

*Determination of the concept of a
human race*

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Occasioned by the reception of his earlier essay, *Of the Different Races of Human Beings* (1775, 2nd edn. 1777), which is also contained in the present volume, Kant's second essay on the natural history of the human species, entitled *Bestimmung des Begriffs einer Menschenrace* (Determination of the Concept of a Human Race), appeared in November 1785 in issue no. 11 of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (Berlin Monthly), pp. 390–417. While Kant's earlier essay had addressed the unity of the human species and its differentiation into subspecies ("races") in a fairly detailed geographical context, his second essay on the same topics focuses on conceptual issues and stresses that the elucidation of a concept such as that of a human race cannot be based on observation alone but needs to be guided by a preliminary determination of what to look for.

Kant's methodological clarification and the corresponding alternative presentation of his earlier account of the natural history of the human species in the second essay seek to redress the one-sided reception of the first essay, which had concentrated exclusively on Kant's hypothetical account of the actual differentiation of the human species over time and space and neglected to pay attention to his chief philosophical concern with developing the very concept of a subspecies – as possessing physical characteristics that are passed on unfaillingly both within one and the same subspecies and across different subspecies. Accordingly, Kant restates in his second essay the main traits of his theory of the possibility of the differentiation of a species into subspecies in the form of six key propositions, each elucidated by conceptual clarifications and geographical as well as anthropological illustrations and culminating in the definitional determination of a subspecies. In addition, Kant stresses the methodological difference between the description of nature and an account of the development of nature ("natural history"). He also rejects explicitly the recourse to different species in explaining the hereditary differences among different populations of human beings, maintaining instead the unity of the human species and its basis in a common stock of potentialities for specific differentiation ("germs").

The continued controversial reception of his natural history of the human species soon led Kant to publishing a third and final essay on the topic, *On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy* (1788), which is also contained in the present volume.¹

The translation of *Bestimmung des Begriffs einer Menschenrace* is based on the presentation of the work in AA 8: 89–106 and was undertaken by Holly Wilson and Günter Zöller. However, the six numbered sections are provided with arabic numbers, as in the original, and not with Roman numbers, as in the Academy edition. Special care has been taken in rendering Kant's highly differentiated terminology for the differentiation of biological species. Each such term is accompanied by a linguistic footnote placed at its first occurrence in Kant's text and is also listed in the glossary.

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The knowledge^a which the new travels have disseminated about the manifoldnesses in the human species so far have contributed more to exciting the understanding to investigation on this point than to satisfying it. It is of great consequence to have previously determined the concept that one wants to elucidate^b through observation before questioning experience about it; for one finds in experience what one needs only if one knows in advance what to look for. There is much talk about the different *human races*. Some mean by this entirely different *kinds* of human beings; others limit themselves to a narrower meaning but appear to find this difference to amount to not much more than the one which human beings make among themselves by painting and clothing themselves. My intention at present is merely precisely to determine this concept of a *race*, provided there are any in the human species;^c the explanation of the origin of the actually existing races that are considered susceptible to this designation is only a subsidiary work, which one can treat as one wishes. And yet I see that otherwise astute men, in their evaluation of what a few years ago was said in that regard,* directed their attention only to this subsidiary matter, namely the hypothetical application of the principle, but touched only lightly upon the principle itself, on which everything yet depends. This is a fate that befalls several investigations that revert back to principles, and which therefore might dissuade from all disputing and arguing in speculative matters, while recommending only the closer determination and elucidation of what has been misunderstood as advisable. 8: 91

* See Engel's *Philosopher for the World*, Part II, pp. 125f.

^a *Kenntnisse*.

^b *aufklären*.

^c *Menschengattung*.

I.

ONLY WHAT IS HEREDITARY^a IN AN ANIMAL
SPECIES CAN JUSTIFY A CLASSIFICATORY
DIFFERENCE IN THE ANIMAL SPECIES

8: 92 The *Moor* (Mauritanian), who is burned brown by air and sun in his native country and who is so much distinguished from the German or Swede by the skin color, and the French or English *Creole* in the West Indies, who looks pallid and exhausted, as though scarcely recovered from an illness, can be as little counted among different classes of the human species because of this, as can the Spanish peasant from *La Mancha*, who goes around dressed in black like a schoolmaster because the sheep in his province all have black wool. For if the Moor has grown up in rooms and the Creole in Europe, they are both indistinguishable from the inhabitants of our part of the world.

The missionary *Demanet*¹ gives himself airs, as though he alone could judge correctly the blackness of the Negroes, because he spent some time in *Senegambia*, and denies his fellow citizens, the French, any judgment about the matter. I maintain, however, that in France one can judge far more correctly regarding the color of the Negroes who have long resided there, and even better regarding the color of those who have been born there, if one wants to determine their classificatory difference from other human beings, than could be done even in the blacks' home country. For that which the sun impressed into the skin of the Negro in Africa, and which is hence only accidental to him, must fall away in France, and only that blackness remains which was allotted to him by birth and which he passes on to his progeny, and which alone for that reason can be used for a classificatory difference. From all hitherto existing descriptions one cannot yet form a sure concept of the actual color of the South Sea Islanders. For while the color of mahogany wood is attributed to some of them, I still do not know how much of this brown is to be ascribed to a mere coloring from sun and air and how much to birth. Only a child conceived by such a couple in Europe would reveal without ambiguity the skin color that belongs to them *by nature*.^b From a passage in *Carteret's* travel account² (who, to be sure, had gone little ashore on his sea voyage but nevertheless had seen various islanders in their canoes), I conclude that the inhabitants of most of the islands must be whites. For he first saw, as he says, the *true yellow* of the Indian skin color on the *Free Will Island* (near the islands counted among the Indian waters). Whether the formation of the heads on *Malakula* is to be attributed to nature or artifice,^c or how much the natural skin color of the Kaffirs

^a was . . . *anerbt*.

^b *von Natur*.

^c *Künstelei*.

differs from that of the Negroes, and whether other such characteristic properties are hereditary and impressed by nature itself at birth or only accidentally impressed, therefore will not be settled decisively for a long time. 8: 93

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ONE CAN ASSUME FOUR CLASSIFICATORY
DIFFERENCES OF HUMAN BEINGS
WITH RESPECT TO SKIN COLOR

We know with certainty of no other hereditary differences of skin color than those of the *whites*, the *yellow* Indians, the *Negroes*, and the *copper-red* Americans. It is noteworthy that these characters appear to be especially suited for the division of the human species into classes, *first* because each of these classes is so considerably isolated with respect to its residence (i.e., separated from the others but unified in itself): the class of the whites from Cape Finisterra through the North Cape, the Ob river, Little Bukhara, Persia, Arabia Felix,^a Abyssinia, the northern border of the Sahara desert up to the White Cape in Africa or to the mouth of the Senegal; that of the *blacks* from there to Cape Negro and, with the exclusion of the Kaffirs, back to Abyssinia; that of the *yellow*s in Hindustan proper up to Cape Comorin (a half-breed race descendent from them is on the other side of the Indian peninsula and on a few islands lying nearby); that of the *copper-reds* in a completely separate part of the world, namely America. The *second* reason why this character is especially suited for the division into classes, even though a difference in color might appear very insignificant to some, is that the secretion through perspiration must be the most important part of Nature's foresight, considering that the creature – transplanted in all possible regions, where it is affected very differently by air and sun – is supposed to persist in a way that is least needy of art, and that the skin, as the organ of that secretion, carries in itself the trace of this diversity of the natural character which justifies the division of the human species into visibly different classes. – Moreover, I ask that one concede the sometimes disputed *hereditary* difference in skin color until the occasion for its confirmation is found in what follows; likewise to permit that I assume that there are no more hereditary ethnic characters with respect to this natural livery than the above four – for the simple reason that that number can be proven, while no other number besides it can be established with certainty. 8: 94

^a "Happy, or Flourishing Arabia." Ancient name for the comparatively fertile regions in southwestern and southern Arabia (in present-day Yemen).

3.

NO OTHER CHARACTERISTIC PROPERTY IS
NECESSARILY HEREDITARY IN THE CLASS OF
THE WHITES THAN WHAT BELONGS TO THE
HUMAN SPECIES IN GENERAL; AND SO WITH
THE OTHER CLASSES AS WELL

Among us whites there are many hereditary qualities that do not belong to the character of the species, and through which families, even peoples^a are distinguished from one another. But not a single one of these is inherited *unfailingly*;^b rather, those that have these qualities also produce children with others from the class of the whites which lack this differentiating quality. Thus the differential mark^c of the blond color is dominant in Denmark, whereas in Spain (but even more in Asia in the peoples that are counted among the whites) the brunette skin color (with its consequence, the eye and hair color) is dominant. The latter color can even acquire hereditary status^d without exception in an isolated people (as with the Chinese, to whom blue eyes appear ridiculous) because there is no fair-skinned person to be encountered among them who could engender^e his color. Yet if one of these dark-complexioned people has a fair-complexioned wife, then he begets either dark-complexioned or fair-complexioned children, depending on whether they turn to one side or the other;^f and the same vice versa. In certain families there is hereditary consumption, uneven growth, dementia, etc.; but none of these countless hereditary ills is *unfailingly* hereditary. While it would be better carefully to avoid such unions by paying attention to the family sort in marriages, I myself have several times noticed that a healthy man produced a child with a consumptive wife which resembled him in all facial traits and was healthy and another one which resembled the mother and, like her, was consumptive. Likewise, I find only one insane child among various intelligent ones in the marriage of a man in possession of reason with a woman who was herself in possession of reason, but who came from a family in which insanity was hereditary. There is *heredity*^g involved here; but it does not occur unfailingly with respect to that in which both parents differ. – One can apply this same rule also confidently to the remaining classes. Negroes, Indians, or Americans have their personal or family or provincial differences as well; but none of

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^a *Völker.*^b *artet unausbleiblich an.*^c *Unterschied.*^d *kann . . . anerben.*^e *in die Zeugung bringen.*^f *auf die eine oder andere Seite ausschlagen.*^g *Nachartung.*

these will engender^a and propagate its respective peculiarity *unfailingly* in mixing with *those of the same class*.

4.
IN THE MIXING OF THOSE FOUR NAMED
CLASSES WITH ONE ANOTHER THE
CHARACTER OF EACH ONE
IS *UNFAILINGLY* HEREDITARY^b

The white man with the Negro woman and vice versa produce the *mulatto*, with the Indian woman the *yellow* mestizo and with the American the *red* mestizo; the American with the Negro produce the *black Caribbean*, and vice versa. (The mixing of the Indian with the Negro has not yet been attempted.) In heterogeneous mixing the character of the classes is *unfailingly* hereditary, and there are no exceptions to this. Where one finds them cited, there is a misunderstanding at bottom in that one took an *albino* or *kakerlak* (both deformities) for a white. This heredity^c always occurs on both sides and never unilaterally in one and the same child. The white father impresses on it the character of his class and the black mother that of hers. Thus an intermediary sort or bastard must arise each time, which hybrid kind^d gradually will become extinct within more or fewer generations^e occurring within one and the same class. However, if the hybrid kind confines itself to itself, then it will further propagate and perpetuate itself without exception.

5.
REFLECTION ON THE LAW OF NECESSARY
HALF-BREED GENERATION^f

It is always a very remarkable phenomenon that while there are so many characters in the human species, some of which are important and even hereditary within families, not a single one can be found within a class of human beings characterized merely by skin color that is necessarily hereditary – but that this latter character, insignificant as it may appear, is universally and *unfailingly* hereditary within its class as well as in the mixing with one of the three remaining classes. Perhaps we can surmise from this extraordinary phenomenon something about the causes of the heredity of such properties that do not belong essentially to the species, based solely on the circumstance that they occur *unfailingly*.

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^a *in die Zeugung bringen.*

^b *artet . . . unausbleiblich an.*

^c *Anarten.*

^d *Blendlingsart.*

^e *Gliedern der Zeugung.*

^f *Gesetz der notwendig halb-schlächtigen Zeugung.*

First, it is an awkward undertaking to make out *a priori* what brings it about that something which does not belong to the essence of the species can be hereditary; and in this obscurity regarding the sources of cognition the freedom to form hypotheses is so unrestricted that it is a great pity for all the effort and labor spent on refutations in this matter, since every one follows his own head in such cases. In such cases, I, for my part, look only at the particular *maxim of reason*^a from which each person departs and according to which he generally manages to find facts which favor it; and afterward I seek out my maxim, making me incredulous of all those explanations even before I manage to make clear to myself the counterarguments. Now if I find my maxim proved, exactly in keeping with the use of reason in natural science and the only one fit for a consistent mode of thought, then I follow it without heeding those alleged facts, which borrow their credibility and sufficiency for the assumed hypothesis almost exclusively from that already chosen maxim and to which facts one can moreover oppose a hundred other facts without effort. Heredity^b through the effect of the power of the imagination in pregnant women, or even in the mares in the royal stables; the plucking of the beard in entire peoples,^c as well as the cropping of the tails on English horses, through which nature is supposedly compelled to drop outright from its generations^d a product for which it was originally organized; likewise the flattened noses, which are at first artificially given by parents to new-born children and then supposedly taken up by nature into her generative power – these and other grounds of explanation would hardly receive credence through the facts adduced to their support, to which one can oppose far better proved ones, if they did not receive their recommendation from an otherwise wholly correct maxim of reason, namely this one: rather to venture everything in surmising from given appearances than to assume special first powers of nature or created predispositions (according to the principle: *principia praeter necessitatem non sunt multiplicanda*^e). But I am confronted with another maxim which limits the one about doing without dispensable principles, namely, that throughout all of organic nature in all changes of individual creatures their species is preserved unchanged (according to the school formula: *quaelibet natura est conservatrix sui*^f). Now it is clear that if the magic power of the imagination^g or the human artifice with respect

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^a *Vernunftmaxime.*

^b *Anerben.*

^c *Völkerschaften.*

^d *Zeugungen.*

^e Latin for “principles are not to be multiplied beyond necessity.”

^f Latin for “nature always preserves itself.”

^g *Zauberkräft der Einbildung.*

to animal bodies were granted a faculty to alter the generative power itself, to reshape the ordinary model of nature, or disfigure it by means of additions which afterward would yet be permanently preserved in subsequent generations,^a one would no longer know at all from which original nature had started, or how far its alteration^b could go, and into which distorted shape the species and kinds might finally degenerate given that the human imagination knows no boundaries. In accordance with this consideration, I take as my principle not to admit any botching influence of the power of the imagination on nature's business of generation, and not to admit any human faculty to effect alterations in the ancient original of the species or kinds through external artifice, to bring those alterations into the generative power and to make them hereditary. For if I admit even one case of this type, then it is as if I conceded even one ghost story or case of magic. The limits of reason are then broken through once, and delusion forces itself through this breach in thousands. There is also no danger that I intentionally make myself blind to actual experiences with this decision or, which is the same, make myself stubbornly incredulous. For without exception all such fantastic incidences are marked by the fact that they permit *no experiment*, but rather want to be proved only by snatching up contingent perceptions. Yet what is such that, while being susceptible to experiment, cannot withstand a single one, or avoids it with all kinds of excuse, is nothing but delusion and fiction. These are my reasons for not being able to concur with a mode of explanation that ultimately promotes the raving penchant to the art of magic, for which any cloak, even the smallest one, is desirable: namely, that heredity,^c even only the contingent one, which does not always succeed, could ever be the effect of another cause than that of the germs and predispositions lying in the species itself.

But even if I were to concede characters that spring from contingent impressions and nevertheless become hereditary, it would be impossible to explain through this how those four differences in color are the *only ones* among all hereditary characters that are *unfailingly* hereditary. What else could be the cause of this than that they must have lain in the germs of the to us unknown original phylum of the human species, and that as such natural predispositions which were necessary for the preservation of the species^d at least in the first period of its propagation and for that reason had to occur unfailingly in the successive generations?^e

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^a *Zeugungen.*

^b *Abänderung.*

^c *Anarten.*

^d *Erhaltung der Gattung.*

^e *Zeugungen.*

Therefore we are pressed to assume that there were once *different phyla* of human beings, approximately in the habitats in which we encounter them now, which were precisely suited by nature to their different regions, thus also differently organized so that the species might preserve itself – of which the four kinds of skin color are the outer mark. Now not only will this skin color be necessarily hereditary in each phylum in its habitat but it also will preserve itself undiminished in every other region of the earth in all generations^a within the same class if the human species has become sufficiently strong (be it that the complete development came about only little by little or that art was able to assist nature through the gradual use of reason). For this character is necessarily attached to the generative power, because it was required for the preservation of the kind. – However if these phyla were *original*, it would not be possible to explain and grasp why then in their reciprocal mixing with each other the differential character^b is inherited *unfailingly*, as actually happens. For nature has originally given each phylum its character in relation to its climate and in order to be suitable for the latter. Thus the organization of one phylum has an entirely different end from that of the other; and the fact that, in spite of this, the generative powers of both should be so well matched, even in this point of their characteristic difference, that an intermediary sort not only *could* originate but *had* to result unfailingly – that cannot be comprehended at all in the case of different original phyla. Only if one assumes that the predispositions to all this classificatory difference^c must have lain necessarily in the germs of *a single first phylum*, so that the latter would be suitable for the gradual population of the different regions of the world, can it be comprehended why, once these predispositions developed on occasion and accordingly also in different ways, different classes of human beings had to arise, which subsequently also had to contribute their determinate character necessarily to the generation^d with each other class, because this specific character belonged to the possibility of its own existence, thus also to the possibility of propagating its kind, and was derived from the necessary first predisposition in the phyletic species. From such inevitably hereditary properties, which are hereditary even in the mixing with other classes by producing half-breeds, one is forced to conclude their derivation from one single phylum, because without the latter the *necessity* of the heredity^e would not be comprehensible.

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^a *Zeugungen.*^b *Charakter ihrer Verschiedenheit.*^c *klassischen Verschiedenheit.*^d *Zeugung.*^e *Notwendigkeit des Anartens.*

6.

ONLY THAT WHICH IS UNFAILINGLY
HEREDITARY IN THE CLASSIFICATORY
DIFFERENCES OF THE HUMAN SPECIES CAN
JUSTIFY THE DESIGNATION OF A
PARTICULAR HUMAN RACE

Properties that belong essentially to the species itself, and thus are common to all human beings as such, are indeed unfailingly hereditary.^a But since no difference of human beings lies therein, no heed is paid to them in the division of the *races*. What comes into question for establishing a division of the species into classes are physical characters through which human beings (regardless of their sex) *differ* from one another, more precisely, only those physical characters which are hereditary (see §3). Now these classes are to be called *races* only if those characters are *unfailingly* hereditary (in the same class as well as in the mixing with every other). Thus the concept of a race contains first the concept of a common phylum, second *necessarily hereditary* characters of the classificatory difference among the latter's descendants.^b Through the latter, reliable grounds of distinction are established according to which we can divide the species into classes, which then, because of the first point, namely the unity of the phylum, may only be called *races* and by no means *kinds*. The class of the whites is not distinguished from that of the blacks as a special kind within the human species, and there are no *different kinds of human beings*. Otherwise the unity of the phylum from which they could have originated would be denied, for which denial one has no reason, but rather has a very important reason to the contrary, as was proven from the unfailing heredity of their classificatory characters.*

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* Initially, when looking only for characters of comparison (in terms of similarity or dissimilarity), one obtains *classes* of creatures under a species. If one looks further to their phyletic origin, then it must become apparent whether those classes are so many different *kinds* or only *races*. The wolf, the fox, the jackal, the hyena and the house dog are so many classes of four-footed animals. If one assumes that each of them required a special phyletic origin, then they are so many kinds. However, if one concedes that they also could have originated from one phylum, then they are only races of the latter. In **natural history** (which is concerned only with generation and phyletic origination) *kind* and *species* are not distinguished as such. This distinction occurs solely in the **description of nature**, in which only the comparison of marks matters. What is here called *kind*, is often only called *race* there.

^a *unausbleiblich erblich*.

^b *notwendig erbliche Charaktere des klassischen Unterschiedes der Abkömmlinge desselben voneinander*.

The concept of a race is therefore: *the classificatory difference of the animals of one and the same phylum in so far as this difference is unfailingly hereditary.*

This is the determination^a that was my proper intention in this essay; the rest can be seen as belonging to the subsidiary intention or mere addition, and can be accepted or rejected. I consider only the first matter to be proven and moreover useful as a principle for investigation in natural history, because it is susceptible to an *experiment* that can safely guide the application of that concept, which would be shaky and uncertain without it. – If differently shaped human beings are placed in the circumstances of intermixing and if the generation^b is half-breed, then there is already a strong conjecture that they might belong to different races; however, if this product of their mixing is *always* half-breed, then that conjecture becomes certainty. On the contrary, if only a single generation^c exhibits no intermediary sort,^d then one can be certain that both parents from the same species still belong to one and the same race, no matter how different they might look.

8: 101 I have assumed only four races of the human species; not as if I were completely certain that there is nowhere a trace of still more, but because what I require for the character of a race, namely the generation of half-breeds, has been made out only in those and has been sufficiently established in no other class of human beings. Thus Mr. *Pallas*³ says in his description of the Mongolian peoples that the first generation^e of a Russian with a woman of those peoples (a *Buryat*) would immediately produce beautiful children; but he does not indicate whether no trace of the Kalmuckian origin is to be encountered in them. It would be a remarkable circumstance if the mingling of a Mongol with a European should extinguish completely the characteristic traits of the former, given that they are still to be encountered more or less discernibly in the mingling with more southern peoples (presumably with Indians) in the *Chinese, Avars, Malayans*, etc. But the Mongolian particularity actually concerns the shape and not the color; and only with respect to the latter has hitherto existing experience taught us the unfailing heredity^f as the character of a race. Also one cannot make out with certainty whether the Kaffir shape of the Papuans and of the various island dwellers of the Pacific Ocean who are similar to them indicates a special race because the product of their mixing with whites is not yet known; yet they are

^a *Bestimmung.*

^b *Zeugung.*

^c *Zeugung.*

^d *Mittelschlag.*

^e *Zeugung.*

^f *unausbleibliche Anartung.*

