**KANT ON ANIMALITY, RACE, AND SEXUAL DIFFERENCE**

David Alexander Craig, University of Oregon

Abstract: In this essay, I specify the role of human animality in Kant’s accounts of race and sexual difference. Highlighting rather than downplaying Kant’s racism and sexism, I show how Kant’s commitment to the idea that human beings are always both rational and animal allows him to distinguish between different races and sexes according to the varying degrees to which different racial and sexual groups manifest or express their animality. I argue that in Kant’s descriptions of the physiological bases of racial and sexual difference we find the idea that white males are least beholden to their animality—and most capable of fully manifesting reason—while non-white races (especially blacks) and women are more immediately subject to the demands of their animal nature. This chapter therefore demonstrates how attention to Kant’s view of animality can contribute to our understandings of his views of race and sex.

**Introduction**

The aim of this essay is to explore the role played by animality in Kant’s accounts of human racial and sexual difference. To this end, I attend primarily to Kant’s theory of human nature—his view of humans as worldly, natural beings—and leave aside the difficult issue of how, for Kant, human nature affords or inhibits free moral action. While on Kant’s understanding of human nature all human races and sexes equally possess animality as an original predisposition within their nature, I argue that, for Kant, animality plays an especially strong determining role within the natures of non-white and female human beings. His view of the relative strength of animality in these groups reflects the related assumption, which Kant often but not always leaves implicit, that white males have the greatest capacity for tempering the animality within their nature through the use of reason.

Kant’s views on human racial and sexual difference were not static, but transformed over the course of his lifetime, sometimes in substantial ways.\(^1\) His view of animality and its place

---

\(^1\) Kleingeld 2007 argues that Kant’s view of race changed over time, especially in the 1790s. While to my knowledge no comparably direct treatment of Kant’s changing views of the sexes has been written, both Schröder 1997 and Wilson 1997 discuss Kant’s stated views of the differences between the sexes across a variety of pre-
within human nature was also subject to transformation, especially in the transition between his work of the 1780s and the 1790s.\(^2\) In this essay, I occasionally note shifts in his view across texts and periods, but, for the sake of maintaining focus, avoid any detailed discussion of these shifts. Importantly, the underlying role played by animality in Kant’s accounts of human racial and sexual difference—its proportionally greater determining force for non-whites and women—seems itself to remain stable even while his narrower accounts of animality, race, and sex undergo transformation. In what follows, I first provide an overview of Kant’s account of human animality, then sketch my reading of animality’s role in his respective accounts of human racial and sexual difference.

**Kant’s Theory of Human Animality**

From at least the early 1770s and through the end of his life, Kant held animality to be an ineliminable and irreducible component of human nature. The human taken as a natural being is, for Kant, an animal being. Kant’s most direct discussion of this point appears in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1794), where animality, along with humanity and personality, is identified as an “original predisposition [Anlage] to the good in human nature” (RGV 6: 26). For a predisposition to be original for a being, Kant explains, is for it to “belong with necessity to the possibility of this being” (RGV 6: 28). Animality and the other original predispositions “belong to the possibility of human nature” (RGV 6: 28). And while both animality and humanity can be “used inappropriately” (personality alone cannot be misused), neither animality nor humanity can be “eradicated” from human nature (RGV 6: 28). In other words, taken as living, worldly critical and critical texts. For a critique of Kleingeld’s thesis, and a defense of the position that Kant remained committed to a hierarchical concept of race through the 1790s, see Bernasconi 2009.

\(^2\) Chapter three of this dissertation discusses the evolution of Kant’s thinking on this topic. For a brief systematic account of Kant’s view of animality, specifically from the perspective of the *Anthropology* book, see Wilson 2001.
being and not as the purely rational intelligence that Kant’s moral philosophy sometimes, as a matter of abstraction, takes him to be, the human being must have animality in his nature, or must of his nature be an animal, if he is to be possible at all.

Animality’s standing within human nature, though ineliminable, is not without strife. Indeed, throughout Kant’s philosophy, human animality is positioned in an antagonized relation to either human reason or to humanity itself.\(^3\) This relation is presented most programmatically in student notes from Kant’s 1775–1776 anthropology course:

> The human being has two determinations, one with regard to humanity, and one with regard to animality. These two determinations conflict with one another. We do not achieve the perfection of humanity in the determination of animality, and if we want to achieve the perfection of humanity, then we must do violence to the determination of animality. (V-Anth/Fried, 25: 682)\(^4\)

Though spanning a range of some thirty years, and appearing in both pre-critical and critical texts, Kant’s descriptions of animality consistently afford it an originality and ineliminability within human nature, and set it in teleologically charged—and sometimes violent—relation with other dimensions of human nature. In Kant’s anthropological texts of the 1770s, as well as in his anthropological, moral, and historical texts of the 1780s, animality is mostly an obstacle that reason or humanity must struggle against, sometimes violently, even though it cannot be fully

---

\(^3\) The relation of reason to Kant’s notion of humanity is complex. In the moral philosophy of the 1780s, and in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* especially, humanity is figured ideally as that which practical reason directs us to respect in ourselves, treating it always as an end, and never as a means (GMS 4: 429). In the *Religion*, humanity is figured more naturally as one of three predispositions within human nature—that whereby he is “a living and at the same time rational being” (RGV 6: 26). In any case, it is clear that the human’s possession of reason, as the capacity to set ends apart from those of nature outside the human being, is, for Kant, characteristic of humanity. As he puts it in *The Metaphysics of Morals*: “The capacity to set oneself an end—any end whatsoever—is what characterizes humanity (as distinguished from animality)” (MS 6: 392).

\(^4\) Note how animality is named as a *Bestimmung* or “determination,” and not yet as an *Anlage* (“predisposition”) or *Keime* (“germ”), related terms that Kant began using in other contexts at this same time (the 1775 essay on race most notably), and which he uses to describe animality in the *Religion, Pädagogik*, and elsewhere. While this terminological difference is not insignificant, it is the basic conceptual overlap across all descriptions that I am interested to stress here.
overcome or gotten rid of.\(^5\) However, Kant augments the tone, and perhaps also the substance, of his treatment of animality in texts of the mid-to-late 1790s. Here animality must still be placed in proper balance with the other parts of human nature, and this does still entail a struggle.\(^6\) But the relation that Kant advocates is less overtly violent, and animality is even understood to make certain positive contributions to human moral development,\(^7\) rather than only presenting an obstacle to it.

**Animality in Kant’s Accounts of Race and Sexual Difference**

The fact that animality is, for Kant, an ineliminable and teleologically charged part of human nature should impact how we read his accounts of both racial and sexual difference. Its ineliminability within human nature entails that animality, like reason, will always factor in a generic way into Kant’s assessment of any group of human beings taken as natural beings. That animality is teleologically charged, however, and so is seen to play a role (negative or positive) in the purposive development of human nature, means that it will also always factor into Kant’s differentiation of various human groups considered morally or practically. In other words, while

---

\(^5\) In his published works of the 1780s, Kant presents this struggle in stark terms. Our reflection upon the moral law within us, Kant says in the second *Critique*, “infinitely raises my worth as an *intelligence* by my personality, in which the moral law reveals to me a life independent of animality and even of the whole sensible world” (KpV 5: 162). And, in the *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*, he writes of four steps “that reason took in elevating the human being entirely above the society with animals” (MAM 8: 114), which necessitated human reason getting “into a scuffle with [human] animality in its whole strength,” from which arose “ills and, what is worse, with more cultivated reason, vices” (MAM 8: 116).

\(^6\) In *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1798), Kant discusses the human’s “duty to raise himself from the crude state of his nature, from his animality (*quoad actum*), more and more toward humanity” (MS 6: 387). In the *Anthropology* book, completed around the same time, he states that the human is “destined to make himself worthy of humanity *actively*, in struggle with the obstacles that cling to him because of the rawness of his nature” (Anth 7: 325).

\(^7\) Kant’s is committed to a picture of moral perfection whereby humans must strive to act as if they were purely rational beings. Teleologically, such striving amounts to the development of the predisposition to humanity, or of the germ of reason, within human nature. But Kant is also committed to the view that human beings are not purely rational beings, and that we can never abandon our animality in order to become them. In the *Philosophische Religionslehre nach Pölitz* (likely from the mid-1780s), Kant states that “at the same time the human has and must have, if he should continue as a human, many instincts that belong to animality” (V-Phil-Th/Pölitz 28: 1078, my translation). Kant’s human begins as an animal, and ends as one too. Or, as Kant puts it in the *Anthropology* book, the human begins, in its initial state of rawness, the *animal rationale* or animal endowed reason and ends up, through the process of practical perfection, the *animal rationale* or animal that has enacted reason (Anth 7: 321).
every human group can be said, on Kant’s view, to have equal status as natural beings by virtue of the presence of the same set of predispositions within their nature, different groups can be said to have unequal status as moral beings in so far as the relative determining strengths of these predispositions are seen to vary from group to group, and in so far as this variation is seen to have morally salient consequences. While human animality may not help us explain the physiological differences Kant draws between the different races and sexes, it can help us explain the more evaluative differences Kant also draws between them.

a) Race

Kant’s first essay on race, published in 1775, provides what is at first glance a merely descriptive account of human racial difference. Kant explains racial variation among populations of any organism according to the differential development of naturally innate germs or predispositions. “In the migration and transplanting of animals and plants,” Kant says, nature “creates the semblance of new lands; yet they are nothing other than variations and races of the same species the germs and natural predispositions of which have merely developed on occasion in various ways over long periods of time” (VvRM 2: 434). Human racial differences are accounted for along the same lines: given that human beings can be found in diverse climates worldwide, “various germs and natural predispositions had to lie ready in him to be on occasion either unfolded or restrained, so that he would become suited to his place in the world and over the course of the generations would appear to be as it were native to and made for that place” (VvRM 2: 435). While Kant does not in this essay enumerate exactly which set of germs and predispositions must have been originally present for all human beings and then differentially developed so as to give rise to the different human races, it seems clear from contemporaneous
anthropological writings that, at minimum, Kant takes this set to include animality and reason.\textsuperscript{8}

That Kant’s view of racial differentiation, at least from 1775 through 1794,\textsuperscript{9} is not merely descriptive but also morally inflected and evaluative, becomes apparent when we take into account other remarks of Kant’s from the 1770s and 1780s.\textsuperscript{10} Some of the most notorious and illustrative of these remarks appear in Kant’s notebook for an anthropology lecture he gave in the mid-1780s. There, he writes that the Native American and “negro” races cannot rule themselves, and so can serve only as slaves, and also that “The negro can be disciplined and cultivated, but never genuinely be civilized. He falls of himself into wildness” (Refl 1520 15: 878). Kant’s view that the “negro” is incapable of civilization, and that he has a basic tendency to fall into “wildness” [\textit{Wildheit}] is best explained if we understand Kant to be committed, at least at this point in time, to the view that animality, while present in the natures of all human races, is most strongly determinative in the natures of non-whites.

\textsuperscript{8} In addition to the passages from the 1775–1776 anthropology lecture mentioned above, the anonymously published 1771 “Review of Moscati’s work \textit{Of the Corporeal Essential Differences Between the Structure of Animals and Humans}” demonstrates Kant’s view that both animality and reason constitute original aspects of human nature. The relevant passage there is: “From [Moscati’s thesis] we see the following: the first foresight of nature was that the human being as an animal be preserved for himself and his kind; and for that the position which is most suited to his internal build, the situation of the fetus and the preservation in dangers is the four-footed one; but that there also has been placed in him a germ of reason through which, if the latter develops, he is destined for society, and by means of which he assumes permanently the most suitable position for society, viz., the two-footed one. Thereby he gains, on one side, infinitely much over the animals, but he also has to live with the discomforts which result for him from the fact that he has raised his head so proudly above his old comrades” (RezMoscati 2: 425).

\textsuperscript{9} These are the dates during which, Pauline Kleingeld argues, Kant held a strongly hierarchical view of human racial difference. Then, according to Kleingeld, sometime around 1794, as he was drafting “Toward Perpetual Peace” (published in 1795), he had “second thoughts” about race, and revised his position to be more genuinely egalitarian and in line with the universalist principles of his moral philosophy. See Kleingeld 2007.

\textsuperscript{10} Susan Meld Shell, in a recent essay, claims to detect in the 1775 essay an evaluative bias towards the greater development of reason among Europeans (whites), but I believe this bias is only made explicit in other texts, and so can only be read into the 1775 essay, not found within it. Shell writes, “In [the 1775] essay, Kant traces the regularly inherited differences between the various human races to the stimulation of a variety of ‘predispositions,’ each inherent in an original human ‘germ,’ that allowed early humans to adapt to a wide variety of climates across the planet, thereby fostering our physical survival in an environment subject to local catastrophe. A second predisposition, toward the development of reason, unfolds differentially among the various races, and emerges fully, as Kant here suggests, only among Europeans” (Shell 2014, 153).
To support this reading, consider what Kant says about race and animality in his pedagogy lectures, which stem from courses Kant offered four times between 1776 and 1787. Kant writes:

It is also observable in savage [wilden] nations that, though they may be in the service of Europeans for a long time, they can never grow accustomed to the European way of life. But with them this is not a noble propensity towards freedom, as Rousseau and others believe; rather it is a certain raw state [Rohigkeit] in that the animal in this case has so to speak not yet developed the humanity inside itself. (Päd 9: 442)

Taking this passage together with the above remark from Kant’s notebook demonstrates the association of animality with savagery or wildness, and of reason and humanity with European-ness and civilization. As a synoptic examination of his views on race makes clear, Kant counted “negros” (along with Native Americans) as members of the “savage nations,” and took “white” to be synonymous with “European.” Though all races have the same set of predispositions within their nature, for Kant, non-whites, and blacks especially, remain most beholden to animality, and are the most incapable of developing their reason and humanity. Thus the unequal strength or distribution of animality across the natures of different human groups helps us account for Kant’s evaluative, and not merely descriptive, differentiation of the races.

b) Sexual Difference

In the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, one of the last texts he saw to publication, Kant separates anthropology into two basic approaches. One is the physiological, which, Kant says, “concerns the investigation of what nature makes of the human being;” the other the pragmatic, which concerns “the investigation of what he as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself” (Anth 7: 119). Kant recognizes the validity of physiological

---

1 For an account of the thorny editorial history of Kant’s *Pädagogik*, see Louden 2011, 136–137; also Buchner 1904, 15–20.
2 For discussion of the connections between these terms, see Bernasconi 2001, also Shell 2006.
anthropology as a descriptive science of humans considered as sensuous, animal beings, but he repeatedly stresses its insufficiency as an approach to humans considered also as rational, moral, free-acting beings.\textsuperscript{13} Kantian pragmatic anthropology was from its inception intended to have a practical focus, and so to treat the human’s status as a natural, physiological, and animal being only secondarily and when expedient to this central practical objective. As Kant puts it, echoing the progressive schema from the passage from his notebook,

\begin{quote}
The sum total of pragmatic anthropology, in respect to the vocation of the human being and the characteristic of his formation, is the following. The human being is destined by his reason to live in a society with human beings and in it to \textit{cultivate} himself, to \textit{civilize} himself, and to \textit{moralize} himself by means of the arts and sciences. No matter how great his animal tendency may be to give himself over \textit{passively} to the impulses of ease and good living, which he calls happiness, he is still destined to make himself worthy of humanity by \textit{actively} struggling with the obstacles that cling to him because of the crudity of his nature. (Anth 7: 324–325)
\end{quote}

The teleological propensities toward cultivation, civilization, and moralization each necessitate a certain active struggle with those aspects of human nature that arise from the human’s “crudity” or rawness—that is, from the human’s animality.\textsuperscript{14} The distinction between pragmatic and physiological anthropology therefore reflects and perpetuates the distinction between that which is properly and distinctively human within human nature and that which the human has in common with other animals.

Tracking these distinctions in the account of sexual difference Kant offers in the \textit{Anthropology} can help us explain why Kant draws the moral differentiation between the sexes

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{13} Kant had voiced his rejection of physiological anthropology as early as 1773, in a letter written to Marcus Herz just prior to the second iteration of Kant’s anthropology lecture course, which, by the time of his retirement from teaching in 1796, would be offered a total of twenty four times. In the 1773 letter, Kant states his plan to make anthropology “into a proper academic discipline,” one that could “disclose the sources of all the [practical] sciences, the science of morality, of skill, of human intercourse, of the way to educate and govern human beings, and thus of everything that pertains to the practical” (Br 10: 146). Achieving this, Kant explains, entails “omitting entirely” from anthropology the “eternally futile inquiries as to the manner in which bodily organs are connected with thought” (Br 10: 146).

\textsuperscript{14} A treatment of the relation between civilization, cultivation, and moralization in Kant, with consideration of Kant’s inheritance of these concepts from Rousseau, appears in Wilson 2014.
\end{flushleft}
that he does.\textsuperscript{15} Take, for instance, the methodological remark Kant makes regarding which principle one should have in mind when characterizing the female sex:

One can only come to the characterization of [the female] sex if one uses as one's principle not what we make our end, but what nature's end was in establishing womankind; and since this end itself, by means of the foolishness of human beings, must still be wisdom according to nature's purpose, these conjectural ends can also serve to indicate the principle for characterizing woman—a principle which does not depend on our choice but on a higher purpose for the human race. (Anth 7: 305)

What is most distinctive about the character of women, for Kant, is a result not of their own action, which would stem from their reason, but of what nature has made of them, which is a matter of their animality. Though pragmatic anthropology is suitable in general for approaching human beings, when it comes to female humans taken as a subset within this generic, implicitly male category, the physiological approach is best.

When Kant proceeds to specify what “nature’s end” in establishing womankind had been, he lists “(1) the preservation of the species, [and] (2) the cultivation of society and its refinement by womankind” (Anth 7: 306). The dependence of this claim upon Kant’s view of human animality emerges when it is noted that Kant, in the \textit{Religion}, divides the predisposition to animality within human nature into three ends: “\textit{first}, for self-preservation; \textit{second}, for the propagation of the species, through the sexual drive, and for the preservation of the offspring thereby begotten through breeding; \textit{third}, for community with other human beings, i.e., the social drive” (RGV 6: 26). As Kant sometimes associates sociality with human reason,\textsuperscript{16} his attributing “the social drive” to animality in this case raises an interpretive difficulty. Reading this passage along with his account of the character of the female sex in the \textit{Anthropology} helps resolve this.

\textsuperscript{15} Kant’s presentation of sexual difference in the \textit{Anthropology} book is his most widely studied treatment of the subject. The section “On the Difference Between the Sublime and the Beautiful in the Contrast Between the Two Sexes” in the \textit{Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime} (1764) is perhaps the second most prominent. Reading this earlier text in terms of human animality, which is most pronounced as a theme in Kant’s later writings, would require more qualification than is appropriate here.

\textsuperscript{16} See, once again, RezMoscati 2: 425.

Craig, “Kant on Animality, Race, and Sexual Difference,” 9
While society in general may be an achievement of human reason, the specific cultivation and refinement of society by women is a physiological rather than a practical end—something intended by nature and conducted through human animality. Animality is therefore, on Kant’s view, of greater relevance to, and more strongly determinative of, the nature of female human beings than of males.\(^{17}\)

**Conclusion**

If it is established that animality is, for Kant, an ineliminable part of human nature, then it is clear that animality factors, at some level, in his reflections on the nature of any human group. That animality is, moreover, an antagonized aspect—something that must in some way be struggled against in order for the full development of the human’s morally privileged predispositions to take place—means that it can also play an evaluative role in Kant’s differentiation of certain human groups from others. In the case of non-whites and women, I believe Kant is committed to the view that these groups exhibit animality more strongly, with greater determinative force, than do white men. Grasping this point allows us to draw connections between the normative violence done to non-human animals, non-whites, and women on various levels of Kant’s philosophy, and perhaps within the philosophical and institutional tradition that has roots in Kantian thought more broadly. At the same time, better appreciation of the entanglement of these commitments may help us modify them and so articulate a philosophy that, while still in Kant’s wake, is not identical with Kant’s own.

\(^{17}\) Adrian Caverero has recently detected a similar association of the female sex with animality in Kant’s apparent disgust with mothers and children in the *Anthropology*. She writes, “Whereas as a natural being, man is an animal of the species *Homo sapiens*, as a rational and moral being—that is, as a proper human—man is totally repelled at the idea of associating with beasts. In this light, Kant’s impatience with mothers and children becomes, thus, more comprehensible: vis-à-vis the zoological boundary between humans and animals, both mothers and children are borderline figures. Mothers are so because, by nurturing and raising their little ones, they show a natural inclination that aligns them with the females of other species. Children, for their part, are, substantially, still young little beasts” (Caverero 2013, 223).
Work Cited


Kant, Immanuel (1900–). Kants gesammelte Schriften, ed. Royal Prussian (later German, then Berlin-Brandenburg) Academy of Sciences, 29 vols. Berlin: Georg Reimer (later de Gruyter).


Craig, “Kant on Animality, Race, and Sexual Difference,” 11