

God has ordained different decrees and orders of men, some to be High-Honorable, some to be Low-Despicable... yea, some to be born slaves, and so to remain during their lives, as hath been proved.

--John Saffin, a Puritan leader

## Moral Equality and Natural Inferiority \*

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If there are any non-controversial moral principles nowadays moral respect for others is surely one of them. Quite simply, the idea is that everyone can and should have moral respect for others. Needless to say, specifying what having such respect amounts to is a matter of considerable controversy. However, I wish to raise a question in moral psychology concerning the wherewithal it takes to have moral respect for a group of people deemed to be substantially inferior intellectually in virtue of their group membership—say, race or gender. These days, of course, we roundly reject the idea that intellectual inferiority tracks race or gender. But there is a philosophical matter of great importance here because it has often seemed that

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substantial intellectual inferiority as such presents no problem with regard to having the proper moral respect for individuals so classified. So, *a fortiori*, we do not have a problem when such inferiority tracks gender or, as I shall focus upon, race.

The issue of whether considerable intellectual inferiority on the part of a group is a significant barrier to having moral respect for them is nicely raised by Kant's work. As is well known, Kant made it unequivocally clear in his anthropological writings that he took blacks to be quite inferior intellectually. However, it has recently been argued with great force by Thomas Hill and Bernard Boxill, in "Kant and Race",<sup>1</sup> that however wrong Kant was regarding the racial inferiority of blacks, his moral theory remains

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<sup>1</sup> "Kant and Race" by Thomas E. Hill, Jr. and Bernard Boxill, printed in Bernard Boxill (ed.), *Race and Racism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). A similar view has been eloquently articulated by Marcia Baron in "Reading Kant Selectively," in Dieter Schönecker and Thomas Zwenger (eds.) *Kant Verstehen / Understanding Kant. Über die Interpretation Philosophischer Texte* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001). Although her primary focus is upon what historical figures, such as Kant, have said about women, she extends her analysis to what such figures have said about non-whites as well. See also the magnificent essay by Allen Wood, "What Dead Philosophers Mean," in the *Dieter Schönecker and Thomas Zwenger* volume, especially section 3, "Thinking Dead People's Thoughts".

unscathed, because the moral duty to respect persons in virtue of being such is not defeated by intellectual inferiority. It is the view that individuals are worthy of moral respect in virtue of their personhood (and therefore regardless of their intellectual inferiority) that is invoked to maintain that the intellectually inferior do not present a problem when it comes to the matter of being shown moral respect.

I shall argue that having respect for the intellectually inferior is a far more difficult task than one might suppose, especially when this inferiority is linked to some well-defined phenotypical feature such as race or gender and, moreover, the inferiority is great enough. Kant, it seems, took the inferior of blacks vis à vis Europeans to be rather like the difference between a Mercedes-Benz and a Ford Pinto, which is not just a difference in degree but also in kind. I draw upon this analogy in Sections II and III. While Kant's work shall be the focus, the issue of whether or not vast intellectual inferiority presents a significant barrier to moral respect arises for all moral theories.

Let me acknowledge straightaway that from the fact that a task is difficult to accomplish, it does not thereby follow that it cannot or should not be

done. Difficulty as such is not an excusing factor. But there are difficulties and difficulties. A task can be so difficult that it becomes entirely unreasonable to expect anyone to fulfill it. To take an example, it is not a logical truth that if one is a victim of injustice, then one becomes morally outraged and angry with those who have wronged one. The Christian story is about a man who did not; and that much of the story is, itself, perfectly coherent. All the same, it would be most unreasonable to expect human beings so to behave; and a moral theory that required this of human beings would certainly be too demanding. Our human nature in this regard would serve as something of a mitigating factor, if not an excusing condition entirely, because the demand would be absolutely unreasonable. And there is the rub, where a demand is sufficiently unreasonable that fact alone can be at least a mitigating factor. With respect to the issue of inferiority, I shall specifically speak to this consideration in Section III.

Before getting under way, a few caveats are in order. Throughout history, racial inferiority has very often been associated with intellectual inferiority. However, racial inferiority can also be associated exclusively with morally inferiority. In the history of antisemitism, Jews have been regarded as morally

inferior, but not intellectually inferior.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I am interested in intellectual inferiority; for this is the kind of inferiority that has been considered to be a direct product of the biological make-up of a group or a person. Moreover, it is intellectual inferiority that very forcefully raises issues of responsibility if one

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<sup>2</sup> Thus, as I argued in *Vessels of Evil* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), Jews were regarded as irredeemably evil, but not lacking in intelligence. For a more recent discussion of how religious attitudes have changed regarding Jews, see my “Forgiving the Unforgivable,” in Eva Garrard and Geoffrey Scarre (eds.), *Moral Philosophy and the Holocaust* (England: Ashgate Press, 2003). For a general discussion of Jews as evil, see Joel Carmichael, *The Satanizing of Jews* (New York: Fromm International Publishing Corporation, 1992) and Gavin I. Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Quite recently, a trenchant discussion of the demonization of Jews has been presented by Pierre-Andree Tuguieff, “Invention et réinvention du mythe des ‘Sages de Sion’,” *Revue d’Histoire de la Shoah*, no. 180 (January-June 2004): pp. 172-219. As Taguieff observes, Jews have been cited as the source of all evil (p. 205). No one has ever held such a view of blacks who, as I noted in *Vessels of Evil*, have generally been considered moral simpletons—just too dumb to be evil in the robust sense attributed to Jews. For an extremely sensitive discussion of the character of racism, see J. L. A. Garcia “Three Sites for Racism: Social Structures, Valuing, and Vice,” in Michael Levin and Tamas Pataki (eds.), *Race and Mind* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). He masterfully characterizes racism as “vicious ways of falling short of the virtue of benevolence” (section IV).

assumes that responsibility is tied to comprehension of both the laws (moral and legal) that apply to one and the nature of one’s own actions.

Now, of course, it is obvious in one sense that the idea of racial inferiority hardly entails SMR (severe mental retardation [of which Down Syndrome is an instance]), which admits of degrees. Yet, in another sense, precisely what racial inferiority seems to be about is an inferiority that supposedly affects all the members of this or that racial category; and the adult members of a group labeled racially inferior are often held to be child-like because as adults they lack the intellectual wherewithal considered to be appropriate to adulthood, and so the capacity to grasp fully intellectual ideas in general, and profound matters of morality in particular. Views about racial inferiority often suggest that the adult members of the inferior group in question are more or less at a level that is the functional equivalent of an SMR individual. Certainly, there is nothing about the idea of racial inferiority that precludes the intellectual inferiority of a race from being analogous to the intellectual inferiority of SMR individuals. Invariably, a ceiling is set on intelligence rather than a floor. So the idea that an entire race of people can be the functional equivalent of an SMR individual is

certainly in keeping with racial inferiority that posits intellectual inferiority. There would still be differences, obviously. SMR is considered a severe medical affliction; hence, an SMR person is one who has considerable health challenges. By contrast, racial inferiority is not considered a medical affliction, since the inferiority is held to be characteristic of the very nature of the group in question. I shall speak as if a group of people who are considered racially inferior as suffering from SMR. The idea is not to offend. My aim is two-fold. One is to draw attention to how significant the charge of racial inferiority is by keeping before us the reality that considerable intellectual inferiority is presumed. The other is to speak to the general philosophical issues that are involved in respecting the intellectually inferior.

My concern in this essay is not to establish that Kant's moral theory is racist. If I am right that there is a fundamental difficulty here that Kant did not see, it does not automatically follow that Kant's moral theory is racist. Minimally, it simply follows that Kant's theory does not do all that one might want it to do. Nor do I have an interest in establishing that Kant himself was a racist. The philosophical significance of the question that I am concerned to

address does not turn upon establishing the charge of racism, either with respect to Kant or his work.

A final preliminary remark: There has been much discussion as to what criteria a being must satisfy in order to be considered a person. Indeed, it would seem that some, such as Peter Singer and Michael Tooley,<sup>3</sup> suppose that sufficiently retarded individuals should no longer be considered persons. Since neither subscribe to racist views, it would never occur to them that their views have any implications regarding racial inferiority. I am not about to suggest otherwise. I have drawn attention to their thought in order to bring into sharp relief the fact that in this essay I am engaged in a different project entirely. I am assuming personhood in order to show the difficulties that arise in having the proper respect for persons understood to be deeply inferior intellectually. Besides, the project of this essay is not rendered otiose by a theory that determines what rights the intellectually inferior have; for establishing that a group has this or that set of rights does not

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<sup>3</sup> For Peter Singer, see, e.g., *Individuals, Humans, and Persons: Questions of Life and Death* (Sankt Augustin, Germany: Academia Verlag, 1994) and *The Allocation of Health Care Resources: An Ethical Evaluation of the "QALY" Approach* (Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 1998); for Michael Tooley, see *Abortion and Infanticide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

entail that non-members of the group will be readily disposed to respect those rights.

### I. Formulating the Problem

In his essay *Observations on the Feelings of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, Immanuel Kant infamously wrote: “So fundamental is the difference between [the Negro and White] races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color . . .”. Though finding Kant’s views on blacks embarrassing and inappropriate, his defenders have rightly pointed out, most recently Thomas Hill and Bernard Boxill,<sup>4</sup> that Kant unequivocally held that slavery was wrong and could not be justified. Thomas McCarthy has also made this observation, citing the words of Kant in *Perpetual Peace*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> See his essay “On the Way to a World Republic: Kant on Race and Development,” in *Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag von Karl Graf Ballestrem* (Dunker & Humblot Verlag). Upon reviewing various remarks by Kant, such as “children (even those of someone who has become a slave through his crime) are at all times free. For everyone is born free”—McCarthy writes “So it is clear that, on Kant’s view, there is no basis in right for enslaving people or otherwise placing them in bondage, which would even begin to legitimate the African slave trade, of which he had an extensive knowledge”. McCarthy notes, however, that Kant seemed not to have in fact publicly condemned the African slave trade. Both the

Moreover, all the writers note that on Kant’s view *all* persons have moral worth in virtue of their personhood; and there is ne’er an exception to this made in his moral writings. As with physical defects, intellectual inferiority does not detract one iota from an individual’s moral worth as a person because in neither case is an individual any less of a person. So notwithstanding Kant’s unacceptable view of blacks, his official moral theory remains unblemished. This is because the theory entails that blacks are just as much owed moral respect in virtue of their personhood as are all other persons, including those whom Kant held to be more advanced, namely the Europeans.

I fully agree with Hill and Boxill regarding the importance of separating Kant’s moral doctrines from his anthropological observations that might merit the

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essay by McCarthy and the essay by Boxill and Hill are making essentially the same point, namely that whereas Kant’s moral philosophy, strictly speaking, says all the right things (making no exception regarding matters of race), his non-moral writings are often—but not always—problematic. On the one hand, McCarthy is mindful of the tension in Kant’s overall thought; on the other, Boxill and Hill remind us not to read Kant’s objectionable non-moral writings into his moral philosophy. For a sustained discussion of some of Kant’s unsavory remarks regarding blacks, see Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

label racist. I further concur, with Hill and Boxill, that Kant's moral views do not *ipso facto* become racist owing to claims in his anthropological writings, for instance, that might warrant the label. It is not a logical feature of racism or, more generally, any form of X-ism (sexism, antisemitism, and so forth) that X-ism in one aspect of a person's thought entails X-ism in all aspects of a person's thought. In "Of the Different Human Races," Kant distinguished between a species and a race, insisting that all human beings were part of the same species whatever their differences might be. He certainly got this right, whatever untoward things he might have said about this or that group of people. None of these points, though, renders otiose the issue of whether or not having the proper moral respect for those deemed manifestly inferior intellectually is so formidable a task that we might be reluctant to blame those who fail to do so, or we are inclined to blame them to a significantly lesser extent. It is far from obvious that respecting someone whose intellectual inferiority dramatically calls attention to itself in every way is as easy as respecting someone whose sense of moral self is secure and which manifests itself in every way. As I have already indicated, the question can be raised regarding moral theory generally, although Kant's

moral and anthropological writings provide a particularly vivid framework for doing so.

It is worth pointing out that historically personhood and inferiority have never been mutually exclusive. Dating back to Aristotle, numerous groups of people have been classified as both persons and inferior. After all, whether it was during Aristotle's time or Islamic slavery of the Middle Ages or slavery in the United States, slaves have always been considered human beings rather than animals. Moreover, down through the ages men have deemed women intellectually inferior by nature, with few men doubting that women were actually persons. Obviously, the Enlightenment ushered in a new era regarding equality; and Kant and Rousseau are among the era's principal torchbearers. However, we know that when it comes to matters of race and sex, it is possible to have exceedingly visceral feelings that are at odds with our theoretical ideals, where it is our feelings, and not our theory, that reflect our take on the reality of things.<sup>6</sup> In *Observations on the Feelings*

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<sup>6</sup> For an account of how I understand visceral feelings, see my "UpSide-Down Equality: A Response to Kantian Thought," in Michael Levin and Tamas Pataki (eds.), *op. cit.* See also Michael Stocker (with Elizabeth Hegeman), *Valuing Emotion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Stocker advances the thesis that our emotions often reveal to us the things that we in fact value.

*of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, Kant remarked of a Negro carpenter who was reproaching white men that “this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid”. So it is not at all out of the question that Kant’s official view regarding blacks, on the one hand, and his visceral feelings regarding blacks, on the other, were quite at odds with one another; and that his visceral feelings about blacks reflected his actual take on the reality of things. This brings me to the question in moral psychology that I wish to raise.

Suppose it is true that the very nature of the members of an ethnic or racial group is such that all members of that group are vastly inferior intellectually to all others. Could individuals who are not members of that group have enormous difficulty showing the proper moral respect for the members of that group? Or, to ask the question another way, could it turn out that the group’s inferiority constitutes a mitigating factor in terms of others having the proper moral respect for its members? When it comes to moral character assessment, not everything is settled by the truth that

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Accordingly, what we in fact value may be out of step with what we pay lip service to.

a given form of behavior is morally required. As I shall indicate below, there can be excusing conditions or mitigating factors; and these bear mightily upon our assessment of an individual’s moral character. The issue I want to raise, then, is not whether or not in the case of blacks Kant embraced the following principle:

(R) Human beings have moral worth in virtue of their personhood, and that all persons should be respected in virtue of being persons

I assume that he did. Rather, I am interested in whether or not problems arise with having the proper moral respect for a group of people if, as it happens, their nature is such that they are vastly inferior intellectually to others. It is easy to think that Kant could not have thought that intellectual inferiority presented a problem for his moral theory; otherwise, he would have addressed it. Perhaps. In Section III, I shall offer one possible explanation for why he did not address this issue.

What is an ethnic group? What is a racial group? Although I am using the terms synonymously here, I do not mean for either to be synonymous with the idea of a cultural group. Members of the same ethnic group can have different

cultures. There is nothing about the logic of being either white or black, for instance, that entails, respectively, that all whites or all blacks share the same culture. The blacks and whites born and raised in South Africa, for example, do not have the same culture as the blacks and whites born and raised in the United States, although we indisputably have blacks and whites in either case. It goes without saying that there are no hard and fast lines between racial or ethnic groups. In fact, some think that the very idea is intellectually bankrupt.<sup>7</sup> Racism, however, has never much concerned itself with the facts. So I am interested in what might be called the

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Ashley Montague, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974). Others, of course, have pressed this claim, but Montague stands first among those who have done so; for the book by Montague just mentioned was first published in 1942. An equally relevant work is Stephen J. Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996). Gould denies that intelligence is quantifiable in some nice and neat way, as I.Q. tests suggest. This, in turn, challenges the use of I.Q. scores to establish racial intellectual superiority. As for some of the literature regarding the intellectual inferiority of blacks, see Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994) and Arthur Jensen "How Much Can We Boost IQ and Scholastic Achievement," *Harvard Educational Review* 39 (1969): 1-23.

folk sociological attitude regarding race, which takes the category of race to be ever so real notwithstanding the facts of biology to the contrary. If in the end the folk sociological attitude regarding race or ethnicity is rejected as just so much nonsense, that does not present a problem for this essay, since precisely what I am interested in is the problem of moral respect that arises when the folk psychological attitude regarding race is taken seriously, especially when intellectual inferiority is attributed to persons simply in virtue of being a member of the race in question.

At the outset, an important issue arises for Kantian moral theory with regard to intellectual inferiority. This is because Kant's theory of moral agency calls for considerable self-awareness.<sup>8</sup> Seeing

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<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Christine Korsgaard, "Creating the Kingdom of Ends: Reciprocity and Responsibility in Personal Relations," in her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). She writes: "To hold another responsible is to regard her as a person—that is to say, as a free and equal person, capable of acting *both* rationally and morally" (p. 189, my emphasis). This, of course, is true. What I am pointing out in the text is that from the fact that someone is a person (e.g., a mentally retarded individual or one with Alzheimer's), it does not follow that she or he can be held responsible. So we have



oneself as a Legislator of universal moral law and as a member of the Kingdom of Ends are both indicative of the importance that self-awareness has in Kantian theory. And this is to say nothing of applying the Categorical Imperative or having self-respect. Kant's distinction between acting in accordance with duty and acting for the sake of duty (which is when an action has moral worth) is subtle; and the inability to reflect carefully will surely be an impediment to acting in the right way. Gifted people wrestle with applying the categorical imperative. This would suggest, surely, that doing so would be even more difficult for SMR individuals.

In his justly famous essay "Servility and Self-Respect", Thomas Hill has written most eloquently and with great force regarding the defective

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i) (x)(if X can be held responsible, then X is a person [i.e., a *homo sapien*] who is capable of acting rationally and morally).

Claim-(i), however, does not entail

ii) (y)(if Y is a person [i.e., a *homo sapien*], then Y is capable of acting rationally and morally),

Claim-(ii) is false. There are many individuals, the case of children aside, who belong to the class of *homo sapiens* who lack the capacity to act rationally and morally.

reasoning of servile persons.<sup>9</sup> Although philosophers readily see the defects in the moral reasoning of the servile persons, masterfully made plain to us by Hill, we must bear in mind that it is not always easy for persons to reason themselves out of their servility. More to the point, we must bear in mind that providing a masterful argument to the effect that all individuals are entitled to have the proper moral respect for themselves, and should do so, is not the same thing as showing that all individuals have the psychological wherewithal to have the proper moral respect for themselves. Moreover, if Kant thought that having the proper moral respect for oneself required no intellectual wherewithal, he is surely mistaken here. It is no small conceptual matter to see oneself as a Legislator of universal moral law and as a member of the Kingdom of Ends. No one thinks that children are capable of such an intellectual feat. So if there is a group of individuals are so intellectually bereft that they are on a par with children, then it follows that the members of this group are not capable of this feat as well. Indisputably, Kant thought that blacks were vastly inferior intellectually to white Europeans. So it is hardly out of the

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<sup>9</sup> *The Monist* (1973) 58. Reprinted in his *Autonomy and Self-Respect* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

question that he took blacks to be sufficiently inferior that they could not see themselves as Legislators of universal moral law or members of the Kingdom of Ends; for he need only have supposed that blacks were rather like perpetual children. And surely persons who cannot see themselves in this way are also incapable of having the proper moral respect for themselves.

The preceding discussion nicely sets the stage for the question that is the concern of this essay. I take the following as a given: (A) For any person X: if X is so intellectually inferior that X cannot conceive of herself or himself as a member of the Kingdom of Ends or as a Legislator of universal moral law, then (i) X is psychologically incapable of having the proper moral respect for her- or himself and, moreover, (ii) X is incapable of showing others the proper moral respect. Thus, (B) for any two people X and Y: (i) if (A) is true of both of them, then (ii) neither individual is capable of showing the proper moral respect to one another nor, either individually or jointly, to other individuals. How easy can it be to show the proper moral respect for a group of people when, in virtue of their intellectual inferiority, they are incapable of having the proper moral respect for themselves?

Indeed, what point can there be to doing so?

To be sure, there can be isolated instances in which a person fails to realize that she or he is being shown the proper moral respect. Perhaps the speaker's non-verbal behavior was awkward or inappropriate to the words of respect that he uttered. In cases of this sort, though, things can be corrected so that the desired uptake of respect will take place. However, if we are talking about an entire group of people who by their very nature lack the intellectual wherewithal to comprehend things in the right way, then the option to correct for misunderstanding is, by the very structure of things, ruled out of court. Suppose that showing moral respect was rather like having a conversation with someone in a given language. If two people speak the same language, then a conversation is possible. There can be misunderstandings, of course, but it will be possible to correct for these. On the other hand, if two people speak two different languages and do not share a language in common, then a conversation between them is simply not possible.

If a people are so inferior that they cannot understand the moral language of respect, then it is not obvious just how it is that one shows them

respect, precisely because the lack of comprehension is not tied a failure of communication that can be corrected for, but a complete inability to grasp the nature of what is happening. The institution of promising brings this point out rather nicely. If in language L, Opidopo utters to Rachelie “I promise you that I shall be there tomorrow in order to help you” and Rachelie does not speak L and there is no one around at all to translate the promise that Opidopo has just made in L to Rachelie, then what exactly is the moral force of saying that a promise had been made, given that Rachelie has not a clue that this is so and, moreover, Opidopo knows this? To be sure, if both Opidopo and Rachelie both speak L, it is still possible that Rachelie could miss the fact that Opidopo made a promise to her. But this could be easily corrected. Although J. L. Austin held that promising is a performative utterance, the presupposition of his argument is that there is comprehension.<sup>10</sup> If one thinks that a group of people is sufficiently inferior, then even making promises to

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<sup>10</sup> J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962). I am very grateful to Diogo Sardinha for inspiring the discussion here by drawing attention that we communicate entirely in a language that, for neither of us, is the language that we were raised speaking.

members of the group necessarily loses a lot of its moral seriousness.

We might usefully distinguish between a correctable impediment to understanding, where the failure to understand can be corrected, and a constitutive impediment to understanding, where the nature of things is such that understanding cannot take place. The claim of intellectual inferiority (tied in this case to racial inferiority) speaks to a constitutive impediment rather than a corrective one. That is what it means to be inferior by nature. Accordingly, the proper uptake when it comes to comprehension, including moral comprehension, is not achieved by giving the inferior more time to reflect or by speaking more slowly or loudly to them (or whatever). It is one thing to say that everyone is owed proper moral respect in virtue of their personhood. It is quite another to make sense of showing moral respect to a people deemed so intellectually inferior that the language of moral respect, and its concomitant behavior, makes no sense to them. The *assertion* that everyone is owed moral respect does not make it the case that individuals who are vastly inferior intellectually can thereby fathom or make sense of what is being done when others show them moral respect.

As I have already indicated, the problem in moral psychology that I am raising can certainly be raised in connection with other moral theories. For instance, it is hardly obvious that virtue ethics has a better way of dealing with the problem of manifest intellectual inferiority. Likewise with contractarian accounts.<sup>11</sup> At any rate, it should now be clear that Kant's writings nonetheless provide us with a particularly vivid context for raising the problem.

## II. Two Modes of Inferiority

With our problem in moral psychology before us, let us consider the following two world scenarios:

(WS1) There is one and only one group of human beings, say the Omega ethnic group, the members of which are all vastly inferior intellectually to all non-Omega human beings in the world and all Omega individuals are identifiable by the visible phenotypical property  $\phi$  (say blue skin).

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<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). He places enormous emphasis upon the role of reasons in the lives of individuals, which is perfectly understandable. But, alas, what does this mean for persons who, owing to their manifest intellectual inferiority, are such that reasons cannot be expected to operate fully in their lives.

and

(WS2) Manifest intellectual inferiority among the Betas shows itself randomly throughout the human race, with no one identifiable group of people having more members who are manifestly inferior intellectually than any other group of people; hence, there is no parallel Omega group. Moreover, this inflection of intellectual inferiority is quite rare.

Thus, (WS1) and (WS2) are formally incompatible. Moreover, it is to be understood that in (WS1), it is simply a fact about their different appearances that the inferior Omegas and the non-Omeegas cannot be mistaken for one another even from afar; whereas in (WS2), the intellectually inferior do not look substantially different generally from the non-inferior.

Let us assume that if (WS1) is true, then at the very least every non-Omega person in (WS1) knows this. Likewise, if (WS2) is true, then all the non-inferior Betas in (WS2) know this. Let us also assume that in terms of capacities, the level of inferiority among the manifestly inferior intellectually in (WS1) is identical to the level of inferiority among the manifestly inferior in (WS2). So whatever it is that

the inferior of (WS1) cannot do, it is the case that the inferior of (WS2) cannot do, and conversely. I think that defenders of Kant rely heavily upon the idea that we have the same level of inferiority in either case. This point is problematic, though, as we shall see in Section III, because having the same level of inferiority does not entail that the configuration of the inferiority in question is the same.

Now, let us suppose for the sake of argument that the inferior in (WS2) are shown the proper moral respect. How might this be? To begin with, the Betas who happen to be manifestly inferior intellectually are not identifiable as such by any recognizable physical feature. What is more, even if there are different causes for the inferiority among individuals, these differences are distributed evenly across groups. Accordingly, it will be impossible for the intellectually complete, let us say, among the Betas to contrive some phenotypical difference related to ethnicity or height, say, as the basis for the manifest intellectual deficiency. Indeed, precisely because Beta people who are manifestly deficient in this way are typically born to intellectually complete persons, it turns out that intellectually complete individuals are often inclined to say (pointing to the intellectually

deficient) “But for the grace of God I could have been that person”. Or they intone that “But for the grace of God, that intellectually deficient child could have been mine”. I shall call this counterfactual interpersonal identification.<sup>12</sup> Hence, in (WS2) there is much sympathy for those parents who give birth to such children. Everyone understands the disappointment and pain of these parents.

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<sup>12</sup> Here I follow Lawrence Kohlberg’s notion of reversibility. See ch. 5, “Justice as Reversibility,” in his *The Philosophy of Moral Development* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981). In ordinary parlance, the idea is that of putting oneself in the other person’s shoes. It is very tempting to think of reversibility as simply an act of ratiocination, limited only by a person’s powers of imagination. Yes and no. What we can imagine is not entirely independent of our experiences, as given by the world in which we live; and when a person’s imagination is too far removed from that context, then it is very likely that the individual is psychologically deranged if, that is, he thinks that his imagination alone provides him with sufficient insight into another’s experience. So, for instance, no one living presently in Western culture has a genuine grasp as to what Islamic slavery was like during the Mamluk Empire (circa 1250), because present day experiences are too far removed from the social structures in which that form of slavery existed precluding any substantial measure of psychic access, if you will. I am indebted to Nasri Abdel-Aziz for bringing to my attention the collection of essays by Shaun E. Marmon (ed.), *Slavery in the Islamic Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Mark Weiner Publishers, 1999). Of course, we do not always need a full grasp of something in order to know that it is morally wrong, and unquestionably so. Presumably, men do not have a full grasp of rape; yet, any man can be absolutely confident that rape constitutes an egregious moral wrong.

Accordingly, we might imagine that in (WS2) it is by extension, by way of counterfactual interpersonal identification, that Beta people have the proper moral respect for the intellectually deficient among them. Though no one expects the intellectually deficient to see themselves as members of the Kingdom of Ends or to be adept at applying the Categorical Imperative, it is nonetheless the case that the deficient are viewed by the intellectually adequate as individuals who suffered an enormous loss. The manifestly deficient intellectually are respected in virtue of being regarded as the kind of individuals who *should* have a capacity that they, in fact, lack. All the same, no one really expects individuals who are manifestly deficient intellectually to have the proper moral respect for one another or for themselves. Another factor that contributes to having the proper moral respect for the mentally deficient in (WS2) is what I shall call transference respect: although strictly speaking Z is psychologically such that Z does not command anyone's respect, people nonetheless respect Z because Z is related to, or has close ties with, individuals who roundly command the respect of others.

I have said that SMR Betas are shown proper

moral respect. What is important to the account is that this respect is occasioned not so much by SMR Betas themselves but the moral and social environment that surrounds SMR individuals according to which SMR Betas are considered a part of both the moral and social community, owing to the ties that SMR Betas have with Betas who complete.

In (WS1), where the manifestly intellectually inferior Omegas are all identifiable by the property  $\phi$  (blue skin), we have a different story altogether. What is of particular interest to me here is that with an Omega group all of whose members are vastly inferior intellectually and who are readily identifiable, it will certainly be very easy for non-Omeegas to erect a psychological wall between themselves and the Omegas. Of course, everyone knows that Omegas are human beings. No one contests that. Nonetheless, there has come to be an ineluctable association with being vastly inferior intellectually, possessing blue skin, and being an Omega person. Transference respect is not operative, since no non-Omega is related to, or has close ties with, an Omega. Nor is there any counterfactual interpersonal identification with Omegas. For a non-Omega could not be an Omega, nor conversely. So it is not just that no one wants to be intellectually

deficient (which is all too understandable), it is also turns out to be just as much the case that no one wants either to be an Omega person or to possess blue skin (which for all practical purposes come to the same thing). People cringe at the thought. For unlike the intellectually deficient Betas in (WS2), the Omegas are not seen as deficient individuals who have suffered a loss, and so who should have a capacity that they lack. Instead, the Omegas are seen as individuals whose nature is such that being intellectually deficient accords with it. Most significantly, no one expects Omegas to have the proper moral respect amongst themselves, because it is not thought that the Omegas have the intellectual wherewithal to seem themselves as a Legislator of universal moral law or as a member of the Kingdom of Ends. An analogy might be instructive here.

A Ford Pinto has much less horsepower than a Mercedes-Benz that has, say, 400 horsepower. Let us suppose that a Pinto in good condition is a 100 horsepower car. A defective Mercedes may actually be capable of only 100 horsepower, and so be equivalent in horsepower to a Pinto. In that case both cars lack 400 horsepower. But it is only the Mercedes—and not the Pinto—that lacks what it

ought to have or would have if it were as it should be. A Ford Pinto lacks 400 horsepower; and this lack is not a defect on its part. Instead, that is precisely the way that it should be. So a Pinto's lack of 400 horsepower accords with its constitutional make-up. A Ford Pinto is simply not in the same league as a Mercedes-Benz, though both are indisputably cars. In (WS2), the Betas who are vastly deficient intellectually are rather like a defective Mercedes-Benz; whereas in (WS1), the vastly deficient intellectually, namely the Omegas, are rather like a Ford Pinto. Notwithstanding the fact that non-Omegas recognize that Omegas are persons, the non-Omegas view the difference between themselves and Omegas in accordance with the sharp reality that distinguishes the two groups. The history of the world shows that viewing someone as a human being does not require putting her or him on the same plane as oneself either morally or intellectually. It is clear that Kant thought that blacks were persons. However, this does not settle as much as one might suppose.

### III. Inferiority, Psychological Wherewithal, and World Views

I have allowed, it will be remembered, that in

(WS2), the intellectually inferior among the Betas are shown the proper moral respect by complete Betas. So it might be thought that if this is the case, then there can be no problem with non-Omegas having the proper moral respect to their counterpart, namely the Omegas who are vastly inferior intellectually. To be sure, this might be more difficult. But as we all know, a more difficult thing to do is not thereby something that we are less obligated to do; and Kant's theory does not say that it will be equally easy to respect all individuals in virtue of their personhood. With perfect consistency Kant could have held that respecting the moral personhood of blacks requires more concentration or more reminders around the home or whatever than does respecting the moral personhood of white Europeans, but that blacks are owed such respect nonetheless. Moreover, Kant attaches considerable importance to overcoming inappropriate inclinations in order to do what is right. Typically, it is far more difficult to refrain from viciously lying about someone who caused one great harm than it is to refrain from lying in that way about someone who offered one tremendous assistance. But people should refrain from doing the former anyway. These considerations notwithstanding, we should not be oblivious to the ways in which moral

requirements can be difficult to meet. This is because if things are difficult enough in certain kinds of ways, then we could very well have a mitigating factor. Without dropping altogether the moral requirement in question, difficulties can constitute a reason to excuse for failing to meet the requirement or a reason to assign less blame.

Taking a page from the United States legal system, there is the idea of a crime of passion. This is when a spouse, upon returning home, walks in on her or his partner having sexual relations with another person, and then shoots either or both of the parties found together, owing to uncontrollable rage on the part of the spouse upon seeing this situation. A crime of passion stands in sharp contradistinction to premeditated murder. When the charge of crime of passion stands, the provable homicide is treated as a case of manslaughter rather than first-degree murder. There is also the fighting words doctrine. According to the U.S. Supreme Court (*Cohen vs California*. 403 U.S. 15 [1971]), these are words that constitute "personally abusive epithets which, when addressed to the ordinary citizen, are, as a matter of common knowledge, inherently likely to provoke violent reactions". For our purposes, the point is that both crimes of passion and fighting words are taken as



mitigating factors because it is held to be unreasonable to expect a person who walks in on her or his spouse in bed with another person not to become so agitated that he performs a violent act. Likewise, for an individual to whom certain kinds of words are addressed. Further, both precepts are embedded in what we might call commonsense moral sensibilities as to when the failure to comply with the law admits of mitigating circumstances. It would be preferable, from the standpoint of the law, if either offended party would just walk away, which requires a level of self-control that is certainly within the realm of human possibility. From the standpoint of commonsense moral sensibilities, though, walking away in instances such as these is thought to require a measure of self-control that is beyond the pale of the reasonable, although attaining it is humanly possible. Circumstances can be such that it can be unreasonable to expect people to do what is possible—so much so that the circumstances constitute a mitigating factor. This point holds as a conceptual truth even if we think that there are better examples that serve to make the point. Recall the extraordinary moral behavior of the people of Le Chambon who harbored and sheltered Jews in direct opposition to the military might of Nazi Germany.

Had they been moved by fear to close their homes to the Jews, who could have blamed them? Was their heroic behavior humanly possible? After all, they were humans who so behaved. Yet, what they did was absolutely extraordinary, which is why the people of Le Chambon have a special place of admiration in the history of events surrounding the Holocaust.

With this in mind, let us return to the case of (WS1). The Omegas are so intellectually deficient that they are unable to conceive of themselves as members of the Kingdom of Ends. Nor, owing to their intellectual deficiency, can they show one another the proper moral respect. A number of issues immediately arise, owing to their intellectual inferiority. (1) There is the issue of showing the proper moral respect towards an entire group of people who are constitutionally incapable of having such respect for themselves. (2) There is the issue of showing such respect towards the Omega individuals who are constitutionally incapable of understanding what it is that one is doing. (3) There is the issue of showing such individuals respect although they fail to respond in the appropriate manner, owing to their intellectual inferiority. Finally, (4) there is the issue of showing proper moral respect for an entire group of

people who are constitutionally incapable of reciprocating by doing likewise.

Each consideration, I believe, marks a natural and understandable reluctance to show the Omegas the proper moral respect. Considerations (1) and (3), each adding additional weight, invite the assessment that showing the Omegas the proper moral respect is simply pointless. It goes without saying that one should not treat Omegas cruelly, as they can experience pain. They are even responsive to warmth, as with a pat on the head or a rub on the back. Moral respect, however, is another matter entirely. They do not understand the idea of treating persons as ends in themselves. Criticisms and praise in this regard simply invite a blank stare from them. The Omegas are child-like and can only grasp simple concepts. The non-Omegas, having read their Kant, want to do right by the Omegas. The problem is that every interaction between an Omega and a non-Omega, where the non-Omega aspires to be Kantian like with respect to the Omega, leaves the non-Omega in a state of despair because the Omega is woefully unresponsive. It is rather like trying to have a conversation with someone who, through no fault of her or his own, simply cannot understand one. In a

situation like this, what value can there be in continuing to talk? When loved-ones fall into a coma, spouses and children often carry on such one-way conversations. We understand this. But no one expects others to do so. And we are impressed that even spouses and children can maintain such behavior for an extended period of time. If a group of people are sufficiently inferior intellectually that their own moral standing as persons does not have, and cannot have, any significance to them, it would take a very remarkable individual, indeed, who nonetheless endeavored to show them the proper moral respect.

Consideration (4) raises a different issue, yet one that is related to the first three. When the very possibility of reciprocity, with regard to moral respect, is deemed out of the question for an entire group of people owing to their intellectual inferiority, this changes dramatically how we see ourselves in relation to being supportive of them in showing them self-respect. Although we restrain ourselves or make sacrifices in order to show them moral respect, we can never have a reasonable hope of their doing the same on our behalf owing to their manifest intellectual inferiority. A measure of resentment here would ever so understandable.

One of the many profound passages in John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* pertains to the idea of excusable envy,<sup>13</sup> where the economic difference between the well-off members of group A and the worse-off members of group B are so great that the members of group B experience envy towards those of group A, although those in A have not in any way wronged those in B. I have drawn attention to this in order to point out that in an analogous manner we can become resentful towards those whose burdens we must continually shoulder. Why? Simply because doing so takes too great a toll upon our lives, and they do not reciprocate because they are incapable of doing so. It is no one's fault that this is so. This, however, does nothing to eradicate the sense of inequity that comes with having to do all the work on behalf of others, as the non-Omegas in (WS1) would have to do on behalf of the Omegas. We could have resentment here even if showing the Omegas the proper moral respect made a difference on their behalf. *A fortiori*, then, this is so if from the outset it all seems for naught.

On the quite reasonable assumption that

people are loathed to do things that they regard as pointless or which occasions resentment on their part (or both), then having the proper moral respect for the Omegas proves to be a significant psychological challenge. The problem is that even as persons the Omegas are beyond the moral reach. It is one thing to expect individuals to perform their moral duties, even though this is quite demanding of them, when doing so makes a positive difference. It is quite another to have this expectation when doing so appears to be of entirely of no avail. In the former case, there is the issue of harming others should one fail to do one's duty. But it is precisely this consideration that is not operative in the latter case. We naturally think of individuals who maintain their moral march even when all seems lost as extraordinary individuals. Just as naturally, though, we do not expect most individuals so to behave. Essentially, this is the difference between (WS2), where SMRs individuals are randomly distributed throughout society and are indistinguishable from the other members of society, and (WS1), where we have an identifiable ethnic group all of whose members suffer from SMR. We expect the SMRs in (WS2) to be shown moral respect even if it is difficult to do so, and although doing so is not likely to make a

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<sup>13</sup> (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 531

difference in their lives. And it is tempting to think that if individuals can show moral respect for the SMRs of (WS2), then they should be able to do so for the SMRs, namely the Omegas, of (WS1).

Specifically, I would imagine that defenders of Kant rely upon the following argument: (1) In terms of abilities and so forth, the intellectually deficient Omegas of (WS1) are no different than the intellectually deficient of (WS2); hence, (2) there is no difference at all between what it is to be intellectually deficient in (WS1) and what it is to be intellectually deficient in (WS2). Accordingly, (3) if there is no problem in having the proper moral respect for the intellectually deficient of (WS2), then (4) there can be no problem in having the proper moral respect for the intellectually deficient Omegas of (WS1). The problem, alas, is that (2) is false, because although we do not have a difference in capacity between the intellectually deficient of (WS1) and the intellectually deficient of (WS2), we do have a fundamental difference in the ontogenesis of the deficiency in capacity in each case. And this makes for a fundamental difference in how the same intellectual deficiency is configured, which in turn makes for a fundamental difference in how the intellectually

adequate perceive the manifestly deficient intellectually in (WS1), on the one hand, and in (WS2), on the other, as the analogy between the Ford Pinto and the defective Mercedes-Benz makes abundantly clear. Indisputably, there is a difference between a Ford Pinto and a defective Mercedes-Benz.

In (WS1), the manifestly deficient Omegas are analogous to a Pinto car, and thus non-Omegas reason as follows:

(a) For any person X, if X is an Omega then X ought to be severely retarded mentally, because this is part of the nature of being an Omega. Hence, if X is an Omega, then it is not an accident that X is SMR.

By contrast, in (WS2) the manifestly deficient Betas are rather are analogous to a defective Mercedes-Benz; accordingly, everyone else reasons as follows:

(b) For any person Y, Y should be intellectually complete; accordingly, if perchance there is a Y who turns out to be SMR, then this is because with regard to that particular Y things did not go as they should have gone. *A fortiori*, it is not part of the nature of what it is to be a Y that a Y turns out to be an individual who is manifestly deficient intellectually.

Clearly, (a) and (b) exemplify two fundamentally different and incompatible psychological attitudes. This is so notwithstanding the truth that we have the same level of intellectual inferiority between the Omegas of (WS1) and the manifestly deficient intellectually in (WS2); for we nonetheless have a radically different configuration of that inferiority between the two cases. Sameness with respect to *level of inferiority* does not imply sameness with respect to *configuration of inferiority*. And the difference in configuration here is far from being trivial. Hence, the argument above, according to which (1) is thought to imply (2), is invalid, since we can have a difference in terms of configuration notwithstanding the fact that we have equality with respect to capacity. So even if it is true that the proper moral respect for SMRs in (WS2) is possible, and I have tried to explain how that might be so, this truth does not entail that having such respect for Omegas in (WS1) is either equally possible or not without formidable psychological obstacles.

Is it humanly possible for the non-Omegas in (WS1) to have the same psychological attitude toward the intellectually inferior Omegas that that the Betas in (WS2) have towards the SMR persons of (WS2)? It

most certainly is, in a strictly logical sense of the word. But is it reasonable to expect this? Absolutely not. We have two radically different and incompatible ways of seeing SMR persons. In (WS1), the problem is not simply that one holds that SMR individuals are incapable of the requisite psychological level for moral personhood; since that, in fact, is equally true of the SMR individuals in (WS2). Rather, there is no sense at all that these individuals *ought to have been such that* they possess the requisite level psychological level for moral personhood. *Ex hypothesi*, there is no defect in the nature of Omegas the absence of which would give them a claim to the requisite psychological level for moral personhood. Nor is there any independent reason for treating Omegas as if they were capable of proper self-respect and so worthy of so being respected. Kant reminded us not to be cruel to animals, lest such cruel behavior should occasion like behavior on our part towards those who are deserving of proper moral respect. However, he understood perfectly well that the gap between animals and creatures deserving of proper moral respect is so wide that the latter gained nothing from pretending that the former were also deserving of proper moral respect. Finally, recall that although

SMR Betas are shown the proper moral respect, this is occasioned not by SMR Betas themselves but by the fact that SMR Betas are accepted as members of the moral and social community owing to their ties with complete Betas. In (WS1), we do not have a parallel situation with Omegas.

We might sharpen the point just made in the following way. Showing animals kindness has significance for human beings. One might say it has symbolic value. By contrast, showing them the proper moral respect, should one speak this way, has no symbolic value at all for human beings. In (WS1), the endeavor to show the proper moral respect to Omegas, in addition to the other difficulties already outlined, has no symbolic value to non-Omega, owing to just the fact that the difference between Omegas and non-Omeegas, like the difference between human beings and animals for Kant, is perceived to be a sharp and fundamental one carved in the rock of nature itself.

At a practical level, we can further see the difference between the Omegas of (WS1) and SMR individuals of (WS2). In (WS2), the occasion to show the proper respect towards a person who is manifestly deficient intellectually would present itself

only upon occasion and momentarily. For instance, a psychologically complete person encounters an SMR individual in the elevator, where the SMR person is with her or his family or with friends. For the duration of the elevator ride, the healthy person shows the SMR person the proper moral respect. The elevator door opens, and the healthy person continues on her merry way. It may be weeks or even months before she is in a similar situation. She does her moral duty in this regard. However, life's circumstances are such that she is rarely called upon to do so, and only for a few fleeting moments when she is. Showing SMR Betas the proper moral respect, even as an onerous task, falls under the rubric of basic decency and politeness towards, among others, the complete members of (WS2) who are providing for a Beta who is SMR-like. Accordingly, although the SMR persons in (WS2) cannot reciprocate by showing others the proper moral respect, this asymmetry is diffused by the fact that the moral relationship between SMR persons and the non-SMR persons of (WS2) is not such that the latter are understood to have a special obligation to the former when it comes to moral nurturing, if you will. This is because in (WS2), the SMR have family and the friends of family who play that role. Finally, there is the very

fundamental consideration that showing SMR Betas the proper moral respect, or the endeavor to do so, has enormous symbolic value.

If the considerations of this section are sound, then it would be a gross understatement to intone that showing respect to Omegas is simply more difficult than showing respect to SMR Betas, as if this were just a matter of being particularly mindful of an obstacle or extra diligent or more resourceful. For what we have between the Omegas and the SMR Betas is not simply a difference in degree, but a fundamental difference in kind. Omegas are not even on a par with children who shall one day become psychologically complete adults to whom the entire compliment of morality applies. Why, Omegas are not even creatures for whom it is true that they ought to become individuals to whom the entire compliment of morality applies. So the very idea of moral training for Omegas, with an eye towards their becoming morally complete persons, is out of the question. Thus, showing the Omega the proper moral respect is essentially on a par with showing the proper moral respect to adults judged to have the wherewithal of children. Persons with a sense of higher calling might have as their aim to this, just as

St. Francis Assize took it upon himself on one occasion to preach to birds. It goes without saying, however, that just as it is unreasonable to expect even those with deep religious commitments to preach to birds, it is equally unreasonable to expect individuals to show the proper moral respect to a people deemed to have the intellectual wherewithal of children.

Obviously, the case of Omegas is intended to mirror the case of blacks. And it might be thought that since Kant held that blacks were indeed persons, then he could not have thought that showing them proper moral respect was on a par with endeavoring to do so with animals. But not so; and I have already hinted at why. For it suffices that Kant thought that blacks were persons manqué. That is, he could have thought that, owing to their natural inferiority, blacks were rather like perpetual children. Children, surely, are persons. Yet, Kant most certainly did not think that children could conceive of themselves as members of the Kingdom of Ends and, therefore, that the full force of moral law applied to them. There is no inconsistency here. This is how people have generally used the language. It has been traditionally understood that the precepts of morality (fully) apply only to adult persons, understood to possess a certain level of psychological wherewithal, without anyone

supposing that children were anything other than persons or thinking it necessary to make this explicit. No one, for instance, thinks for a moment that Rousseau is talking about children when he claims that in civil society the very soul is elevated. Similarly, no one thinks that Rawls is talking about children when he talks about the fellow-feeling among citizens. Yet, if anything is true, it is true that both Rousseau and Rawls regarded children as persons. Needless to say, it would be a mistake to suppose that with regard to this aspect of morality Kant had a fundamentally different conception of persons and children. So the truth that Kant held that blacks are persons does not settle the matter, since he could have thought that without supposing that blacks were psychologically capable of having or even coming to have the proper moral respect for themselves. Blacks, Kant could have thought, were persons manqué, because they are like perpetual children having a nature that never allowed for them to flower into adult human beings to whom the entire compliment of morality would apply. This gives us a moral difference in kind even among persons.

Thomas Jefferson, an intellectual giant in his own right, shared a view of blacks similar to Kant's.

In a letter to Benjamin Banneker entitled "Hope for our Black Brethern" Jefferson writes:<sup>14</sup>

No body wishes more than I do to see such proofs as you exhibit, that nature has given to our black brethren, talents equal to those of the other colors of men, and that the appearance of a want of them is owing merely to the degraded condition of their existence both in Africa & America. . . . [N]o body wishes more ardently [than I] to see a good system commenced for raising the condition both of their body & mind to what it ought to be, as fast as the imbecillity [sic] of their present existence, and other circumstance which cannot be neglected, will admit.

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<sup>14</sup> In *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 982-83. Compare Jefferson's views here with the thought of Alexis de Tocqueville who wrote "S'il devient libre, l'indépendance lui paraît souvent alors une chaîne plus pesante que l'esclavage même; car dans le cours de son existence, il a appris à se soumettre à tout, excepté la raison; et quand la raison devient son seul guide, il ne saurait reconnaître sa voix". *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, BK I, Part II, ch. x. Without referencing Kant, Tocqueville masterfully captures what appears to be Kant's view of blacks. It is not simply that they were less talented as such, but that they are incapable of following the precepts of reason.



Jefferson never doubted that blacks were persons, as he referred to them as brethren; and presumably he did not refer to animals in this way. Yet, he thought that there was a fundamental difference between the typical poor white of the Ole South and the typical black slave. This is rather astonishing; for insofar as the one was uncouth and lacking in refinement surely the other was as well, even if this lack took different forms in some instances. What is more, and this gets to the heart of the matter in many respects, Jefferson most certainly did not think is that the typical white was anywhere near *his* intellectual equal and, therefore, that uncouth whites needed only the proper training in order to exhibit in their lives the intellectual virtues that were characteristic of his life.<sup>15</sup> All the same, he thought that blacks and whites differed in a most fundamental way. *Mutatis mutandis*, the very same points hold with respect to Kant's experience of whites vis à vis blacks. Unlike Kant, however, Jefferson's remarks seem to suggest that he thought that blacks could be relieved of their "imbecility".

Of significance, though, is that Jefferson seems

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<sup>15</sup> See Jefferson's letter "A System of Education," to Peter Carr, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings, op. cit.*

to have thought that the elimination of this "imbecility" among blacks was necessary before it could be reasonable to expect that ordinary whites would treat blacks on the same moral plane as they (whites) are. Why? Because where "imbecility" is seen as the defining character of a people, then the natural reaction is to be repulsed by them and to see them as unworthy of respect. Notice the parallel between Jefferson's line of thought here and Mill's claim in *On Liberty* (chapter 1). Mill observes that his doctrine of individual sovereignty applies "only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties". Mill has in mind here not only that his doctrine does not apply to children, but that it also does not apply to "backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage".

So we have three intellectual giants: Kant (b. 1724), Jefferson (b. 1743), and Mill (b. 1806). Did all three think consider blacks to be persons? Absolutely. Just so, Jefferson and Mill both suggest that a group of people is not to be shown proper respect while they are *awash* in their state of imbecility (Jefferson) or barbarism (Mill), it being understood that this a contingent state that can be alleviated. Accordingly, if Kant held that the imbecility of blacks is an eradicable feature of their

nature and, therefore, that blacks are necessarily children-like by nature, then with perfect consistency he could have held that blacks are not owed the proper moral respect. What is more, this much would have been in line with the thought of both Jefferson and Mill, with the difference lying in the modality of the attribution of significant inferiority to blacks: Jefferson and Mill thinking it contingent; Kant thinking it an ineliminable feature of the nature of blacks.

#### IV. Conclusion: Hearing the Moral Challenge

Nowadays, of course, most of us reject out of hand Kant's assessment of the inherent and inescapable inferiority of blacks or, for that matter, any other ethnic group. Not only that, most of us also stay clear of a Jefferson or Mill type view of ethnic groups. So the very idea of an entire race being child-like, whatever the modality might be, is simply viewed as untenable. But this was not the world view of three formidable intellectuals, namely Kant, Jefferson, and Mill. In this essay, I have raised a question in moral psychology that takes seriously their world view. Interestingly, the difference between Kant, on the one hand, and Jefferson and Mill, on the other, with regard to inferiority brings

into to sharper relief the concerns of this essay.

Where we have demonstrable and unshakable intellectual inferiority on the part of a people, as Kant supposed was the case with blacks, then we have seen that showing such individuals the proper moral respect will stand as a most formidable task. But suppose that what we have, instead, is the contingent inferiority of which Jefferson and Mill speak. The suggestion on the part of both (in Kantian language) is that in cases of this sort we should raise the people in question to the level where they can be shown the proper moral respect. The question that naturally presents itself is this: How plausible is it to suppose that human beings in general have the moral wherewithal it takes to meet this moral challenge? Some will rule this question out of court on the grounds we have a moral duty to rise to the occasion, however difficult this may be for us to do.

True, but one of the ways in which we can fail to meet our moral duties is by giving insufficient attention to the details that must be addressed in order to accomplish the task. On a traditional view of marriage, everyone knows that infidelity is to be avoided. Yet, many illuminating pages have been written on how it is possible to achieve precisely this

goal; and people continue to learn how not to do what they know they morally ought not to do and, moreover, want not to do. We better understand that there are precautionary steps to take if we are to succeed at avoiding infidelity. Why? Because not withstanding our good intentions and our undying love for our spouse, the passing of time makes it is far too easy for things to go awry if we are not cautious in our interactions with other others and if we are not careful to keep the romantic flame between ourselves and our partner burning high. So it would be absolutely stunning if something so complicated as elevating a people, à la Jefferson and Mill, to the point that they could be shown the proper moral respect were something that could be achieved without attending to the matter in great detail. It is obvious that there is a fundamental conceptual difference between those who are irrevocably inferior and those whose inferiority is merely owing to the circumstances of their lives. But this fundamental difference need not resonate experientially at the outset with those who happen upon such individuals. In the face of barbarism, what are the moral markers in terms of behavior or whatever that make moral elevation is possible? Then, what social structures have to be in place in order to underwrite the

elevation continually? Needless to say, the answer to this last question would depend in part on how much time such moral elevation would take. A generation? Several generations? From a different direction, what would count as evidence that progress is being made? How would the initial lack of appropriate responsiveness on the part of those being elevated be dealt with? Accordingly, how would one avoid an attitude of superiority? Just as no insight into avoiding fidelity is to be had merely by saying that married individuals have a moral duty to do so regardless of the circumstances, it is equally true that no insight into bringing about the moral elevation of a people is to be had simply by asserting and re-asserting that one is morally obligated to do so regardless of the difficulties that it involves.

For many, though, it is troubling and offensive even to entertain the idea that a people are barbaric. This is understandable; for there is no end to the nefarious use to which judgements of this sort have been put. Jonathan Glover's seminal work, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*,<sup>16</sup> reminds us of how vicious human beings can be. This truth, though, speaks to the very concern that was raised in

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<sup>16</sup> (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

the preceding paragraph. Far from settling the matter, a commitment to multi-culturalism forcefully raises the question of how we affirm the moral worth of individuals across radical differences and in the face of the reality that human beings appear to have a propensity to deny the moral worth of other human beings. If we were much clearer about how to go about affirming others in the face of what appeared to be inferiority on their part, then our commitment to multi-culturalism, far from being torn asunder, would be more richly affirmed. It is disingenuous to talk about affirming the moral worth of all human beings, in virtue of their personhood, if we are unwilling to take seriously the practical challenges, as revealed by human history itself, that doing so presents. Those who quickly dismiss Kant on the grounds that he is a racist forgo the opportunity to ask a most searching question in moral psychology inspired by both his moral and anthropological writings. Unfortunately, this is no less true of those who, in the admirable attempt to defend Kant, ignore the truth revealed by history itself that notwithstanding the obviousness of personhood the affirmation of the moral worth of all human beings by all human beings has been and remains a formidable challenge. On the one hand, just about any issue can be

raised in a morally fulsome manner. On the other hand, though, any issue can be raised with wisdom and purity of heart. We can adamantly reject Kant's worldview of racial inequality and yet realize that when the issue of intellectual inferiority is raised in the right way, the question provides us with a wonderful opportunity for the kind of moral self-examination and reflection that marvellously enriches our moral life, as well as the opportunity to affirm and re-affirm our commitment, by way of taking practical steps, to the majestic moral worth of all human beings under any and all circumstances. That, I believe, is moral progress by any other name.