

Kant, Immanuel (1724–1804): Influence on the Origins and Development of Anthropology

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Kant's contributions to anthropology can best be grouped into three categories: his "pragmatic anthropology," his race theory, and the influence of his broader philosophy (including both his moral and his theoretical philosophy) on anthropological practice.

Kant's pragmatic anthropology

In a famous letter to his former student Marcus Herz in 1773, Kant describes the course in "anthropology" that he taught more than twenty times, from 1772 until the end of his life, even though the course was not required as part of the teaching responsibilities associated with his professorship in logic and metaphysics:

This winter I am giving, for the second time, a lecture course on anthropology, a subject that I now intend to make into a proper academic discipline. But my plan is quite unique. I intend to disclose the bases of all sciences, the principles of morality, of skill, of human intercourse, of the method of molding and governing men, and thus of everything that pertains to the practical. (Kant 1900, 10:146; all translations of Kant are from Guyer and Wood 1992–)

Later, in his personal notes, Kant reiterates his pragmatic emphasis: "the historical kind of teaching is pragmatic, when it ... is not merely for the school, but also for the world or ethics" (Kant 1900, 16:804, cf. 25:xv). When Kant published his book based on this course, he titled it *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (*Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*), and, even before he started teaching "anthropology," Kant's course in "physical geography" was aimed toward, among other things, "mak[ing] good [students'] lack of experience" through "an entertaining and easy compendium of the things that might prepare them and serve them for the exercise of practical reason" (Kant 1900, 2:312). This pragmatic anthropology was not specifically focused on human *differences* or even on human *culture* per se, but was "a doctrine of knowledge of the human being, systematically formulated" that took as its object "what *he* as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself" (Kant 1900, 7:119; emphasis original). In this study, while Kant sought to classify kinds of human beings, he was equally interested in universal characteristics of all human beings. And, while he insisted that "travel or books of travel" are important resources for

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the anthropologist (Kant 1900, 7:120), his conception of “anthropology” begins with “general knowledge” and “knowledge of human beings at home [gained] through social intercourse with one’s townsmen” (7:120).

Anthropology in Kant’s sense would include much that today is included in psychology, sociology, and even history; he included all knowledge of human beings that can be put to use. Where Kant’s anthropology is most akin to the sort of comparative cultural study typical of many anthropologists is in his accounts of the “character of peoples/nations [*der Charakter des Volks*]” (Kant 1900, 7:311, see also 2:243), where he seeks to “present the character of [each nation], as they are now, in some examples, and, as far as possible, systematically; which makes it possible to judge what each can expect from the other and how each could use the other to his own advantage” (7:312). Kant hoped that his pragmatic anthropology would create a new discipline, an empirical study of human beings that would eschew merely scholastic knowledge for the sake of systematized observations with direct practical importance. Despite his own interest in his brand of anthropology, however, Kant’s particular approach to the discipline as such had less impact on the history of anthropology than three other features of his thought: his race theory, his moral theory, and his transcendental idealism, which this entry now takes up in turn.

Kant’s race theory, moral theory, and transcendental idealism

Kant’s writings are permeated with horribly degrading claims about other races (for a discussion, see Frierson 2013, 102–7), but more important than these scattered remarks was Kant’s attempt to develop a scientific concept of race. Robert Bernasconi has argued that Kant “invented the concept of race” (2001, 11). Kant developed his theory of race ostensibly to argue against polygenetic accounts of the human species, but also (and more importantly) to provide support for his teleological biology. While modern racial classifications go back at least as far as Linnaeus, Kant developed a carefully delineated and empirically tractable distinction between “species” and “race” in order to reconcile monogenesis (common descent) with the prevalent (European) need to distinguish Europeans from other people. All who can interbreed are the same species (and share common descent); hence monogenesis is true and humans are one species. But some characteristics (most notably skin color) “blend” when humans interbreed; these characteristics are distinctive to different racial groups. Beyond merely defining this concept of race, Kant used his teleological biology to account for racial difference. Racial classification has a *purpose*: “The human species was destined for all climates and for every soil; consequently, various germs and natural predispositions had to lie ready in him to be on occasion either unfolded or restrained” (Kant 1900, 2:435, see also 8:168). And the mechanism of racial distinction is rooted in naturally purposive structures—germs and predispositions—that adapt to local situations and then become fixed and heritable (see Kant 1900, 2:442, see also 8:166, 172). Differences between human beings are caused by environmental factors, but at least some of these differences—notably skin color—can become hereditary.

Kant's rigorous account provided important support for the concept of race during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and thereby contributed (at least indirectly) to racist approaches to anthropology from the nineteenth century to the present.

Kant's pragmatic anthropology and his race theory are core components of his empirical account of human beings, and his race theory is related to his broader teleological approach to history, which exercised important influences on anthropology, particularly in the early nineteenth century. But Kant is best known for his philosophical theory, within which two features are particularly important for the discipline of anthropology. First, Kant's moral theory crystallized the notions of respect for others and basic human rights, which have become important parts of contemporary discussions of relationships between peoples. Kant himself applies these notions to issues that are relevant to anthropology, such as colonialism (see especially see Kant 1900, 6:353; 8:358–59), and his conceptions of mutual respect and the “cosmopolitan” duty of “hospitality” continue to be relevant to ethical reflection within the discipline of anthropology. However, Kant's conception of human rights was situated in the context of a universalism about morals that many anthropologists have called into question. Thus, while Kant insists that “everyone must grant that a [moral] law ... must carry with it absolute necessity [and thereby strict universality]” (1900, 4:289), anthropologists as early as Kant's own student Johann Gottfried von Herder and continuing through contemporary theorists have exhibited a more “relativist bent” (Geertz 2000, 44) according to which different cultures have different sets of moral norms and assumptions and “an anthropologist ... is bound to avoid any weighing of one in favor of the other” (Benedict 1934, 1).

Finally, the most important of Kant's contributions to anthropology comes from the core tenet of his so-called transcendental philosophy, his view that “the objects must conform to our cognition” (Kant 1900, B xvi)—that is, that the world one inhabits is partly constituted by the cognitive structures in terms of which one situates oneself within that world. Kant used this principle to elucidate “a priori” universal forms of human cognition that structure the nature of our world. But thinkers after Kant—from Herder to Nietzsche to Foucault and Geertz—relativized this a priori in an effort to elucidate how, as Geertz put it, “descriptions of Berber, Jewish, or French culture must be cast in terms of the constructions we imagine Berbers, Jews, or Frenchmen to place upon what they live through” (1973, 15). In the end, Kant's own attempted revolution in anthropology as an academic discipline was largely forgotten and his race theory played an important (and unfortunate) historical role (albeit one no longer typically associated with Kant), but his more strictly philosophical claims about the nature of morals and human cognition exerted an immediate influence on early anthropologists and continue to affect the practice of anthropology today.

SEE ALSO: Cross-Cultural Aesthetics; Cultural Ecology; Cultural Relativism; Enlightenment, the; Ethics and Morality, Anthropological Approaches to; Foucault, Michel (1926–84); Geertz, Clifford (1926–2006); Germany, Anthropology in; History and Anthropology; Hospitality; Human Rights; Informed Consent; Motivation; Nature,

Concepts of; Objecthood; Philosophical Anthropology; Rationality and Belief; Social and Cultural Anthropology

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