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White Supremacy in Eurocentric Epistemologies: On the West's Responsibility for its Philosophical Heritage

Abstract

There is a largely overlooked fundamental flaw in the Eurocentric epistemological foundation. Counter to the overwhelming ethos of the Enlightenment, this epistemological bedrock shockingly does not seem to be an epistemology of the human being, but only of the white human being. I, as a Western scholar, have to relativise my epistemological heritage, because it does not take into account the diversity of the human being. I will briefly explore the racist views of Voltaire, Hume, and Kant and I will argue that Western philosophy needs to (re)analyse its epistemological tradition with regards to the way the racist views of its protagonists corrupted their philosophical work. I suggest contextualization of the philosophical tradition and its desuperiorisation to foster ethical and broader philosophical dialogue amongst global scholars.

Keywords

white supremacy, racism, the Enlightenment, desuperiorisation, Voltaire, David Hume, Immanuel Kant

Introduction

It is my critical evaluation that there is a largely overlooked fundamental flaw in the Western epistemological foundation, which no doubt has origins that can be traced back further, but is (re)introduced by the philosophers of the Enlightenment. Counter to the overwhelming ethos of the Enlightenment, this epistemological bedrock shockingly does not seem to be an epistemology of the human being, but only of the *white* human being. Indeed, I, as a Western scholar, have to *relativise* my epistemological heritage, because it does not take into account the diversity of the human being. I have to carefully analyse the shortcomings of my epistemological traditions caused by a limited frame of reference that encompasses only the white (and male) human being.¹

Additionally, I have to relativise my contemporary epistemological approach. I need to understand that I do not have any reason to consider eurocentric epistemology superior. Eurocentric epistemological superiority is a purely arbitrary positioning.

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I focus in this paper on the problem of white supremacy. This, as far as I can see, mostly implies male supremacy. Thus, even if I sometimes do make it explicit, in my critique

of the white supremacy I also imply the male supremacy, or to be even more specific, the male hetero-sexual supremacy.

By reading some of the important so-called enlightened and enlightening philosophers, such as the exemplars Voltaire, David Hume and Immanuel Kant, one can find blatant white supremacist racism.² Consequently, it is very likely that their racism affected the construction of their philosophical edifices. However, it seems Western scholarship has demonstrated little interest to address this problem. It is not that the texts I engage here are hidden; at least then I could claim a conspiracy. Rather they appear to be widely intentionally disregarded. If philosophy is to retain its integrity, then a work of amelioration must be done, and these destructive, fracturing epistemologies must be addressed.

Fracturing Eurocentric epistemologies

Voltaire

In Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*, under the entry "Equality" it says:

"NOTHING can be clearer than that men, enjoying the faculties of their common nature, are in a state of equality; they are equal when they perform their animal functions and exercise their understandings."³

Voltaire recognises that as a fundamental truth all humans are the same. However, he states that in the world as it is, this fundamental truth cannot become factual reality:⁴

"If the earth were in fact what it might be supposed it should be – if men found upon it everywhere an easy and certain subsistence, and a climate congenial to their nature, it would be evidently impossible for one man to subjugate another. Let the globe be covered with wholesome fruits; let the air on which we depend for life convey to us no diseases and premature death (...)."⁵

In the end, there will always be a significant class difference between the poor and the rich:

"It is impossible in our melancholy world to prevent men living in society from being divided into two classes, one of the rich who commands, the other of the poor who obey, and these two are subdivided into various others, which have also their respective shades of difference."⁶

Thus, after bemoaning how human equality cannot become factual reality because the world in which we live is not always equal, it is quite surprising to read in Voltaire's study "The Negro" the following:

"[I]t may be said that if [the 'Negros'] understanding is not of a different nature from ours, it is at least greatly inferior. They are not capable of any great application or association, and seem formed neither in the advantages nor in abuses of our philosophy. (...) The petty nations of blacks, who have but little commerce with other nations, are strangers to all kind of religious worship. The first degree of stupidity is to think only of the present and bodily wants. (...) The second degree is to foresee by halves, without being able to form any fixed society; to behold the stars with wonder and amazement; to celebrate certain feasts, to make general rejoicing on the return of certain seasons, or the appearance of a particular star, without going further or having any distinct positive idea. In this middle state between imbecility and infant reason, many nations have continued for several ages."⁷

This is an intellectual cabinet piece: Voltaire remains true to the premise that all human beings are alike and ideally should be equal, but the "Negro[s]" "understanding" is "at least greatly inferior". This is a poorly concealed racism. Silently Voltaire introduces another difference in addition to the class difference between poor and rich. This difference works in the same way as that of poor and rich: it divides people into two subclasses, and such a divi-

sion does not deny that both subclasses belong to the class of human beings. However, in contrast to the difference between poverty and wealth, which cannot be prevented “in our melancholy world”, this other difference suddenly brings in an extremely vulgar way a normative difference into the matter. It can be said that this formulation is already extremely polemical – the mind of the “Negro” is like the “Western mind”, but whoever asserts this, whoever declares the “Negro” to be of the human kind, must “at least” agree that the “Negros” understanding is greatly inferior. The class difference came into the world because not all people can access the same resources. This does not break with the assumption that people are the same. This difference, however, exists because there is the “Negro”, who even when having access to resources, still does not know what to do. The “Negro”, in Voltaire’s view, cannot simply become a human being in the actual sense.

There is a considerable disparity between these two approaches to human beings. It is very strange that such a discrepancy can be found here with the work of one of the great precursors of the Enlightenment. Is this tension the isolated failing of one individual of the century of the Enlightenment?

David Hume

This hope must be given up immediately. On the contrary, this apparent tension, which obviously was not perceived as tension, is not an isolated case at all. Let us listen to the deep reflections of Hume in *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*:

“It is universally acknowledged that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations. The same motives always produce the same actions: the same events follow from the same causes. Ambition, avarice, self-love, vanity, friendship, generosity, public spirit: these passions, mixed in various degrees, and distributed through society, have been, from the beginning of the world, and still are, the source of all the actions and enterprises, which have ever been observed among mankind. Would you know the sentiments, inclinations, and course of the life of the GREEKS and ROMANS? Study well the temper and actions of the FRENCH and ENGLISH: You cannot be much mistaken in transferring to the former most of the observations which you have made about the latter. Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. (...) Should a traveller, returning from a far country, bring us an account of men, wholly different from any with whom we were ever acquainted; men, who were entirely divested of avarice, ambition, or revenge; who knew no pleasure but friendship, generosity, and public spirit; we should immediately, from these circumstances, de-

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For a broad discussion of the recent research on this matter, cf. Lucy Allais, “Kant’s Racism”, *Philosophical Papers* 45 (2016) 1–2, pp. 1–36, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/05568641.2016.1199170>.

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Voltaire, “Equality”, in: Voltaire, *A Philosophical Dictionary. Part I*, in: Voltaire, *The Works of Voltaire. A Contemporary Version*, vol. IV, translated by William F. Fleming, E. R. DuMont, New York 1901 [1764], pp. 260–266, pp. 260–261.

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For a brief summary of Voltaire on equality, see: Wolfgang Röd, *Geschichte der Phi-*

losophie. Die Philosophie der Neuzeit 2. Von Newton bis Rousseau, C. H. Beck, München 1984, pp. 182–183.

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Voltaire, “Equality”, p. 261.

6

Ibid., p. 262.

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Voltaire, “The Negro”, in: Voltaire, *Short Studies in English and American Subjects. Voltaire. A Contemporary Version. Vol. XIX. Part II*, translated by William F. Fleming, E. R. DuMont, New York 1901 [1734], pp. 240–242, pp. 241–242.

tect the falsehood, and prove him a liar, with the same certainty as if he had stuffed his narration with stories of centaurs and dragons, miracles and prodigies.”⁸

We have just learned that “human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations”, the French and the English can easily be compared since they are both of the humankind. But then suddenly the same terrible intellectual trick Voltaire used can be found in a footnote in Hume’s *On National Characters*:⁹

“I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient GERMANS, the present TARTARS, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are NEGROE slaves dispersed all over EUROPE, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; tho’ low people amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In JAMAICA indeed they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but ‘tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly.”¹⁰

Thus, all the humans are epistemologically equal, but then there is this strange “species of men” that does not do as the species Hume assigns himself to and thus this species must be inferior, even “naturally inferior to the whites”. Hume wants to give a good reason why he thinks that (or does he just want to hide his racism?). He claims the accomplishments of the “whites” cannot be found anywhere among the “negroes”. Is that really a surprise? And if it is a surprise, why is that a bad thing? The answer seems to be that either the epistemology, political philosophy, or Hume’s philosophy in total is just not a philosophy of the human: it is a philosophy of the white human. And this is, to a certain degree, justifiable. A philosopher has to think about a certain part of reality. But suddenly there is an implicit normative component introduced. Significantly, when he does not find comparable accomplishments in the “negros” culture to those in his culture, he concludes that they are inferior. Hume was right to point out that he did not find these accomplishments, but he was deeply wrong when he – the individual who indeed observed the is-ought-gap¹¹ – interpreted this finding as normatively relevant. Hume found a difference. That is all. The African political systems were different. That should not be a surprise. But a difference is in no way necessarily and implicitly a normative difference, and moreover, it is in no way a necessarily and implicitly a normative difference in your favour. Nobody can deny that differences might be found, but at the same time, there is nothing that forces us to place two different things within a normative hierarchy.¹² Frankly, I consider all absolute normative comparisons of thought systems, be they inferiorising or superiorising, as radically arbitrary. Hume does not understand that he looks to the African person and is disappointed that he does not find himself. There appears to be no attempt to see the other in their dignity. Inferiority is nowhere to be found here, just difference. But if Hume is implicitly biased, then that which is different from mine is at the same time inferior. It seems thus that Hume, like Voltaire, is part of the intellectual foundation of construction of thoughts that today is called *white supremacy*.

Immanuel Kant

Let’s give it one more try and hope an adequate understanding of the human being can be found in the most famous of all thinkers of the German Enlightenment. Kant states in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*:

“In order to assign the human being his class in the system of animate nature, nothing remains for us than to say that he has a character, which he himself creates, in so far as he is capable of perfecting himself according to ends that he himself adopts. By means of this the human being, as an animal endowed with the *capacity of reason (animal rationabile)*, can make out of himself a *rational animal (animal rationale)* – whereby he first *preserves* himself and his species; second, *trains, instructs, and educates* his species for domestic society; third, *governs* it as a systematic whole (arranged according to principles of reason) appropriate for society. But in comparison with the idea of possible rational beings on earth in general, the characteristic of the human species is this: that nature has planted in it the seed of *discord*, and has willed that its own reason brings *concord* out of this, or at least the constant approximation to it.”¹³

Thus, this is what makes a human a human: “he has a character, which he himself creates”. And this creation, as Kant just has taught us, goes a very specific way. But, disappointingly, Kant is not talking about all humans. He is, as we have to be aware of, only talking about humans in his – debatable – narrow sense. There are other, inferior humans, Kant states in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*:

“The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises about the trifling.”¹⁴

Are these humans not capable of creating themselves? According to Kant, obviously not. Kant repeats Hume’s foundational thought of white supremacy at length:¹⁵

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David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1999 [1748], pp. 151–152.

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This footnote was added by Hume in 1753, it did not appear in the first edition of 1748. Cf. John Immerwahr, “Hume’s Revised Racism”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53 (1992) 3, pp. 481–486, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2709889>; and the critique of Immerwahr by Garrett. See: Aaron Garrett, “Hume’s Revised Racism Revisited”, *Hume Studies* 26 (2000) 1, pp. 171–177, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hms.2011.0251>.

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David Hume, “Of National Characters”, in: *David Hume: Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, vol. I, Longmans, Green, and Co., London 1889 [1748/1753], pp. 244–258, p. 252.

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“In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark’d, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz’d to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, ‘tis necessary that it shou’d be observ’d and explain’d; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely diffe-

rent from it.” See: David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1960 [1738–1740], p. 469 [= III, 1, 1]). On the is-ought-gap, cf. Charles R. Piggin, “Naturalism”, in: Peter Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics*, Blackwell, Oxford 2000, pp. 421–431; Björn Freter, *Wirklichkeit und existentielle Praxis. Vorarbeiten zu einer Phänomenologie der Normativität entwickelt an narrativen Texten der altgriechischen, neutestamentlichen, mitteleuropäischen und klassischen deutschen Literatur*, Lit, Berlin 2016, pp. 357–367.

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Cf. Björn Freter, “Tolerance and Respect. An examination of material difference and formal identity”, *Ewanlen* 2007, pp. 10–16; Björn Freter, “Decolonization of the West, Desuperiorisation of Thought, and Elative Ethics”, in: Elvis Imafidon (ed.), *Handbook of African Philosophy of Difference: The Othering of the Other*, Springer, Dordrecht – New York (to be published in 2019).

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Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, translated by Robert B. Loudon, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006 [1798], p. 226.

14

Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, translated by John T. Goldthwait, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles 1965 [1764], pp. 110–111.

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This has been analysed in an exemplary way in: Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, “The Color of



“Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality, even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great regarding mental capacities as in colour. The religion of fetishes so widespread among them is perhaps a sort of idolatry that sinks as deeply into the trifling as appears to be possible to human nature. A bird’s feather, a cow’s horn, a conch shell, or any other common object, as soon as it becomes consecrated by a few words, is an object of veneration and invocation in swearing oaths. The blacks are very vain but in the Negro’s way, and so talkative that they must be driven apart from each other with thrashings.”¹⁶

We learn that “blacks” do not have what it takes to be fully human. Even after being set free after being “transported elsewhere from their countries” – an appalling euphemism for slave trade – they do not produce anything great, or should we say, white. They do not have what is needed to be fully human, Kant is “suggesting that there is an essential and natural ‘gift’ that those who are ‘white’ inherently have and those who are ‘black’ inherently lack”.¹⁷ The consequence of this is simply that the Enlightenment is not about black people. In his famous essay *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* Kant writes:

“*Enlightenment is mankind’s exit from its self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. Self-incurred is this inability if its cause lies not in the lack of understanding but rather in the lack of the resolution and the courage to use it without the guidance of another. Sapere aude! Have the courage to use your own understanding!* is thus the motto of enlightenment.”¹⁸

After we have learned about the inferiority of the “blacks” “mental capacities”, we have to understand that the “motto of enlightenment” is not directed at humanity, it is directed at Europe, or more specifically at male Europe.

“For Kant European humanity is *the* humanity *par excellence*.”¹⁹

In the midst of Kant’s work, we find foundations of the most vulgar elitist white supremacy:

“Humanity is in its greatest perfection in the race of whites. The yellow Indians are already of lower talent. The Negroes are much lower and at the lowest there are parts of the American people.”²⁰

All of this is disturbing, very disturbing. The triptych of Enlightenment philosophers Voltaire, Hume, and Kant speaks with the attitude of addressing all human beings. However, this is not the case. Taking a look at the humans they do talk to, only the so-called ‘white’ humans can be found (and to make it worse, not even all of them, for they are certainly not talking to women, to homosexual persons etc.). In other words: These philosophers are talking only to *actual* humans, to humans *that matter*, to humans of *value*. We find all this at the very heart of the Enlightenment!

All these approaches pretend to be descriptive, but they are not. I would argue that the European intellectual elite described itself, roamed around in the world, did not find itself again and thus judged nobody is like us exactly and *because* of that – and here comes the sheer arbitrary positioning – they are the only ones that matter. This European narcissism was not looking for the world as the world; it was only looking for itself and looking down on everything else. It was mostly interested in replicating itself. This came to actual reality with colonialism. Edward Said described that with haunting precision:

“You get rid of the most offending human and animal blight (...) and you confined the rest to reservations, compounds, native homeland (...), and you can build a new society on the vacated space. Thus was Europe reconstituted abroad, its ‘multiplication of space’ successfully projected and managed. The result was a widely varied group of little Europes scattered throughout Asia, Africa, and the Americas (...).”²¹

Can white supremacists be enlightened?

I must come to a very strange conclusion. The underlying anthropologies of Voltaire, Hume, and Kant are not actually anthropologies, they are only *logoi*, teachings, about the *anthropos*, the human being, insofar this *anthropos* is *leukos*, a white human being.²² Instead of anthropologies, I find *normative leucologies* – more precisely even: *Leuco-andro-heterologies*. This must be of importance for if these thinkers held the non-white human in such contempt, I must question if the humanity of the non-white human reflected in their work. Despite the forays undertaken by some researchers,²³ the question *Did these thinkers of the Enlightenment cover the reality of the non-white human at all?* remains an issue of central importance requiring further, broad philosophical consideration of works past and future attitudinal approaches of white scholarship.

More polemically, is the *Critique of Pure Reason* maybe only a *Critique of Pure White (Male) Reason*? Is it possible to be a white supremacist and – at the same time – properly write a *Critique of Pure Reason*? Would being a white supremacist not imply some significant limitation in the scope of thinking? How can one think about the reason for the human being in general if one ignores all non-white (non-male) reason? Can you speak of an inferior race and develop a categorical imperative at the same time?²⁴ Does not one

Reason: The Idea of ‘Race’ in Kant’s Anthropology”, in: Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (ed.), *Postcolonial African Philosophy. A Critical Reader*, Blackwell, Cambridge 1997, pp. 103–140, p. 126.

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I. Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, pp. 110–111.

17

E. C. Eze, “The Color of Reason”, p. 126.

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Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?”, in: James Schmidt (ed.), *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1996 [1784], pp. 58–64, p. 58.

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E. C. Eze, “The Color of Reason”, p. 121; cf. Shana Almeida, “Race-based Epistemologies: The Role of Race and Dominance in Knowledge Production”, *Wagadu* 13 (2015), pp. 70–105.

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Immanuel Kant, *Immanuel Kant’s physische Geographie. Auf Verlangen des Verfassers, aus seiner Handschrift herausgegeben und*

zum Theil bearbeitet von D. Friedrich Theodor Rink. Zweyter Band., Göbbels und Unser, Königsberg 1802, p. 10. The translation is mine, the original reads: “Die Menschheit ist in ihrer größten Vollkommenheit in der Race der Weißen. Die gelben Indianer haben ein geringeres Talent. Die Neger sind weit tiefer und am tiefsten steht ein Theil der amerikanischen Völkerschaften.”

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Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine*, Vintage Books, New York 1992 [1979], p. 78.

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Cf. an impressive study by: Zoe Todd, “An Indigenous Feminist’s Take On The Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ Is Just Another Word For Colonialism”, *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29 (2016) 1, pp. 5–22, pp. 11–13, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12124>.

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Cf. Peter K. J. Park, *Africa, Asia, and History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon, 1780–1830*, State University of New York Press, Albany 2013.

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I am sure many colleagues might protest and point out that Kant strongly opposed colonialism, especially in his work *Perpetual*



influence the other? Can one be a white supremacist and still bring forth the Enlightenment?

I do not know the answers to these questions, and I am embarrassed not to know the answers, and thus to admit that I did not take this into account in my very own prior philosophical work. I am embarrassed that, as far as I can see, these questions are not broadly discussed, and even worse, there does not even seem to be a consent that these questions are important at all. Personally, I think that this is a scandalous failure of modern Western philosophy. This needs to be changed.

Just to be clear, this is not about throwing away the work of our sampling of the renown Western thinkers, Voltaire, Hume, Kant, and so many others – I have not even mentioned Hegel or Fichte.²⁵ Without a doubt, these works will remain to be of great value, but they need to be contextualised, “we must be vigilant about deconstructing the nature of truth and reality upon which epistemologies are generally based”.²⁶ I need to be aware of the fact that these people were white supremacists and thus had a significantly narrowed perception of what is human and what is not. Consequently, if a philosopher has a narrowed perception of the human being while at the same time working on freeing the human being out of his *self-incurred immaturity*,²⁷ it would be quite surprising if that would not have significantly affected that person’s philosophy.²⁸ I need to be aware of the fact that the history of white supremacy runs right through the history of philosophy (of the Enlightenment). Of course, this is not a secret. None of the texts I cited are concealed. This problem is hidden in plain sight indeed. Most modern Western philosophers, I assume, know all this. They know, but only rarely somebody uses this knowledge and addresses these tensions.

Whatever the answers will be to the questions I have raised, the first order of action is undoubtedly to explicitly acknowledge the disturbing double-standards in these most influential philosophers beyond lip-service. This acknowledgement needs to transform the scholarly attitudes in tangible ways beyond a cursory mentioning of the white supremacy of Voltaire or Hume or Kant to a meaningful analysis of their white supremacy and how that affected their thinking and ours.

The total disregard for African thought

It is thus somewhat more understandable why the distinguished moral philosophy was not able to stop the imperialistic exploitation of Africa (and so many other parts in the world). It is evident that there was simply nothing of actual human value in the colonies until the Europeans brought themselves there. If this seems inflammatory, let us once again use Said’s words instead: the “human and animal blight” was eliminated and Europe could replicate itself. This has a strange implication. African philosophical thought has *not* been colonised in a strict sense.

In contrast to the exploitation of labour or land, philosophy, or African thought in general, has markedly not been exploited. It can perhaps now be understood why. It has been regarded with such contempt that it was not recognized as original thought or true philosophy at all but as something so inferior that it was not deemed worth exploiting. This originated with the white supremacist philosophy of the Enlightenment, and it can still be seen in the more recent reviews of African thought, as they might have begun with Placide Temple’s

book *Bantu Philosophy*.²⁹ African thought is still characterised here, if it is accepted as thinking at all, as inferior, primitive thinking, that, while fascinatingly exotic, has nothing too serious to offer.

At the same time that African thought was deeply disregarded, Western thought was introduced to Africa. However, it could not be received and processed in a positive sense; it was forced into the African thinking in an attempt to gain credibility as actual philosophy in the first place: eurocentric philosophy committed practically an Epistemicide on African Thought. This has continued to the present day through, for example, the “[h]igher education institutional cultures”, who “continue to privilege western symbols, rituals and behaviours imposed as a result of epistemicide”.³⁰ Epistemological racism is still very much alive and continues as the white supremacist heritage of the Enlightenment still permeates the education of successive generations of scholars. And how could this epistemological racism not still reign? We have just seen it. Philosophers of the highest calibre were vulgar white supremacists and this white supremacy, in its explicit and its implicit form, was forced into African thought, especially into the academic curricula.³¹

Thus, African thought, following Fanon’s line of reasoning,³² largely failed to develop under colonial oppression without constantly seeing itself as primi-

Peace. But does that really matter? I do not doubt that Kant opposed colonialism, but at the same time I do not doubt that he was a white supremacist. The first does not exclude the latter.

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Cf. Gudrun Hentges, “Das Janusgesicht der Aufklärung Antijudaismus und Antisemitismus in der Philosophie von Kant, Fichte und Hegel”, in: Samuel Salzborn (ed.), *Antisemitismus. Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Netzwerk für politische Bildung, Kultur und Kommunikation e.V., Giessen 2004, pp. 11–32.

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S. Almeida, “Race-based Epistemologies”, p. 81; cf. *ibid.*, p. 83.

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Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?”, p. 58.

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Scheurich and Young point out very correctly: “Consider who the major, influential philosophers, writers, politicians, corporate leaders, social scientists, educational leaders (e.g., Kant, Flaubert, Churchill, Henry Ford, Weber, Dewey) have been over the course of western modernism. They have virtually all been White. And it is they who have constructed the world we live in—named it, discussed it, explained it. It is they who have developed the ontological and axiological categories or concepts like individuality, truth, education, free enterprise, good conduct, social welfare, etc. that we use to think (that thinks us?) and that we use to socialize and educate children. This racially exclusive group has also developed the epistemologies, the legitimated ways

of knowing (...) that we use. And it is these epistemologies and their allied ontologies and axiologies, taken together as a lived web or fabric of social constructions, that make or construct ‘the world’ or ‘the Real’ (...)” See: James Joseph Scheurich, Michelle D. Young, “Coloring Epistemologies: Are Our Research Epistemologies Racially Biased?”, *Educational Researcher* 26 (1997) 4, pp. 4–16, p. 8.

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Cf. Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, Présence Africaine, Paris 1969 [1945]; cf. Frederick Ochieng’-Odhiambo, *Trends and Issues in African Philosophy*, Peter Lang, New York 2010, pp. 26–39.

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J. Teboho Lebakeng, M. Manthiba Phalane, Nase Dalindjebo, “Epistemicide, institutional cultures and the imperative for the Africanisation of universities in South Africa”, *Alternation* 13 (2006) 1, pp. 70–87, p. 70.

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Cf. Teboho J. Lebakeng, “Discourse on colonial epistemicide and contemporary attempts to re-affirm indigenous knowledge systems, with particular reference to South Africa”, *Caribbean Journal of Philosophy* 3 (2011) 1, pp. 1–12.

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Cf. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, New York 2008 [1952].

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Cf. B. Freter, “Decolonization of the West, Desuperiorisation of Thought, and Elative Ethics”.

tive and inferior. African thinking, in the shadow of colonialism, is only perceived as serious thought if it overcame its (so-called) African primitivisms, and thus turns into Western thinking. The colonial Western narcissism again reproduced itself, this time in the realm of philosophy.

It must thus be the task of contemporary Western philosophy to finally approach African thought in a non-contemptible manner, to overcome our implicit racism. It seems to me the urgent task of Western thinkers is to seek a means to engage with African thought in a manner that exposes, and finally overcomes, this racist contempt. Western thinking will not be able to enter into meaningful discourse with African thought if it does not overcome its colonial contempt. Western thinking must strive to understand the colonial and post-colonial assault on African thought thoroughly. We Western thinkers must desuperiorise ourselves, our philosophy, and our thinking.³³ Desuperiorisation, the practical decolonisation from the standpoint of the violator, must be the project that flanks the African work on decolonisation.

Philosophy as a human matter

Western thinking can, and must, give up its strange pretension to what constitutes “true” philosophy and finally embrace it fully as a *humane elemental, universal practice*. We have to overcome the assumption that anybody has a prerogative on philosophy. Where there is a problem, a dilemma, a crisis, there is philosophy. Philosophy – who could dare to doubt that seriously? – is a humane matter. This includes finally affirming non-Eurocentric philosophy and overcoming the white supremacy of the West’s philosophical tradition. I should, indeed all of us Western scholars should revise this heritage to be inclusive of all of humankind. We need to overcome the implicit racism that we carry around with us to this very day. Our epistemology should no longer fracture our and other epistemologies. Only then will Western thought be able to present itself as a worthy discourse partner to engage African thought and its practitioners.

The Western philosophers need to consider their very own historical epistemic stance. Philosophising eurocentrically in this day and age seems to me not only disturbingly reductionistic; it is anti-philosophical. Every philosopher educated in the Western tradition knows of the incorporated fundamental racial bias in so many philosophers and yet we do not know how this affects our current philosophy. We Western scholars do not know this because it is unknowable. We do not know because we were ignorant and had not heeded the words of our African colleagues, such as Molefi Asante who warned that “[e]very subject in the curriculum of the Eurocentric university is permeated with white supremacy; a student completes the curriculum to his or her psychological peril”.³⁴ We have also ignored working in the West colleagues who pointed at these problems, such as the critique found in Carter G. Woodson’s *The Mis-Education of the Negro*³⁵ – published eighty years ago! All this is just embarrassing.

Eurocentric philosophers need to be more critical in handling the Euro-Western traditions. Western scholars need to begin decolonisation with the desuperiorisation and de-Eurocentrication of Western academic education, for as Maserumule suggests “transformation of higher education generally (...) requires a professoriate with a de-coloniality posture”.³⁶ I further recommend a relational and ethical approach to epistemological issues and a responsive decolonial pedagogy based on care.³⁷ It is of greatest importance to under-

stand that this pedagogy is not, as Western thought so often tries to claim, an objective matter. It is a highly contextualised and individualistically ethical matter. It must be acknowledged that the educator is allowed to make his personal epistemological choices, aware that knowledge as socially constructed and situated within and between knowers. With this relational epistemological outlook, it needs to be understood that different opinions about reality will exist. The educator cannot be asked to believe anything and everything. They cannot have a view from anywhere and from everywhere. We have to turn this epistemological problem around when it comes to these issues of difference and understand it as an *ethical problem*. The question is not who is right about reality and how that should be taught, but rather: *How can I take the next human being seriously in their approach to reality?* Eurocentric philosophers need to decentre their approach; we need to relativise our eurocentric philosophical posture,³⁸ develop and maintain a desuperiorising outlook, and embrace a pedagogical praxis that acknowledges the practitioner's positionality. Through these reflexive practices that embrace conscientisation and sensitivity, we hope that culturally responsive pedagogies can be promoted that will form the basis of democratic learning communities that are inclusive and open to revision as the process of decolonisation evolves.

Conclusion

A few glimpses into the history of the Enlightenment philosophy through the lens of Voltaire, Kant, and Hume were enough to conclude that the legacy of the Enlightenment is at times a liability. Western philosophers must finally acknowledge this burden. It is unclear how deep the racism of the Enlightenment has deformed philosophy, and to what extent we still – willingly or not – continue to protect this racism, because an extensive critical reflection has still not become widely accepted. Western philosophers must directly address this unexplained danger instead of treating it as historical marginalia. This should begin immediately through critical reflection, pedagogical and curricular choices in the education of the next generations of philosophers, our research agendas, and our ethical practices. There is no reason to wait any longer. Let us get started.

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Molefi Kete Asante, "An Afrocentric South African University", *Asante* (May 13, 2009). Available at: <http://www.asante.net/articles/13/an-afrocentric-south-african-university/> (accessed on May 6, 2018).

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Cf. Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Dover Publications, Mineola 2005 [1933].

36

Herbert Maserumule Mashupye, "Why Africa's professors are afraid of colonial education being dismantled", *The Conversation* (November 25, 2015). Available at: <https://theconversation.com/why-africas-professors-are-afraid-of-colonial-education-being-dismantled-50930> (accessed on May 6, 2018).

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This issue will be addressed in: Yvette P. Franklin, Björn Freter, "Embracing an Ethical Epistemological Approach in African Higher Education", in: Siseko H. Kumalo (ed.), *The South African Epistemic Decolonial Turn: A Global Perspective*, UKZN Press, Pietermaritzburg 2019 [to be published].

38

Cf. James A. Banks, "The Canon Debate, Knowledge Construction, and Multicultural Education", *Educational Researcher* 22 (1993) 5, pp. 4–14, doi: <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x022005004>.

Björn Freter

**Bjelačka nadređenost u eurocentričnim epistemologijama:
o odgovornosti Zapada za svoje filozofsko naslijeđe**

Sažetak

Postoji naveliko previđena temeljna mana u eurocentričnoj spoznajnoteorijskoj osnovi. Suprotno nadmoćnom etosu prosvjetiteljstva, ova teorijskospoznajna podloga šokantno, čini se, nije epistemologija ljudskog bića, nego bijelca. Osobno sam, kao zapadnjački istraživač, morao relativizirati svoje spoznajnoteorijsko naslijeđe jer uopće ne uključuje u sebe raznolikost ljudskog bića. Kratko ću istražiti rasističke poglede Voltaira, Humea i Kanta i argumentirat ću da zapadna filozofija mora iznova analizirati svoju spoznajnoteorijsku tradiciju uzimajući u obzir rasističke poglede njezinih protagonista koji su korumpirali vlastiti filozofski rad. Predlažem kontekstualizaciju filozofske tradicije i desuperiorizaciju da bi se etički i širi filozofski dijalog mogao njegovati među istraživačima na svjetskoj razini.

Ključne riječi

superiornost bijele rase, rasizam, prosvjetiteljstvo, desuperiorizacija, Voltaire, David Hume, Immanuel Kant

Björn Freter

**Weißer Vorherrschaft in eurozentrischen Erkenntnistheorien:
Über die Verantwortung des Westens für sein philosophisches Erbe**

Zusammenfassung

Es gibt ein fundamentales Problem in den erkenntnistheoretischen Grundlagen des westlichen Denkens. Trotz des strengen Ethos der Aufklärung scheint die Erkenntnistheorie der Aufklärung eben keine des Menschen überhaupt, sondern vornehmlich eine des weißen Menschen zu sein. Als westlicher Akademiker muss ich mein eigenes erkenntnistheoretisches Erbe relativieren, denn dieses Erbe berücksichtigt die Vielfalt menschlichen Lebens nicht. Ich werde kurz die rassistischen Ansichten von Voltaire, Hume und Kant untersuchen und mich dafür aussprechen, die westliche Philosophie und ihre erkenntnistheoretische Tradition aufs Neue in Bezug auf die Frage zu analysieren, inwieweit die rassistischen Ansichten der Protagonisten der Aufklärung ihre philosophische Arbeit deformiert haben. Ich schlage eine (Neu-)Kontextualisierung der philosophischen Tradition und ihre Desuperiorisierung vor, um den ethisch-philosophischen Dialog mit afrikanischen Philosophen auf neuer Grundlage zu ermöglichen.

Schlüsselwörter

weiße Vorherrschaft, Rassismus, Aufklärung, Desuperiorisation, Voltaire, David Hume, Immanuel Kant

Björn Freter

**Le suprémacisme blanc au sein des épistémologies eurocentriques:
Sur la responsabilité de l'Occident pour son héritage philosophique**

Résumé

Dans l'ensemble, il existe un défaut majeur que l'on néglige dans le fondement eurocentrique de la théorie de la connaissance. Contrairement à l'ethos dominant des Lumières, il semblerait que, de façon choquante, la base de cette théorie de la connaissance ne soit pas une épistémologie qui se rapporte à l'être humain, mais à l'homme blanc. Personnellement, en tant que chercheur occidental, j'ai dû relativiser mon héritage théorique sur la connaissance car il n'incluait aucunement la diversité de l'être humain. J'examinerai, de manière brève, le regard raciste de Voltaire, de Hume et de Kant, et j'argumenterai en faveur d'une nouvelle analyse de la tradition

théorique de la connaissance que la philosophie occidentale devra élaborer, en prenant en considération le regard raciste des protagonistes qui ont corrompu leur propre travail philosophique. Je propose une contextualisation de la tradition philosophique et un déracinement du suprémacisme blanc afin d'être en mesure de cultiver un dialogue éthique, et de manière plus large philosophique, parmi les chercheurs au niveau mondial.

Mots-clés

supériorité de la race blanche, racisme, Lumières, déracinement de la supériorité, Voltaire, David Hume, Emmanuel Kant