications on eighteenth-century natural history include "The Idea of Racial Degeneracy in Buffon's *Histoire naturelle*," in *Racism in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. H. Pagliaro (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973), 293-321; "Buffon, German Biology, and the Historical Interpretation of Biological Species," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 12, no. 2 (July 1979): 109-53; *From*

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*Natural History to the History of Nature: Readings from Buffon and his Critics*, co-ed. John Lyon (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1981); “The Gaze of Natural History,” in *Inventing Human Science: Eighteenth-Century Domains*, ed. Christopher Fox, Roy Porter, and Robert Wokler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 112-51; “Preforming the Categories: Eighteenth-Century Generation Theory and the Biological Roots of Kant’s A Priori,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 40, no. 2 (April 2002): 229-53; “Kant on the History of Nature: The Ambiguous Heritage of the Critical Philosophy for Natural History,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 37 (2006): 627-48.

<sup>5</sup> Phillip R. Sloan, “Kant on the history of nature: The ambiguous heritage of the critical philosophy for natural history,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 37 (2006): 627-48; quotations p. 629.

<sup>6</sup> For “The Buffonian Revolution,” see Sloan’s “The Gaze of Natural History” and also his chapter on “Natural History,” in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, Vol. 2: 903-938.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 921.

<sup>8</sup> Buffon, “De la Dégénération des animaux,” *Histoire naturelle* XIV (1766); see Sloan, “The Idea of Racial Degeneracy” and “The Gaze of Natural History.”

<sup>9</sup> Phillip Sloan, “Buffon, German Biology, and the Historical Interpretation of Biological Species,” 126. Mikkelsen is indebted foremost to Sloan for his interpretation of Kant: “If asked . . . to identify a single article from the past several decades which might best serve as a point of entry into the literature on this undercurrent in recent Kant studies, I would select Phillip R. Sloan’s early, pioneering article on Kant’s relationship

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to Buffon, ‘Buffon, Germany Biology, and the Historical Interpretation of Biological Species’” (Mikkelsen, 315 n. 91).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>11</sup> “Kant achieved a clarity far greater than that of Buffon. . . .” (ibid., 126).

<sup>12</sup> Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1980): 5-27.

<sup>13</sup> Mikkelsen, 23. Our author tries to use some ideas he found in Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s *Racial Formation in the United States*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994)—specifically their claim that “racism can now be seen as characterizing some, but not, all racial projects”—to support his view that Kant’s race theory is not ideological (Mikkelsen, 301 n. 7). Here, Mikkelsen breaks from basic scholarly protocol. To use Omi and Winant in this way, he had to bypass the main idea of *Racial Formation in the United States* and grab hold of a corollary idea (that “racism can now be seen as characterizing some, but not all, racial projects”). However, Omi and Winant’s “theory of racial formation suggests that society is suffused with racial projects, large and small, to which all [humans] are subjected” (p. 60). They add, “This racial ‘subjection’ is quintessentially ideological.”

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>15</sup> See John H. Eddy, Jr., “Buffon’s *Histoire naturelle*: History? A Critique of Recent Interpretations.” *Isis* 85, no. 4 (Dec. 1994): 644-661; Thierry Hoquet, “History without Time: Buffon’s Natural History as a Nonmathematical Physique,” *Isis* 101, no. 1 (2010): 30-61; and María Verónica Galifione, “Natural History and Temporalization: Reflections

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on Buffon's Natural History," *História, Ciências, Saúde—Manguinhos* 20, no. 3 (Sept. 2013): 813-829.

<sup>16</sup> Later, Kant changed his mind on the question of the validity of a historical science of nature on epistemological grounds. Sloan registers his awareness of this change in his article "Kant on the History of Nature."