

ARTICLE

A Kantian Account of Trauma

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Abstract

In our societies today, the prevalence of serious, untreated trauma means that we cannot reliably expect to receive or give unconditional love, understood as love which functions within a normative framework to protect each and all of us as having dignity. Serious, untreated trauma makes unconditional love (so understood) unreliable because each time the pattern of the psychological damage (trauma) is triggered in the traumatized person, in the wrongdoers or in the bystanders, their behaviour easily becomes self- and other-numbing, destructive and moralizing in an irrational and often self-deceived attempt to preserve or defend themselves or others against forces felt as threatening even though they are not. It is also common for someone who lives in societal conditions where it is impossible to avoid patterned, traumatizing behaviour to experience the emotional temptation to give up on the possibility of a better future for oneself, one's loved ones or one's community within the larger community or the state. For some, this is experienced as a draw towards suicide, while others experience it as a serious temptation to give up on working together with the good forces in society. This article seeks to continue Charles Mills' work on radicalizing Kant by sketching a Kantian account of trauma and thereby develop philosophical resources that can help us fight historical oppression and violence.

Keywords: Kant; Charles Mills; oppression; violence; trauma

1. Introduction

The human condition is such that living a full life characteristically involves facing trauma. After all, impersonal, brutal, destructive and even lethal blows come to most of us in the forms of natural disasters, sickness, accidents and deaths of loved ones. Living life well therefore unavoidably involves learning to deal with trauma, including very serious, life-changing versions of it. Indeed, during the current COVID-19 pandemic, most people on the planet are experiencing traumatizing conditions to various degrees. Much serious trauma, however, is caused by human beings subjecting others to dehumanizing violence and oppression, and some of it is intergenerational, ongoing and maintained by our private and public institutions. One reason why it is difficult to understand human-caused trauma is that it can have several sources. Subjecting others to trauma-inducing behaviour can, for example, be grounded in a survival instinct or self-interest, or it can come from a place of hurt and damage, from a desire to act as if one's

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actions have no consequences, from the temptation to lower others to feel good about oneself, from an inability to feel (numbness) or be vulnerable, or from frustrated sexual and/or affectionate love interests. Finally – and in part because serious untreated trauma is so poorly understood – much traumatizing or traumatized behaviour is entangled with both self-deception and histories of patterned, dehumanizing brutality for the individuals, families, social groups or societies involved. For example, these dehumanizing patterns of human-caused trauma often track and/or interact with histories of violent (intersecting) racist (including colonialist), sexist, heterosexist, cissexist, religious, ablist, classist and/or ethnic oppressive societal forces that typically have found their ways – in different ways and degrees – into the functioning of private and public institutions as well.

The prevalence of serious, untreated (let alone unacknowledged)¹ trauma in our current societies entails that we cannot reliably expect to receive or give what I (unconventionally) will call ‘unconditional’ love, understood as love which reliably functions within a normative framework that treats all with respect or protects each and all of us as having dignity at all times. Serious, untreated trauma makes unconditional love, so understood, very difficult to give or receive in such societal conditions for everyone involved. Whether we look at the traumatized person, the wrongdoers or the bystanders who have been involved in seriously traumatizing interaction(s), each easily becomes self- and other-numbing, defensive, destructive or moralizing in an irrational and often self-deceived attempt to defend themselves or others against forces felt as threatening or criticizing even though they are not. Consequently, those surrounding someone so triggered must always be aware of whether the psychological principle of the trauma is activated and managed or not. In relationships and societal settings characterized by serious, untreated trauma, there can, therefore, be moments or even periods of love – affectionate and moral – but the extent of this very much depends on the functioning of the psychological principle of trauma in the persons involved. Untreated, serious trauma consequently makes it the case that those whose lives are deeply affected by it struggle to give and receive anything beyond what I (unconventionally) call ‘conditional’ love, understood as love that is conditioned by the psychological principle of their trauma. Living this way is not only existentially exhausting; it is also emotionally numbing and damaging for everyone involved. Moreover, it is common for someone who lives in societal conditions that make it impossible for them to avoid being subjected to patterned, traumatizing behaviour to experience the temptation to give up on the possibility of a better future for oneself, one’s loved ones or one’s community within the larger community or the state. For some victims, this is experienced as a general numbing or as a draw towards suicide, while others experience it as a serious temptation to give up on working together with good forces in society. Correspondingly, for those actively or passively participating in the traumatizing wrongdoing, it is easy to be drawn to ‘doubling down’, such as by self-deceptively insisting on describing the traumatizing wrongdoing as ‘normal’ or as ‘deserved’ by the victims.

This article argues that Kant’s practical philosophy has resources with which we can increase our understanding of trauma. The aspiration to develop a distinctly Kantian account of trauma will strike some as strange. After all, the ideal Kantian human agent is often seen as purely rational, as someone who always does what is right, and in this traditional literature, our ever so earthly – or distinctly human rather than merely rational – being is not seen as particularly important or interesting philosophically. Consequently too, it seems like Kantian analysis will have nothing

distinctive to say about trauma since it is a phenomenon that is deeply related to, exactly, our earthly animalistic, social being, or to what sometimes is called our empirical or phenomenal (rather than rational or noumenal) being. Against this historically prominent view of the Kantian agent as purely rational, this article utilizes Kant's fuller account of human nature to identify central features of traumatized and traumatizing events and lives. By utilizing and developing these rich philosophical resources in dialogue with those found in other, relevant literature, we can see the extraordinary usefulness of Kant's theory to thinkers who aim to understand how the structure of our phenomenology is constitutive of a systematic philosophical account of trauma.²

2. Trauma

This section starts by drawing briefly on existing writings on serious trauma – by philosophers and literary writers alike – to get central features of trauma into view. I emphasize how, unless we deal with this damage, trauma continues to function as an unruly, unmanaged psychological principle that is developmentally arresting or destructive in the lives of traumatized people, their wrongdoers, active or passive bystanders and, of course, their loved ones and their communities. I address how conditions of ongoing trauma – which is characteristic of much domestic abuse as well as racist, sexist, ablist, etc., oppressive patterns of behaviour in our societies – correspondingly make complete healing impossible. Under such conditions, victims who are doing better tend to create emotionally healthy pockets of dignified existence while working, insofar as possible, to expand this sphere and with good societal forces towards a better future more generally. I also contrast these writings on trauma with the relevant types prominent in mainstream philosophy and bring these differences to bear on Charles Mills' criticism of related, liberal philosophy as whitewashing our histories and practices and Onora O'Neill's emphasis on the importance of being careful so that we do not confuse 'abstraction' with 'idealization'.

In the last few decades, some incredible philosophical writings on personal trauma under conditions of serious oppression or violence have appeared.³ To start, we may draw attention to how the writings of feminists such as Luisa Capetillo, Audre Lorde and Maria Lugones are able to give voice to and theorize trauma in relation to life at the intersections of racism, (hetero)sexism and classism. Similarly, in his *At the Mind's Limit: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities* (1980/2009), Jean Améry shares with us the unbearable pain and suffering experienced under torture, including the extreme difficulty of holding onto one's own mind in this process. Equally ground-breaking is Patricia J. Williams' *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (1991). Williams' focus is also on intergenerational trauma – including how it stubbornly persists in the families of those brutalized and those who did the brutalizing – as well as on how to deal with racism in the academy and the world where all non-White⁴ people must learn to deal with emotionally arrested or aggressive racist behaviours to survive and do well. These writings have been accompanied by related ones by Linda Martín Alcoff (2018), Susan Brison (2001) and Andrea Dworkin (1993), all of whom focus on their traumatic, personal experiences as women who have been subjected to sexual violence. They tell us about and theorize their existential and emotional challenges in the aftermath of being or having been

subjected to sexual violence, such as being unable to carry on (ungrounded), feeling existentially numb, experiencing both debilitating fear (of other human beings or situations) and permanent changes in their ability to be spontaneous and joyous, and of their persistent, difficult, slow work of regaining emotional control over how each day and their lives proceed.

Given my focus in this article, I find it useful also briefly to draw attention to some relatively recent literary engagements with trauma that are tremendous resources for us as we keep developing our philosophical understanding of it. For example, in his *Remembering Akbar: Inside the Iranian Revolution*, Behrooz Ghamari-Trabrizi (2016) shares with us many of his experiences of life on death row for his resistant political student activities in Iran. Through these beautifully written short stories, Ghamari tells us about moments of deep humanity among the fellow prisoners, about the continuous, extreme dehumanizing treatment by the officials in charge, as well as about how these experiences transformed him and have and still do require careful attention by him on a regular basis to be managed. In his novels, Sayed Kashua (2004, 2006, 2012, 2016, 2020) combines his extraordinary writing abilities with wit and a deep affection of human beings so as to share with us the enormous difficulties involved in living life as a Palestinian – in Israel, in the Palestinian territories, in the world – today. Kashua's writings also communicate the importance of continuously learning to deal with emotional challenges related to particular traumatizing experiences as well as learning to deal with the ongoing oppression and violences. Hannah Gadsby, in her *Nanette* (2017), similarly draws attention to the intersectional struggles of living as a lesbian, autistic person in conditions of ongoing trauma during her upbringing in Tasmania as well as her life in general.

To me, these writings and performances – like the related, slightly older ones of Maya Angelou,⁵ James Baldwin (1998) and Toni Morrison (1987) in the US context – draw our attention to central features of traumatic experiences as well as life under ongoing traumatizing conditions that all good philosophical accounts must strive to capture. They also share with their more explicitly philosophically theoretical counterparts (above) invaluable descriptions of and reflections on how humans strive to protect their own and others' dignity in the moment of (excruciating) trauma as well as under unbearable conditions of ongoing violence and oppression. And they all share an unwavering love of humanity, as revealed in their deep commitment to protecting the human dignity of the affected people in the moment and to keep working with other, good forces in society towards a better future for all. There is plainly an enormous generosity in these writings and performances. Whether the mode of communication is literary, straightforwardly political or distinctly philosophical, these engagements are also quite personal in that they explore traumatized life that the authors have intimate first-personal experience with. By drawing on their own life or the experiences of suffering they can relate to first-personally, they bear witness to their own or the lives of those whose oppressed identities and related experiences they share. In their own voices and ways, I hear them as joining Maya Angelou's efforts in, for example, 'Still I Rise', to recognize the value and beauty as well as the suffering of people who are being violated and oppressed. And I hear them as taking seriously the responsibility of using words to be truthful to these lives while striving to bring about a better future – even if figuring out how to do that in a way they can morally own sometimes involves having to be silent for a long time or

having to move or flee and live and write (temporarily or permanently) elsewhere on the planet than where the lives and the histories described are located. And, of course, all of this is consistent with how they never condescendingly moralize about, but rather humanize, those who are unable to resist for a while or any longer.

Good philosophical theories must capture these features of traumatized lives and traumatizing behaviours. Striving to do this is, in my view, prominent in the writings of outstanding thinkers who were able to break the White, male ranks of Western academia. As I argue below, it should also have been prominent, but was and is not, in Kant's writings and the subsequent Kantian tradition – and if it had been, the tradition we are inheriting would have been much richer philosophically, including because Kant's writings contain many of the ideas we need to improve our understanding of these features of traumatized lives and traumatizing behaviours philosophically. Instead, as a general rule, attention to these important phenomena only started in the Kantian tradition with the entrance of women and non-White men in philosophy.⁶ Moreover, like the lives and writings of thinkers above illustrate, Anna J. Cooper (1998) and Hannah Arendt (1948/1973) argue that, in addition to the importance of political conditions, the hope for the realization of human freedom on the planet partially, and unfairly, rests on what we may call 'chosen peoples' – understood as peoples whose identities track serious historical oppression and violence – being able to protect themselves and their loved ones in periods when there are only overwhelming 'isms' (such as racism) and work with good forces when they exist in the wider populations to try to overcome the extremely damaging isms together with them.⁷ One reason for this is that realizing human freedom – or true humanity – on our planet is only possible if both oppressed and privileged groups dare to take on their complicated inheritance together; only then can historical patterns of oppression be broken and overcome. In addition, as I hear her, Arendt thinks that if chosen peoples give up on their oppressors, then, at least in the modern world, this is something that fascist and totalitarian political forces will try to use to establish absolutely destructive regimes. I return to these issues with the help of Arendt, Baldwin, Cooper and Kant towards the end of this article.

If we now turn to the existing, mainstream philosophical treatments of trauma – (Kantian or not) conference talks, teachings and writings – we find the prominence of a very different type of engagement. These discussions – such as those on killing people, abortion, shooting down airplanes, sex, marriage, free speech, gender, affirmative action, state territory, war, human rights, etc. – suggest that we should focus only on the question of whether or not a type of action is objectively right or wrong, and any appeal to the subjectivity of those involved, including how they feel, is typically viewed as philosophically distracting. Hence, in related, classical discussions of killing versus saving, the examples often involve extraordinarily disturbing, hypothetical examples, such as pushing people off bridges and in front of trolleys or radically vulnerable human beings drowning without being saved by uncaring or otherwise emotionally stunted bystanders. Typically, too, the content in these examples – that is, which kinds of humans are being pushed or (not) saved – is often quite disturbing in how they track existing prominent prejudices against various dehumanized groups in explicit or implicit ways. There is also a tendency in these discussions – at conferences and the like – that those whose lives are not characterized by related trauma either challenge the sense of reality of those whose lives are so characterized

(‘gaslighting’) or presuppose in their inquiries that their own ways are the normal ones and those who live different kinds of lives are the abnormal ones. For example, experienced feminist women scholars have had to learn how to handle situations where men ask them to provide empirical evidence for their claims that women are discriminated against (that they are describing their own lives is not deemed to be relevant evidence) just as LGBTQIA+ and disability scholars must learn how to handle colleagues in the profession who ask them to give a philosophical account of the differences between themselves/their loved ones and ‘other animals’. Any emotional reaction that resists the central imperative of these questions or the idea that asking such questions constitutes the pursuit of all the related, deep philosophical truths and wisdom is commonly met with charges of being uncommitted to academic freedom and/or not having the proper, good (‘tough’) philosophical mindset.⁸

The first characteristic of our philosophical tradition mentioned in the previous paragraph – pursuing only the question of what the objective principles of right and wrong are – can be seen as one way in which liberal philosophy as a practice unintentionally ‘whitewashes’ philosophy by focusing only on so-called ‘ideal’ questions, as Charles Mills (2012, 2017) has explained so well. I think, however, we can expand Mills’ idea by letting it cover also the second phenomenon, namely the question of how to choose examples and use our experiences well, of how to apply the ideal or objective principles to particular cases and our own lives as part of obtaining more complete or wiser philosophical theories of various phenomena. I believe, in other words, that the liberal philosophical practices we are inheriting in the West unfortunately encourage a mindset in which the question of how to apply the objective principles of freedom, human rights, etc. – however our ideal theory specifies them – to human life generally or to our particular, historical societies is something that ideally should be done by hyperreflective professional philosophers once they are done with the ‘real’ work and need a rest. Moreover, guiding this practice seems to be the conviction that more complete accounts can be obtained without knowing much about human life, whether human life generally, a particular kind of life or a particular historical society, and so, without paying careful attention to one’s own vulnerabilities and limitations in these regards and without first listening carefully to those whose lives we are applying our objective principles to. I believe this mistaken conception of philosophical wisdom has caused and still causes much of the damage done by the current liberal and other Western philosophical traditions. I believe, as will become clearer as I go on, that when developing their applied (or non-ideal) theories, good Kantian accounts will pay careful attention to writings of the kind found in the first paragraphs of this section.

To put this general point by means of Onora O’Neill’s useful distinction between ‘abstraction’ (to single out certain general features of human nature, institutions, etc.) and ‘idealization’ (to normalize or glorify specific kinds of lives), a problem with our inherited and current Western philosophical practice is that in the name of abstraction we unintentionally and unknowingly often end up idealizing certain kinds of human lives.⁹ Indeed, what we tend to idealize in these examples are privileged lives, including by explicitly or implicitly dehumanizing those whose lives are historically oppressed or violated. It is therefore not a coincidence that the ones whose value tends to be up for grabs in these hypothetical reflections are those of babies, disabled people, women, older people, overweight people, LGBTQIA+ folk, etc.

Unintentionally, then, our philosophical practice participates – actively or passively – in maintaining traumatizing conditions for historically oppressed and violated people, including as they fight their way to gain entrance into academia. This is not to deny that the resulting theories are sometimes brilliantly innovative or creative; it is only to say that too often they are not full, let alone wise, philosophical accounts of and engagements with important human phenomena. Given this article's focus, from here onwards, I limit my analysis to Kant and the liberal, Kantian philosophical tradition. As we will see, once we replace the traditional 'pure rational' Kantian agent with Kant's own (even if commonly unknown), much richer human agent, we can see how accounts of freedom, of general human phenomenology and of particular historical societies are constitutive parts of a fuller theory of trauma.

3. The Kantian agent

This section starts by sketching central features of my favoured conception of the Kantian agent with a focus on how we develop from newborns to morally responsible, human animals. I emphasize how we learn to feel, desire and set ends of our own in emotionally healthy, morally responsible ways that aim to integrate, transform and develop various aspects of our selves – with their different levels of reflexive and reflective consciousness – through associative, abstract conceptual and teleological-aesthetic thought. And I briefly outline Kant's account of why we struggle so much to do this in emotionally healthy, morally good ways; why we are tempted to do bad things, to ourselves and each other. Finally, I explain how this account fits with Kant's idea of how our aim in life – the highest good – is to strengthen our natural and our moral vital forces such that we bring happiness and morality into a close union, where morality sets the framework within which we pursue happiness wisely. It is this striving towards the highest good, we can then see, that trauma interrupts at both ends (of happiness and of morality), though traumatizing violence is characteristically aimed at our reflexive and associative animalistic parts, which is why healing is typically so difficult.

Kant's practical philosophy was the first one to envision virtue (ethics) and right (justice) as grounded in objective principles of freedom. In his writings on virtue or first-personal (meta)ethics, such as *The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* or *Critique of Practical Reason*, we find his famous and much studied proposals regarding the principle of practical reason – the moral law – which we, humans, experience as the categorical imperative. In his Doctrine of Right (in *The Metaphysics of Morals*) as well as his political essays, we find his corresponding conception of right (law and justice) – which is grounded on his universal principle of right. In my view, Kant's theories of virtuous internal and rightful external freedom – which together constitute what we may call his 'ideal theory' – are the best ones we have in our tradition and they deserve a lot of attention. At the same time, this work must be complemented by study of his writings on contingent features of human life on planet Earth and on particular historical phenomena and societies (what we may call his twofold 'non-ideal' theory). Radicalizing Kant therefore requires us also to carefully engage and develop these non-ideal aspects of the Kantian practical philosophical project, including by addressing the question of how the ideal and the non-ideal parts of the theory work together in a coherent whole. Increasing our philosophical efforts

in these non-ideal areas is important, I think, because this is where we find some of Kant's own, and our inherited, serious philosophical mistakes and (patterned) bad judgements on display. In addition, it is important because our philosophical inabilities to envision just, sustainable and flourishing earthly lives are closely intertwined with much moral and political theoretical inadequacy, bad behaviour and institutional practices in, exactly, societies grounded on legal-political principles of freedom. Just as Kant himself was not wise about, among other things, core issues involving historical oppression and diversity, neither are we, our theories or the historical societies, practices and institutions we are inheriting.

As hinted above, my claim that we should view Kantian accounts of our distinctly human and historical circumstances as constitutive of more complete practical philosophies – including more complete legal-political theories – probably will, but should not, strike Kantians as controversial because this is, in fact, Kant's own explicit view of the matter. For example, in the Introduction to the *Metaphysics of Morals*,¹⁰ Kant emphasizes that more complete practical philosophical accounts need the accounts of the objective principles of freedom to be supplemented by what he calls accounts of 'moral anthropology' (*MM*, 6: 217), understood as accounts that show how these principles of freedom apply to our distinctly human nature. Moreover, in some of his political essays, he argues that accounts of liberal principles of freedom need a 'principle of politics' in order to be applied to historical societies (*SRL*, 8: 429; cf. *TP*, 8: 277ff.). As noted above and as explored in the rapidly increasing related secondary literature, when Kant applies his objective principles of freedom to the human condition and to historical societies, his analyses typically end up espousing much racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc. Holding Kant accountable for this is, in my view, constitutive of striving to protect and develop our philosophical practice with integrity. Still, I do not think Kantian engagements with these issues should stop here, as we must take on the question of how to apply the objective principles of freedom to the human condition generally and to our historical societies in particular. We should, in other words, take on the challenge Kant clearly recognized but failed to carry through with regard to critiquing our social identities and the various isms characteristic of our historical societies.

Hence, in my view, a useful starting point is his general non-ideal accounts of both the human condition and our historical societies – accounts that, in turn, can be used as philosophical resources as we investigate specific historical phenomena such as trauma. One related contribution to the project of radicalizing Kant is to use Kant's philosophy and the predominant Kantian philosophical practice to illustrate two general points regarding how to 'abstract' rather than 'idealize'. First, when we turn to issues of moral anthropology, we must take care to make sure that our investigations also track our distinctly or contingently human nature and not only our rational (objective or universal) one. Second, our basic, non-ideal approach must be bottom-up rather than top-down insofar as this is necessary to ensure that our theories are truthful to the actual lives and historical societies our philosophical theories strive to critique. Kant and much Kantian philosophical practice fail significantly on both counts, which is why Kant's own position ends up being racist, sexist, heterosexist, etc., and why much of the Kantian practice (like other philosophical practices) unintentionally participates in destructive whitewashing of our histories and practices. Additionally, when we do begin from this more promising starting

point in non-ideal theory, I believe the best Kantian approach takes care to let what Kant calls our ‘animality’ do important philosophical work. Not only is this important to get our feet back on planet Earth; it is also important because much dehumanization combines a lowering of some human beings to the level of animals with a view of animals as not being anything but instrumentally valuable. Moreover, if we follow this method, we can get certain features emphasized in writings on trauma, such as in the works mentioned in the previous section, into philosophical view too. To set the stage for this, let me briefly sketch a few central general phenomenological and moral features of the Kantian human agent as I currently understand it.¹¹

Some of the attraction of Kant’s general account of the human agent is, in my view, its ability to capture both our development into complex embodied, social, rational beings capable of moral responsibility as well as the central features of arrested development, (self-)damage and healing. To see this, notice first that good philosophical accounts need to be able to capture a newborn baby’s characteristic behaviours. Kant can capture much of this behaviour by his account of what he calls our predisposition to animality, which is part of his account of the predisposition to good in human nature (*R*, 6: 26–8). To import some contemporary philosophical language into this, according to his account of animality, Kant’s proposal is that central features of the baby’s behaviour can be described as self-reflexively conscious¹² in nature and as involving a non-conceptual subjective awareness of our natural vital force. Let me explain. Part of the philosophical puzzle involved in explaining a newborn baby’s behaviour is that whatever our account is, the baby is not able to reason or think abstractly and yet the baby is clearly striving consciously – things are not just happening through the baby – and the baby clearly navigates pleasures and pains. For example, the baby sucks and will suck until full or there is no more pleasure in sucking (self-preservation), the baby responds to gentle touch with pleasure (sex drive) and the baby is calmed and comforted by being held close and affectionately comforted (basic community). These three conscious strivings, Kant suggests, are enabled by the baby’s relational categories of the understanding (substance/self-preservation, causality/sex drive, community/affectionate unions) in relation to our natural vital force. Moreover, and importantly, they are only reflexive in nature in that they are internal to first-order desires of a consciously striving self. When newborn babies’ caregivers provide good environments for them in these regards, and there are no troublesome health issues, they mostly eat, sleep, pee and poop as a harmonious whole; their natural vital force is strong and harmonious. Because we share this predisposition with other animals, Kant describes it as a feature that makes us into a ‘living being’, and it is a predisposition that can be developed, transformed and integrated into our lives by many different types of thought, including associative, abstract conceptual and aesthetic-teleological imagination. (More on this later.)

In addition, newborn human babies scream, which, Kant proposes, can only be explained by reference to how they represent their inability to act as frustrating (*Anth*, 7: 268). In contrast to all other animals (none of whom scream when they are born), newborn babies cannot act – they cannot even hold their own head or choose to move their own limbs – and this is frustrating. This frustration shows, Kant proposes, how the human animal is different from other animals in that it is born with a capacity for freedom – and, so, this feature of us is internally connected not to the predisposition to animality but to that of humanity. It is this part of the

predisposition to humanity that in time is developed into our ability to set ends of our own, which in turn is only possible once we have become selves who are able to reflect (in the sense of think *about*) – and, so, is revealed as a nascent ability once we start doing things like reaching for something. The other component part of our predisposition to humanity is our social sense of self, which is also inherently reflective or requires the self to have developed more complex reflective cognitive powers. It is our ability to relate to an image of ourselves or as being seen by others – which is crudely revealed as soon as the baby starts to smile (around three months). Smiling at being seen by a loved one is only possible if one can relate to oneself as seen or relate to an image of oneself.¹³ Together, setting ends of our own and our social sense of self make us, Kant proposes, a ‘rational being’, which also can be developed through the different kinds of thought mentioned above. (More on this too shortly.)

Finally, there is the predisposition to personality, which Kant thinks we only can explain philosophically with reference to our capacity for practical reason, which is why he describes this susceptibility as ‘moral feeling’ and this predisposition as constitutive of enabling ‘responsibility’. Hence, we can only feel morally obliged once we have developed our ability to act on maxims in morally responsible ways – and, so, once we are able not only to feel what we want but to think about what we want and think that we want something, or to act as motivated by practical reason. That is to say, to do this, we must first develop reflective self-consciousness (relate to ourselves and what we want as an ‘I’), abstract conceptual thinking (act on ‘maxims’), an ability to consider whether or not doing something is consistent with respect for ourselves and others as rational end-setters (‘universalize maxims’), and, finally, the ability to do or not do something because our own reason deems the action right or wrong (act as motivated by ‘duty’ or practical reason).¹⁴ In other words, Kant’s analysis of the ‘ought’ (moral duty) in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* is primarily a study of our ability to be morally responsible, which is why Kant does not talk about the other aspects of our nature (animality and social sense of self) in any detail there but merely refers to all of this as our empirical, ‘heteronomous’ parts.

Let me illustrate the above account by switching to an example involving adults, namely, how the account captures central features of falling deeply in love in a way that is good for all involved parties. When we so fall in love, we feel and are truly safe together with the other person (self-preservation), we easily and strongly get turned on sexually by the other (sex drive) and we are profoundly complemented by the other as an ‘us’ (basic community). Consequently, we subjectively feel our natural vitality as strong and harmonious (our natural vital force). All of this relates to the predisposition of animality above. Its reflexive character can be seen in how we cannot simply choose to feel these things; at the beginning of the process, we merely realize the existence of these feelings in nascent ways and have chosen to act on them insofar as we become a ‘we’ or ‘us’ of this kind. (More on this soon.) Turning to our predisposition of humanity and our social sense of self, we see it revealed in how such love is also accompanied by a deep feeling of being really seen by the other, being seen as good and by how it gives each party joy to see and be seen by the other(s). In addition, good loving relationships of this kind are deeply appreciative and supportive of how the loved ones are distinct from one another and are setting ends of their own. People who are loved like this feel it as giving them support

and confidence to try for more, to become more. Finally, such relationships are characterized by what we sometimes call respect for boundaries or what Kant sometimes calls our 'unsocial sociability'. It is constitutive of healthy loving relationships that those in them respect each other's need for being on one's own and setting one's own ends (rational end-setting). This is realizing the predisposition to personality, and insofar as we develop this ability to a great extent, we develop what Kant calls a strong 'moral vital force' (*MM*, 6: 400) or 'moral character' (*Anth*, 7: 285).

As we develop, integrate and transform these moral, social and rational aspects of ourselves together with our predisposition to animality, we use all kinds of thought – associative, abstract conceptual and aesthetic. We learn to feel, think and create in richer ways, ways that are developing for oneself, for all involved in the relationship and for the surrounding communities. We realize a way of living together that makes us happy – we are liked for who we are, and we realize ourselves in new and creative ways – and we do it while maintaining a deep respect for the other person; we treat each other as having dignity. We know that another person's striving to live life with us by their side in such a union is among life's greatest gifts, and it is something we treasure. Again, insofar as we live together well in these regards, we learn to set ends in ways sensitive to the other's strivings, to them knowing it is safe to feel and become more. Paradoxically, too, such relationships make us much more vulnerable – because someone can hurt us much more deeply than most and, indeed, losing them will feel like an ungrounding of our selves – but also much stronger and more stable. Moreover, if we are able to live together in this way, we are realizing the highest good, which for Kant involves bringing happiness and morality into union, where morality sets the framework within which we pursue happiness (*MM*, 6: 426; cf. *TP*, 8: 279; *CPrR*, 5: 110–11).

Kant complements his account of the predisposition to good in human nature with an account of the propensity to evil (*R*, 6: 29–33). His proposal is that our propensity to evil comes in three degrees and that moving from one degree to the next – from 'frailty' to 'impurity' to 'depravity' – is to lose one's life in increasingly significant ways. Moreover, on my preferred interpretation, frailty refers to an instance of wrongdoing, impurity to a pattern of wrongdoing and depravity to a striving to destroy morality. The first two kinds – frailty and impurity – come in both self-deceived and non-self-deceived versions, whereas the latter comes only in a self-deceived version. So, I can fail to control my anger and lash out at someone in a particular situation (frailty), and afterwards I can be surprised and shocked at myself for having done this (not self-deceived) or I can describe my action as giving someone what they deserve (self-deceived), which is worse. What is worse than both of these scenarios is that I can also have a pattern of not being able to control my anger (impurity), which, again, I can correctly describe to myself as a problem (not self-deceived) or, worse, as my taking a much needed moral stand against the constantly unreasonable world (self-deceived). Finally, and again worse than all the previous scenarios, destructive, uncontrolled anger can be characteristic of how I go about my life (depravity), but I describe it to myself as morally justified resentment. This is the worse condition because I am orienting my life in such a way that it strives to destroy morality, but I am describing myself as deeply moral; my life is oriented towards destroying morality under the guise of protecting it. Such a mind tends to be tortured and incessantly, anxiously needing to have others to affirm one's actions and

supportive (fictitious) narrative as good. As Arendt captures with her ideas on evil's 'banality' (1963/2006) or 'thoughtlessness' (1971/1981) and Kant on the lack of a well-functioning conscience (*MM*, 6: 400–1; cf. *CPrR*, 5: 98–9), when we do things badly, our mind is not a coherent, harmonious whole.¹⁵

Notice that if we combine this account of the propensity to evil with the above account of the predisposition to good, then we can explain some of the examples used at the beginning of this article to describe the temptation to engage in traumatizing behaviour. On this account, it is no longer surprising that people can be tempted to subject others to trauma out of survival (animality), self-interest or a desire for unlimited freedom of choice (rational end-setting), a temptation to lower others (envy or jealousy) to feel better about oneself (social sense of self), an uncontrolled sexual or affectionately loving desire (animality) or a damage in oneself (that makes one feel bad about oneself) that results from another's wrongdoing. Or to move to the examples of being in love, it can explain, for example, how we cannot choose who we fall in love with (as animality is reflexive in nature), the ungrounding nature of a heartbreak (as, again, our animality is reflexive) or the temptation to be unfaithful (as temptations can be felt very strongly). In addition, it can explain relational, including domestic abuse, since if one lacks a strong and healthy sense of self (narcissism), it can be difficult to affirm others as distinctive and as valuable as oneself and lead us instead to seek to dominate and lower, and not live together as equals with a healthy space for the unsocial parts of our selves. Moreover, it is no longer strange that a culture can be developed in which some groups dehumanize others in the ways the authors cited at the beginning of this article show us so well. Kant proposes that his idea of a depraved heart, together with the vices that can be grafted onto the predisposition to humanity, can help us identify '*diabolical vices*', which speak to some of the worst we – humans – can do (*R*, 6: 27). He argues that these vices are characterized by an 'anxious endeavor' to obtain a 'hateful superiority' over others (*R*, 6: 27). Moreover, when this temptation is joined by societal groups, it can give rise to '*vices of culture*', which are characterized by an 'extreme degree of malignancy[, namely] ... a maximum of evil that surpasses humanity ... e.g. in *envy, ingratitude, joy in others' misfortune, etc.*' (*R*, 6: 27). Hence, there are deep temptations in us that give rise to some of our patterned, historical cultural vices, from racism, sexism, cissexism, heterosexism, ablism and classism to xenophobia and bigotry.

Notice too that the above account of the Kantian agent helps us pay attention to striking psychological, emotional and moral features of traumatized lives, including, again, those outlined in the first section of this article. To start, our account can, as it must, explain how trauma involves attacks that can threaten our embodied sense or feelings of safety in the world, can numb us, can open up suicidal spaces, can cause us to have uncontrollable and extremely reactive responses to situations or to people, can lead to existential changes for the person involved, can involve extreme bodily damage, can cause extreme feelings of shame and loss of dignity, and/or can lead to personality changes or splits, including extreme existential withdrawal from the world and dissociation disorders. It can explain why dealing well with trauma often involves finding ongoing ways to acknowledge the pain and hurt – whether past or present – and to develop safe moments or spaces where this reality is affirmed and

cared for. Protective spaces and/or healing furthermore tend to be characterized by slowly and carefully creating spaces or moments with good people in them, people characterized by reliable, truthful descriptions of the world as well as with kindness around the trauma and deep, reliable respect for the person involved. Under conditions of ongoing trauma, healing is impossible, which presumably is why in such situations the main focus of those involved seems to centrally involve creating protective spaces, deeply owning what one is all about (morally, religiously/spiritually and emotionally), and learning to value solitude.¹⁶ In addition, the problem of betrayal is real, whereas full healing is only possible once the trauma is acknowledged and recognized by all and there is a shared effort at healing (whether in a family, in a friendship, in a community or society or as part of institutions). Working towards such a future must be an aim for all, but to what extent or how doing so is possible requires, we might say with Kant, 'a judgment sharpened by experience' (*GW*, 4: 389) – or wisdom.¹⁷

Finally, notice that the above account can also explain why reflection as such is insufficient to heal or learn to manage the damage done to us – a feature also often paid attention to in the literary and philosophical engagements with trauma mentioned at the beginning of this article. Because traumatic damage reaches the reflexive level, healing characteristically involves intentionally reflexive work (therapy) – often combined with associative as well as abstract conceptual and aesthetic-teleological thought, including as found in art, music and literature – aimed at enabling us to be attentive to and feel the pain caused by the damage as well as restoring our animalistic sense of being safe, loved and lovable in our own bodies. This reflexive, embodied sense of being safe, loved and lovable, I argue, is part of what having been or being subjected to trauma threatens, and it is part of what we protect and value when we treat ourselves and other human beings as precious or as having dignity. Moreover, if we have engaged in traumatizing behaviour or stood by without intervening when it is happening – whether because we could not,¹⁸ because we did not care or because we took pleasure in it – these experiences threaten our subjective sense of being good at all. Hence, it can be tempting not to heal and instead tell a self-deceived story, whether as individuals, social groups or society. After all, for the wrongdoer, this work involves learning to feel what one has done to another and to oneself, while for the benefiting bystanders, it involves learning how some of what they feel good about by themselves actually tracks oppression of others (social sense of self). And, so, instead of healing it can be emotionally tempting to live with a serious, untreated traumatic wound instead. The reflexive nature of traumatic experiences is also, on this account, why healing tends to be easier and better with reliable, truthful and kind therapists, friends and communities grounding us with unconditional moral love (reliable, respectful care) as we start working on our traumas, whether these are done to us or by us or are something we have been or are participating in as active or passive bystanders. And it is, I suggest, also why many people use nature, religion or art in addition to an improved understanding (through finding appropriate concepts and developing good theories) as empowering resources as they heal. These teleological-aesthetic resources help us feel the whole – the world as such and us in it – as good and beautiful reflexively despite all the evidence to the contrary.

4. Concluding remarks: living through and with trauma

Kimberlé Crenshaw (in her 1989 account of ‘intersectionality’)¹⁹ and Marilyn Frye (in her 1983 account of ‘double binds’) powerfully capture how members of a specific dehumanized population may face several destructive forces, often combined in new ways, at the same time. For example, enslaved Black women were subjected to the same extreme numbing violence that enslaved Black men were subjected to, to sexualized violence, especially rape, in a patterned way by white slavers and also by other men, and domestic violence from traumatized husbands.²⁰ And, indeed, Black women today still face similar destructive, intersectional forces, while other oppressed groups face other dehumanizing forces, including intersectional ones. In other words, when the intersectional oppressive pathologies interact with one another, they give rise to new pathologies such that those subjected to intersectional violence face more than the sum of the two (or more) isms. Indicative of how deep all these problems still are in our societies is the fact that many of the democratically elected political leaders in the world today were elected in part by appealing to such dehumanizing sentiments among powerful segments of their populations. As private individuals, as theorists and artists, as citizens and as public leaders, facing these complexities is therefore unavoidable given the historical societies we inherit. And if Cooper and Arendt as well as the Kantian account presented here is on the right track, then our ability to move towards a better future depends on how well we are able to understand these destructive forces and how wisely we are able to handle them. The aim in what follows is to use these ideas of Kant, Cooper and Arendt as philosophical tools with which to capture some of James Baldwin’s related wisdom.

Central to Baldwin’s writings is an emphasis on our histories, and one of his interesting proposals is that the right way to see and respond to the challenge of our racialized histories is to encourage upcoming generations of Black and White people to consider themselves ‘siblings’.²¹ In my view, his proposal can be understood as follows: we could draw an analogy between Black and White young people and two groups of siblings in a family where the one group of siblings has been abused and violated by their shared parents, while the other has not. As they grow up and struggle to learn to assume moral responsibility for themselves, their tasks are not identical. On the one hand, those who have been abused must deal with all the emotional challenges that come with having been subjected to patterned, systemic wrongdoing by the moral authorities entrusted with the task of protecting them: in the family, the abuse has been undertaken by the parents, while as citizens of a country, the abuse has been committed by the public authority, such as the supreme court and judges, the legislators and politicians and the executive authority (police and prison systems) as well as, of course, others vested with public authority, such as doctors, lawyers and educators. Also, the danger of betrayal is real even as members of oppressed groups gain power: will they, we may ask with Arendt, be able to transform the practices by endorsing the fact that they are ‘pariahs’ (outcasts) or will they, in one or more ways, be tempted to join or not resist the oppressive, destructive forces as ‘parvenues’?

To illustrate the latter temptation, notice that both Hillary Clinton (White woman) and Barack Obama (Black man) first betrayed LGBTQIA+ community for political gain – and then changed their way once they realized that doing so was politically

beneficial. Love then became love. Which is better than not, of course. Still, it would be better if there had been genuine acknowledgements by Clinton and Obama of the damage they did to the LGBTQIA+ community, of how they yielded to the temptation to dehumanize a vulnerable group for political gain. Significantly too, as Cooper's analysis anticipates, although both Black men and White women share a history of betraying Black women in a patterned way, the opposite is not true. Black women, as a rule, do not betray either category. To go back to the previous examples, Michelle Obama (Black woman) appears never to have been tempted to betray the LGBTQIA+ community, and Black (but not White) women did overwhelmingly support Clinton's candidacy when she ran against Donald Trump.²² If Kant's general account of moral character is correct, these facts are no accident. If you learn to manage both oppressive forces (deep vulnerability), including as they intersect, and still hold onto goodness (affectionate love of and respect for humanity), then you are likely to be firmer in your moral character; you know deep 'in your bones' what is at stake and you will not be as easily tempted to betray the more vulnerable groups just because doing so may be advantageous for you in some regard. Doing the right thing feels more like an 'of course!' than a 'I guess perhaps I should'.

On the other hand, to return to the analogy, those siblings who did not have to endure their parents' abuse, who were privileged in that regard, must deal with how many of the ways in which they feel good, worthy and accomplished about themselves stem from the practices of wrongly putting their siblings down as bad, unworthy and unaccomplished, as they were 'a problem' (Du Bois) or 'second best' (Beauvoir).²³ Consequently, for those who are given or inherit privileged circumstances and identities, a first challenge is to engage in the task of telling history as it is, including a proper, more complex and truthful description of their own goodness, worth and accomplishments. And like lost rookie police officers who for the first time find themselves in a situation where treating Black people as dehumanized is the norm and they either stood by or participated, these privileged siblings have violent experiences of those first violations in their childhoods, those first numbings, of another person's dignity and, so, a violation of their own dignity too, as Baldwin (1998) captures so well. Moreover, as Lucy Allais (2016) proposes, the racist mind is not a coherent mind; it is an incoherent one, one that cannot be brought into unity with itself and, so, not in a harmonious way with our human nature as a whole. Relatedly, she argues later (2021) that it is profoundly difficult to make sense of our lives in truthful ways under conditions of deep, systemic injustice. And yet, as the above analysis maintains, the violators and bystanders *do* have internal to themselves emotional resources from which to heal and build towards a better future. Doing so, however, is not something that is tempting (as it is painful, including morally painful because it involves feeling what actually happened) – what one did to another human being or what has been done to another while one stood by – and regaining one's sense of being good and loveable involves feeling one's human frailty and vulnerability intensely. Hence, in serious cases, self-deception and violence – including suicide – can open up as felt ways out.

Finally, note that the above idea of Baldwin's sibling analogy can probably be expanded. I believe his suggestion regarding the kind of challenge the histories we inherit bring us can be used also to capture other relations involving systemic injustice, such as relations between various religious and ethnic groups, between different

socio-economic classes, between men and women and between sexual or gendered majorities and minorities. In all cases, a core challenge for us at this point in history is first to become aware of how our various identities track privilege and/or (violent) oppression, and then together learn how to describe both our histories and our emotional and systemic challenges truthfully and accurately. Only if we do, do we stand a chance to move forward in better ways. Moreover, if the Arendtian-Cooperian analysis earlier in this article is correct, then one way to read the challenge of the pandemic is to read it as emblematic of the patterns of oppressive and violent behaviours we inherit. The pandemic has made evident to everyone some central features of living in traumatizing conditions in the ways most women, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, BIPOC people, sex workers, disabled people, etc. are forced always to do. Members of these groups all know that they cannot fix the problems on their own, and often they depend radically on more empowered others to care about them and their lives as precious. In addition, being able to manage well involves learning to protect oneself, when others do not, against imperceptible dangers; it involves, as Maya Angelou reminds us, learning to 'wear masks' in social and public spaces, and it involves dealing with people who deny basic facts. Paradoxically too, the pandemic can be the beginning of a transformative process where everyone can become more aware of what it is like for dehumanized populations to live in a violently oppressive world and how acting on privilege is damaging to others as well as to oneself (by becoming numb to suffering and to the effects of one's actions and attitudes). It seems to me, in other words, that we have good reasons to listen to Arendt and the old Jewish insight: true humanity is only possible if the chosen peoples no longer remain chosen – and making that possible can only be a shared project for humankind. And against much of philosophical practice – Kantian and otherwise – doing so wisely also requires us to no longer devalue our animality or regard it as an enemy; rather, we must embrace it as an admirable and wondrous part of human life on planet Earth.²⁴

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Notes

1 As I explain below, the lack of acknowledgement in the sense of telling a self-deceived story instead is deeply tempting for us as individuals, as social groups and as societies. This is one important reason why healing is such a difficult process to even start.

2 I started developing this alternative conception of the Kantian agent in articles that culminated in Varden (2020a). As can be seen there, I see this conception to be following the general direction of important Kant scholarship from the 1980s onwards – such as found in the relevant works of Kantians like Barbara Herman, Thomas E. Hill Jr., Onora O'Neill, Christine Korsgaard and Allen Wood et al. – that sought a richer conception of the Kantian agent. A major difference between my account and theirs is the way I utilize Kant's account of human nature – of the predisposition to good and the propensity to evil – to develop such a richer, more systematic understanding of Kantian agents, including their phenomenology.

3 Within the context of this article, it is impossible to engage these rich writings in satisfying ways. My aim here is simply to indicate what incredible resources they contain as we strive to develop and improve – or 'radicalize' – Kant's position.

- 4 I am using Black and White to refer to racialization inherently linked with modern European colonialization and the transatlantic slave trade.
- 5 I am thinking especially of Maya Angelou's autobiographies.
- 6 For an overview of the entrance of women Kant scholars, see Varden (2020a).
- 7 See e.g. Cooper, 'Has America a Race Problem? If so, How Can it Best be Solved?' (in 1998) and Arendt's discussions of Jewish 'chosenness' in (1948/1973).
- 8 For an important reflection on this complexity, see Elizabeth Barnes (2018).
- 9 See e.g. Onora O'Neill (1996).
- 10 Throughout this text, all of Kant's works are referenced by means of the standard Prussian Academy pagination in combination with the following abbreviations: *MM* for *The Metaphysics of Morals*; *R* for *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*; *TP* for 'On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, But it is of No Use in Practice'; *Anth* for *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*; and *SRL* for 'On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy'. All these works are contained in Kant (1996a, b, 2007).
- 11 For reasons of space and since I have written much on this before – see e.g. Varden (2020a, b) – I do not defend my interpretation of Kant's account of animality here. My aim here is simply to show some of the philosophical value of going in the basic direction I defend in those other places.
- 12 'Self-reflexive' consciousness means an awareness internal to any thought or action, whereas 'self-reflective' consciousness means a first-personal *thinking about* what one is thinking or doing and that one is the one doing it. Self-reflective consciousness is a second-order awareness of what I am already self-reflexively conscious of.
- 13 This cognitive ability is often tested by the so-called mirror test. In this test, a mirror is introduced into an animal's environment and a dot is unknowingly put somewhere on the animal's body that cannot be seen by the animal. If the animal starts to use the mirror to get rid of the dot, then this behaviour shows that the animal is capable of relating to the image in the mirror as an image of itself.
- 14 I have written on this several times at this point. E.g. see my 2020 Kant publications.
- 15 See also Allais (2016) for a very interesting exploration of this incoherence as revealed in Kant's racist thoughts. I return to her analysis below.
- 16 I am not, in other words, thinking only about, for example, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's 'The Solitude of the Self' (www.loc.gov/resource/rbnawsa.n8358/?st=gallery) or Hannah Arendt's many reflections on solitude, but I think an appreciation of solitude captures central aspects of the lives of many subjected to fierce oppression and often intersectional forces. To mention just a few examples of women with distinctly philosophical minds whose lives, speeches, autobiographies and other writings seem to affirm this judgement, think about those of Queen Kristina, Rahel Varnhagen, Sojourner Truth, Mary Anne Evans and Anna J. Cooper. These lives also illustrate moments and patterns of arrested development, difficulties dealing with various kinds of betrayal (personal, political, etc.), struggles with creating relationships that are truly good for them and learning to let go of certain ambitions that are not yet possible for someone with these identities. In my view, this tends to be the case of all lives that are subjected to violent oppressive forces, especially when they are of intersectional natures, just as it tends to be the case that those whose identities are correspondingly oppressive tend to be violent in relation to these people and emotionally numb in response to their suffering and their own inability to feel. And, of course, insofar as their lives track privilege, their reflections often participate in silencing or lowering other oppressed identities. None of them is only good, which, given the conception of human nature presented here, is not surprising.
- 17 For my interpretation of Kant on wisdom, see Varden (2021).
- 18 In his reflections on some of the existential difficulties facing a Jewish person who survived World War II in Europe, Karl Jaspers relatedly proposes the idea of a 'metaphysical guilt' (Jaspers 1947/2001: 65), which he describes as the guilt related to how he, like others, sometimes chose to survive rather than do anything when fellow beings were being taken away or subjected to horrific wrongdoing.
- 19 As Crenshaw emphasizes, the concept of intersectionality speaks to ideas anticipated in the writings of earlier Black feminists such as Sojourner Truth (see e.g. her 'Ain't [or Ar'n't] I a Woman': <https://sojournertruthmemorial.org/sojourner-truth/her-words/>) and Anna Julia Cooper (1998). See also Angela Davis (1981/1983) for more on this point.
- 20 For a powerful engagement with this complexity of Black women's lives, see Nikki Giovanni and James Baldwin's conversation on this theme (www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Jc54RvDUZU). In my view,

Baldwin is unable to switch from a 'Yes. But ...' to a 'Yes. And ...' in his response to Giovanni's discussion of the problem of domestic and partner violence against Black women by Black men.

21 I am drawing here on these essays of James Baldwin's (collected in Baldwin 1998, with the pagination here cited): 'My Dungeon Shook: Letter to my Nephew' (pp. 291–6); 'Nothing Personal' (1964) (pp. 692–707); 'Words of a Native Son' (1964) (pp. 707–13); 'The American Dream and the American Negro' (1965) (pp. 714–20); and 'The White Man's Guilt' (1965) (pp. 722–7).

22 Or to use an earlier example, Sojourner Truth never betrayed Frederick Douglass and Anna J. Cooper never betrayed W. E. B. Du Bois, even though the reverse is not true.

23 See also Vice's (2010) related discussion of White–Black relations in South Africa.

24 For more on this latter point, see Varden (2021).

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