Robert Bernasconi’s article in RP 117 has harsh and important things to say about some philosophical heroes of the Enlightenment, especially Kant, and it deserves serious critical attention. This response is not directly concerned with the central claims of the article but with a marginal, though still significant, aspect: its treatment of Hegel. It will be argued that Bernasconi has overreached himself here and that Hegel should be moved out of the range of his criticism. To show this would in one way do Bernasconi a service, for it would allow what is truly integral to his case to stand out more clearly. It must be admitted, however, that, as is perhaps only to be expected, his dealings with Hegel cannot simply be excised without affecting the rest. They reflect back on the main project, suggesting grounds for viewing it with a certain reserve.

It seems all too easy to cite considerations that should have induced Bernasconi to be more discriminating in his targets. If, for instance, Kant, as he claims, failed ‘to express disapproval of’, while Locke ‘accepted’, black slavery, Hegel’s considered verdict stands in sharp contrast.

It can be given in a formulation that is familiar to Bernasconi since he quotes it elsewhere: ‘reason must maintain that the slavery of the Negroes is a wholly unjust institution, one which contradicts true justice, both human and divine, and which is to be rejected.’ It can be given in a formulation that is familiar to Bernasconi since he quotes it elsewhere: ‘reason must maintain that the slavery of the Negroes is a wholly unjust institution, one which contradicts true justice, both human and divine, and which is to be rejected.’ This judgement might surely have sufficed of itself to give Bernasconi pause in claiming that the issues raised by ‘Hegel’s racism’ are ‘ultimately no different’ from those raised in the case of Kant. The subject of anti-black racism needs, however, to be taken a little further since it is the primary focus of Bernasconi’s article.

A starting point is provided by a reference to my book, Hegel on History. Bernasconi expresses surprise at finding me ‘defend Hegel from the charge of racism’ on the grounds that he was a ‘geographical determinist’. It would be pointless to dwell here on the fact that this is but one strand of the defence, not, as Bernasconi implies, the whole of it. The same is true of the fact that I do not actually use the term ‘geographical determinist’ of Hegel, preferring to speak of his ‘geographical materialism’. What is worth dwelling on is the fact that Hegel’s geographical thesis is understood and applied by him with an impartiality that, so far from providing a cloak for racism, seems incompatible with it. The relevant claim is that in some regions of the globe, nature, in the form of terrain or, more especially, climate, presents too great an obstacle to the development of spirit. This is no less true of the ‘frigid’ than it is of the ‘torrid’ zone: ‘The frost which grips the inhabitants of Lapland and the fiery heat of Africa are forces of too powerful a nature for human beings to resist, or for spirit to achieve free movement.’ Thus, these forces are too powerful for human beings in general – for white Europeans no less than for black Africans. It is, one might say, ironic that, as we now know, Africa was the birthplace of Hegelian spirit, of the distinctively human consciousness he interpreted through that concept, and remained its sole home for all but a small portion of its life on earth. Hegel would, however, have had no difficulty in showing this truth the respect he habitually accords the findings of science. Among many other indications there is the claim, hard to square with ‘geographical determinism’, that the Greeks derived the materials for the development of their art and religion from, among other non-European sources, Egypt, while Egypt ‘probably received its culture from Ethiopia’. On the strength of these observations Hegel might reasonably be regarded as a precursor of ‘Black Athena’. It is at the very least odd to find a thinker who inclines in that direction accused of being an anti-black racist.

Hegel’s account of the Greeks deserves a closer look, for it constitutes virtually a hymn to racial impurity. Thus, he insists that it is ‘superficial and absurd’ to suppose that their ‘beautiful and truly free life’ could arise as ‘the development of a race [Gesch-
keeping within the limits of blood relationship and friendship'. On the contrary, the Greeks developed themselves from ‘a colluvies, a conflux of the most various nations [Nationen]', and the beginnings of their cultural development are connected with ‘the advent of foreigners’ in Greece. The terminology is significant here. In Hegel’s standard usage a ‘nation’ is a group united by common descent, in accord with the kind of fact of etymology to which he attaches great significance, ‘the derivation of the word natio from nasci’ (to be born). Thus, ‘nation’ may be seen as cognate with, perhaps as a narrower specification of, ‘race’.

The important point for present purposes is that a ‘nation’ has to be distinguished from a ‘people’ (Volk). A people is a ‘spiritual individual’, a community constituted through a distinctive form of spirit, that is, a distinctive form of consciousness and self-consciousness, ‘its self-consciousness in relation to its own truth, its essence’, or what might broadly be termed its culture. Hegel makes the relevant point by telling us that in so far as peoples are also nations, ‘their principle is a natural one’. Thus, we are in touch once more with an aspect of the distinction between nature and spirit, a distinction that belongs to the very architecture of his thought and has an especially crucial role in the philosophy of history. For history is precisely, in one aspect at least, the escape of spirit from nature, its overcoming of all natural determinants such as common descent or blood relationship. As is to be expected, it is peoples and not nations, spiritual and not natural entities, who are the vehicles of this process. Indeed, groups whose principle is a natural one, such as nations, tribes, castes and races, cannot as such figure as historical subjects. It follows that, for Hegel, there literally cannot be a racist interpretation of history. History is an object which can never be brought into focus through racist categories, and racism is incompatible with historical understanding.

Turning from Hegel’s philosophy of history to his philosophy of right yields a smaller range of material combined with an even clearer enunciation of anti-racist principle. The key idea is that in the modern state ‘A human being counts as such because he is a human being, not because he is a Jew, Catholic, Protestant, German, Italian, etc.’ It is, rather obviously, the case of the Jews that is most pertinent at present. In this passage, as elsewhere, Hegel is setting himself against the most powerful form of racism of his time and place. This manifested itself in, for instance, the fulminations of J.F. Fries against ‘the Jewish caste’ and in the movement to exclude the members of this ‘caste’ from civil and political rights. In the face of such tendencies, Hegel insists that ‘Jews are primarily human beings’, adding that the demand for their exclusion has ‘proved in practice the height of folly’ while the way in which governments, and more particularly the Prussian government, have acted in this regard has proved ‘wise and honourable’.

It is curious that Bernasconi, in his dealings with Hegel’s racism, allows him no credit for his stand as a principled opponent of anti-Semitism. The oddity is the greater if one contrasts his treatment with that of Heidegger. The issue at stake on each side of the contrast is that of the supposed connection between philosophy and racist views. Where Heidegger is concerned, Bernasconi is tentative and circumspect: ‘his anti-Semitism, although undeniable, is not so easily associated with his philosophy, although an argument along these lines can be formulated’. In dealing with Hegel such judiciousness is cast aside, though an argument to connect his alleged racism with his philosophy would be at least as difficult to formulate.

Bernasconi formulates no such argument while tending to proceed as if he had. It may possibly be symptomatic in this regard that he is content just to situate disparagingly, by prefacing with an astonished ‘it is even suggested that’, the claim made in Hegel on History that Hegelian spirit provides an unrivalled theoretical basis for ‘the fundamental equality of human beings’. There is, of course, no reason why he should engage in particular with my statement of the case for Hegelian spirit. Yet he surely needs to engage seriously with that case in some form. For, on the face of it, to speak of the fundamental equality of human beings is simply to spell out what that spirit plainly implies. It is, after all, the spirit whose ‘substance … is freedom’, a substance to be achieved only ‘through the freedom of each individual’ since ‘we know … that all human beings as such are free, that the human beings as human being is free’. To note this is to be brought in contact with what Bernasconi calls ‘moral universalism’, an aspect of the legacy of the Enlightenment which Hegel accepted and took forward. Bernasconi constructs a vigorous, sceptical rhetoric around this doctrine, once again without providing an argument on the key question, its supposed inner link with racism. What he does instead is to focus on the seemingly related idea of Kantian ‘cosmopolitanism’ and offer an argument against that. He then simply runs the two ideas indifferently together as a couplet, ‘moral universalism or cosmopolitanism’.

This procedure would be unsatisfactory even if the argument against cosmopolitanism were more per-
suasive. All it essentially relies on, however, to establish the link with racism is a supposed biographical fact about Kant. The ‘hypothesis’ is that his cosmopolitanism ‘made his racism even more pronounced because the racial inferiority he already recognized now struck him as an offence against all humanity, an offence against this very cosmopolitanism’. What is needed, however, is a theoretical argument about concepts, not an appeal to individual psychology. The problem would scarcely be worth noting were it not for the example set for Bernasconi by Hegel’s stance on the same issue. For Hegel distinguishes between the two Enlightenment doctrines now in question, and in retaining the one while rejecting the other suggests at least the germ of a rational ground for his preference. He does so, significantly, in the section of the Philosophy of Right cited earlier, in close proximity to its celebration of the inclusiveness of the modern state. What is suggested there is that cosmopolitanism represents a fake, merely abstract, universalism, a ‘fixed position’ of false homogeneity that abstracts, in particular, from ‘the concrete life of the state’ with its variety of peoples and their defining spirits. Bernasconi might have found in this at least a model for the kind of argument against cosmopolitanism he requires.

A different kind of point should be made by way of conclusion. It is prompted by the wholly admirable sense that pervades Bernasconi’s writing of the practical significance of ideas, and, more specifically, by the contrast he alludes to between the real world of racist injustice and oppression and that of contemporary discourse about racism. In part the point consists simply in questioning the wisdom in this context of a strategy of damning the Enlightenment even in its highest flights of moral universalism. The mention of Heidegger should be enough to suggest that the precedents here are not encouraging, and that a Hegelian balance and realism in this area might serve the cause of antiracism better. The point may be put in a more general form. This involves the view that, however hard to articulate, there is an indispensable distinction of some kind to be acknowledged between what belongs to the structure of a philosophy and what does not, between contingent facts about the lives and opinions of some Enlightenment thinkers and what is of the essence of Enlightenment philosophy. Bernasconi’s work is a salutary reminder of the complexity of such a distinction, specifically of the dangers of relying on it for a facile airbrushing of the great figures of the past. It also suggests, however, the dangers of an answering facility on the other side.

The distinction in question is needed because, without it, disreputable opinions or even incidental remarks, instead of being judged to be incompatible with the logic of a philosopher’s position, a sad decline from her best insights, are liable to engulf the whole. Our antiracist critique will then end up proving far too much. The test it proposes is one that Hegel will certainly not pass, not least in view of what I have called the ‘obnoxious and shocking’ character of his aspersions on non-European peoples, with their residue of ‘cultural prejudice, complacency and arrogance’. Neither, however, just to consider the spectrum of his nineteenth-century successors, will Marx, Mill or Nietzsche. Indeed, it is doubtful whether many European thinkers whose opinions and attitudes were formed before, say, the 1970s would emerge unscathed. The entire canon of Western philosophy from Aristotle to Wittgenstein is likely to stand convicted. This is to render the history of philosophy in a paranoid style that seems to mirror, at least in its monocular obsessionalness, the fantasies of the racists.

This outcome may be tolerable for the historians themselves, confirming them in their role as the valets to whom, in Hegel’s epigram, no man is a hero. They may even enjoy the frisson of making their own, and our, flesh crawl with frightful stories, secure in the inner conviction that, ensconced in the liberal academy, they cannot themselves fall victim to the evils they so readily conjure up. For the actual victims of racism, however, the implications are different. Such an intellectual construct cannot possibly empower but rather serves to crush them under the weight of history. Those whom it empowers can only be the racists, conveying to them the assurance that the entire tradition of Western philosophy is, whatever surface protestations it may make, really on their side. The whiff of a kind of treason of the clerks hangs in the air here. A proper sense of clerical responsibility would require them instead to deny racism the least shred of intellectual legitimacy or credibility and exhibit it as the vicious stupidity and unreason it is. In that task Hegel should, as this discussion has tried to show, be recognized as a resourceful ally.

Notes

2. Ibid., pp. 15, 16.
Hegel’s racism
A reply to McCarney

Robert Bernasconi

Some of Joseph McCarney’s criticisms of my ‘Will the Real Kant Please Stand Up’ arise only because he misidentifies the issue I discuss there. As I explain in my opening paragraph, I wrote the essay to call into question the way philosophers today address – or often fail to address in a serious way – the racism of some of the most exalted figures of the history of Western philosophy. I make it clear that the aim of the essay is not to establish the racism of those figures, although I do rehearse some of the evidence for the convenience of readers not familiar with my earlier essays on the subject. It is our racism, not theirs, that my essay primarily addresses. Or, more precisely, I am concerned with the institutional racism of a discipline that has developed subtle strategies to play down the racism of Locke, Kant and Hegel, among others, with the inevitable consequence that, for example, in the United States philosophers are disproportionately white. So if, as McCarney puts it, I tend to proceed as if I had formulated an argument linking Hegel’s ‘alleged’(!) racism with his philosophy, this is because I have done so elsewhere, as I explain in note 15.

However, even if my essay in Radical Philosophy does not focus on Hegel’s racism, I am happy to take this opportunity to defend what I have said elsewhere about it, not least because McCarney’s response to ‘Will the Real Kant Please Stand Up’ exemplifies many of the tendencies I want to expose. McCarney objects to my statement in note 15 that the issues raised by Hegel’s racism are ‘ultimately no different’ from those raised in the case of Kant, but he misses the target when he attempts to counter this claim by showing that Hegel, unlike Locke and Kant, explicitly opposed slavery.¹ The paragraph to which that note is attached is not about slavery, but about the tendency of analytic philosophers to ignore historical evidence when they interpret philosophical works from past eras. My point is not that Kant’s racism is the same as Hegel’s, but that their racism, however different, raises the same set of issues for us today, not least because philosophers tend to use the same strategies to avoid addressing their racism.

One of the most common of these strategies is to ignore the specifics of the historical context, while at the same time proclaiming, without appeal to historical evidence, a ‘child-of-his-time’ defence. There is, in other words, lip service to history, but no attempt to follow through on it. McCarney himself is not immune to this tendency. On McCarney’s account, Hegel’s superiority over Locke and Kant is established

¹ For the original text, see G.W.F. Hegel, Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K.M. Michel, Theorie Werkausgabe, vol. 12, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, pp. 278–80.


12. Hegel, Lectures, p. 55, translation modified; Die Vernunft, p. 64.
16. Ibid. p. 22 n38.
17. Hegel, Lectures, pp. 54–5, translation modified.
19. Ibid., pp. 18–19.

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on the basis that he alone explicitly attacked the African slave trade. But it is entirely illegitimate for McCarney to juxtapose the different treatments of slavery in Locke, Kant and Hegel, as if they were contemporaries. Hegel’s rejection of chattel slavery does not have the same meaning that it would have had, had it been written in a different period. When Hegel denounced slavery, the decisive questions, at least among Europeans, were less whether slavery should be abolished and more how and when it should be abolished and whether this episode in European history should be allowed to undermine its sense of its own moral superiority. In fact, Hegel was clear both that chattel slavery should be abandoned only gradually and that the enslavement of blacks should be regarded in retrospect as a necessary moment in the transition towards a higher stage of development. In my view, this places Hegel on the wrong side of the debate to which he was actually contributing, a debate of genuine political significance at the time he was writing.

Things only get worse when we turn to Hegel’s use of the travel literature of his day in order to establish his portrait of Africans in the Lectures on the Philosophy of History. In Hegel on History, McCarney defends Hegel by blaming his sources, even while showing himself to be willing to concede that the ‘histrionic temptations of the lecture theatre’ may have led him to select ‘the most lurid and blood-curdling of the tales available to him’. But in ‘Hegel at the Court of the Ashanti’, which I cite in note 15, I show that Hegel cannot be portrayed as a victim of his sources. Hegel’s portrait of blacks as cannibals was not simply a stereotype that Hegel unthinkingly repeated. I demonstrate, I believe for the first time, that the stories Hegel told his students about Africans were his own invention, in so far as he took published accounts and exaggerated the details. For example, whereas Hegel’s source records that the king of Ashanti crushed the bones of his dead mother in rum and water, he reported that the bones were washed in blood. Hegel also included other stories, especially about cannibalism and mindless massacres, that either are without any known source or are greatly exaggerated. McCarney has read my essay on Hegel’s distortion of his sources: he refers to it indirectly in his response but he does not take the opportunity either to answer my argument or to modify his defence. Indeed, it does not even lead him to pause when he presents us with a Hegel who respects the findings of science. The idea that Hegel’s racist portrayal of Africa can be excused because it simply followed the best knowledge of the day cannot be sustained and has been perpetuated only because historians of philosophy have not done their homework. That McCarney explicitly persists in the image of a Hegel who follows the best scientific evidence, when I have shown the contrary, is troubling.

The purpose of the stories Hegel fabricated about Africans was to support his contention that they were not yet ready for freedom. He manufactured a case against Africans to support his claim that slavery had improved blacks. It is always possible that McCarney thinks that this has nothing to do with Hegel’s philosophy, and, while I am inclined to think that this is hardly a marginal question for a philosopher for whom freedom is such a central concept, I concede that, for a certain style of philosophizing, it is a matter of course to eliminate what is subsequently regarded as embarrassing. This is another of those strategies that in ‘Will the Real Kant Please Stand Up’ I identify as a way of playing down a philosopher’s racism. To be sure, from that perspective, which has already turned its back on the historical philosopher, there is no clear criterion by which to decide what is or is not integral. So, rather than debate the importance of this case, let me introduce another which is even harder to dismiss and which again runs directly counter to McCarney’s interpretation.

McCarney understands Hegel to have said that ‘groups whose principle is a natural one, such as nations, tribes, castes and races, cannot figure as historical subjects’. My problem is not with that claim as such, but with McCarney’s suggestion that it follows that for Hegel ‘there literally cannot be a racist interpretation of history’. But it is not enough to notice that, for Hegel, the subjects of history are peoples. It is also relevant that he believes that only certain races produce peoples. Indeed, not all races even divide into specific national spirits. Furthermore, in my essay ‘With What Must the Philosophy of History Begin?’, I explain that this was why Hegel judged that history proper begins only with the Caucasian race. As I cite this essay in the same note, note 15, to which McCarney takes such exception, I would have expected him, in his response to my essay, to address the textual evidence that Hegel uses race as a category to exclude all but Caucasians from being historical subjects in the full sense. Even if McCarney was unaware of the clear textual evidence that I have marshalled in support of this interpretation, I would have thought that the notorious exclusion of Africa proper from world history would have alerted him to it. But this is not part of McCarney’s Hegel. McCarney writes: ‘For history is precisely, in one aspect at least,
the escape of spirit from nature, its overcoming of all natural determinants such as common descent or blood relationship.’ Contrast that with what Hegel himself wrote: ‘each particular principle of a people is also subject to natural determining?’ In Hegel on History McCarney writes that ‘a firmer theoretical basis for the fundamental equality of human beings than Hegelian spirit provides can scarcely be conceived’.

I would suggest that a firmer theoretical basis might have been found had Hegel had a different account of nature’s relation to spirit than the one he actually had.

Instead of debating my textual arguments about Hegel’s racism, McCarney fantasizes about a Hegel who ‘might reasonably be regarded as a precursor of “Black Athena”’. This assertion is made on the strength of Hegel’s observation that the Greeks derived the development of their art and religion from, among other non-European sources, Egypt, while Egypt ‘probably received its culture from Ethiopia’. However, it should be recalled that one of Martin Bernal’s major claims in the first volume of Black Athena is that the thesis of an Egyptian source for Greek culture, the ‘Ancient Model’, was first seriously challenged between 1815 and 1830, especially by Karl Otfried Müller in the 1820s. Hegel was writing at a time when the idea that Egyptian art and religion was one of the sources of Greek art and religion was still very much alive. I am therefore at a loss to know what McCarney means when he describes Hegel specifically as a ‘precursor’ of this view. What is clear is that Hegel was having trouble reconciling the widely shared admiration of his day for things Egyptian with the growing tendency to try to correlate the hierarchy of civilizations with a hierarchy of races, given that the ancient Egyptians were at that time widely thought of as black. The African component of Egypt is very much in evidence in Hegel’s discussion, even while he insisted that Egypt did not belong to Africa proper.

Locke, Kant and Hegel did not simply reflect the prejudices of their time. They reinvented those prejudices by giving racism new forms. Locke played a role in formulating the principle that masters have absolute power and authority over the Negro slaves at a time when the form of North American slavery was far from having been decided. Kant was the first to offer a scientific definition of race, and he himself appealed to this idea of race in order to legitimate prejudices against race mixing. Hegel was a precursor of the mid-nineteenth-century tendency to construct philosophies of history organized around the concept of race, such as we find in Robert Knox and Gobineau. The fact that Locke, Kant and Hegel also played a role in formulating emancipatory ideas constitutes the problem I am concerned with. It does not make it disappear. This is because the annunciation of fine principles – the philosopher’s stock in trade – is no guarantee that one is not at the same time undermining or negating those principles.

I do not see that as an indirect result of my work in this area ‘the actual victims of racism’ will be crushed by racists newly empowered to learn that the entire tradition of Western philosophy is on their side. Nor do I share the vision McCarney’s final paragraph conjures up, according to which attention to racism within the Western philosophical canon will lead scholars to adopt a paranoid approach to the history of philosophy that will result in them becoming ‘secure in the inner conviction that, ensconced in the liberal academy, they cannot fall victim to the evils they so readily conjure up’. I do not share that vision because philosophers for the most part seem already to have that inner conviction about themselves, while ignoring the institutional racism of their discipline. I thought it was clear that I presented the failings of Locke, Kant and Hegel to encourage us to think harder about our own philosophical procedures, not in order to generate self-satisfaction. I am sorry that McCarney did not accept my invitation.

Notes