

Charles Mills on Deracializing Liberalism

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Charles W. Mills. *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 244 + xxi, GBP 23.99. ISBN: 978-0-19-024542-9.

This collection of Charles Mills' writings includes his famous "White Ignorance" and "Kant's Untermenschen," along with his most extensive engagement with the writings of John Rawls. Fleischacker's review endorses and expands Mills' critique of what Rawls calls "ideal theory," while disputing Mills' characterization of Kant's moral theory as intrinsically racist. It proposes a different way of understanding how Kant and other philosophers have been able to maintain egalitarian principles while still being racist.

Key words: Charles Mills; Immanuel Kant; John Rawls; ideal theory; racism; moral principles

Charles Mills has long been a pioneer in the philosophy of race, the author of a large body of nuanced, systematic, and deeply challenging work. In his latest collection of essays, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, he brings together some of his most famous pieces—the marvelous “White Ignorance” and the highly provocative “Kant’s *Untermenschen*,” in particular—with a series of internal critiques of liberal political philosophy, especially at the hands of John Rawls and his followers. The essays as a whole add up to a call for a new kind of liberalism, one that would start from an explicit recognition of the centrality of racism to the structure of the United States and other modern societies, and address itself directly to overcoming that barrier to justice. The book ends with a promissory note: Mills says that “in future work I hope to develop in greater detail” what a “black radical liberalism” might look like—a liberalism that is both true to the ideals of the liberal tradition (“the liberalism that *should have been*”) and cognizant of the oppression that blacks have suffered under “the liberalism that actually was and is” (215).

As in any collection of essays, there are stronger and weaker pieces, but the best are outstanding. “White Ignorance,” which draws richly on social epistemology to lay out a blueprint for explaining how a society systematically blinds itself to facts about black people, is a gem, and has already helped launch a wide literature. “Kant’s *Untermenschen*” makes a powerful case for reading Kant’s moral philosophy as intrinsically racist; I disagree with elements of that case, as I’ll explain shortly, but it has done much to force those of us who admire Kant to face up to a crucial issue. And “Retrieving Rawls for Racial Justice” is a deft and convincing response to those who want to employ Rawls, unmodified, to promote rectificatory justice for black people in the United States. Working out from a fine grasp of the details of Rawls’ system, Mills shows how it is unsuited to such purposes.

The last of these pieces develops a thesis that runs through the rest of the book: that what Rawls called “ideal theory” is intrinsically incapable of addressing the problems of a society structured by deep historical injustices, like racism. And for Mills, here as in his groundbreaking

Racial Contract, supposedly liberal societies all over the world, but especially in the United States, have been thoroughly structured by racism. White supremacy is not a minor, easily overcomeable blemish on societies defined otherwise by egalitarian political principles and practices, he argues, but a feature that has shaped their entire social and economic worlds. A racial contract—a contract to maintain the supremacy of whites over blacks, not a contract to guarantee equal rights to everyone—provides the real foundation of most supposedly liberal societies today. But ideal theory cannot so much as recognize this situation, says Mills, and hence cannot do anything to rectify it. If we want to rectify it, we will need nonideal theory instead.

One striking feature of this collection is its staunch commitment to liberalism, if a “radical” and deracialized liberalism. Although he began his career as a Marxist, at this point Mills does not share the continued faith of many academics in Marxism. Mills says disappointingly little to explain why not, although he gestures at some reasons for the change: because Marxism is less good than liberalism at theorizing personhood (7), because “Marx’s vision seems increasingly unrealizable, with no attractive ‘communist’ models to point at” (126; see also 77), and because it is pragmatically better for the struggle for racial justice if it can build alliances with liberals and not just with socialists (126, 133-4). Mills also makes use of certain Marxist conceptual tools, particularly the notion of “exploitation”—which, he points out, makes much more straightforward sense in the context of a racial critique than it does in a class-based one (45-7, 129-30). Mills is rather gentle about Marx’s own racism, however, mentioning it explicitly just once (202), and never suggesting that it may permeate his thought (he never says, for instance, that Marx was calling for solidarity just among the *white* proletariat, although that is probably as plausible as saying that Kant was calling just for white people to be treated as ends in themselves). This is an omission of some importance, I think, but of greater importance is the fact that Mills wants fully to endorse liberal beliefs in the moral value of personhood, in rights, in justice, and in mind-independent truth, while deploying all these beliefs to bring out the offenses against personhood, rights, justice, and honesty that have marked liberal practices. This use of liberalism against itself, in place of the Marxist rejection of liberalism, makes for a position that is I think both plausible and prudent. Mills is mindful of the danger of a left that undermines its own epistemic and pragmatic bases for social critique, and crafts a robust alternative to it here.

I’d like to offer one friendly amendment to Mills’ views, and one criticism of them. I’ll devote the rest of this review to these two points.

1 Problems with Ideal Theory

The friendly amendment is that Mills does not go quite far enough in his critique of Rawls’ emphasis on “ideal theory.” Mills rightly says that ideal theory is of necessity ahistorical, and therefore ill-suited to saying anything about “actual historic oppression and its legacy in the present” (76); he rightly sees this abstraction from history as the key reason why both *Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism* have virtually nothing to say about race; and he rightly holds Rawls to account for never writing about race, even when he did turn to non-ideal theory late in his career. But Mills could go further. I am not sure that there has ever really *been* such a thing as “ideal theory” in political philosophy: the very notion may be a distortion of what political philosophers do.

Now, I think somewhat more can be said on behalf of ideal theory than Mills does. Mills quotes Rawls as saying, in defense of his approach, “The reason for beginning with ideal theory is that it provides [...] the only basis for the systematic grasp of [the] more pressing problems [we face

in everyday life]” (quoted on 77). To which Mills responds, a few lines later, by asking, “*How in God’s name could anybody think that this is the appropriate way to do ethics?*” (Mills’ emphasis). But one might well consider it the appropriate way to do ethics if one believes, as Rawls seems to do in the lines surrounding the one that Mills quotes, that only “the nature and aims of a perfectly just society” will give us a high enough and comprehensive enough standard for resolving the pressing problems that surround us in everyday life. We may aim *too low* if we simply try to alleviate a particular form of poverty or racism in our city or state; we may not get at the fundamental causes of that injustice. Or we may resolve that injustice while leaving untouched, or even giving rise to, a different injustice elsewhere. Ideal theory may thus be needed to make clear what, overall, we are aiming for.

Having said this much in defense of Rawls’ method, however, I am skeptical of its feasibility. What inspires people to engage in political philosophy is virtually always a specific injustice around them. Locke wrote his *Treatises* on government to defend the Glorious Revolution; his essays and letters on religious toleration even more obviously propose very specific policies in response to very specific problems. Kant wrote his political essays first as warnings against restrictions on freedom proposed by the kings of Prussia and then as responses to the French Revolution. Mill offers interventions into debates raging in his day throughout *On Liberty*, *On the Subjection of Women* and his *Considerations on Representative Government*. Arendt does the same in practically all her writings.

And the way that these and other political philosophers deploy even apparently general terms and principles tends, perhaps inevitably, to reflect the specific issues that motivated them. Thus for Locke, notoriously, “liberty” primarily means the right to own property and to practice one’s religion freely; he says little about freedom of speech and nothing about a right to vote. For Kant, freedom of speech is the paradigm instance of liberty, but the freedom of speech he has in mind is primarily that of academics. Mill is concerned to defend a much broader freedom of speech, as well as certain kinds of sexual freedom, but makes no case for universal democracy. And Arendt is obsessed with the nature of totalitarianism and with the corruption of democracy in the United States during the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. Something similar can be said of Rousseau, Marx, Horkheimer, and Foucault. Their responses to issues of their day define the agenda they take up, and their views on those issues explain what they *mean* by “freedom” and “equality,” “democracy” and “justice” (not to mention the more concrete terms for which they are famous: amour-propre, alienation, exploitation, instrumental reason, surveillance). They thus wind up addressing specific problems of a specific imperfect society whether they intend to do that or not. Even when they speak generally, and appear to lay out principles for all societies everywhere and everywhen, we make best sense of those principles by way of their concrete concerns. (This is even true of Rawls, whose *Theory of Justice* proposes principles well-suited to the anti-Soviet left in the America of the 1960s and 70s—an absolute priority for liberty followed by a social democratic program within that limitation—while his *Political Liberalism* lays out a theory suited to the debates over religion in politics that began to rage in America after the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.)

It may be possible to establish a yet more radical point: that terms and principles, at least in politics, *cannot* be defined except by reference to practices and problems that give content to a particular society’s discourse at a particular time. I don’t want to defend any strong version of this thesis here, but suppose something in the neighborhood is true. Then we will have to regard “ideal theory” as at best an aspiration that our actual theories may approximate, and can expect to work towards only out of our various non-ideal theories. Would that be so bad? Suppose we say that we learn something valuable about religious liberty and limited government from Locke, who was wrestling vividly with those issues, something more about freedom of thought and speech from Kant and Mill, for whom those issues were paramount, something about the evils of inequality and

the nature of democracy from Rousseau, something more subtle about inequality under capitalism from Marx, and something about the dangers of surveillance from Foucault. Each of these figures and many others contributes something to non-ideal theory, and we may hope that by piecing them together, we can slowly approach an ideal theory. On this model, ideal theory comes last, not first; it must be built out of our various responses, *in situ*, to injustice, rather than drawn from the head of an atemporal, ideally rational Zeus. This seems to me a better picture of what political philosophers actually do than Rawls' vision of getting the ideal theory right first, and then applying it to cases.

But now, should we say that he was simply misled by a problematic feature of his approach to theory into setting aside the severe racism around him? Mills, recognizing that Rawls was personally not racist, offers this generous explanation as the main reason for his failure to deal with American racism, but refuses to exculpate him entirely on that basis. Noting that Rawls did eventually engage in non-ideal theory, as regards the international arena, in his *Law of Peoples*, and that he spent his life in the “Western democracy most centrally structured by racial injustice” (162), Mills asks, “why—in the three decades up to his death, enjoying the success of *Theory*—could he not find the time to write even *one essay* on racial justice? [...] What does this say about his priorities?” (156, emphasis in the original). Mills also notes that just a tiny fraction of the voluminous literature on Rawlsianism has ever dealt with racial justice (162-3)—and that something similar is true of Nozick's writings and the writings of Nozick's disciples, despite the fact that Nozick's account of justice makes explicit room for reparations in the face of a history of injustice (88). It is not just the blindness to history that ideal theory can entail, then, that explains the blindness of America's premier political philosophers to the gross injustices that have been perpetrated against black people in this country: we need to bring “white ignorance” into that explanation as well, and acknowledge that that ignorance infects even supposedly left-wing American academics.

But precisely because it is not just the failings of theory that explain why political philosophers have for so long ignored the racial injustice right under their noses, I think Mills may be too optimistic to look to improved theory as the best antidote to that ailment. Mills praises Elizabeth Anderson's *The Imperative of Integration* as an excellent work by a political philosopher on racial injustice in America, and holds it up as a model of non-ideal theory. I agree—but Anderson's book is richly informed by empirical data, and makes a series of concrete, empirically informed policy proposals; the abstractions of theory come in just as a framework for interpreting the social conditions she considers. Mills himself, by contrast, proposes in future work to derive and defend a set of Rawls-style principles for dealing with the non-ideal justice of overcoming racism (210-15). I am intrigued by this project, and look forward to seeing it, but worry that it may play into the philosophers' fantasy that abstraction can resolve concrete problems.

2 Liberalism and Race Revisited

This concern also informs my second main response to Mills, which concerns his chapter on Kant. There can be no doubt that Kant was a racist, at least for most of his life (there is some debate over whether he moved away from racism in his final decade). The question is whether that racism infects his moral philosophy. Mills' answer to this is an emphatic “yes,” urging us to read Kant's moral philosophy as a proclamation of white supremacy, such that its famous principles really teach just that *white* people (white men, in fact) are ends in themselves and that we should “Treat only whites with respect” (98). Mills maintains that there is no non-circular way of delineating what is essential or central to Kant's moral philosophy so as to keep his purportedly egalitarian principles separate

from his racism (97, 101-3, 105). To teach Kant honestly would then be to teach him as a racist, not an egalitarian, and contemporary Kantians committed to egalitarianism would need to start from the recognition that Kant's thought needs to be radically revised, if we are to excise its racism (111-12).

I think Mills is quite right to urge philosophy professors to bring out Kant's racism when we teach Kant, and I have in fact been inspired by this essay to do that. But I do not agree with Mills' view of Kant's theory. That's in part because he relies too much on Emmanuel Eze for his history. Eze is a sloppy scholar, saying for instance that in the *Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime*, "Kant deployed the transcendentalism of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in order to establish ways in which moral feelings apply to humans generally" (quoted in Mills: 99). But the *Observations* were published at the height of Kant's *empiricist* period—seven years before the *Inaugural Dissertation*, the very earliest moment at which Kant might be said to have begun developing a philosophy that could be called "transcendentalism," and seventeen years before the *Critique*, whose methods Eze says Kant was deploying. Eze also claims that "The black person can be denied full humanity [for Kant] since full and 'true' humanity accrues only to the white European" (Eze, "Color of Reason," 221). But Kant never did say that, insisting, even in one of his most racist pieces, that "Negroes and Whites are [...] not different types of human beings," just two different races (Ak 2:430, my translation).¹

So even at his worst, Kant never imported a category of "sub-humans" into his moral philosophy. Moreover, once he developed his transcendental philosophy, he came to treat the claim that every rational being—everyone capable of any degree of reasoning—has dignity as an *a priori* truth, not something that could vary with our contingent features. Taken together, these points make it implausible to suppose that Kant himself intended his call for every human being to be treated as an end, or with respect, to extend just to white people.

I would add that there are non-circular ways of picking out what is central to Kant's moral philosophy without reference to the question of whether racism belongs to that central core: several of them, in fact. First, we could look at the themes that Kant repeats across his moral writings, emphasizing them in the *Groundwork*, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the *Religion*, and the *Metaphysics of Morals*. Second, we can take the themes in Kant's moral writings that follow most directly from aspects of his epistemology (e.g., the notion that we cannot know God and therefore cannot derive morality from God's will, or the notion that our free will must be a cause and that to be a cause, it must be expressed in a law) to reveal the core of his moral thought. And third, we can ask, not what Kant himself regarded as the core of his moral views, but what his later readers, especially his most committed followers and critics, took to be that core: that, after all, tells us what to count as *Kantianism*, as Kant's impact on the history of moral philosophy. None of these approaches are circular—none begins by assuming that Kant's racism either does or does not appear in the core views we attribute to Kant or Kantianism, nor do any of them either entail or preclude the possibility that racism is part of those core views.

Yet every one of these approaches winds up separating Kant's core moral philosophy sharply from his racism. Kant never mentions race, nor so much as alludes to the possibility that "person" might extend to anything less than all human beings, in any of his moral writings. (And the omission is a curious one, if he really thought that only white people can count as ends-in-themselves—he was certainly not averse to expressing racist views!) Nor are any of the moral themes that follow from his epistemological arguments remotely racist. Nor again do the most prominent readers of Kant's moral philosophy associate it with racism. Even those among Kant's followers who were avid racists—Schopenhauer, for instance, or the proto-Nazi Otto Weininger—do not cite Kant to support their racism. So there is a good, non-question-begging reason to regard

Kant's moral *principles* as independent of his racism—to treat them as the ringing proclamations of egalitarianism that they seem to be.

But in that case, how do we deal with the fact that some Kantians, including Kant himself, seem to have combined their egalitarian principles with racism? I would say that this fact gives us good reason to be skeptical of an over-emphasis on principles. What we can learn from Kant's racism is precisely that human attitudes and actions are not guided as much by principle as many philosophers like to think—that something else comes in when we try to live out our principles. What else? Well, elsewhere² I have suggested that we do well to attend to judgment, the modes of thought by which we apply abstract principles to concrete cases—what Aristotle called, in his animadversions against overly theoretical approaches to ethics, “practical wisdom” (*phronesis*). Many a believer in Jewish law or Christian love or liberal or anti-capitalist principles have found ways to argue that their commitments do not apply to this or that situation before them, or that extenuating circumstances here or overriding concerns there allow for their principles to be compromised or modified. Otherwise it would be hard to explain how Christians have justified war and socialists have justified undemocratic rule. But if principles—theory—can be so easily bent and molded in application, then we should be wary even of anti-racist principles: they too may be bent or molded to fit the interests of the person or people applying them. At the very least, we will need to develop habits of honest judgment to go along with our principles.

But of course it is overly optimistic to suppose that we can easily develop habits of honest judgment. We are all deeply subject to prejudice and illusion and self-deception, after all, both as individuals and as a society. Perhaps psychoanalysis can help us overcome these things, to some degree, as individuals, and perhaps epistemic critique, of the sort Mills himself helped to initiate in “White Ignorance,” can help us see beyond them, to some degree, as a society. In any case, it is exercises of these sorts, I submit, and not more and better theory, that we need if we are to bring our practice in line with our principles.

So while Mills is right to bring out the enormous gulf between the egalitarianism that Kant proclaimed in moral theory and the racism that suffuses his anthropological writings, I disagree that the best explanation of that gulf renders Kant's theory implicitly racist. And one reason to resist that explanation is that it directs us too much to theory as a way of bridging that gulf. We need to attend to the forces in ourselves that lead us to distort *any* theory we take on, not just to look for better theories.

I want to say the same about Mills' critique of Rawls, although here my point is much closer to Mills' own. Rawls himself vastly over-emphasized the value of doing political philosophy at a very rarefied, abstract level—the level of ideal theory—and thereby distracted himself from engaging with some of the most urgent, concrete problems in the society in which he actually lived. We do not adequately respond to that problem by constructing better theories. Rather, we might want to turn away from pure theory altogether: to integrate our abstract principles into a detailed examination of the great issues that face us, while fending off the danger that prejudice and ideology and self-deception will lead us to misconstrue those issues. Mills' critique of modern political philosophy for its blindness to the racism around us is invaluable as a guide to these dangers. But we follow the spirit of that critique best if we do more to turn away from a model of philosophy as constructing principles alone. Principle alone never could and never did guide a human life. Only practical wisdom, which incorporates principles into habits and modes of perception, can do that.

Samuel Fleischacker works in moral and political philosophy, the history of moral and philosophy, and the philosophy of religion. His publications include *The Ethics of Culture* (Cornell, 1994), *On Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations: A Philosophical Companion* (Princeton, 2003), *A Short History of Distributive Justice* (Harvard, 2004), *Divine Teaching and the Way of the World* (Oxford, 2011), *Kant's Questions: What Is Enlightenment?* (Routledge, 2012), and *The Good and the Good Book* (Oxford, 2015), and *Being Me Being You: Adam Smith and Empathy* (University of Chicago, 2019). Professor Fleischacker has been a Fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford (USA), the University Center for Human Values at Princeton (USA), and the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities at Edinburgh University (UK). He taught previously at Williams College (USA).

¹ “Neger und Weiße [sind] zwar nicht verschiedene Arten von Menschen [...] aber doch zwei verschiedene Racen” (Ak 2:430).

² Samuel Fleischacker, *A Third Concept of Liberty: Judgment and Freedom in Kant and Adam Smith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).