Racism and the Disciplinary Differentiation of Science and Philosophy

Program and Abstracts

Values in Medicine, Science, and Technology Conference 2018
Co-hosted by the Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies

Program - Thursday, May 17, 2018

9-9:30am Coffee & Registration
9:30-9:45am Welcoming Remarks by Nils Roemer (UT Dallas)
   Workshop Introduction by Matthew J Brown (UT Dallas)
9:45-10:30am Karin Kuchler (University of Vienna) - A Genealogy of European Philosophy in the Context of the Darker Side of Enlightenment
10:30-11:15am Justin E.H. Smith (University of Paris) - What Can We Know about Anton Wilhelm Amo?
11:15-11:30am BREAK
11:30am-12:15pm Kevin Harrelson (Ball State University) - Humans and Persons: Some Historical Observations on the Distinction
12:15-12:45pm Response to Kuchler, Smith, and Harrelson by Demetrius Eudell (Wesleyan University)
12:45-1:45pm LUNCH
2-2:45pm Jameliah Shorter-Bourhanou (Georgia College) - Race in Kant’s Philosophy of History
2:45-3:30pm Stella Sandford (Kingston University) - Kant, Race and Natural History
3:30-3:45pm BREAK
3:45-4:30pm Eric Martin (Baylor University) - Linnaeus, reason, and race
4:30-5:15pm Jennifer Mensch (Western Sydney University) - Lines of Descent: German Anthropology from Kant to Girtanner and Humboldt
5:15-6:00pm Response to Shorter-Bourhanou, Sandford, Martin, Mensch by Peter Park (UT Dallas)
6:00pm DINNER
Abstracts

Karin Kuchler (University of Vienna) - A Genealogy of European Philosophy in the Context of the Darker Side of Enlightenment

Abstract: The project presented addresses the question of eurocentrism in philosophy and the historiography of philosophy by drawing on postcolonial and poststructural theory. Europe and philosophy have two things before all in common: both are subjects of a narrative that is both special and peculiar; and that narrative, on the other hand, is special by virtue of its special subjects. This makes one the definiens of the other – at a certain point in history, they even appear to be interchangeable. The other trait shared by Europe and (European) philosophy is their claim to universality. This claim of one tradition alone, however, cannot be upheld any longer. Historical evidence has shown that several birthplaces of philosophy can look back onto very long traditions of practice. Furthermore, the European itself as the subject of history has become questionable in the light of postcolonial theory.

In 1791, just sixty years after Johann Jakob Brucker had for the first time written about a European philosophy in his Kurtzen Fragen zur philosophischen Historie, Dieterich Tiedemann not only excluded any non-European philosophy from the history of philosophy: He explicitly proscribes any mention thereof. Along with this exclusion arose the complete historization of philosophy as an academic discipline in 19th century universities, and the climax of a philosophy of history that gave cause and legitimacy to the brutal colonization of the planet by European powers. Both narratives engage figures of speech that first appear in the construction of a European philosophy. Hence, it represents a hiatus that offers both form and pattern for eurocentrism in philosophy.

The question I would like to pose in this talk is how the shift from a way of categorizing the other from a spacial arrangement to a temporal arrangement as proposed by Walter Mignolo has changed the order of knowledge in a such a way as to make it possible to speak of European philosophy as both the only, and universally valid philosophy. After a thorough explication of the history of eurocentrism in general and in the history of the historiography of scholarship, the claim to hegemony that was founded in the writing of the history of philosophy in early enlightenment will be analyzed by way of discourse analysis. Methodological background for this approach lies in the works of Michel Foucault and Edward Said. The demonstration of how it became possible to speak of European philosophy as the only and universal form of philosophy is not only relevant to the self-conception and practice of philosophy as an academic discipline. It can also contribute to the appreciation and understanding of cultural production in all regions of the world.
Justin E.H. Smith (University of Paris) - What Can We Know about Anton Wilhelm Amo?

The African philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo, active in Germany in the early 18th century, did not leave abundant traces of his life from which researchers might reconstruct it and come to understand the development of his thought. We have three treatises, a few letters, a handful of entries in accounting books and university registration records. The researcher is thus obligated to work from fragments, and must inevitably resort to imagination, and to considerations of plausibility rather than of fact, wherever there are long silences in the record of his life. Imagination is necessary in historical research, but also dangerous, as it easily tempts us into transforming our subject, in this case the real, historical Amo, into a character of fiction, playing the role we would have liked him to play rather than speaking for himself. Yet through rigorous study researchers over the past few decades have managed to piece together a fairly vivid picture of the life of this exceptional thinker, and to illuminate the sources and motivations for his philosophical arguments. In this talk I would like to share some of the results of this study, up to and including my own archival research in Germany and Holland, arguing in particular that Amo’s philosophy is best understood as emerging out of a very local and specific context of philosophical (and medical) debate at the Universities of Halle and Wittenberg in the 1720s and 1730s. Having shown this, I will next turn to a consideration of the possible future place that Amo might take up in the canon of modern European, and African, philosophy.

Kevin Harrelson (Ball State University) - Humans and Persons: Some Historical Observations on the Distinction

Abstract: It is commonplace that the concept of person has both normative and descriptive meanings. The descriptive meaning – in our language usually marked by ‘human’ – is biological and distinguishes members of a species. The normative concept – usually ‘person’ – is a moral or legal term that may or may not be extensionally equivalent to ‘human’. In other words, it may be that some humans are not persons, or some persons not humans.

In “Kant’s Untermenschen” and “Kant on Race, Redux,” Charles Mills’s challenges the apparent harmlessness of this distinction: the normative weight of ‘person’, he argued, derives from the implication that some humans fail, or may fail, to meet the criteria. In those essays he hedges his conclusions somewhat, leaving the argument ambiguous between a weak and a strong reading. My proposed contribution begins by distinguishing these readings and arguing in favor of the strong reading. The concept of subperson, as I wish to revise the argument, is part of the conceptual architecture of ‘personhood’.

My point is not about Kant interpretation; I wish rather to generalize Mills’s
argument. Something similar, namely, applies also to the Lockean notion of person: it derives its weight from the equality granted to members of the “same rank and species.” The main difference between Locke and Kant, I argue, is that the former saw more clearly than the latter did that his whole moral edifice depended on the possibility of excluding some humans from the community of persons.

In the second half of my contribution, I look at how this Lockean/Kantian account of personhood structured some justifications for distinguishing philosophy and psychology in the nineteenth century. I examine specifically the writings of Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp, and isolate a few points at which the philosophical concept of person hinges on a potentially racialized interpretation of humanity.

Jameliah Shorter-Bourhanou (Georgia College) - Race in Kant’s Philosophy of History

Abstract: In 1785, Kant argues that all human beings are to be treated with inherent dignity and worth insofar as their reason gives them the capacity to comply with the moral law (AA 4:430). In this same decade, Kant published two of his three essays on race (1777, 1785, and 1788). In these works, Kant presents a racial hierarchy to justify the idea that Africans, for example, are “lazy, soft, and trifling” (AA 2:439). The larger debate in the literature has been whether Kant’s statements on race have any impact on the egalitarian views for which he is revered. The commonly accepted argument regarding this discrepancy is that Kant changes his view on race to a more egalitarian view in his cosmopolitan writings. What has been overlooked, however, is the fact that Kant’s ideas on race become subtle and therefore able to take root in universal ideas.

Kant’s philosophy of history provides fertile ground for a discussion about race and egalitarianism. There, Kant discusses the capacity for human progress toward cosmopolitanism against the backdrop of moral universalism in the moral philosophy and pseudo-science in the race philosophy. In “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim” (1784), Kant argues that first and foremost, humans must work to develop their Anlagen, a pseudo-scientific notion that holds the potential for the species to establish a cosmopolitan and morally egalitarian society. In this paper, I argue that race is a natural and inheritable inequity that Kant utilizes in his philosophy of history that systematically excludes some people from his egalitarian ideals. I suggest that Kant’s emphasis on the individual capacity to labor bars Africans and other groups from taking part in a morally universal and cosmopolitan society.
Stella Sandford (Kingston University) - Kant, Race and Natural History

**Abstract:** This contribution will address, in particular, the question of the disciplinary and professional differentiation of philosophy and science from one another. In contesting the legitimacy of the retrospective attribution of such a distinction in the study of Kant’s work, it will contest the idea of the disciplinary isolation of philosophy, an idea that allows Kant’s theory of race and his racism to be ignored or dismissed as irrelevant by philosophers.

The growing literature on what are beginning to be referred to as Kant’s Rassen- schriften has shown that in crucial respects there can be no historical and programmatic separation between them and the broader development of Kant’s philosophy, including his critical philosophy – which is perhaps not surprising when we are dealing with a systematic philosopher. But it is still not clear exactly what the place of the concept of race and the theory of race is in that oeuvre. The demonstration of shared elements between the essays on race and the critical philosophy does not in itself give an answer to the question that goes to the heart of the matter for students and teachers of Kant’s works: what, if anything, is the significance of the concept of race and the theory of race in the development of the critical philosophy?

This contribution will present a new argument concerning the relation between Kant’s theory of race and aspects of the critical philosophy by connecting the history of philosophy to the history of science. It will argue that Kant’s treatment of the problem of the systematic unity of nature and knowledge in the Critique of Pure Reason and the Critique of the Power of Judgment can be traced back to problems in the natural history of the period, and particularly to the problem of the possibility of a natural system of nature. Kant’s transformation of the methodological problem from natural history into a set of philosophical (and specifically epistemological) problems proceeds by way of the working out of his own problem in natural history – the problem of the natural history of the human races – and specifically the problem of the unity-in-diversity of the human species, in response to which he develops a theory of race. This theory of race is, further, the first developed model of the use of teleological judgment in Kant’s work. This contribution will thus argue that Kant’s philosophical position on the systematic unity of nature and of knowledge in the first and third Critiques, and his account and defense of teleological judgment, are developed out of problems first articulated in his solution to the natural historical problem of the unity in diversity of the human species – that is, in his theory of race. This argument cannot and does not seek to establish that these aspects of the critical philosophy are therefore racialized. But it does demonstrate how the problem of the unity-in-diversity of the human species and Kant’s theory of race is significant for the development of aspects of the critical philosophy. This means that we have to acknowledge that the question of race was central to Kant’s thought in the period including the Critique of Pure Reason; that ‘race’
is the privileged case in thinking the problem of a natural system of nature, which is kin to the transcendental, critical problem of the systematic unity of knowledge; and thus that, in some sense, it is a fundamentally important part of the philosophical context of the Critique of Pure Reason and the Critique of the Power of Judgment and it contributes to their philosophical problematics.

Eric Martin (Baylor University) - Linnaeus, reason, and race

Abstract: The grouping of humans into racial kinds is often held to be a precondition for racism, and the 18th century Swedish physician Carl Linnaeus was at the forefront of that taxonomic project. Linnaeus is well known as the progenitor of modern taxonomy whose name is invoked in every school lesson on binomial nomenclature. He has a good claim on inventing the modern sense of the word “species,” and after Aristotle, he is perhaps the most significant figure in the history of natural classification.

Moreover, Linnaeus played a pivotal role in the momentous naturalization of the human, shifting the study of humans from theological to natural modes of inquiry. He was the first modern to include humans as part of overarching natural historical classification. Linnaeus proposed different classifications of humans throughout his corpus, adding to the numbers of groups as years went on.

This paper has three parts: First, I trace Linnaeus’ classifications of humans in various editions of Systema Naturae. Second, I bring attention to a topic that Linnaeus claimed actually escapes pure “principles of science,” namely reason – which in his mind was intimately connected with the capacity for science. Linnaeus wrote that it is science that distinguishes Europeans from other, inferior types of people. Finally, I briefly recount Linnaeus’ reception among German thinkers like Kant and British figures such as Whewell, Hooker, and Darwin.

Jennifer Mensch (Western Sydney University) -

Lines of Descent: German Anthropology from Kant to Girtanner and Humboldt

Abstract: In 1798 Kant was at last ready to publish his Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view. It was a text that Kant introduced simply as “the present manual from my anthropology course,” even though he had in fact given up teaching altogether in 1796. Until then, Kant had taught his anthropology course twenty-four times, every Winter semester since he had made the decision, in 1772, to take his discussions of the mental and moral character of mankind out of his long-running physical geography course and into a newly created course just for that purpose. The anthropology course contained discussions
of the characteristic differences between the sexes, the nations, and the races, discussions inherited from Kant’s most popular work, his 1764 Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and sublime. Until 1796 these topics concluded the semester’s treatment of temperament and physiognomy—the key contributing factors for understanding a person’s moral character—because here Kant was able to supply real-life examples of the manner in which the shaping effects of sex, culture, or place determined one’s moral possibilities. It is striking, therefore, to see that in the published version of Kant’s anthropology manual the usual remarks devoted to racial characteristics was missing. In its place was one short paragraph on patterns of inheritance, which began by Kant’s referring readers to Christoph Girtanner’s review of the subject, given that he had presented it “so beautifully and thoroughly in explanation and further development of his work (and in accordance with my principles).”

Here Kant was referring to Girtanner’s 1796 book, Concerning the Kantian Principle for Natural History: An Attempt to Treat this Science Philosophically. Girtanner’s text contained long passages from Kant’s various publications on race but its agenda was diverse. First and foremost Girtanner sought to demonstrate the importance of Kant’s philosophical approach for determining the proper course of investigations in a scientific study of race. For this Girtanner needed to mediate between Kant and the famed naturalist, Georg Forster, whose mid-80s rebuke had brought Kant to the larger attention of the scientific community, and forced him to clarify his position in his 1788 essay “On the use of teleological principles in philosophy.” In 1786 Forster had raised a number of complaints against Kant, but the central contention turned on Kant’s appeal to colour as the best criterion for determining racial lineage. It was by focusing on their dispute over the mechanisms responsible for the inheritance of colour, however, that Girtanner would achieve the second task he had set out to accomplish in his book. This task was the marriage of Kant’s racial taxonomy and Johann Blumenbach’s notion of a “formative drive” at the seat of all biological life.

Kant had praised Blumenbach’s notion—calling it a theory of “generic preformation”—in the Critique of Judgement, and he was eager to win the support of the rising star of the Göttingen medical faculty, particularly in light of Forster’s recent attacks. For his own part, Blumenbach was flattered, even ecstatic, to have received such an endorsement. It remains a question, however, as to whether Kant himself, or Kant via Girtanner, had any significant effect on Blumenbach’s scientific investigations. For the first part of my discussion, therefore, I want to focus on this question in order to contrast the influence that even a direct appropriation of Kant’s theories, such as that provided by Girtanner, would have on the course of anthropology, to the case offered up by Wilhelm von Humboldt.

Humboldt, like Girtanner, adopted key parts of Kant’s philosophical system, but these were not taken from Kant’s anthropological writings, but came rather from Kant’s account of cognition. Humboldt took up Kant’s epigenetic theory of category formation, applied it to Herder’s blood-and-soil theory of the origin
of language, and thereby redirected the field of anthropological research toward a new theory of comparative linguistics. In Humboldt’s writings, such as in his text On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species, there were traces, moreover, of Kant’s racial theories at work in the linguistic analysis. Comparative linguistics thus served as an analogue of comparative anatomy for analyzing not only racial differences, but lineal descent, and its importance in shaping both evolution theory and ethnology cannot be overstated. Across Humboldt’s prolific works, however, it remained at heart a Kantian project. The contrasting effect of this legacy will be the focus of the second half of my discussion. (739 words)