by Jure Zovko

# The enduring legacy of Kant's philosophy

A Conversation with Han Shuifa[1]

1. Last year, we celebrated the 300th birthday of the greatest philosopher of all time, Immanuel Kant. You and I met during the Kant Congress in Bonn, at which point I was invited to Peking University, and since then, our intensive collaboration has begun. In Bonn, we had the opportunity to engage with the world's leading experts in Kantian philosophy across various sections and to explore the contemporary relevance of Kant's philosophy. What was your impression of the congress in Bonn from a cosmopolitan perspective?

   The International Kant Conference held in Bonn in 2024 was particularly significant, as it coincided with the tercentenary of Kant's birth. The theme—Kant's Program of Enlightenment—remains a timeless and ever-relevant topic. Over 700 scholars and students from around the world attended, engaging in six days of rich dialogue on both traditional Kantian issues and the pressing challenges facing contemporary humanity. I was invited to deliver a keynote speech entitled "Cognition and Meta-Methods" and to chair two sessions, during which I reconnected with many long-standing colleagues in the Kantian scholarly community.

   It was, of course, a great pleasure to meet you, Prof. Zovko. Your lecture, "Judgement and Science," delivered at the Institute of Foreign Philosophy at Peking University, was a thought-provoking presentation. I have been to Croatia—a country of remarkable beauty for which I have special fondness—and owing to historical ties, I have come to learn something about your nation's past and some of its notable intellectual figures.

   Returning to the Bonn conference, many senior Kant scholars were in attendance, including my old friends such as Baum, Gerhardt, Höffe, and other German scholars, as well as Paul Guyer. An even

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larger contingent consisted of younger scholars. One notable feature of this year's Kant Conference was the participation of more than twenty Chinese scholars—more than ever before—with young scholars comprising the majority. This reflects the increasingly prominent role that Chinese Kant scholars are playing in the international Kantian academic community. Together with young Kant scholars from Peking University, I proposed to Dietmar Heidemann, President of the Kant Society, that the 20th International Kant Conference be held at Peking University. Mr. Heidemann was very supportive of this idea, and we intend to continue our efforts to bring this plan to fruition.

Secondly, I observed that the real challenges of the contemporary world also featured prominently in the conference discussions, such as in the panel on "Kant and the Challenges of Globalization: Poverty, Climate Change, and Migration." The problems of poverty and climate change are not so much challenges to Kant's philosophy per se as they are challenges for Kant scholars to confront and address. Artificial intelligence is currently a popular topic, but the theme "Kant and Artificial Intelligence" remains at the cutting edge. This is because Kant's theoretical philosophy anticipates many of the foundational problems now being debated in the field of AI. I addressed this issue in my keynote presentation at the 2019 International Kant Conference held at Peking University.

Furthermore, the title of the conference session "Kant and Non-Western Philosophy" stood out to me as somewhat problematic. A more appropriate formulation might have been "Kant and Asian Philosophy," "Kant and Latin American Philosophy," or "Kant and African Philosophy." The phrase "Non-Western Philosophy" implicitly suggests that the organizers had not fully acknowledged the growing influence of Kantian scholarship beyond the Western world—most notably in China. It is evident that the organizers' perspective and understanding of Kantian philosophy still require further broadening in order to reflect its truly global relevance. Additionally, the music performed at the opening ceremony of the conference seemed tailored to rather narrow tastes and struck me as somewhat discordant.

Nevertheless, despite the last-minute change of venue, the Bonn Kant Conference was, on the whole, a success—characterized by a vibrant and intellectually rich academic atmosphere.

2. John McDowell, one of the most influential analytic philosophers, stated in an interview with Marcus Willaschek (*Information Philosophie*, March 2004, pp. 24–30, 2005) that Kant is the greatest philosopher of all time. McDowell justifies his assertion that Kant's famous formulation, "Thoughts without content are empty, concepts without intuition are blind," explores and answers fundamental philosophical questions in a "simply unbelievably insightful and profound" way. He references Wilfrid Sellars' *Myth of the Given*, arguing that reality, as mediated by our cognitive abilities, is already interpreted and embedded within the framework of knowledge that forms part of our educative second nature. What is your opinion on McDowell's interpretation and evaluation of Kant's philosophy?

   McDowell's writings have indeed exerted a growing influence in the Chinese philosophical community, with many of his key texts now available in Chinese translation. His renewed affirmation of Kantian thought testifies to the profound insight and foundational nature of Kant's philosophy. In my view, within the entire history of philosophy, thinkers capable of penetrating to the very essence of knowledge—and of articulating the relationship between knowledge and human nature—are exceedingly rare. Kant stands out as one of the most important among them.

   McDowell's work, to a certain extent, breaks through the taboos of analytic philosophy, allowing for a renewed appreciation of Kant's account of the structure of the mind. Nonetheless, analytic philosophy often remains confined by its empiricist dogmas, rendering it incapable of probing the deeper structures of cognition—that is, the substratum of language. In this respect, McDowell himself is not entirely exempt from these constraints. Although he rightly affirms the profundity and foundational significance of Kant's well-known dictum—"Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind"—thereby challenging certain tenets of empiricism, he nonetheless fails to grasp the true core of Kantian philosophy: cognition is fundamentally an activity.

It seems to me that both McDowell and Sellars still suffer from several evident limitations. First, they remain confined within the cave of experience and are therefore incapable of grasping or explaining the very question McDowell himself has posed—namely, the possibility of thought. It is evident that, within the bounds of their experiential cave, the furthest extent of their discourse lies in describing what experience is like. The recent developments in artificial intelligence have also exposed the limitations inherent in their theoretical models. Second, they conflate the description of empirical phenomena with the explanation of cognition—an inherited misconception accepted as a prejudice. Clearly, McDowell has not succeeded in overcoming this confusion. Third, their reflections on cognition are repeatedly grounded in highly individualized and quotidian examples, while neglecting rigorously established scientific knowledge. This marks a fundamental divergence from Kant and indicates that they have not genuinely comprehended the essence of his philosophy. Fourth, their theories bear the character of insular intellectual circles: if one does not accept their terminologies—which themselves lack empirical justification—the entire theoretical edifice risks collapsing.

Sellars' judgment is, of course, quite reasonable. However, Kant's corresponding theory begins from a premise fundamentally different from Sellars': the a priori knowledge we obtain in mathematics or physics is, in fact, something we ourselves have placed into those domains. This means that reality is indeed a significant component within the framework of knowledge. Yet the crucial question concerns precisely how reality intervenes and in what manner it functions. These are the kinds of issues that call for further investigation—questions to which Sellars, it seems, has not provided an adequate account.

3. Kant is fascinating in all three segments of his philosophising, namely in his answers to the questions: "What can I know?", "What should I do?", and "What may I hope for?" During my lectures at several leading Chinese universities last year, I attempted to consider the question: How is it possible to conceive a global philosophy today that would unify all three of Kant's questions within a universal philosophical endeavour? Kant is a classic of philosophy from whom we hope to gain guidance on fundamental questions of human life. His idea of the cosmopolitanism of

reason is a model of world philosophy that assumes all fundamental human problems and questions of life can be solved rationally. Among the global problems that affect us all, I would like to mention by name: increasing environmental pollution (air pollution, plastic pollution, radioactive contamination, water pollution) – a threat to life on Earth, which is the only oasis of life in the desert of the universe.

Kant's three questions are not only the ultimate questions of philosophy, but also the fundamental questions of humanity. Our continual reflection upon them deepens our understanding and leads to new insights. Likewise, in our ongoing pursuit of answers, we discover that people's responses to these questions are far from uniform. Even if consensus is reached at certain times or on specific aspects, new divergences and debates inevitably follow.

The ideal of a "global philosophy" is undoubtedly an inspiring one. However, to unify Kant's three questions within a single, universal philosophical endeavour remains, in my view, an exceedingly difficult task in the near term. This is due to numerous persistent obstacles—chief among them the long-standing problem of how to bridge, or at least connect, the gap between facts and norms. Nevertheless, if our attention is directed primarily toward the principles of human life, then the cosmopolitan model of global philosophy does seem to offer a viable path. This is because humanity must reach a minimum consensus and shared principles concerning how we coexist in society—principles that allow for peaceful negotiation, discussion, and resolution of the shared problems we face, such as the urgent issues you mention.

However, achieving a higher level of consensus will inevitably require serious consideration of economic, fiscal, social, and political conditions. Without addressing the vast inequalities in global economic development and the significant disparities in living standards among different nations, the pursuit of a deeper consensus will remain difficult. The recent wave of de-globalization—initiated by the Western world itself—is, in fact, illustrative of these tensions. Incidentally, Professor Gosepath of the Free University of Berlin has also long advocated for a form of global philosophy. While his approach may differ from yours, both of you share a common intellectual foundation in Kantian philosophy.

You raise the issue of global environmental degradation—a problem that indeed concerns all of humanity. In this domain, it is perhaps easier to achieve some degree of consensus, as a clean planet is not only a cosmopolitan ideal but also a practical goal of daily life. Yet the greatest challenge today lies in the divergence of interests between nations at different stages of economic development and with differing geographical conditions, particularly regarding how to implement concrete measures to address and eliminate environmental pollution. Coordinating and reconciling these conflicting interests is, at present, the foremost task in managing global pollution. In addition, differing conceptions and values result in divergent attitudes toward environmental threats. For instance, the United States' withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on climate change was motivated not only by considerations of national interest but also by deep-seated conceptual differences.

On such matters of global concern, liberal democracies ought, ideally, to take the lead and provide necessary support to less developed countries. This would align with the cosmopolitan ideal. However, reality often diverges dramatically from both expectation and the conclusions reached through normative reasoning. Many Western nations are reluctant to assume responsibility for historical injustices they have caused, nor are they always willing to play a leadership role in remedying them. At the same time, the majority of economically underdeveloped nations lack the capacity to shoulder such burdens. Given these realities, the appropriate response is not to abandon the ideal, but rather to pursue more rational and pragmatic strategies. First, we must seek a minimal consensus—namely, a shared point of interest from which all nations might benefit and to which they are willing to commit resources. Second, the effort to prevent and reduce pollution must be integrated with the need of economic development, and it must also match the current level of scientific and technological capacity for pollution control. Without a balance between these two aspects, it will be difficult to effectively control or improve global environmental conditions.

Third, the exemplary effect must be taken seriously. In the global endeavour to control and govern environmental pollution, Western countries ought to relinquish their prejudices: on the one hand, they should make greater contributions to global environmental

protection in order to offset the historical injustices for which they bear responsibility, and actively support and develop industries such as renewable energy; on the other hand, they should vigorously assist underdeveloped countries in their economic development, including the construction of infrastructure, thereby enabling them to acquire both the basic capacity and the will to participate in environmental protection.

If we return to Kant's philosophy, we ought to fully grasp the twofold determination of human nature in Kant's practical philosophy—namely, Vernunft (reason) and Rationalität (reasonableness or prudential rationality). The former is characterized by the imperative to make bold use of reason (sapere aude), while the latter emphasizes the necessity for human beings to rationally deliberate and calculate the various reasonable means and effective methods for attaining concrete ends. I take Kant's cosmopolitan ideal to be grounded precisely in these two capacities of human rationality.

4. The second question of human reason "What should we do?" should also be analysed as an ethical question, primarily in the context of the current development of biotechnological science. Science and current scientific research could lead humanity into an irreversible situation in which a return to the status ante quem is no longer possible. To prevent this, we must emphasise that scientific research on biomedical engineering is closely linked to ethical issues. Kant's second question should also be considered in the context of genetic engineering because the future and destiny of the human species may be endangered by biotechnological research, in particular by gene technology.

   The question "What should we do?" carries enduring significance. Kant hoped that human reason could reach consensus on this matter. However, the future development and evolutionary prospects of humanity already exceed the boundaries of our current cognition. For this reason, humanity must answer this question under the condition of great uncertainty—an uncertainty that had not yet been so clearly recognized in Kant's own time.

   The ethical limits concerning biotechnological interventions involving the human being, which you have raised, are—when considered in relation to the future of humanity—even more challenging and

carry greater risks than environmental pollution, for they touch on the critical issue of whether the structure of human life itself might become contaminated. At the very least, this problem must be considered along two dimensions. First, in what direction will human evolution develop? Second, what kind of impact and effect will the future development of artificial intelligence have on the human being? Only when we frame modern biotechnology—especially gene technology—in terms of these fundamental questions concerning its potential applications to human beings, can we begin to respond adequately to the question "What should we do?" This question is no longer confined to ethical considerations in the narrow sense, but directly implicates the metaphysical question of the human being: namely, What is the nature of the human?

To this, I offer a response on two levels. The first is general and enduring: namely, that nothing must be allowed to endanger the fundamental interests of humanity—such as the integrity of the mind and body, aesthetic sensibility, and generational continuity. The second is historical and context-dependent: that in every particular era, we must ensure that gene technologies applied to human beings meet the highest standards of safety—specifically, that they do not undermine the era's prevailing conception of mental and physical health, aesthetic ideals of the body, and historical self-understanding. However, we must acknowledge that certain changes—though unrelated to genes—have nonetheless altered our aesthetic norms and traditional conceptions of human nature, such as extensive tattooing and gender transition. In this sense, some applications of genetic technology pertain only modes or forms, rather than essence. Of course, if germline cells are involved, then what is at issue is the relation between the individual and the species. On this matter, I have consistently upheld the following position: anthropocentrism. If, as you have stated, the Earth is the only oasis of life in the universe, then anthropocentrism is all the more an unassailable truth.

5. One of the most impressive thoughts in Kant's opus can be found in § 60 of the Critique of Judgement, where it is said that the study of the humanities (humaniora) has the primary purpose of cultivating our powers of mind. With the philosophical task of cultivating our emotional powers and our life-world, we are faced with Kant's third question: "What can we hope for?" Although Kant experts

often associate this question with religion, I take a different view. Rather, I believe that the third question is related to the themes of the third critique, the critique of aesthetic judgement, which is about how to create a civilised and cultured society in which interpersonal relationships are characterised by mutual appreciation and respect. The hope is rather, as Kant expressed it in his aesthetic theory, that man "fits into the world" (AA 16, 127).

> This question is directly related to my previous response. I fully agree with your view that Kant's question "What can we hope for?" (Was darf ich hoffen?) ought to be understood in terms of human mundane life—that is, our hopes and expectations concerning the present and future condition of human existence in this world. The hope situated within the immanent world is precisely in line with Chinese tradition: the Confucian ideal is the Great Unity (大同) of human society. The anthropocentrism I advocate likewise takes justice within this world as its ultimate aim. Anthropocentrism must, therefore, exclude any form of artificial intelligence-centrism.
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> The fundamental difference between human beings and artificial intelligence lies in the fact that every human being possesses a unique individuality. Groups formed by individuals with distinct personalities will themselves have distinctive characteristics. Thus, different individuals, the groups they constitute, and the larger collectives composed of these smaller groups—including political communities such as the state—each exhibit their own uniqueness. It should also be noted that certain communities transcend the boundaries of the state, such as ethnic, religious, and cultural groups. A civilised and cultured society is therefore one composed of individuals and groups marked by individuality and distinctiveness, living together peacefully. This reflects a central philosophical notion in Chinese philosophy: harmony without uniformity (和而不同).
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> Within such a society, mutual appreciation and respect among individuals are necessary precisely because differences exist. Each individual and each group possesses its own particularity. If difference were to vanish, then the very object of appreciation and respect would likewise disappear, rendering them unnecessary. It is evident, even on the level of aesthetics alone, that we naturally desire to behold and appreciate a diversity of beauty, rather than uniformity and sameness.

For contemporary humanity, the greatest challenge is to preserve individual uniqueness and the particularity of groups, while also cultivating mutual appreciation, respect, and peaceful coexistence. However, one important clarification must be made: mutual appreciation does not imply universal appreciation. Given the plurality of aesthetic sensibilities, people retain the right not to admire certain personalities. Yet within the bounds of legality, they are still obliged to uphold a baseline of respect. A demand for universal appreciation would, in fact, devolve into an attitude that erases individuality.

At present, there is a troubling tendency in parts of the Western world to suppress, marginalise, or even eliminate certain individualities and cultural characteristics in the name of promoting one particular form of individuality or a few select cultural traits. Some fear the inevitable divergence in taste and preference that arise from difference, and therefore attempt to compel universal acceptance of all tastes. This, however, is unacceptable.

6. If we examine Kant's third question from the perspective of religion and ask whether religions can contribute to the cultivation of the human spirit, we encounter the problem of religious fanaticism and terrorism, which seem to be ever-present. In my opinion, hope in the Kantian sense could be interpreted as encouraging followers of different religions to share their religious experiences with one another, fostering tolerance and peace in a pluralistic global society. In the Kantian framework, religions should align with cosmopolitan reason and be accessible to all people.

   Human existence, from an external perspective, is defined by what a person does and how they do it; from an internal perspective, it is defined by what they hope for.

   In Christian culture, hope points to the ultimate end, and the expectation of salvation constitutes the entire essence of the believer's life. Without undergoing Enlightenment and revolution, Christianity and its closely related religions tend to sacralize the ultimate end, thereby ossifying the norms, concepts, and ways of life particular to the communities historically shaped by these religions. Under such conditions, tolerance and peace among different religions are difficult to achieve—at best they result from temporary and pragmatic

arrangements, which are fragile and unsustainable. Religious fanaticism and terrorism are thus recurrent phenomena.

Religions capable of coexisting peacefully and tolerantly with one another are, in this sense, products of modernity—religions that have undergone rationalization through revolutionary transformation. Such religions must undergo a fundamental change from their earlier forms: they must be understood no longer as the sole truth, but rather as one among many forms of belief that human beings may freely choose. They may propagate their doctrines, but they must not demand universal acceptance, and still less can they compel people to live according to their norms.

As previously mentioned, in the mainstream of traditional Chinese thought, the core of the ultimate end lies in the flourishing and peace of human generations within the immanent world. People's everyday and highest hopes are directed toward this goal. Under such a conception, religious fanaticism and terrorism find little ground to thrive, though of course other sources of conflict may still exist. In traditional Chinese society, religions were generally able to develop independently and coexist without significant conflict.

Modern scientific knowledge reveals that the ultimate destiny of humanity is uncertain. Therefore, the immanent world is not only the most suitable domain for realizing ultimate ends—it is also the space in which individuals may peacefully seek their own distinct ultimate purposes.

7. In his criticism of the French materialist Julien Offray de Lamettrie's biological view of man in his essay 'What is Enlightenment?', Kant explicitly emphasises that man is 'far more than a machine' due to his freedom of choice and action and that it is necessary to consider him 'according to his dignity', which is based on his autonomy. In our age of moral relativism, in which the reduction to materialism is the predominant philosophical principle, do you find Kant's warning important in order to preserve the dignity of man and the humanities? Do you agree that there is no alternative to a morality based on respect for human dignity? Personally, I see the task of ethical reflection in the context of modern biotechnological

research – as well as in relation to other forward-looking areas of scientific research – in the preservation of human dignity.

Kant's moral philosophy establishes a fundamental principle: the human being is an end. This, to a certain extent, answers Kant's own question: What is man? In other words, for Kant, man is the end of man.

Intuitively speaking, the human being, as an end, is a unity of mind and body; hence, the moral end is the individual as such a unified whole. In modern political philosophy, human life and bodily integrity are recognized as basic rights and liberty. I believe Kant was acutely aware of this, as the preservation of human life constitutes, within his moral philosophy, a categorical imperative—one that admits no exception.

However, the crucial point is that the moral law presupposes human reason and is legislated by practical reason—this is what constitutes human free will. At this point, we must carefully distinguish the subtlety and precision of Kant's thought: the subject and object of dignity is the person as a unity of mind and body, yet the principle and command to respect this unified being can only arise from its rational part, and not from bodily instincts or inclinations—which Kant refers to as Neigung. If it were the latter, then morality would become impossible, for morality necessarily carries a demand for universality, even if only within a limited scope, as within the moral norms of a given nation. At present, there is a concerted effort to establish universal norms for humanity. If this is indeed possible, then such norms would fall under the category of justice, not merely morality—for example, the notion of basic human rights. In fact, the pursuit of universally valid moral norms for humanity is itself highly problematic, since many traditional moral norms—such as diligence or frugality—have now become matters of personal choice. If a norm is to claim universality and be truly implemented, it would require external coercion. But clearly, the realization of moral norms cannot rely on external coercion.

Modern science and technology—including biotechnology and artificial intelligence—bear significance for the human being on multiple levels. The development of science and technology is itself an expression of human reason and sensibility; thus, if such development is suppressed, it amounts in effect to the suppression of

human reason. This would inevitably give rise to a series of negative consequences. Many of those who adopt a critical stance toward science and technology often overlook this point.

At the same time, we must also recognize that the products of science and technology have indeed brought risks to humanity—sometimes risks of a grave magnitude. For example, nuclear science in the twentieth century led to the production and use of atomic weapons. Yet it must equally be acknowledged that nuclear technology has brought benefits to humanity in numerous fields, including energy, medicine, industry, and agriculture.

Genetic technology, to be sure, possesses a nature markedly distinct from other forms of technology. If misapplied, it could bring irreparable catastrophe to human life itself. Yet if applied properly, it could equally bring immense benefit to humankind. In short, the development of science and technology as such cannot ultimately be suppressed; it is part of human nature. However, technology may be subject to limitation, and its application to the human being must be subjected to even more stringent scrutiny. As you have noted, such application must take the preservation of human dignity as its fundamental premise—and beyond that, must also be guided by the criterion of safeguarding human safety.

8. Your most famous former student, Huaping Lu-Adler, wrote the philosophical bestseller Kant, Race, and Racism: Views from Somewhere (2023). In Bonn, we had the opportunity to attend a panel discussion on "Kant and Racism." In your opinion, could Kant be considered a racist, even though in his later work, Toward Perpetual Peace, he advocated egalitarian views for all nations regardless of racial or religious affiliation and was one of the most consistent critics of slavery and colonialism –while it is well known that Hume, at the same time, was a slave owner? Has your former student Huaping Lu-Adler joined the globalist attack on Kant's philosophy and, in doing so, replaced profound Chinese wisdom with American globalist superficiality?

   Huaping Lu-Adler attended several of my courses during her studies at Peking University. She now holds considerable influence in the international Kantian community. However, aside from attending international Kant conferences, we have had little contact.

To regard Kant as a racist—rather than merely criticizing the racial elements in some of his earlier writings—is, as you mentioned, part of a current intellectual trend originating in the United States and echoed by some scholars in Europe. In my view, this reflects a broader spread of so-called "political correctness."

*1. How should we understand the historical limitations of past thinkers and philosophers?*

Historically speaking, the concept of the general human being within Western thought began to take shape only in the early modern period. By contrast, the Chinese conception of the general human being emerged much earlier, already established during the time of Confucius and Mencius. I addressed this issue in a 2010 essay titled "Unfolding: An Examination of One Side of Enlightenment History". In the West, the idea of the common human being gradually formed only after the Enlightenment. However, it was also during this period that scientific racism was formulated.

Although Johann Friedrich Blumenbach divided humanity into five races and identified the Caucasian as the "most beautiful" and "original" human type, he did not advocate a theory of racial superiority. He maintained that all human beings belong to a single species and that racial differences are continuous rather than essential or hierarchical. Nonetheless, the inherent limitations of his theory made it susceptible to appropriation by political racists. Kant's early views on race were undoubtedly influenced by the scientific thought of his time. Yet his dominant theoretical orientation was toward the concept of the general human being. The internal tensions within his philosophy are, in this sense, reflective of the contradictions of his age.

Indeed, we can approach the issue of racism from a broader philosophical-historical perspective. Take, for instance, the theories of Plato and Aristotle. Both upheld the classification of human beings into distinct ranks, viewing these divisions as natural and grounding them in bloodline. Aristotle, for example, argued that the distinction between master and slave is both natural and just.

The Judaic-Christian tradition and its related religions are also paradigmatic forms of what may be termed ascriptive categorization. Here, I deliberately avoid the modern concept of "race" and

instead employ the broader term ascriptive categories, since the practice of dividing human beings into different classes and caste-like groups—fixed by blood and reinforced by institutions—has been a longstanding tradition in Western society. Across different epochs, Western thinkers have offered various theoretical justifications for this system. This form of ascriptive hierarchy reached its apex under German National Socialism and was only theoretically and politically repudiated—at least in principle—during the American civil rights movement in the 20th century.

The pressing question today is: how are we to regard all Western thinkers who preceded this historical shift? More specifically, how should we assess those philosophers who, during periods in which ascriptive thinking prevailed, inevitably held views shaped by such assumptions, while also articulating philosophical ideas that remain valuable and constructive today? In other words, many of the positive concepts and theories that emerged in Western philosophy prior to the Enlightenment—concepts and theories that are still accepted and upheld—were developed within historical contexts imbued with racial, religious, superstitious, or unscientific elements. Thus, the problem of how we evaluate these ideas is analogous to the problem of how we evaluate Kant's thought: should we reject the entire value of a philosophical theory merely because it is historically entangled with ideas that, from a modern perspective, are politically or morally problematic? If so, then would not Western intellectual history fall into utter darkness?

*2. The Subject of Kant's Philosophy*

Kant's philosophy laid a solid foundation in the history of Western thought for the modern concept and theory of the general human being. The three Critiques each investigate one of the core human faculties and articulate principles that pertain to the capacities of the general human being—not to those of any particular group. When Kant states that the human being is an end, the concept of the human being is universal, encompassing all persons, and not limited to any specific subset. When he unifies the three questions you mentioned earlier under the overarching question What is the human being?, the term "human" is likewise to be understood in its universal sense—as the general human being.

Across the Critiques, as well as in the political and historical writings from his critical period, there is no textual basis for interpreting Kant as restricting rationality to any particular race. When he writes that Enlightenment is "the emergence from one's self-incurred immaturity" and calls upon us to "have the courage to use your own reason," the subject of reason is the universal, general human being—not a particular group.

In my view, with regard to the issue of race, the positions Kant articulates in *Toward Perpetual Peace* and *The Metaphysics of Morals* ought to be regarded as his final and definitive views. These works demonstrate that he had moved beyond earlier race-based assumptions. While this does not erase certain earlier statements marked by racial prejudice, it does attest to the development of Kant's thinking and his efforts toward achieving the internal consistency of his theoretical system.

If one refuses to acknowledge this transformation in Kant's thought, and insists instead on defining his entire philosophical project on the basis of isolated earlier remarks, then one would be engaging in the same kind of reductive judgment as dismissing all of Aristotle's philosophical contributions on account of his endorsement of slavery, or denying the achievements of American history in liberty, democracy, science, and education on the basis of its history of Native American genocide and the institution of slavery. Such a stance is neither comprehensive nor reasonable.

*3. On the method of interpreting Kant as a racist*

When we read Kant today, particularly in considering the impact of his thought on modernity, we certainly ought to remain vigilant toward those of his views that reflect historical limitations—including racialist elements. However, the primary focus should remain on the positive contributions his thought has made to modern society.

For Kant, human reason is an a priori capacity, though its exercise takes place within the empirical world. Practical reason is a priori, and the universality of the human being is likewise an a priori characteristic. Yet, as with the moral law, although every person possesses practical reason innately, not everyone follows the moral law in practice. This is why immoral behaviour appears in empirical reality, and thus why moral education becomes necessary. One cannot reject

Kant's universal moral law or his conception of the general human being simply because he recognized the empirical variability of moral conduct—i.e., that some individuals act immorally. Nor can one claim that Kant's moral law applies only to those who consistently adhere to it in empirical life. Kant's remarks on race, in theoretical terms, should be understood in an analogous way.

For those who assert that Kant was unequivocally a racist do so by employing particular methodological strategies designed to substantiate their accusations. For example, they treat Kant's pre-critical views and their residues as constant, enduring features of his philosophy. They then separate out a notion of the "general human being" infused with racial assumptions from Kant's later, mature conception of the same term, thereby portraying Kant as a proponent of strong racialism. In doing so, they narrow Kant's concept of the "general human being" into one that applies only to "the general White." This method presupposes a hierarchy whereby Kant's racial statements are treated as foundational, while his universalist statements are subordinated. By this logic, even the three Critiques would fall under the category of racialized texts.

I believe this is unwarranted. One must not reconstruct Kant's position on race by projecting modern sensibilities backward, nor should one use Kant's empirical remarks to refute his general theoretical claims. One must not deny the evolution in Kant's views on race, and certainly not reject his core and enduring principles on the basis of isolated or temporary positions. For example, in *Toward Perpetual Peace*, Kant explicitly praises the intelligence of the Chinese—this clearly stands in tension not only with some of his earlier views, but also with the thesis that Kant maintained a consistent, systematic racialism.

Confucius once said, "The benevolent love others," but also remarked, "Only women and petty men are difficult to keep close." If one were to focus exclusively on the latter statement and use it to negate the general meaning of ren (benevolence), then the far-reaching and lasting influence of Confucian thought would not be comprehensible. We acknowledge that Confucius's thinking had its historical limitations—he could not have reached the level of universality that modern humanistic thought aspires to—but it is equally true

that he initiated China's long-standing reflection on the general human being, leaving a lasting and positive legacy.

Kant's thought, like that of all great philosophers, bears the limitations of its historical epoch. But just as we do not deny the greatness of other thinkers on account of such limitations, neither should we allow the charge of racism—understood as totalizing and essential to his philosophy—to obscure the greatness of Kant's work, the universalism of his moral law, and his lasting contribution to modern conceptions of justice.

*4. On the responsibility for contemporary racism*

The debate surrounding Kant's remarks on race touches on a deeper issue: namely, how scholars today ought to bear responsibility for the phenomenon of racism in the modern world.

Those who assert that Kant was a racist tend to overstate the contemporary significance of reconstructing Kant's racial views. They take the identification of racial elements in Kant's philosophy as a necessary component of anti-racist practice. In reality, however, this reflects an underlying intention to displace responsibility—an attempt to lessen the weight of their own obligation by transferring blame to thinkers of the past. But attributing today's social pathologies, even partially, to historical figures does not meaningfully alleviate the racial injustices embedded in contemporary American society—since those injustices are produced by a wide array of complex factors.

We observe that many critics, while enjoying the cultural and material products created under systems shaped by racial injustice, simultaneously experience unease about the persistence of racism today. In response, they turn to figures such as Kant, engaging in what might be described as an intellectual exhumation—vigorously holding such philosophers accountable for their statements. This is, in effect, a rationalized performance. But it cannot change actual conditions.

For example, if American scholars were genuinely committed to eradicating racism at its roots, then the most thorough and concrete course of action would be to return the land of New York to Indigenous peoples. A less radical alternative would be to establish one or several Indigenous languages as official and academic languages

in New York and at New York University. After all, the very status of English as the official language on American soil is itself a consequence and manifestation of racial domination.

Given that these scholars reject the abstract notion of the "general human being," then, for the sake of logical consistency, they should also reject abstract condemnations of racism. Instead, they should pursue concrete measures to address racism's enduring effects. By that logic, the proposals mentioned above would constitute the most thoroughgoing response. Especially when these scholars criticize Kant for his seemingly dispassionate attitude toward the historical suffering of Indigenous and African peoples, they should be all the more unwilling to respond with dispassion to the enduring consequences of racism in contemporary America.

To be sure, I fully recognize that such proposals are, in practice, neither feasible nor reasonable. My point is simply this: correcting historical injustices—or addressing the historical limitations within Kant's philosophy—requires modern thinkers to adopt both a historically informed and objective stance. We should not impose anachronistic demands on historical figures. At the same time, we must respond to present realities with reasonable and effective actions. When confronting such issues, the adoption of extreme positions amounts to an abdication of intellectual and moral responsibility.

9. At your Department of Philosophy at Peking University, Kant and classical German philosophy are studied intensively. Is this a continuation of the Marxist tradition, in the sense that Marx's philosophy cannot be understood without a systematic knowledge of Hegel, or is your department primarily focused on the German philosophical tradition independently of Marx's claim?

   The study of German philosophy is a long-standing and distinguished tradition in the Department of Philosophy at Peking University. As early as the 1910s, during the establishment of the Philosophy Division—Peking University's earliest institutional form of philosophy education—faculty members were already introducing German philosophy into their teaching. By the early 1920s, specialized courses on German philosophy had been formally instituted.

Cai Yuanpei, one of the university's most celebrated presidents, was himself a major scholar of German philosophy and pedagogy.

Beginning in the mid-1920s, a number of scholars who had studied in Germany—such as Zhang Yi, Zhang Junmai, Zheng Xin, He Lin, and Hong Qian—brought back with them a deep engagement with German philosophical thought. Their collective work laid the groundwork for a durable tradition of Kantian and German Idealist studies at Peking University.

Before 1949, the development of Kantian and German philosophy at Peking University evolved independently of the Marxist tradition. After 1949, however, the two began to intersect. Before the Reform and Opening period, Hegelian philosophy was the dominant strand within German philosophy studies. This prominence was due, on the one hand, to the direct influence of Hegel on Marx's thought, and on the other, to the marginalization of Kant within Marxist discourse, which tended to treat Kant's philosophy with suspicion or condescension.

Following the Reform and Opening, this dynamic underwent a swift transformation. Kantian philosophy came to occupy a central position within the broader study of German Idealism and German philosophy more generally. Of course, Hegelian philosophy continued to receive sustained attention, and many of its concepts and frameworks have become standard interpretive tools for engaging with Marxist theory. Moreover, due to the deep integration of Hegelian thought into contemporary French philosophy, many scholars are now also inclined to study and understand Hegel from this perspective.

At present, the Department of Philosophy at Peking University remains a leading center for Kantian and German Idealist studies in China. In recent years, younger scholars in the department have led the translation of a 22-volume collected edition of Schelling's works, which has sparked renewed academic interest in Schelling's thought and further enriched the field.

10. In your opinion, is Kant's deontological morality of respecting human dignity superior to the consequentialist morality of utilitarian provenance? How does an educated Chinese citizen view

deontological morality and the fundamental necessity of speaking and respecting the truth?

This is a deeply serious theoretical question and, at the same time, a complex practical difficulty. The principle of treating humanity as an end, or as the end in itself grounded in human dignity, is the supreme principle of Kant's practical reason. While people are accustomed to criticizing the formalistic character of Kant's moral philosophy, they often overlook the fact that the principle of humanity as an end constitutes its substantive core. The decisive point at which deontological ethics proves superior to the consequentialism of utilitarian provenance lies precisely here. From a theoretical standpoint, only deontology is capable of establishing universal moral norms; by contrast, if moral evaluation is based on consequences, such universality becomes unattainable.

At present, we ought to recognize that deontological ethics functions primarily in the domain of justice. Principles grounded in basic human rights serve as the highest standard of human conduct, whether in domestic affairs or in international relations.

However, how basic rights are to be defined remains a difficult problem. Different states, shaped by divergent histories, fundamental beliefs, inherited burdens, and religious traditions, identify and interpret basic rights from varying perspectives. As a result, fundamental differences arise between states on this most basic level. Furthermore, from the perspective of historical development, countries are situated at different stages, and differ in economic, social, and even natural conditions. These differences not only constrain conceptions of rights, but more crucially, constrain the realization of those rights.

Therefore, in the contemporary world, the pursuit of a universal consensus on justice must proceed by distinguishing between two levels. On the international level, the consensus achievable can only be of a minimal nature; within a particular state, a relatively high degree of consensus can be realized, because legal, economic, and political mechanisms can be employed to ensure that basic rights—or basic goods—are widely protected. This, however, is difficult to achieve at the international level. For example, it is evident that the citizens of one country cannot be expected to provide even minimal medical guarantees to the citizens of another country.

On this basis, we can more readily understand and respond to the question you raised concerning deontological morality and the principles of speaking the truth and respecting facts. Both are essential to a just modern society. Without principles grounded in deontological ethics, it is impossible to establish universally valid norms governing interpersonal conduct. However, if one disregards the actual conditions of the world—if one lacks knowledge of, or fails to understand, the concrete realities of a particular country, thereby neglecting factual circumstances—then even the highest moral principles, if not supported by real-world conditions, amount to nothing more than lofty abstractions. Such principles would be detached from the lived context, rendering them impractical; indeed, they may even provoke social instability and thereby obstruct the development and progress of the society in question.

In this respect, the implementation of deontological principles must be situated within historical conditions. Their realization is necessarily gradual, not instantaneous. Such principles must begin from the most basic rights and progressively expand their scope. However, even these fundamental goods are not capable of unlimited expansion—for if they are extended without limit, humanity may ultimately come into conflict with itself.

11. You will also participate in the conference of the International Academy for Philosophy of Science at Zhejiang University in Hangzhou in October 2025 on the topic of "Responsibilities in Science and Technology." What can you tell us about your position, and is it possible to argue this topic from Kant's perspective?

    This topic can indeed be addressed from the perspective of Kantian philosophy, as its core concerns the question of the human being's responsibility to oneself. Kant's perspective, however, is a multi-dimensional one, comprising at least three essential elements: first, the principle that the human being is an end; second, the Enlightenment use of reason; and third, the fundamental uncertainty of ultimate knowledge.

    First, because the human being is an end, the development of science and technology must be oriented toward the human being as its end—that is, it must serve human existence and development, and never subordinate the human to technological means. In the

current age of artificial intelligence and genetic technologies, this requirement becomes especially urgent, as we must be attentive to the risks that such developments pose to human beings and human society. I have already addressed this point earlier.

Second, science and technology are the product of human rationality. The Kantian question "What can I know?" aligns with the Enlightenment motto: "Sapere aude"—dare to use your own reason. This rational impulse drives the continuous pursuit of knowledge and the creation of new technologies. The desire for knowledge is not an accidental trait, but a fundamental expression of human nature itself. For modern humanity, it has become so deeply ingrained that to suppress it would be to suppress a defining feature of what it means to be human.

Third, the outcomes of scientific and technological development are inherently uncertain. There is no final or absolute knowledge of the world, and the ultimate fate of humanity remains unknown. Precisely because of this epistemic uncertainty, our generation bears the moral responsibility to ensure that the application of science and technology is governed by the highest principle—namely, the safeguarding of human dignity and safety. In other words, while scientific and technological development cannot be halted— since it is driven by human reason itself—humanity nonetheless bears the responsibility, and possesses the capacity, to limit its misuse.

In this respect, the conference you are organizing in collaboration with Zhejiang University is of genuine significance. It urges us to take these questions with seriousness and intellectual rigor, and through research and deliberation, to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the various issues connected with responsibility in science and technology. Only then can we, in the face of ever-accelerating scientific and technological developments, move toward the timely establishment of appropriate norms and preventive mechanisms.