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Memorial for Charles W. Mills

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Charles W. Mills was a pre-eminent political philosopher of our time: a towering figure in philosophy of race; a widely influential proponent of non-ideal political theory and of corrective justice; both a trenchant critic of Enlightenment political liberalism as collaborative with European colonialism and chattel slavery, and a promoter of a *truly* universal realization of its moral-political values of equal respect for all individuals. Personally, he was a hard-working and kind colleague, teacher and mentor; a detached yet fascinated observer of interpersonal behaviour; and, above all, an immensely witty conversationalist, his dry remarks often accompanied by a wry sidelong glance, inviting shared amusement.

Mills' work bears marks of that humour, for example, in describing the way in which Kant's racism calls for a reconsideration of Kant's Critical philosophy as 'a Copernican Revolution of a different sort (I couldn't resist this)' (2014: 149). But, if Kant's incongruity theory of humour is correct (*CPJ*, 5: 332–3), Mills' wit bears a deeper relation to his work on Kant as well. For in that work Mills is driven by, and eloquently elicits in his readers, a recognition of painful incongruities: between Kantian moral and political ideals of respect for all persons and the modern Western history of racially structured subordination and disrespect, continuing to this day; between those ideals and Kant's own hierarchical – white supremacist – race theory (see 'Of the Different Races of Human Beings', 2: 440–1, and the well-known footnote at 2: 437–8, apparently accepting slavery of Africans and indigenous American peoples; see also 'On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy', 8: 174ff.).

The important contributions to Kant scholarship in Mills' work are at least threefold. First, as Mills notes, those who study Kant today must be honest about the contents of Kant's texts, painful and offensive as they may be; we must shy away from defensive hagiography (Mills 2005: 97, 111). As Mills amply acknowledges, other scholars, such as Tsenay Serequeberhan, Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, Mark Larrimore and Robert Bernasconi, preceded him in calling attention to Kant's racism (see especially Mills 2017). But Mills' observations on this point have perhaps had most influence, for he charts clearly and carefully not just what Kant claims, but also its position within Kant's systematic philosophy, as an empirical claim with crucial implications for the meaning and application of *a priori* moral concepts and commitments (Mills 2005: 100–5; Mills also offers helpful contextualization of such claims in the terms of twenty-first-century categorizations of racist thought; see Mills 2014: 126–32).

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As Mills puts it, one may endorse Kant's *a priori* 'basic moral principle', yet also recognize that 'because of his empirical beliefs, [Kant] wanted to apply [it] only to a restricted set of the human population' and that, empirically grounded as it may be, this 'issue of who gets counted in the moral community' is not 'merely a matter of incidental detail' (Mills 2005: 104).

Indeed, and second, Mills provides a powerful interpretive and theoretical proposal as to how one may understand Kant's philosophy as coherent, despite the apparent contradiction between Kant's racist views and his moral demand for respect for all persons. He famously proposes that Kant understands members of non-white races to be human beings, but not full persons – '*Untermenschen*' ('sub-persons') in the memorable (and controversial) title of Mills' first piece fully devoted to Kant's views on race (Mills 2005). Thus, he argues, Kant may consistently hold that such human beings may be disrespected, even enslaved, while also claiming that such treatment of full (white) persons is morally unacceptable (Mills 2014: 140–7).

This interpretive-reconstructive approach in turn establishes the groundwork for Mills' 'Black Radical Kantianism' (Mills 2018), namely, his positive proposal concerning how truly to realize, morally and politically, the Kantian ideal of equality of respect for persons: not just by acknowledging, but by addressing and ameliorating, the social subordination of non-white human beings, the deeply wrongful treatment of them as (what Mills terms) sub-persons. Such realization will involve, he argues, not a 'color-blind' application of Kant's moral-political principles of respect to all individuals in an undifferentiated, purely present-minded way, but rather one that takes into account the non-ideal – empirical and grim – 'differentiated histories' of racialized social groups. It will, therefore, aim actively to correct the 'ideological and psychological legacy' of long-standing treatment of some human beings as persons, and others not, and to repair the economic, political, moral-psychological damage caused to individuals by social 'habits of disrespect', in order to restore and thus truly to acknowledge their rightful status as persons. (All quoted phrases are from Mills 2018: 17, see also 28–9.)

Mills' interpretive, reconstructive and systematic proposals have been found controversial in some quarters. But in their rigour, depth and moral commitment, they must prompt ongoing investigation – as, indeed, in the present issue of this journal. Taking Kant's positions concerning race seriously must mean considering Mills' question seriously: 'If Kant's racial views shaped Kant's philosophical theories, then what are those theories actually saying – as against what for generations they have been *taken* to be saying – and how might they need correction and rethinking in a racialized world?' (2014: 126). (I am myself inclined to pursue Mills' brief suggestion that we must reconstrue 'what it means to rise above nature' (2005: 112) in Kant's thought, as well as recognize and rethink the potentially problematic function Kant may allocate to perfectibility – including, saliently, technological cultural progress – in undergirding moral rational capacities.) Most importantly of all, however, Kant scholars, those who work on Kantian moral and political philosophy, and indeed anyone committed to the stated ideals of Kant's moral theory are called to emulate Mills' attempts to apply those ideals unflinchingly and critically to current reality, and to aspire more fully to realize them in everyday moral behaviour and concerted political action. For, from the very beginning, indeed even before the beginning, of his engagement with Kant, Mills sets us an example of how to strive to enact Kantian moral principles of

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equal respect for all persons, in teaching practice and in understanding and attempting to address how far our world is from those Kantian ideals (see Mills 1994 and 1998).

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