

## Race During the Enlightenment

Immanuel Kant and Johann Herder were two highly influential German Enlightenment thinkers. At a time when nation-states were starting to emerge, the Atlantic slave trade was booming, and colonialism was ever-expanding, the question of race and national identity was on everybody's mind. Important questions for the two philosophers were ones like "What does it mean to be German?" and "What makes us different from other people?" Although Herder's cultural pluralism is generally more accurate and aligns itself better with modern conceptions of race, Kant's climatology is better at advancing the enlightenment ideals like individualism and reason, although it sacrifices equality.

Kant rejects the biological view that was prevalent in society at that time. He replaces the notion that different races were different species with the idea that the different races were just variations of the same species. He first outlines his division of these races by promulgating four fundamental races: White (European), Negro, Hunnic (Mongolian or Kalmuck), and Hindu / Hindustanic (similar to modern day Middle Easterners) (Eze 41). All people, he argues, are one of these fundamental races, or some sort of mix of them. Kant also has one final grouping of people, which he calls "incipient people", which are those who have not yet lived in a climate long enough to take on the characteristics of the race belonging to it.

This last distinction is central to Kant's philosophy on race, as he believes that race is dependent on geography and climate, a view known today as climatology. Everything from the amount of sunlight that reaches the land, to the types of food that a person eats, to the productivity of the soil all contribute to the race of a person (Eze 44). Kant provides several examples of his reasoning in action, such as those that live in the arctic regions of the world. He

explains their short stature as a direct result of the cold climate, as it allows their heart to keep them warmer using less energy (Eze 44). He extends this line of thought to all people of the world, and is able to reach some surprising conclusions. The Negroes, because they live on rich soil that is easier to cultivate crops on, lets them afford to be lazier, more interested in worldly pleasures, and therefore less morally responsible. Europeans, like Kant himself, are characterized in the exact opposite way of the negro, as they have worse soil, so must work much harder, and are morally superior people for it.

Because Kant's thesis relies on his assumption that all races are variations of the same species, he must make a claim for what race all of the others are derived from. Unsurprisingly, he chooses this to be the white brunette, which makes it even more clear that he views the Europeans to be a superior people. Europe contains “the most happy mixture of influences of the colder and hotter regions,” Kant remarks, “where man must have departed the least from his original formation because from here he is equally well prepared for all transplantations” (Eze 48). Although not explicitly stated, there are other conclusions as to why the white race acts as humanity's common stem, all which logically follow from Kant's initial assumptions. For example, in accordance with Kant's view of mixing different races, it makes sense that the white brunette acts as a kind of "blank slate" on which all other races could be made from.

Herder, a German student of Kant, disagrees not only with Kant's climatology, but with Kant's conception of race in general. According to Herder, there is no such thing as race, which then leads him to several immediate conclusions. The first is that no one group of people is better than any other. Because there is no such thing as race to begin with, it is impossible to compare any two groups. It is a culturally pluralistic view of the world that says that each group is

uniquely suited for their environment, and that all things they have to offer the world are valuable. Herder's denial of race leads him to the idea that people instead can be categorized by nations, which themselves consist of culture, language, history, and other identifying aspects.

Although Kant and Herder disagree sharply about the topic in question, they both exhibit radically different views for their time period. Both abandoned the common view that race was just a biological difference, and provided reasoning to disprove it. Even though Herder was more open-minded and sympathetic to non-Europeans than Kant, both texts also contain biased and racist excerpts, at least by today's standards. Just as Kant would racistly say something like "The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling" (Eze 55), Herder would say "With this oleaginous organization to sensual pleasure... the face [of the negro] would have at a distance the resemblance of that of an ape" (Eze 77). They are moving the question of race in new and interesting directions, but traces of the prevailing sentiments of the time are pervasive in both writings.

The most important principle of the Enlightenment, from which all others directly follow, is unequivocally that of reason. It is only through reason can we reach conclusions about egalitarianism and liberty like Jefferson's "all men are created equal" or Rousseau's "man is born free." Kant is superior to Herder in this regard. Kant first presents facts, like the difference in physical characteristics between certain groups of people, and the differences in the climate they inhabit. He then tries to connect these facts through a well thought out argument, and then extrapolates his findings to conclude things about the morals, temperament, and mental capacities of other people. While a sizeable part of Kant's logic is obviously flawed, his initial

argument is rooted in fact, or at least what was believed to be fact at the time, and is formulated in such a way that it applies to all people of the world.

Herder uses solid reasoning too, but not quite to the same extent. He does an excellent job at exposing Kant's logical fallacies and gaps in reasoning. He brings up the fact that no European has ever been to Africa, so there is no way that Kant should be speaking with such certainty (Eze 72), and points out that skin color is so arbitrary, that the negroes could use the same exact reasoning to claim their own superiority (Eze 71). Even with these points however, everything he says is just in retaliation to Kant. Herder himself does not provide such a rigid or comprehensive framework for espousing his own philosophy; it is just a response to Kant's original, bold claim. For example, while Kant's theory applies to people in Europe, Africa, Asian, and the Arctic, Herder only talks about how Africans are suited to their climate. Herder does not even try to provide reasoning for why his own people are well suited for their location in Europe. He builds off of what Kant has to say in a highly educated and constructive way, but as stand alone philosophies, Kant's system is the only one with sufficient self-support, despite its many flaws.

Another important part of Enlightenment thinking, is that of individualism. Kant's philosophy, which concludes that Europeans are the best race is, although unscrupulous, the epitome of a work stressing individualism. Kant's text does not encourage other groups to strive for liberty or greatness, but it does not necessarily have to in order to mesh with Enlightenment ideals. The Enlightenment was a European movement, so the applicability of these principles, especially individualism, are magnified on Europeans themselves. Whether this is fair or not is an entirely different question, but there is much evidence to support that this was the case. This is why figures like Kant are central to the canon of philosophy, while figures like Herder more or

less fade into obscurity, at least in the eyes of the surface level scholars. Kant argues in such a way that he does not compromise other important values like liberty and progress. He wants other groups to be free and continue to progress, but acknowledges that they might never reach the same level of morality or sagacity of Europeans. Again, Herder's view is closer to what many would consider the truth, but in the context of Enlightenment, it is difficult to come any closer to the sacred ideals than Kant does.

The one aspect that Herder does embrace, and one Kant seems to neglect, is that of equality. There is almost no denying that Herder gives everybody more of a chance than Kant, whose entire structure practically assumes, at least to some biased degree, that whites are superior. Herder's philosophy relies on the assumption of equality, and there is no denying that he has Kant beaten in this respect, but even with that being said, Kant champions more of the central Enlightenment ideas effectively. Although he sacrifices the equality of all people, Kant attempts to use reason to bridge together facts in radically different ways, stresses the importance of European individualism, and maintains that all people should be free.

Work Cited

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