Reintroducing Kant’s Geography

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One can take the classification of organic and living beings further. Not only does the vegetable kingdom exist for the sake of the animal kingdom (and its increase and diversification) but humans, as rational beings, exist for the sake of others of a different species (race). The latter stand at a higher level of humanity, either simultaneously (as, for instance, Americans and Europeans) or sequentially. If our earth-globe [Erglob] (having once had been dissolved into chaos, but now being organized and regenerating) were to bring forth, by revolutions of the earth differently organized creatures, which, in turn, gave place to others after their destruction, organic nature could be conceived in terms of a sequence of different world epochs, reproducing themselves in different forms, and our earth as an organically formed body—not one formed merely mechanically.¹

At the University of Königsberg Immanuel Kant lectured on a variety of topics, including both philosophical and non-philosophical topics.² The lecture courses were often well attended, they were widely discussed outside of the classroom, and we have many of them in the form of student transcripts, as well as from some of Kant’s own manuscripts and lecture notes. Kant’s lectures on logic, metaphysics, and ethics are well known parts of his complete works, and are invaluable sources of knowledge and understanding about his work, its substance, coherence and development. In addition to these subjects, however, Kant also gave courses on anthropology and physical geography. Geography was usually offered in the summer semester while anthropology was given in the winter, and geography was offered forty-nine times over a forty-year period from 1756–96—more frequently than any of his other topics other than logic and metaphysics.³ Spanning his entire teaching career they thus serve as archeological registers of Kant’s work chronicling accretions and shifts in thought.

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While the anthropology course was worked up in a book by Kant himself, appearing as *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* a few years before his death, the lectures on geography had a rather different fate. Indeed, in 1798 Kant thought that a version of them was “scarcely possible” at his own advanced age, for the manuscript he used to lecture from was one he believed only he could read. An unauthorized edition edited by Gottfried Vollmer appeared in 1801. Kant then entrusted the task to Theodor Rink, who made use of student transcripts to produce an edition which appeared the next year. While both editions had a wide circulation at the time, it is the Rink edition that has been seen as the official one, being reprinted in the Akademie Edition of *Kants gesammelte Schriften*. In the early part of the twentieth century, Erich Adickes attempted to get a new version produced but his suggestion was declined. The first full English translation of Kant’s *Physical Geography*, a translation based on the Rink edition, is due to appear in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant in Translation* in the near future, in the volume on *Natural Science*—over two hundred years since Kant’s death.

Why did Kant lecture on geography? Although it became one of his most popular and best attended courses, and this initially for a *Privatdozent* who existed on student payments, this does not explain things sufficiently. Wilson is valuable in tracking the changing objectives for the geography lectures, suggesting that initially they were “purely scientific, that is, to make a more certain knowledge of believable travel accounts, and to make this into a legitimate academic course of study.” But the popularity of the course meant that Kant could begin to suggest that their aim could be “to civilise young students to become ‘citizens of the world.’” Zammito has similarly shown how the lectures are related to the *Anthropology* in providing knowledge, but stresses this is for a philosophical purpose. As Louden notes, therefore, their aim was more than merely scholastic, but rather:

The anthropology and physical geography lectures are thus not primarily intended as further contributions to Kant’s critical, transcendent philosophy program . . . [which] was not his only concern. A major portion of Kant’s teaching activity was devoted to trying to enlighten his students more about the people and world around them in order that they might live (pragmatically as well as morally) better lives.

For Louden, anthropology and geography are thus “intersecting halves of a larger whole.” The problematic link between Kant’s views on geography and anthropology, and, especially, on race and his cosmopolitan ethics are highlighted below, but the point here is somewhat different. This is that Kant sees these lectures as providing a broad knowledge of the world as a foundation to the
more general studies of his students, and that together the physical geography and pragmatic anthropology give an empirical grounding for his thought more generally. In a postscript to his 1775 article “Von den verschiedenen Racen der Menschen [On the Different Races of Human Beings]” Kant suggested that the two lecture courses together were Weltkenntnis.13 This would usually translate as “world-knowledge,” but Wilson has suggested the felicitous “cosmopolitan knowledge,” with “cosmopolitan philosophy” for the related Weltwissenschaften.14 This knowledge of the world, for Kant, was integral to the moral and political life of the citizen. Both geography and anthropology were taught by Kant because of their “pragmatic” dimension, the way in which this knowledge can guide us in our moral and practical life.

This world-knowledge, this cosmology, is essential to his other writings. Kant suggests that physical geography is about the world as an “object of external sense”; and anthropology as an “object of inner sense.”15 Wilson is therefore clear that the lectures on anthropology must be seen as philosophy:

Kant explicitly argues that the anthropology is a type of cosmopolitan philosophy. It is not a scholastic philosophy, and it is not critical philosophy, but it is a type of philosophy . . .

The twofold field of physical geography and anthropology are viewed cosmologically and pragmatically. In other words, Kant considered these two disciplines, in the way he taught them, to be philosophy, and philosophy that was useful for the world.16

These lectures were to serve as a propaedeutic for “practical reason,” and are a “history of the contemporary condition of the earth or geography, in the widest sense.”17 This, for Kant, is the preliminary exercise in the knowledge of the world.”18 Knowledge of the world is thus of both “the human being and nature.”19 Physical geography studies nature, anthropology the human, but the latter outweighs the former, since “nature exists for the sake of the human being. The human being is the end of nature.”20 Nonetheless, the twofold field of Weltkenntnis needs to be treated cosmologically.21 Anthropology and geography are thus crucial to Kant’s entire enterprise, through his career and across the so-called pre-critical and critical periods.

The ways these two aspects of Kant’s work have been treated has differed dramatically. The Anthropology has been available in English for several years, with translations in 1974 and 1978 and an entirely new recent translation by Robert Louden. Meanwhile, a complete and reliable translation of the Geographie is still forthcoming (although parts of it have been available in English since the late 1960s).22 Kant’s work on anthropology has been discussed by figures of the stature of Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault.23 The Geography, in contrast, has not received anything like the same amount of attention. It
generally merits an entry in dictionaries of Kant's work, but these tend to be pretty brief.24 There is no explicit discussion of these lectures in A Companion to Kant,25 and a recent edited book on Kant and the Sciences makes only a tangential reference to geography.26 Robert Hanna’s comprehensive study, Kant, Science, and Human Nature, makes only two passing references to geography and offers no sustained engagement.27 Many other accounts on related topics are similar. The same neglect can be found in works concentrating on Kant’s theories of space.28

In part to remedy this glaring neglect, this collection discusses Kant’s work on geography—predominantly focusing on the text, or texts, of the Physische Geographie, but not confined to that work. It is the product of conversations—initially between the editors, but then broadening to a wide range of contributors across different disciplines. The initial conversations between Eduardo and myself were illuminating, since the pairing of our intellectual interests—a political theorist who now works in a geography department and a spatially minded philosopher with an expertise on race—seemed to cover many of the key bases. Yet we quickly realized that the richness and complexity of Kant’s thoughts required a project of many more hands. The texts and contexts, the content, and the relation of the ideas to Kant’s work as a whole and to a range of other issues provide an extensive set of positions from which to approach this work.

Accordingly, this book seeks to provide a range of essays discussing, contextualizing, and criticizing Immanuel Kant’s work on geography. It brings together scholars of geography, philosophy, and related disciplines to allow a broad discussion of the importance of Kant’s text for philosophical and geographical work, both historically and in the contemporary context. At the moment when the wider English language audience will have access to Kant’s work on geography in translation, this book will offer a range of ways of interpreting that text, but also criticizing it. Unlike most other topics in Kant scholarship, we are able to build on little preceding work, although the pioneering studies of J. A. May and Erich Adickes are given appropriate references throughout.29

Contexts

The book is structured around a number of themes. We first situate Kant’s work in its context, before discussing a range of textual issues concerning translation, the edition, and its conceptual claims concerning the relation between history and geography. The other sections are thematic, looking at three key themes: the relation between geography and anthropology; the question of the relation of geography to Kant’s critical thought as a whole or what is here called the “geography of reason”; and the issues of gender, race, history and geography.

Kant understood geography in a very broad sense, including much of what we would today understand as human geography under his title of physical
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groundy. Kant was an innovator in geography, if for no other reason than that he was one of the very first to lecture on it as an explicit topic, before it was common to have chairs in geography in Germany. While others lectured on it in a way that was more akin to travel writing, Kant attempted to systematise the subject, synthesizing insights from a range of different sources. Indeed, his outline for the course was unique, and he had to ask for special dispensation from the Minister of Education in order to give a course for which no textbook could be found.30 The more accurately “physical geography” elements include descriptions of the earth and its terrain; earthquakes and the nature of electricity; climate, the atmosphere, and temperature; and rivers and water. There are also extensive discussions of flora, fauna, and minerals. The final part of the lectures comprised a series of descriptions of particular regions and places in the world. There are many issues and questions in the history of ideas that need to be understood. This book therefore opens with two remarkable chapters, from a historical geographer and a physical geographer, locating and interrogating Kant’s position within the history of geographical thought. Michael Church discusses the way Kant’s ideas fit into discussions of physical geographical knowledge as a whole; Charles Withers offers perspectives on Kant within the history of the discipline.

Church contests the standard view that the geography of Kant’s period was largely practical, and that Kant’s role was important in terms of the codification and ordering of knowledge. Rather, Church shows that Kant was one of a number of compilers of knowledge, and that his work appeared just as the focus shifted to more field-based science, partly based on the studies being undertaken in the new world. The relative neglect of Kant’s geographical work is, he suggests, closely bound up with this development in the history of the discipline. Withers seeks to show how Kant was not, as geographer, the sui generis figure that he is sometimes seen to be in other fields, but rather one whose geographical work links to a wide range of debates. To make this comparative study, Withers claims require an understanding of geography in relation to the Enlightenment thought more generally, which he provides in his essay. As the tensions between these two essays illustrate, the history of ideas is not a straightforward story. Kant’s interlocutors, his inspirations and sources, and, in turn, those he influenced are legion. Whether or not that influence bears any relation to his geography is open to question, and one of the key concerns of these essays.

Texts

Criticism of Kant’s Geography must not merely be for its content, but also for its form. As Werner Stark shows in his contribution, the Rink edition is hopelessly corrupt, and extremely problematic as the basis for any careful study of Kant.
There are thus serious philological difficulties relating to reading the lectures that go beyond their inaccessibility in English. Based on his painstaking archival work compiling all known student transcripts for the Akademie edition, Stark demonstrates how Rink worked, as well as highlighting some of the key issues that must be understood as a basis to a thorough hermeneutic. There are many textual and linguistic issues for us to grapple with as we approach Kant’s text. As a supplement to Stark’s essay we include his discussion of one of the most notorious passages of the Rink edition, concerning race, showing how this philological approach complicates our understanding of what Kant said and wrote.

The process of translating Kant into English is fraught with difficulty, and we are therefore pleased to be able to include an essay by the translator of Kant’s Physical Geography for the Cambridge Edition, Olaf Reinhardt. In this essay, Reinhardt looks at the technical issues concerning translation, noting that for specialized texts it is often a case of translating from one foreign language to another. Yet while the technical language of geography is important, it is incumbent on any philosophical translation that it retain a consistency with other texts by the same author, for which the Cambridge Edition has set high standards.

The final chapter of this section is by one of the translators of the French edition of the lectures, Max Marcuzzi. In this essay, specially translated for this volume by Samuel Butler, Marcuzzi discusses the relation between history and geography in Kant’s lectures, focusing especially on the introduction to the Physical Geography. In doing so, Marcuzzi opens up a number of key themes in that text that relate to Kant’s wider concerns, including the understandings of space and time; the relation between science and philosophy; race and breeding; and the relation between geography and anthropology. It thus acts as an effective bridge into the concerns of the second half of this book.

Towards a Cosmopolitan Education: Geography and Anthropology

Kant saw a particular relation between his geography and anthropology lectures, and indeed the anthropology lectures were initially part of the geography course. Even when he split them apart, Kant continued to see them as closely related. He believed that physical geography and pragmatic anthropology together provided Weltkenntnis, knowledge of the world, an empirical grounding for his thought. This knowledge of the world, for Kant, was integral to the moral and political life of the citizen. Both geography and anthropology were taught by Kant because of their “pragmatic” dimension, that is to say, they way in which this knowledge can guide us in our moral and practical life. This world-knowledge, or cosmology, furthermore, is essential to his other writings, suggesting that physical geography is about the world as an “object of external sense”; and anthropology as an “object of inner sense.”31 Knowledge of the world is thus
of both “the human being and nature,” and anthropology and geography are thus “intersecting halves of a larger whole.”

In 1765–66 Kant offered a detailed discussion of how his work had developed over the past decade:

I have gradually expanded this scheme, and now I propose, by condensing that part of the subject which is concerned with the physical features of the earth, to gain the time necessary for extending my course of lectures to include the other parts of the subject, which are of even greater utility. This discipline will therefore be a physical, moral and political geography. It will contain, first of all, a specification of the remarkable features of nature in three realms. The specification will, however, be limited to those features, among the innumerable many which could be chosen, which particularly satisfy the general desire for knowledge, either because of their rarity or the effect which they can exercise on states by means of trade and industry. This part of the subject, which also contains a treatment of the natural relationship which holds between all the lands and seas in the world, and the reason for their connection, is the essential foundation of all history. Without this foundation, history is scarcely distinguishable from fairy-tales.

The second part of the subject considers human beings, throughout the world, from the point of view of the variety of their natural properties and the differences in that feature of the human which is moral in character. The consideration of these things is at once very important and also highly stimulating as well. Unless these matters are considered, general judgments about man would scarcely be possible. The comparison of human beings with each other, and the comparison of the human today with the moral state of the human in earlier times, furnishes us with a comprehensive map of the human species. Finally, there will be a consideration of what can be regarded as a product of the reciprocal interaction of the two previously mentioned forces, namely, the condition of the states and nations throughout the world. The subject will not be considered so much from the point of view of the way in which the condition of states depends on accidental causes, such as the deeds and fates of individuals, for example, the sequence of governments, conquests and intrigues between states. The condition of states will rather be considered in relation to what is more constant and which contains the more remote ground of those accidental causes, namely, the situation of their countries, the nature of their products, customs, industry, trade and population.
Kant therefore sets out a range of distinctions—the physical, moral, and political geography is alluded to here, but the actual analysis is rather more complicated. By the mid 1770s he offers a range of possibilities:

- Physical geography: the foundation or ground for other types of geography as well as history—a general study or outline of nature;
- Mathematical geography: concerned with the measure of the shape, size and motion of the earth, and its situation in the solar system;
- Moral geography: the relation between moral codes and customs and regions, a kind of spatial differentiation;
- Political geography: the relation of political systems and political laws to physical features of geography, part of the reason why these are only nominally universal;
- Commercial [Handlungs] geography: concerned with the geographical elements of trade in surplus products;
- Theological geography: concerned with theological attitudes and principles and their relation to physical features of the landscape; again a form of spatial differentiation.\(^{35}\)

Physical geography is “the physical description of the earth [and] is the first part of knowledge of the world.”\(^{36}\) Indeed, in his essay on “The Conflict of the Faculties,” Kant divides the philosophy faculty into two parts—the one that deals with “pure rational knowledge” and one that deals with “historical knowledge.” The former contains metaphysics of nature and morals, along with pure philosophy and mathematics; the latter includes history, geography, philology, the humanities, and the empirical knowledge of the natural sciences.\(^{37}\) These therefore produce some philosophical difficulties, particularly concerning how we should see these lectures in relation to Kant’s work as a whole.

In his *Logic*, Kant suggests that there are four fundamental questions.

1. “What can I know?”
2. “What ought I to do?”
3. “What may I hope?”
4. “What is the human being?”

Kant suggests that “Metaphysics answers the first question, morals the second, religion the third, and anthropology the fourth. Fundamentally, however, we could
reckon all of this to anthropology, because the first three questions refer to the last one.”38 Just as these other realms of thought rest on the fundamental question, namely anthropology; so too do Kant’s reflections on the material world rest on the understanding of geography. For Kant, knowledge of the world is not pragmatic merely when it is “extensive knowledge of things in the world, for example, animals, plants and minerals from various lands and climates—but only when it contains knowledge of the human being as a citizen of the world.”39 In other words, pragmatic anthropology is the relation of the human to the world, and is thus what Robert Louden calls “impure ethics.”40 Although much of the material in the geography lectures would also come under that remit—parts of the Anthropology derived from earlier lectures on geography41—we might make a case that much of the rest of the geography is “impure physics,” in other words the empirical detail that inhabits the categories of abstract thought.42

Two of the most important scholars of the anthropology—Robert Louden and Holly Wilson—offer a range of perspectives on the relation between these two texts. Louden focuses on the role of the human in the physical geography, but more broadly in terms of the relation of the human to nature. Louden’s claim is that attempts to draw a strict demarcation between geography and anthropology fail, and that Kant’s analyses of what we would today call “human geography” are inadequate in the Physical Geography, and, especially when they concern race, deeply problematic. Wilson takes a rather different approach, concentrating on how Kant saw these lectures as educational, and underlines their “pragmatic” purpose. One of their aims, Wilson contends, is to show how natural events can be explained without reference to the will of God, stressing a significant emphasis on the question of causality in the text. In the final essay of this section, David Morris shows how Kant’s work on nature generally, and the question of the organism specifically, relates to his work on reason and questions of teleology. In doing so, Morris begins to open up the questions of the next part of the book.

Kant’s Geography of Reason: Reason and Its Spatiality

These next essays are concerned with showing how Kant’s thought as a whole was concerned with geographical questions. While in part an attempt to provide a new key to unlocking Kant’s thought, more generally it seeks to deepen and enrich already existing analyses. Jeff Malpas and Karsten Thiel show how Kant can be understood as pursuing a “geography of reason”; and Onora O’Neill thinks about the way spatial and political categories function in Kant’s thought more generally. Jeff Edwards shows how Kant’s work as a whole offers a particular political geography, given its concern with the question of land and its acquisition. The problems of community, and the relation of groups to the
places they inhabit, are key concerns in Kant’s treatment of private law. These essays thus begin a valuable project for understanding Kant’s geography beyond his *Geography*. Kant’s position within the discipline of geography is too often reduced to a caricature, again more often cited than read. We believe a careful study of the *Geography* needs to take place alongside a reexamination of the role of geography and space in his critical philosophy generally and his work on the philosophy of history and political history more specifically. Together they raise a range of political and philosophical questions.

**Gender, Race, History, and Geography**

One of the key political issues in Kant’s work over recent years has been his understanding of race. Race, for instance, is only very briefly discussed in the *Anthropology*, but at much greater length in the *Geography*. The latter text includes discussions of what is called “moral geography” concerning the “customs and characters” of different peoples, and some extensive discussion of race. In a key essay, David Harvey related the lectures to the interest in Kant’s cosmopolitanism, suggesting this renders this particular concept deeply problematic. Harvey notes that many Kantians want to dismiss the work on geography as “irrelevant,” ‘not to be taken seriously’ or [suggest that] it ‘lacks interest,’ in much the same way that Benno Erdmann described the *Anthropology* as the “laborious compilation of a seventy-four year old man as he stood on the threshold of decrepitude.” For Harvey “the content of Kant’s *Geography* is nothing short of an intellectual and political embarrassment.” One of the aims of this book was to create a space for an encounter between Harvey and philosophers who were taking the *Geography* seriously. Following Harvey’s updated account of these claims, we publish a response by Edward S. Casey, originally delivered at the Stony Brook Manhattan workshop.

There follow three essays that pick up, in different ways, on these issues. Robert Bernasconi offers a detailed analysis of how the geography lectures fit into his pioneering analysis of Kant’s racial thought. The essay explicitly engages those, like Pauline Kleingeld, who have attempted to show that Kant had “second thoughts” on racial questions, particularly in the 1790s. Bernasconi gives Kleingeld due credit for shifting the terrain of the Kant and race debate onto the terrain of these lectures, but contests, point by point, her analysis and the claims of others such as Sankar Muthu and Peter Fenves. Walter Mignolo’s essay provides a helpful development of these claims, offering a reading against Kant, trying to show how his work is both part of the problem of a colonial mode of thought but also, paradoxically offers resources for thinking against it. His reading is particularly insightful in looking at the structure of Kant’s geography lectures, especially in their treatment of parts of the world.
The final chapter is by this volume’s co-editor, Eduardo Mendieta, and serves both as a contribution in its own right as well as an epilogue to the volume as a whole. While again treating questions of race, Mendieta also forces us to think about Kant’s attitude to women; the relation of sexual difference to racial difference, and both to the distinction between history and geography. The chapter thus provides a recapitulation of many of the key themes of this volume, as well as opening a range of questions for how work on this aspect of Kant’s work might develop in the future. These essays, then, provide the basis upon which we might rise to Harvey’s challenge: to examine the relation of Kant to contemporary cosmopolitan thought. In this sense, in this section the book moves from being a contribution to Kant scholarship to one that speaks to wider political and social concerns, especially concerning post-colonial or de-colonial thought.

Conclusion

In summary, we attempt to show that Kant’s work on geography is not simply a minor concern, but a key topic that needs to be taken much more seriously by scholars of his thought generally. While much of the detail of his lectures may be outdated and therefore of merely historical interest, Kant’s way of structuring geographical knowledge and its relation to his thought as a whole is potentially of enduring importance. This importance lies both in the way he understands geography as a counterbalance to history, and in terms of the organization of knowledge. All perceived things are located in logical classifications such as those of Linnaeus; and in space and time. Logic deals with the first; physics with space and time, and of these, geography deals with space—history with time. Geography therefore allows us access to the ordering and categorizing of the world. Indeed, Kant distinguishes geography as the description of the whole world from topography as the description of single places and chorography as that of regions. Orography and hydrography—the description of mountains and water—are also mentioned as divisions.

The forthcoming translation of these lectures provides an opportune moment to take stock of their historical importance and contemporary relevance. Yet the availability of the material should come with a warning. Those reading that translation need to be aware of at least two key things: how corrupt the version being translated is, and an awareness of the debates on and around the lectures in recent years. This book provides the basis for understanding just such issues. To read Kant’s work on geography is an inherently interdisciplinary venture, which encompasses both human and physical geography and philosophy, but also German studies, anthropology and race studies; and this why the volume of essays include contributions from a range of disciplines. The issues raised by
these texts of Kant's are textual and linguistic, philological and hermeneutic, philosophical and political, even as we consider their relation to geography and the wider history of ideas. Only a multidisciplinary, and multihanded, approach can do justice to their complexity. This book seeks to rise to that challenge.

Notes


3. These figures differ in various accounts, but the most reliable source is Robert Louden, *Kant's Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.


7. *Immanuel Kant's Physische Geographie*, ed. Friedrich Theodor Rink (Königsberg, 1802), here cited according to AK 9.


32. Physical Geography, AK 9: 158.
33. Louden, Kant’s Impure Ethics, 95.
35. Physical Geography, AK 9: 160–1, 164–5. Rink changes the order of their first presentation, adding “literary geography” (161), which is not in the 1774 transcript or in the fuller elaboration. He also adds detail to the elaboration, usually based on material later delivered in the lectures themselves. Some of the changes—“civil society” for “society” or the replacement of “Handlungs Geographie” with “merkantilische Geographie”—are more interpretative. May claims that “his concept of the limits and scope of geography is inevitably much broader than any contemporary concept can reasonably be” (Kant’s Concept of Geography, 153).
39. Kant, Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, 4.
40. Louden, Kant’s Impure Ethics.
43. Kant, Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, 223–4. However, note that Kant suggests in that work (199) that the observations on the relation of physiognomy to race “belong more to physical geography than pragmatic anthropology.”
44. Physical Geography, AK 9: 164.
ment Racism to the Study of the History of Philosophy,” Radical Philosophy 117 (Jan/Feb 2003): 13–22. The literature on these questions is now extensive, and is discussed in Bernasconi’s essay in this volume. See also David Farrell Krell, “The Bodies of Black Folk: From Kant and Hegel to Du Bois and Baldwin,” boundary 2 27:3 (2000): 103–34; and more generally The Tragic Absolute: German Idealism and the Languishing of God (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).


52. Physical Geography, AK 9: 159.