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The Radical Enlightenment of Charles W. Mills

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## Table of contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	2
<b>1. Locating Mills’s Enlightenment: black, radical, Kantian</b> .....	10
1. I. Enlightenments in dialogue .....	10
1. II. Mills’s Kantianism .....	13
<b>2. Factual objectivism</b> .....	21
2. I. Getting the facts right .....	21
2. II. Kant on impartial reasoning .....	24
2. III. Mills’s standpoint theory .....	26
2. IV. Standpoint, impartiality, and rationality .....	28
2. V. Conclusion .....	33
<b>3. Moral objectivism</b> .....	35
3. I. Constructivism .....	35
3. II. Kant’s categorical imperative .....	36
3. III. Rawls’s Kantian constructivism .....	38
3. IV. Mills’s radical constructivism .....	41
3. V. Conclusion .....	47
<b>4. Universalist and egalitarian humanism</b> .....	49
4. I. Personhood and sub-personhood.....	49
4. II. Criticisms .....	54
4. III. Conclusion .....	61
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	62
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	66

## Introduction

The relation between Charles Mills and the Enlightenment has often been overlooked or seen as antithetical. Yet Mills considered his philosophy a part of the (black) radical Enlightenment. The latter, he claimed, is true to the core principles of Enlightenment philosophy – objectivism, universalism, and rationalism – but radicalizes them with a focus on actual (racial) socio-political domination. In this paper, I argue that the principles of Enlightenment philosophy play a fundamental role in Mills’s project of locating real-world racial domination and the struggle against it at the center of philosophical reflection. I also show that, according to Mills, only the radical Enlightenment is able to substantively realize these principles. More generally, my discussion sheds light on Mills’s understanding of Enlightenment philosophy and the radical Enlightenment in particular.

It will be helpful to begin with a brief overview of Mills’s project. An analytical Marxist in the 1980s, Mills shifted to critical philosophy of race in the 1990s. His landmark book, *The Racial Contract* (1997), unleashed a rigorous critique of the social contract tradition: seemingly universalist and egalitarian but actually underwritten by racial exclusionism. He insisted that modern societies were not built on a consensual agreement between free and equal atomistic individuals. Rather, influenced by subversive contractualism – Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s class contract (1997) and Carole Pateman’s *The Sexual Contract* (1988) – Mills proposed seeing global white supremacy in terms of a racial contract. Whites, the only contract signatories, relegated non-whites to an inferior moral, civil, juridical, economic, and cultural standing. European imperialism, indigenous expropriation, slavery, apartheid, as well as religious and “scientific” texts make up the racial contract. Mills condemned prominent contract theorists such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant for their overt racism and John Rawls for ignoring historical and ongoing racial domination. He insisted on including race as a social (not biological) category of examination, so that racial realities finally appear on the radar of mainstream political philosophy. Despite his criticism, Mills believed that contractualism, and liberalism more generally, can be redeemed in a revised version, attuned to racial justice. He went on to develop a set of meta-theoretical, conceptual, and normative tools that will form the base of this revised liberalism. He coined concepts such as *white ignorance*, describing a social epistemology

wherein agents are not ahistorical but socially and historically embedded, and where veridical perception and judgment fail because of social factors including white vested interests, an amnesiac conceptual framework, and the overwhelmingly white canon. He also theorized *sub-personhood*, arguing that non-whites have not been recognized as Kantian persons worthy of equal respect. He is also one of the central philosophers to work on *non-ideal theory*, insisting that given the historical record of racial domination and its aftermath, political philosophy should cease theorizing about the principles which regulate an ideal, well-ordered polity, seeking instead to develop principles for correcting actual unjust societies. Such notions formed an integral part of his next books, including *Contract and Domination* (2007, with Pateman) and *Black Rights/White Wrongs* (2017). The latter can be seen as groundwork for a *black radical liberalism*, a synthesis of Marxist, Du Boisian, and Kantian insights, which together retune Rawls's contract apparatus to face and address issues of corrective racial justice. Unfortunately, Mills passed away before fully developing his black radical liberalism, but his book included an outline of the project. The above-mentioned themes will be discussed in detail later on.

Mills claimed once that his two central reference-points are “Marxism and the diasporic black radical tradition” (Mills 2016, 90). But many other statements indicate the significant influence of the Enlightenment philosophical tradition on his thought.<sup>1</sup> For example, in *The Racial Contract* he writes that his critique of the social contract “is really in the spirit of a racially informed *Ideologiekritik* and thus pro-Enlightenment [...] and antipostmodernist”. His critique of the racial-exclusionist white Enlightenment, he explains, is grounded in principles such as rationalism, objective truth (of the historical legacy of racial domination), and universal moral values (equality and freedom). He demonstrates “how [these principles] have been betrayed by white contractarians” (Mills 1997, 129). Similarly, in *Contract and Domination* he argues that an accurate description of the unjust reality is both an ideal in itself and a prerequisite for a truly universal moral theory:

“[F]ar from being anti-Enlightenment, [a critique of actual domination] has a much better claim to be carrying on the Enlightenment legacy. Getting the facts right is supposed to be an essential part of the Enlightenment mission, and in its mystified picture of the

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<sup>1</sup> As I explain later, Mills sees Marxism and some strains of black diasporic philosophy as belonging to the Enlightenment.

origins and workings of modern polities, mainstream contract theory certainly does not do that. And if the Enlightenment is supposed to be committed to moral egalitarianism and a transformation of society to realize this imperative, then ignoring the ways in which class, gender, and race void nominal egalitarianism of substance is hardly the way to achieve such equality” (Pateman and Mills 2007, 105).

In 2018, reflecting on the global uprising of authoritarianism, he claims that “the oncoming darkness of an aggressively resurgent anti-Enlightenment, which bears some affinities to traditional conservatism and the nineteenth-century counter-Enlightenment but is now more explicitly racialized than before”, means that one can no longer “afford to be sneering at Enlightenment norms”. He points out that for people of color such norms were never operative, adding that “the problem has never been a genuinely universalist White Enlightenment but a consistently racially particularist White Enlightenment” (Mills 2018a). In a piece published months before his passing, he argues for the formal recognition of black Enlightenment philosophy (Mills 2021, 19; see also chapter 1).

Most importantly for the current thesis, in an essay titled *Defending the Radical Enlightenment* (2002), Mills identifies and defends the core principles of Enlightenment philosophy and locates his own work within the tradition of the radical Enlightenment. The classical/mainstream<sup>2</sup> Enlightenment, he claims, is characterized firstly by *a (nominal) cognitive commitment to the supremacy of rationality*, designating an epistemic confidence that the natural and social worlds are generally knowable. “[W]e can and should be pushing back the darkness of ignorance” (Mills 2002, 10). Secondly, the Enlightenment includes *a (nominal) normative commitment to universalist and egalitarian humanism*. So with respect to morality, it endorses the view that all people possess a moral status as free and equal (at least according to abstract moral formulations). Thirdly, the Enlightenment has *a (nominal) meta-theoretical commitment to objectivism both in factual and normative claims*. It rejects relativism and holds that what is true and morally right is (generally) so for everyone. Let us call these *the principles of Enlightenment*. The qualification ‘nominal’ in these three points signifies Mills’s recurring claim that the predominantly white, male, and bourgeois Enlightenment has largely failed to live up to its declared standards

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<sup>2</sup> The same thing is meant by ‘classical’ and ‘mainstream’ Enlightenment, namely the well-known and canonical theories of the Enlightenment period as well as contemporary variants that build on the former.

(assuming it had such standards in the first place). Instead, it has produced prejudicial and false factual claims as well as exclusionary moral theories that encourage the marginalization and subjugation of some. The *radical* Enlightenment, Mills asserts, remains true to the principles of Enlightenment. Yet it supplements them with a theory of actual socio-political domination and self-consciously takes the perspective of the oppressed. In this way, the radical Enlightenment seeks to revise and transform mainstream Enlightenment philosophy, equipping it to address and redress real-world injustice (Mills 2002, 10-1). As such, its goal is “to *complete* the Enlightenment project, not overturn it” (Mills 2002, 10). ‘Radicalization’, then, is achieved through the insistence on a factual picture, which – unlike mainstream accounts – makes actual domination visible.<sup>3</sup> This expands (radicalizes) the commitment to objectivism, adds a social dimension to rationalism, and motivates moral prescriptions to realize substantive respect, equality, and freedom.<sup>4</sup>

My primary claim is that the principles of Enlightenment play a fundamental role in Mills’s endeavor to disclose the workings of white supremacy and develop normative prescriptions for achieving substantive universal equality. The claim can be reversed, in a sense, since Mills also argues that truly realizing Enlightenment principles necessitates attention to the non-ideal reality. The Enlightenment variety radicalized by Mills is, I claim, Kantianism. He does so by putting the latter’s apparatus into dialogue with subversive (Afro-modern, Marxist, feminist) theories. Before going over the stages of the argument, let me discuss the reasons that motivate it.

Firstly, the theme of Enlightenment in Mills’s work is, as of yet, unexplored. Related (but not synonymous) notions, such as contractualism and liberalism, are visibly central

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<sup>3</sup> The radical Enlightenment, with its focus on real-world domination, can rightly be termed *non-ideal* Enlightenment, whereas the classical Enlightenment, which abstracts away from this factual background, is generally concerned with ideal theory. I alternate throughout the paper between ‘radical’ and ‘non-ideal’, but my main concern is the radicalization of Enlightenment principles, not non-ideal theory in general.

<sup>4</sup> My use of the term ‘radical Enlightenment’ is not meant to evoke the meaning ascribed to it by the historian Jonathan Israel. In Israel’s usage, the concept describes a radical democratic tradition initiated by Baruch Spinoza (Israel 2011, 7, 10-1). For Israel, the radical Enlightenment is necessarily predicated on endorsing Spinozist one-substance metaphysics (Israel 2011, 2). Contrarily, Mills has in mind a theory informed by actual social domination. Moreover, he mostly leaves metaphysics aside and makes virtually no reference to Spinoza.

in Mills's own books and have been covered by commentators. The Enlightenment, however, is either implicit or mentioned in single passages. Only some less-known essays by Mills (the main ones mentioned above) center on the Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, many scholars have missed Mills's explicit Enlightenment commitments. As Elvira Basevich notes, Mills's hybrid position has given rise to harsh criticisms by liberals and radicals alike (the latter term designating, for Mills, socialists, feminists, and anti-racists). Some liberals (when not ignoring him) argue that Mills's empirically informed normative theory lacks in objective validity (Basevich 2021, 76; chapter 3). Others have judged his critique of mainstream Enlightenment liberalism as a complete rejection of the latter's normative foundations (Basevich 2021, 76; Mills 2002, 10). For example, Glenn Loury reads *The Racial Contract* as a rebuttal of Kantianism and Enlightenment universalism (chapter 4), and Francis Fukuyama claims that Mills has a communitarian conception of persons, running a risk of incompatibility with objectivism (chapter 2).

Various radicals also misunderstand Mills. As Mills points out, numerous race and gender theorists simply misread his work as dismissive of the Enlightenment as such (Mills 2017b, 36). Others, who are really interested in 'thrashing' liberalism altogether, readily embrace his uncompromising challenge to the mainstream Enlightenment but brush aside his attempt to rearticulate the Enlightenment framework (Mills 2017a, 191-2; Hooker 2018, 767). In so doing, they disregard that (according to Mills himself) the critique they endorse is essentially grounded in the principles of Enlightenment. Olúfémi Táíwò recounts attending a presentation by Mills, who argued that liberalism offers a vital language for describing racial injustice. Táíwò, a graduate student at the time, raised his hand and asked: "Why do we need liberal political philosophers to believe anything at all? Why don't we just critique them and move on?" (Táíwò 2021).

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<sup>5</sup> The term 'Enlightenment' is not (necessarily) interchangeable with 'liberalism'. For Mills, Marxism belongs to the radical Enlightenment (Mills 2002, 12) yet not to liberalism. In addition, there is the relativist, counter-Enlightenment liberalism variant of Isaiah Berlin (overlooked by Mills) (Sternhell 2010, 9-10, 23). Moreover, Mills claims that "liberalism is *the* Enlightenment ideology" (Mills 2002, 11), implying that, for him, 'Enlightenment' is broader than liberalism, covering general meta-theoretical commitments (although liberalism is its most celebrated theory). Mills draws on liberal philosophers in his attempt to realize those commitments, but since my thesis is primarily preoccupied with the meta-theoretical principles themselves, the term 'Enlightenment' seems more fitting.

Other radicals claim that Mills’s Enlightenment jargon is primarily a strategy (*Realpolitik*) aimed at winning over mainstream political philosophers. Whether to make sense of Mills’s attempt to save liberalism or simply misunderstanding him, they greatly overstate the strategic element while downplaying the degree to which his project is substantively rooted in the Enlightenment. This position was endorsed, for instance, by numerous participants in a workshop dedicated to Mills at Humboldt University of Berlin (Busse et al. 2022). Another example for this trend is Derrick Darby’s critique of Mills. Darby suggests that Mills’s “liberal redemption song” is likely to be rejected both by some radical critics, finding it insufficiently radical, and by white liberals, encountering obstacles related to white psychology. According to Darby, Mills insists on liberalism “because blacks need mainstream white allies” (Darby 2019, 376). Mills could avoid these objections, Darby says, by “not fram[ing] his case as providing a theoretical tool that radical liberals can use to achieve racial justice, instead simply arguing for the rightness or truth of his alternative backward-looking principles of justice”. However, Darby maintains, this path is implausible because Mills “is fully invested in a partly instrumentalist defense of justice” where the question of audience is primary (Darby 2019, 377n7). I think Darby greatly overemphasizes the strategic aspect of Mills’s radical liberalism, as if it were almost exclusively an attempt to win over the liberal ranks who dominate political philosophy’s quarters. He does not give enough attention to the degree to which Mills’s work is based in Enlightenment principles, including objectivism, so that the “truth” or validity of Mills’s normative arguments is in fact central.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, some radical philosophers question whether Mills is able to substantiate his Enlightenment commitments (although their critiques are not directly concerned with the latter). For instance, Tommie Shelby maintains that Mills’s non-ideal theory is unable to reasonably justify normative principles – a problem with respect to moral objectivism (see

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<sup>6</sup> Mills writes that his argument “is more prescriptive than descriptive. [He is] not claiming that black radical liberalism is actually being embraced by [whites] but that it should be” (Mills 2018c, 769). To be sure, Mills explicitly and repeatedly notes the strategic dimension of his work, and certain passages (e.g. Mills 2017a, 10) can convey the impression that his liberal vocabulary is exclusively strategic. But as shown, Mills often justifies the radical Enlightenment on substantive grounds. Furthermore, the talk of Mills ‘using a strategy’ in order to foreground racial justice might imply that he compromised his real beliefs in the process. However, had Mills found notions such as objectivism, rationalism, and universalism inherently problematic, he would not have employed them for his racial justice project.



chapter 3). Kathryn Gines sees his work as insufficiently sensitive to the insights of intersectionality, while others perceive it as uncritical of capitalism – thus one can question whether Mills lives up to his purported universalism (chapter 4).

By putting the spotlight on Mills’s radical Enlightenment, I respond to these critics. Missing this (in my opinion) fundamental dimension of Mills’s work is to misrepresent it.

At least some of the reactions cited above, I argue, have to do with what Linda Martín Alcoff calls “one of the greatest antinomies of modern discourse”: the “juxtaposition between universalist legitimation narratives that deny or trivialize difference and careful delineations of supposedly morally relevant phenotypic human difference” (Alcoff 1996, 5). On one hand, liberals tend to think that an objective, rational, and universalistic theory must steer clear of particularities such as race (Alcoff 1996, 9). On the other hand, radicals often view the Enlightenment (with its ‘denial of difference’) as inherently oppressive; alternatively, perhaps due increased attention to empirical ‘difference’, they miss the fundamental role of the principles of Enlightenment in Mills’s work and/or overstate its strategic aspect. Mills’s radical Enlightenment framework, I suggest, has the potential to surmount the supposed antithesis mentioned by Alcoff.

The argument is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 functions as groundwork. My aim is to justify the claim that Kantianism (Kant and Rawls) is the Enlightenment variety radicalized by Mills and to explain his radicalization method. I suggest understanding the Enlightenment in terms of a dialogue conducted within the West between canonical and oppositional strands, whereby the latter sometimes appropriate and modify the former’s apparatus for emancipatory goals. Mills’s own project places Kantianism in conversation with theories of domination: Marxism, feminism, and black diasporic thought. I furthermore give a periodization of Mills’s radical Kantianism and respond to initial objections.

The next three chapters reveal the essential role of Enlightenment principles in Mills’s radical philosophy. Chapter 2 discusses factual objectivism. For Mills, it is both possible and desirable to attain objective knowledge about society. He criticizes both postmodernist relativism and the classical Enlightenment, which nominally affirms factual objectivism but distorts the facts about racial domination. I also suggest, drawing on Kant, that

objectivism entails the epistemic ideal of an impartial perspective. I argue that Kant's account has influenced Mills. Rejecting Kant's individualism, Mills appropriates the ideal of impartiality and radicalizes it within an account of social epistemology, maintaining that the perspectives of the oppressed are more likely to be impartial and lead to a veridical perception of social reality.

Chapter 3 maintains that moral objectivism is essential for Mills, giving him objective normative standards on which to oppose racial domination and justify corrective principles. Following Kant and Rawls, he uses moral constructivism to ensure a fair and impartial rational procedure for justifying normative principles; yet he radicalizes it by acknowledging the legacy of white supremacy. I reject claims that this move makes him unable to justify objective normative principles, while conceding that I cannot provide a comprehensive defense of his strategy. I argue that Rawls's methodology is also predicated on contextual substance, although implicitly and distortedly. Moreover, I call attention to Mills's claim that acknowledging white racial domination is, in fact, the only way to avoid white particularism and be in a position to realize the objectivist commitment.

For Mills, (factual and moral) objectivism is tightly knit to what he calls the supremacy of rationality. Rationality designates the possibility and manner of arriving at the truth, while objectivism refers to the latter's general validity. In order to avoid repetitions, I do not dedicate a chapter to rationality and address it instead (somewhat implicitly) in the two chapters about objectivism. Reason has a critical potential, and it plays a crucial part in guaranteeing an impartial perspective capable of attaining objective factual truths and constructing objectively valid normative principles.

Chapter 4 argues that universalist egalitarian humanism has a key function in Mills's work. His project is predicated on Kantian personhood as a universal moral status entitling one to equal respect. But Mills radically transforms it by noting the legacy of non-white sub-personhood. The normative task becomes the substantive realization of equal respect for those who have been denied it. This position is more radically universalist than idealized theories which take personhood for granted. I also maintain that his framework can incorporate and address further categories of domination (e.g. gender, class) and their intersections, and that Mills already began moving in this direction.

## **1. Locating Mills's Enlightenment: black, radical, Kantian**

In this chapter I provide an initial justification (which I substantiate in the following chapters) of my claim that out of the distinct varieties of the (classical) Enlightenment, it is ultimately Kantianism (Kant and Rawls) that Mills radicalizes. I also explain Mills's radicalization strategy. Based on Mills, I suggest recognizing as part of the Enlightenment also oppositional strains, which criticize but also seek to appropriate and transform parts of the canon. Historically, it is through such a dialogue that the Enlightenment has been radicalized, as demonstrated by the Haitian Revolution. Similarly, Mills's radical Enlightenment is achieved by putting Kantianism into dialogue with radical varieties: Marxism, feminism, and, above all, black diasporic thought.

### **1. I. Enlightenments in dialogue**

Mills holds that it is problematic to speak of *the* Enlightenment, as if it were the property of a particular culture. "I suggest it is more illuminating - more enlightening - to think of *Enlightenment* as a general outlook, a certain cognitive and moral impulse, which can be found, albeit to differing extents, in all peoples". The task of realizing the Enlightenment is everyone's responsibility (Mills 2002, 27). So although the Enlightenment is usually thought of as referring to the (white, male) canon, it contains insurgent and dissident varieties that rebel against the doctrines of both the old order and the mainstream (racial, patriarchal, bourgeois) Enlightenment.

Mills views modern Western political philosophy, and the Enlightenment in particular, in terms of a dialogue conducted within the West, including not only the usual (white) canonical philosophers but also subversive figures who have challenged white particularism. Despite using the term 'dialogue', he is clear that any correspondence has been rather one-sided: the mainstream Enlightenment tends to marginalize and often silence oppositional voices. Even so, according to Mills, Enlightenment liberalism appears "more monolithically imperial than it actually is". Oppositional thinkers, especially non-white but also white, have used the tools of the Enlightenment for anti-colonial critiques (Mills

2015a, 5). The oppositional texts of those non-whites who juridically belong to the West (construed as “a series of empires”) should be considered part of the Western tradition (Mills 2015a, 7). Mills argues for “a rethinking of Western political philosophy” that will respect and incorporate such oppositional voices into the canon. Doing so will create “a real dialogue of equals [...] that would better be able to address and begin the remedying of the legacy of the Euro-polity” (Mills 2015a, 23).<sup>7</sup>

In this light, Mills defines and recovers a particular exemplar of radical Enlightenment, the black Enlightenment, which arises in the modern Western world *in opposition to* the racial subordination of black people and the white philosophy which rationalized it.<sup>8</sup> While contesting the latter, the black Enlightenment sometimes seeks to appropriate some of its main tenets, transform them, and use them for emancipatory ends (Mills 2018b, 3; 2021, 19-20). “A lot of black thought has simply revolved around the insistent demand that whites *live up to their own (ostensibly universalist) principles*” (Mills 1998, 5). The unique experience of black people as the group most harmed by the social, political, and economic structures of race facilitates an accurate understanding of racial domination as well as the development of oppositional theories.<sup>9</sup> By rethinking the cannon to include the black diasporic tradition, “the hope is that [...] the consistently radical enlightenment viewpoint of a transformative Black philosophy can be developed that will be a rainbowed vision, potentially containing all colors, for all of us” (Mills 2021, 36). The black Enlightenment, then, is possibly the most radical one (Mills 2021, 35).

A good example for the black Enlightenment, Mills says, is the Haitian Revolution, which “was more genuinely universalist, more consistently a realization of (ostensible) enlightenment values, than either the American or French Revolutions” (Mills 2021, 26). Among the elements that played a role in this event are the distinctive experiences of the enslaved that motivated the uprisings; Voodoo traditions, functioning as a regenerating

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<sup>7</sup> Here Mills contrasts with Cedric Robinson, who, as Tommie Shelby notes, sees the black political tradition as fully opposed to and independent from Western (white) philosophy (Shelby 2021, 45).

<sup>8</sup> According to Mills, most race scholars agree that the category of race has emerged only in modernity, linked to socio-political structures of racial subordination and domination. Hence, black philosophy (including the black Enlightenment) – a philosophy informed by and in opposition to racial domination – begins only in modernity (Mills 2021, 23-4).

<sup>9</sup> These claims pertain to Mills’s standpoint theory, which I discuss at length in chapter 2.

energy and psychological distancing from the horrors of slavery (Tomba 2015, 120); and the French Revolution and its call to restructure society according to universal and humanist moral principles. The dialogical aspect is clear. Gurminder K. Bhambra notes that “a delegation from Haiti travelled to Paris to argue in front of the Constituent Assembly for a clause to abolish slavery to be included in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen” (Bhambra 2015, 270). Such calls, combined with armed rebellion, led to the (short-termed) abolition of slavery in Haiti (Bhambra 2015, 272; Tomba 2015, 119). Massimiliano Tomba thus argues that “[a]s a practical and theoretical battlefield, the Declaration [of 1793] includes among its authors even those who were excluded” such as the Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture (Tomba 2015, 115). Bhambra emphasizes the bilateral element in this dialogue, asserting that “[t]he most radical political statement of the French Revolution – that is, the one with the greatest universal potential – came from Haiti” (Bhambra 2015, 270). The Haitians took equality and universality to new realms. According to Bhambra, in independent Haiti, “colour was made no bar to political participation. [...] everybody who was black could participate in politics, and black was not an issue of phenotype but of a commitment to the values of equality and freedom and an opposition to colonialism” (Bhambra 2015, 269-70).

I suggest understanding Mills’s own radical Enlightenment philosophy as such a dialogical battlefield. His autobiographical remarks illustrate this. Initially an analytical Marxist, Mills turned to race and Africana philosophy in the mid-1990s (Mills 2016, 104). Critiquing and thus engaging more closely with liberalism, he came to think that a liberal apparatus detached from individualist social ontology and informed by a theory of group domination “could generate surprisingly radical prescriptions” (Mills 2017b, 42). He was also heavily influenced by feminist philosophy. This led to the development of black radical liberalism (Mills 2016, 108-9). What is the contribution of each paradigm? Marxism offers a non-ideal, materialist focus on social structures, hierarchies and oppression. Radical feminism exemplifies the theorization of oppression irreducible to class domination. From liberal feminism comes the constructive critique of classical liberalism with the aim of equipping it to battle patriarchy. Out of “the progressive side of the black diasporic political tradition, above all in W. E. B. Du Bois”, the realization of the centrality of race and white supremacy to the modern world. And finally, from classical liberalism, “the

importance of developing a normative apparatus of rights and the means for theorizing about social justice for equal persons”, albeit revised in non-ideal terms through the acknowledgment of historical and present domination, group hierarchies, and the psychological effects of socialization (Mills 2016, 109). He credits Enlightenment liberalism with having the most developed normative theorizations of rights, personhood, and justice (Mills 2017a, 203). Hence the need to supplement the radical paradigms with classical liberalism – especially Marxism, which is normatively weak because of Marx’s view of liberal rights as bourgeois ideology (Mills 2017a, 209).<sup>10</sup>

## 1. II. Mills’s Kantianism

The above suggests that Mills’s radical philosophy is not self-contained. Its self-conscious point of departure is the critique of the oppressor and his hegemonic philosophical paradigm. Nevertheless, it sometimes seeks to adopt and radicalize the principles and apparatus of the latter, such that the result is distinctive in many respects. My claim is that Mills ultimately radicalizes the *Kantian* variety of Enlightenment. The principles of Enlightenment which Mills identifies are most fittingly represented by Kantianism. Furthermore, Mills makes use of Kantian concepts and devices in realizing those principles. The next three chapters will demonstrate this. But I nonetheless want to make an initial case for these claims in order to meet possible objections.

In his *Radical Enlightenment* essay, Mills does not claim to be radicalizing Kantianism specifically. Instead, he says more generally that the radical Enlightenment appropriates the apparatus of the mainstream Enlightenment, “naturalizes it, and then turns it on itself, reflexively, seeking to use socially embedded and embodied reason to explain the failings of socially embedded and embodied reason” (Mills 2002, 12). He adds that the normative values and concepts of the mainstream Enlightenment – while historically serving the interests of bourgeois white men – should not be discredited but extended to and

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<sup>10</sup> Mills was also deeply influenced by disciplines other than philosophy, such as history, sociology, and political science (Mills 2010, 21).

realized for others (Mills 2002, 22).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, he thinks of (a certain interpretation of) Marxism and (some strands of) feminism as radical Enlightenment varieties (Mills 2002, 12). Thus, while Mills can definitely be said to be radicalizing Marxism and feminism by bringing racial domination into the picture, it is clear that he is primarily interested in the radicalization of the classical Enlightenment.

But this will not be enough. The classical Enlightenment consists of distinct and conflicting strands, so claiming that Mills radicalizes the classical Enlightenment in general could be charged with banality. To prevent that, it is necessary to specify which variant is being radicalized. I will now justify my choice of Kantianism.

Consider, first, that Kant's philosophy is typically considered a prime exemplar of the principles of Enlightenment. See, for instance, Zeev Sternhell's characterization of what he calls the "French-Kantian Enlightenment". "The Enlightenment was not a consistent theoretical structure", he says, but "the thinkers of the French Enlightenment and their principal ally, Kant, had certain principles in common" (Sternhell 2010, 4). To begin with, it is *rationalist* (Sternhell 2010, 1). While it does not strictly oppose the senses, it thinks reason should ultimately rule because it allows making sense of oneself and one's society; it enables knowledge attainment and moral judgment. Rationality facilitates critical thinking that is able to surmount ideological dogmatism and prejudice (Sternhell 2010, 3, 5). Moreover, it assumes *objective criteria of truth* and rejects relativism. Against the Counter-Enlightenment that preaches particularist identitarianism, authenticity, and views the essence or spirit of one's nation or culture as the only source of truth, the French-Kantian Enlightenment advocates objectivity and impartiality. It is human reason, ultimately independent of one's group belonging, that can lead to truth (Sternhell 2010, 16-7). A similar logic applies in the normative sphere. The French-Kantian Enlightenment asserts the existence of *objective values or principles* (Sternhell 2010, 443). So the resulting moral theories are supposed to be shielded against charges of relativism and dogmatism which threaten to diminish their moral force. This contrasts with the Counter-Enlightenment

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<sup>11</sup> See also Mills's argument, contra Audre Lorde, that the master's tools *can* be used to dismantle the master's house, whereby the tools in question are the descriptive and egalitarian-normative claims of liberalism and contract theory (Mills 2009a, 93-4).

which grants primacy to tradition, custom, and group membership, including seeing morality as culture-relative (Sternhell 2010, 8). The French-Kantian Enlightenment is also *universalist and egalitarian*. It is predicated on the moral ideals of equality and freedom and asserts that the aim of political power is justice: resistance to unjustified domination and achievement of liberty (Sternhell 2010, 2-3, 5, 443). Notice that Sternhell subscribes to the standard view of Kant as an egalitarian and a universalist, which Mills rejects. (Mills agrees that a Kantianism purged of racism is egalitarian and universalist, but mainly nominally, not substantively. I discuss this below.) But the bottom line is that the principles identified by Sternhell as standing at the core of the French-Kantian Enlightenment are those which Mills sees at the heart of the classical Enlightenment and which he seeks to radicalize.

Rawls should also be considered a Kantian. He has been deeply influenced by Kant and has stated so himself. Additionally, he is often credited with the re-popularization of Kantian philosophy in the 20th century (Rawls 1980, 515; O'Neill 2013, 7-8). Mills, too, thinks of Rawls as a Kantian (Mills 2018b, 24-5). Although there are important differences between Kant and Rawls, I take the latter's work to embody the principles of Enlightenment. It is primarily Rawls's Kant-inspired contractualist method for achieving moral objectivism that is important for Mills (chapter 3 discusses this topic and substantiates the claim that Rawls is a Kantian).

Let us now turn to Mills. Kant and Rawls are the mainstream Enlightenment figures with whom Mills has most often and thoroughly engaged. While much of this engagement consists of sharp critique, Mills is largely indebted to the Kantian and Rawlsian apparatus in his attempt to substantively realize the principles of Enlightenment. His account of objectivity and social epistemology builds in part on Kant's account of Enlightenment and impartiality (see chapter 2). His non-ideal contractualism draws heavily on Rawls's device of the original position for achieving an objective and impartial perspective on normative questions (chapter 3). And his universalism is based upon the Kantian notion of equal respect, seeking to address the fact that non-whites have been systematically disrespected (chapter 4). This is by no means a reflection of Mills's later philosophy alone. Mills started working systematically on race in 1994, "bracketing" (but not renouncing) his Marxism



(Mills 2017b, 41). I argue that this is also the moment in which his philosophy (at least in some respects) began to be recognizably Kantian. Although Mills still published on Marxism in that year (Sullivan 2017, 3), three of his other publications on race had made significant use of a Kantian framework for explaining what is wrong with racial domination. Building on the Kantian notion of personhood, including the imperative to treat persons with equal respect and never merely as a means, he argues that non-whites have been oppressed, exploited, and generally treated as sub-persons. He asserts that normative philosophy must register this reality if it is to assist in redressing it (Mills 1994, 147-8; 1998, 9, 15, 106-12).<sup>12</sup> For Mills, the notion of personhood entails all of the principles of Enlightenment: personhood is an objective moral status describing the equality of all people based on their rationality; sub-personhood describes the objective factual state of affairs wherein non-white personhood has not been recognized. Commenting on one of those publications, Mills writes that it “introduced many of the topics and themes that I later developed in other essays” (Mills 1998, xvi). This suggests that Mills’s black radical project was essentially predicated on a radicalized Kantianism from its inception (while obviously being significantly developed over the years). Mills’s black radical liberalism, and his essay *Black Radical Kantianism* (2018) in which he offers a Kantian translation of Afro-modern philosophical insights, do not reflect a late change of heart but are entirely consistent with his early work on race.<sup>13</sup> I develop these brief remarks in greater detail in the next three chapters.

Let me now turn to a brief examination of other classical Enlightenment philosophers, in order to strengthen by elimination my claim that Mills radicalizes the Kantian variety of Enlightenment. Many of the usual figures receive little or no attention by Mills (e.g. the French philosophers of the 18th century). A brief examination of those who do receive attention will show that they do not fully endorse the principles of Enlightenment. In this

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<sup>12</sup> The three articles are *Do Black Men Have a Moral Duty to Marry Black Women?* (1994), *Non-Cartesian Sums: Philosophy and the African-American Experience*, and *Revisionist Ontologies: Theorizing White Supremacy*. The latter two are included in *Blackness Visible* (1998).

<sup>13</sup> My argument here is supposed to deflect the charge that, in claiming that Mills’s critical race philosophy is based on a radicalized Kantianism, I am cherry-picking from Mills’s later work. As argued, I see Mills’s work on race as generally a coherent and consistent project. The few times that I do draw on Mills’s Marxist writings are, I claim, consistent with his black radical Kantian project.

regard, I would argue that Mills is mistaken to suggest that the principles identified by him are the core principles of the ‘classical Enlightenment’ in general. Thomas Hobbes’s normative account is conventionalist and hence rather weak. For him, the aim of the social contract is not the political realization and protection of the moral ideals of equality and freedom. Rather, the contract is motivated by considerations of prudence, order, and self-interested cooperation (Mills 1997, 17; Pateman and Mills 2007, 15). Hence, Hobbes’s egalitarian and emancipatory aspirations are limited, to say the least. David Hume’s ethics is not rationalist but sentimentalist, and his empiricism has often been interpreted as skeptical towards objective reality and notions of universal validity (Cohon 2018; Fogelin 2008, 210-2, 234-5). John Locke, on the other hand, may plausibly be said to subscribe to the principles of Enlightenment. Furthermore, Mills sometimes claims that a case for black reparations can be made on the ground of Lockean property rights (Mills 2002, 24). However, Locke’s moral conception of the person, which centers around property rights, makes him a forerunner of libertarianism. Mills rejects this conception of personhood, adopting instead the Kantian notion of personhood that forbids exploiting others, which he finds amenable for progressives (Pateman and Mills 2007, 6, 18-9, 84). Put differently, Locke’s understanding of egalitarianism is quite remote from what Mills has in mind. The link between Mills and Kantianism is far more direct.

The case of Rousseau is an interesting one. He is, according to Sternhell, one of the central proponents of the French-Kantian Enlightenment alongside Kant (Sternhell 2010, 4-5). Judith Shklar, too, sees in Rousseau a commitment to the principles of Enlightenment and underlines his influence on Kant (Shklar 2020, 28-30). Rousseau is also a serious inspiration for Mills. In particular, his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* is for Mills the archetype of the subversive social contract tradition to which Mills contributed *The Racial Contract*. Rousseau’s critical work uncovers the unjust, non-ideal class exploitation contract, and in so doing sets the scene for a subsequent emancipatory contract that is to constitute a just and free society (Mills 2009a, 92). In this sense, Rousseau influences Mills with respect to the principles of Enlightenment: factual and moral objectivism (revealing and condemning the domination contract) and universalist-egalitarian humanism (aiming at emancipation). However, despite this inspirational impulse, Mills is far more preoccupied with the specifics of Kant’s and Rawls’s philosophies: “[d]ubious about

Rousseau's own solution in terms of a 'general will' (so I am not following his example in that respect), I am working within a liberal framework" (Mills 2009a, 97). In addition, to the extent that Mills follows Rousseau's example regarding the non-ideal contract, Rousseau can be considered a radical Enlightenment thinker. Thus, he is not the most adequate representative of the classical Enlightenment radicalized by Mills.<sup>14</sup> In my view, then, Kantianism provides the most fitting embodiment of the principles of Enlightenment.

Lastly, I want to mention another sense in which Mills can be considered a defender of the Kantian Enlightenment variety. Kant is normally regarded as the most prominent Enlightenment philosopher, and Rawls as the most notable liberal philosopher of the 20th century. Many liberals subscribe to some version of Kantianism or Rawlsianism, while radicals and conservatives who oppose the Enlightenment often target Kantian notions. Hence, when Mills professes a commitment to objectivism, rationality, and universalist-egalitarian humanism – standardly identified with Kantianism – he positions himself as a defender of the principles at the heart of Kantianism.

Notice that I am neither claiming that Mills is a devoted Kantian nor that the principles of Enlightenment are Kantianism's invention or property. Mills realizes each 'Kantian' principle by drawing extensively on Marxism, feminism, and black radicalism in ways that Kant and Rawls obviously did not. Mills thinks that it is possible to substantively realize the principles of the classical Enlightenment only by bringing parts of its apparatus into dialogue with these other paradigms. My point is that the principles of Enlightenment that Mills wants to radicalize are most suitably represented by Kantianism and that – in attempting to realize those principles – he is drawing on concepts and devices from the Kantian apparatus.

Finally, I want to address a possible objection. One might question whether Kantianism is actually committed to the principles of Enlightenment because of Kant's prejudicial racist and sexist assertions and his support of race and gender hierarchies. Hence, one

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<sup>14</sup> Although Rousseau is definitely radicalized by incorporating race and gender into the framework of subversive social contract (Mills 2009a, 95).

could understand me as claiming something like ‘Mills is committed to the principles of the Kantian Enlightenment which Kant himself is not committed to’ and then judge it as absurd. Some have defended the late Kant against charges of racism (Kleingeld 2019, 8), but Mills replies that, even if true, racism has formed part of most of Kant’s philosophical career (Mills 2018b, 8). I will presuppose for the sake of argument that Mills is right. My reply is the following (like Mills, I concentrate here on race but a similar argument can be made regarding gender). To begin with, let us distinguish between three kinds of Enlightenment theories (a non-exhaustive list):

- A. Classical, overtly racist (e.g. Kant)
- B. Classical, sanitized (non-racist), ideal theory version of A (e.g. Rawls and contemporary Kantians)
- C. Radical, non-ideal theory (e.g. Mills)

Mills would say that A has a very limited nominal commitment to the principles of Enlightenment, professing them but excluding non-whites (so only whites are equal persons, rational, etc.). Yet one could still take A (in some version), sanitize it from its problematic exclusion clauses, include non-whites – and get B. On Mills’s view, B is entirely committed to Enlightenment principles *nominally* but not *substantively*. Put differently, it professes these principles for everyone (white and non-white) but, because of its ideal theory framework, it misrepresents actual histories, fails to address racial domination, and ends up taking the particularist perspective of the hegemonic white group. Thus it cannot lead to a substantial realization of Enlightenment ideals. That is why Mills advocates C, a non-ideal version of B, radicalized by the inclusion of a factual picture that registers historical domination and its present legacy. As already stated, Mills thinks that such a theory has better chances to substantively realize the principles of Enlightenment. Note, however, that this means that it is possible to say that B-Kantianism is (nominally) committed to the principles of Enlightenment. Moreover, it is far from being a consensus that B-theories are as problematic and unhelpful as Mills claims, even among some who share Mills’s radical sympathies (Shelby 2004; Shelby 2013; Darby 2019, 378). If they are right, then there is no problem in claiming that B is committed to the principles of Enlightenment (nominally *and*, to varying extents, substantively).

The next three chapters will discuss how Mills realizes (and radicalizes) the Kantian Enlightenment, beginning with a discussion of factual objectivism.

## 2. Factual objectivism

This chapter elucidates the crucial role of factual objectivism and rationality in Mills's work as well as their radical transformation in a theory informed by racial domination. My claims are the following. First, objectivism allows Mills to say that racial domination exists objectively. This is the first point of radicalization – insistence on the actual social and historical facts contra mainstream theory which abstracts away from reality. Next, I suggest that objectivism also implies an ideal of an objective (impartial) perspective. For Kant, the ideal of impartiality is tightly interwoven with rational thinking, describing a stance capable of overcoming subjective biases and attaining knowledge. Kant's view is criticized as individualistic and ahistorical by Mills, who instead advocates a social epistemology (standpoint theory). Yet I argue that Mills does not *fully* reject Kant's view. Rather, in important respects, he preserves Kant's ideals of impartiality and rationality but turns them materialistic, taking into account group perspectives, ideology, and the social mechanisms that participate in the production of knowledge and ignorance.

### 2. I. Getting the facts right

The philosophy of the Enlightenment is typically characterized by a meta-theoretical commitment to objectivism in factual claims. It rejects relativism, accepts objective standards for distinguishing truth from falsehood, and maintains that what is true is generally so for everyone.

Let us begin by examining Mills's endorsement of factual objectivism and the role it plays in his work. His central claim in *The Racial Contract* is that seemingly universalist and egalitarian mainstream political philosophy has been underwritten by white supremacy. This criticism, he declares,

“is explicitly predicated on the *truth* of a particular metanarrative, the historical account of the European conquest of the world, which has made the world what it is today. Thus it lays claims to truth, objectivity, realism, the description of the world as it actually is [...] and invites criticism on those same terms” (Mills 1997, 129).

In other words, a critique of actual (historical and present) racial injustice must insist on the existence of objective and knowable reality. Only by asserting that racial oppression is objectively real (and morally wrong) can the critique maintain its force. Relativism accepts all claims as equally valid and rejects any objective grounds upon which to base assertions such as ‘there is nothing which supports the existence of natural racial hierarchies’ or ‘white supremacy has deeply shaped the modern period’. In addition, the anti-racist should be wary of relativism because it tends to benefit established mainstream theories (Mills 1998, 37-8). So the critique, Mills states, is “pro-Enlightenment [...] and anti-postmodernist”. He ultimately views postmodernism, because of its relativist outlook, “as an epistemological and theoretical dead end, itself symptomatic rather than diagnostic of the problems of the globe”. He rejects the “postmodernist picture of isolated, mutually unintelligible language games” and holds that degraded norms and their critique are commensurable; it is possible to condemn an ideal’s failure in a specific case while simultaneously affirming said ideal and employing it as part of the critique itself (Mills 1997, 129).

Mills views the commitment to “an objective perception of things as they are” as a defining element of the classical Enlightenment. Yet he thinks the latter has usually failed to live up to this ideal. The Enlightenment has held the banner of truth but ended up producing factual falsities about non-whites, race, and the racial aspects of modern social structures. On the one hand, there is the overtly racial (racist) liberalism of the past which justified racial domination (Mills 2017a, xvi). On the other hand, race is normally untheorized in contemporary (white) mainstream philosophy, which simply claims that since race has no biological existence, it should not be debated at all (Mills 1998, 47). Yet, according to Mills, given the histories of imperialism, expropriation, and slavery, “this neglect by Western philosophy has been an evasion. That race *should* be irrelevant is certainly an attractive ideal, but when it has *not* been irrelevant, it is absurd to proceed as if it had been” (Mills 1998, 41). Thus self-described objectivist white philosophers take their own particular ‘racelessness’ to be representative of everyone else including non-whites. In this way they misrepresent the nature of modern societies and preclude challenging the status quo.

The radical Enlightenment's challenge is, therefore, to find a way to talk about race as existing objectively yet consistently with its biological inexistence. Rejecting *racial realism* (races as biological/natural kinds) (Mills 1998, 45-6), the alternative objectivist position is *racial constructivism*. Race has historically been the justification for the attribution of differential moral and juridical status, moral characteristics, and personality traits to different groups of people (Mills 1997, 23-5). It is acknowledged that the social realities of race could have been otherwise, but race is nonetheless "a *contingently* deep reality that structures our particular social universe, having a social objectivity and causal significance that arise out of our particular history" (Mills 1998, 48). A constructed reality is real: "'constructed' contrasts with 'natural', not with 'real'" (Mills 2010, 170).<sup>15</sup> Racial constructivism allows Mills to claim that the modern period is shaped by white supremacy and suggest the metaphor of the racial contract for understanding this reality. Hence, with respect to factual objectivism, Mills's radicalization is carried out by insisting on the ignored facts and histories, which, while contingent, explain the objective reality of modern Western societies (Mills 2002, 17). A precise description of reality is an Enlightenment ideal, and the radical Enlightenment complies better with it (Pateman and Mills 2007, 105).

However, factual objectivism has another dimension: impartiality. Objectivism is not only about the objective validity of true claims. Rather, one is normatively expected to be objective, i.e. impartial, in order to be in a position to perceive the truth. Importantly, impartiality is where factual objectivism intersects with another Enlightenment principle mentioned by Mills: the supremacy of rationality. The latter means, for Mills, the possibility and the imperative to know the natural and the social world – while impartiality describes the cognizer's state of mind or epistemic positioning that enable attaining knowledge.

Mills, however, advocates social epistemology, foregrounding groups not individuals, and claiming that some group perspectives are epistemically advantaged (more likely to correctly perceive the social world). I propose seeing Mills's view as a radicalization of

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<sup>15</sup> As a constructed entity, race depends not only on time but also on space. For instance, some people may count as blacks in the USA but not in the Caribbean and Latin America (Mills 1998, 77).



the Kantian ideal of impartiality, although many would (at least initially) object to such a thesis. Making sense of this requires, first, an overview of Kant's position.

## 2. II. Kant on impartial reasoning

As Samuel Fleischacker explains, Kant identifies enlightenment<sup>16</sup> with the ability to independently arrive at truths and distinguish them from falsehoods (Fleischacker 2013, 4-5). Enlightenment is a position which enables the attainment of knowledge. It has to do with a *form* of reasoning; not with the *content* of people's claims (Fleischacker 2013, 23). In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant lays down the rules for this form of reasoning, which is supposed to ensure objective, impartial, and unbiased thinking. The general idea, he says, is to consider

“everyone else's way of representing in thought, in order as it were to hold its judgment up to human reason as a whole and thereby avoid the illusion which, from subjective private conditions that could easily be held to be objective, would have a detrimental influence on the judgment. Now this happens by one holding his judgment up not so much to the actual as to the merely possible judgments of others, and putting himself into the position of everyone else, merely by abstracting from the limitations that contingently attach to our own judging” (KU 5:293–4).<sup>17</sup>

The three rules, which he calls the “maxims of the common human understanding”, are the following: (1) Think for oneself; (2) think in the position of everyone else; (3) think in accord with oneself. “The first is the maxim of the unprejudiced way of thinking, the second of the broad-minded way, the third that of the consistent way” (KU 5:294). I focus on the first two. The rule of thinking for oneself is developed in Kant's famous essay: *What is Enlightenment?* There he urges readers to have the courage to make use of their intellect without the direction of another (a state of ‘maturity’) (WA 8:35). As for the second rule, Kant advocates thinking from a universal perspective (a “broad-minded way of thinking”) by putting oneself “into the standpoint of others”, thus distancing oneself

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<sup>16</sup> Here ‘enlightenment’ refers to a state of mind, hence the lower-case.

<sup>17</sup> References to Kant's writings contain the abbreviated title followed by the Academy Edition's volume and pagination. See the bibliography for information regarding abbreviations and English translations.

from subjective biases stemming from an investment in one's private desires, goals, identities, etc. (KU 5:295).

According to Fleischacker, with these rules Kant proposes that we carefully scrutinize with good arguments any claim, justification, and their source, and that we do so under modes of reasoning and standards that are shareable with other human beings – “*as human beings, not as fellow Germans or Christians or lawyers*” (Fleischacker 2013, 22). Since Kant defines humans as rational beings, he believes that relying on human intellect is a mode of reasoning shareable by all (Fleischacker 2013, 24-5). Furthermore, by trying to think from the standpoint of others, we are able to reflect on our concrete goals and identities. Notice that Kant speaks of the possible, not actual, perspective of others. His primary concern seems to be that we distance ourselves from our own particularistic biases, rather than taking the actual standpoints of others. However, in the Enlightenment essay he discusses the imperative that people communicate their thoughts in a public scholarly realm, “submitting these remarks to judgment by the public” (WA 8:37-8; see also Fleischacker 2013, 17-8, 22). Thus, a simple reconstruction suffices for interpreting Kant as strongly encouraging a consideration of others’ actual perspectives. Seyla Benhabib, too, favors a reading of Kant as “enjoin[ing] us to view each person as one to whom I owe the moral respect to consider their standpoint”. She thinks this demands an exercise of contextual judgment that takes the actual perspectives of others into account (Benhabib 1992, 136). And Fleischacker asserts that Kant encourages us to use others’ advice, experiences, and testimonies in the process of making up our minds (Fleischacker 2013, 19-21). In sum, Kant sees rational deliberation and impartiality (self-distancing from particularistic ways of thinking) as preconditions for the possibility of attaining objective knowledge.

Kant’s position has been criticized by some radical philosophers including Mills. The upshot is this (note: I am bracketing the claims that Kant considered non-whites and white women as incapable rational agents; see Mills 2017a, 95-6, 106; see also my chapter 4): Kant’s epistemology is individualistic and ahistorical, positing subjects abstracted from social structures of class, race, and gender. It thus ignores and disrespects differences and particular experiences and allows hegemonic groups (white bourgeois males) to present their own particularity as if it were the universal human condition. Failures to attain

knowledge are attributed to general and ahistorical phenomena such as sensory illusions, hallucinations, and dreams. The socializing effects of oppressive social structures on cognition (of both the oppressed and the advantaged) are largely neglected (Mills 1998, xi; 2017a, 49; 2018b, 12; Fleischacker 2013, 119). Kant, the critics claim, “fails to see that good reasons can often be *local* reasons, drawn from the experience of a specific group of people” (Fleischacker 2013, 125).<sup>18</sup> That is why Mills endorses, instead, social epistemology in the form of standpoint theory.

## 2. III. Mills’s standpoint theory

As Mills explains, social epistemology arises in oppositional philosophy (Marxism, feminism, black radicalism) in response to mainstream epistemology, examining cognizers located within a social ontology of group relations marked by domination. The subject is no longer ahistorical and abstract, but a member of a social group at a specific time and place (Mills 1998, 21; 2017a, 49-50). But what is standpoint theory, according to Mills? The following passage captures its crucial aspects and is worth citing at length. Standpoint theory is

“the general thesis [...] that in a system of subordination, or interlocking and overlapping subordinations, the perspective of those at the bottom is more likely to be the foundation of an objective assessment of its workings than the perspective of those more favorably located. In other words, material advantage comes at an epistemic cost: the likelihood that, because of one’s unrepresentative group experience and vested interests in the established order, one will find it more difficult to see that order as it really is. One will be more prone to illusions, more susceptible to rationalizations and denials of its injustice. Those at the bottom are certainly not thereby guaranteed a veridical view of the social structure. But the mere fact of having no group interest in its perpetuation is a great cognitive advantage, while the everyday experience of oppression will make them less likely to accept dominant accounts that deny or gloss over the ugly realities on which it is based” (Mills 2021, 25).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Note that a minimalist interpretation of Kant (such as the one presented here, drawing on Fleischacker), which does not compel us to adopt an entire philosophical system, is not fully susceptible to all of these claims (see Fleischacker 2013, 30, 119, 126).

<sup>19</sup> Standpoint theory refers not only to factual but also to moral judgements (Mills 2017a, 58).

Standpoint theory deals with the social mechanisms through which true, false, or no beliefs are constituted. It includes two central components. The first is the process whereby hegemonic groups fail to acquire true beliefs or acquire false beliefs that misrepresent (social) reality. The second is the process in which subordinate groups acquire more veridical beliefs about it. Mills's focus is, of course, race. Accordingly, Mills names the first component *white ignorance*.

White ignorance consists of various elements, including perception, conception, memory, testimony, and motivational group interest (Mills 2017a, 59). All *perceptions* are mediated by *concepts* whose formation is social. In hierarchical societies with relations of domination and subordination, prevalent concepts may well contain within them the prejudice and bias of the ruling group (Mills 2017a, 60). Take, for instance, the convictions in the (cultural/scholarly/moral/civil) superiority of whites or the West, as well as Eurocentrist outlooks (Mills 2017a, 61-3). The process that determines which concepts are available involves *memory* (or rather lack thereof). Whether and how the history of racial domination and exploitation is registered within collective memory is decisive (Mills, 2017a, 64-5). In anthologies of political philosophy, for instance, non-white thinkers have been largely neglected (Pateman and Mills 2007, 240-1). Memory is based in part on *testimonies*, but in white-supremacist societies, the testimonies of non-whites are frequently unavailable or discredited (Mills 2017a, 67-9). Finally, since whites benefit from their superior moral, political, and material status, they have a *vested interest* (motivation) in keeping the epistemic terrain unaltered, favoring certain concepts, theoretical frameworks, and a selective memory (Mills 2017a, 8, 69-70). White ignorance is thus not passive but “an ignorance that fights back” (Mills 2017a, 49).

For Mills, white ignorance characterizes some of the failures and biases of the mainstream Enlightenment, whether in its (past) overt racist or (contemporary) sanitized-yet-idealized versions. The latter, for instance, makes no use of concepts such as ‘domination’, ‘hegemony’, ‘ideology’, or ‘exploitation’ (Mills 2017a, 50-1). The discrediting of theories about racial hierarchies and the achievement of formal civil equality paved the way for a colorblind philosophy which ignores the legacy of racial domination and oppression. Non-white material disadvantage and its causes disappear from the theoretical terrain, and so

do normative discussions about corrective measures (Mills 2017a, 63-4). This is often not deliberate, of course, but arises out of “patterns of majoritarian group cognition influencing one as a member of a racially privileged white community”, establishing a certain epistemic horizon and rendering certain theoretical terrains more attractive than others (Mills 2015a, 21).

The second component of standpoint theory, corresponding to white ignorance, is (potential) non-white epistemic advantage. Subordinate groups’ immediate experience of oppression (and their collective memory of its history) promotes the development of adequate concepts which facilitate a more veridical perception of the social system (Mills 1998, 27-8). They also have no vested interests in maintaining the status quo. In addition, awareness to white ignorance and its functioning helps avoid its pitfalls (Mills 2017a, 55; 2002, 13). On Mills’s view, one evidence for these claims is the fact that people of color, more commonly than whites, have throughout the modern period recognized the centrality of race to the Western political and philosophical systems (Mills 2017a, 43, 53-4). Historical oppositional struggles, too, illustrate the epistemic advantage of non-whites, whose observations regarding their differential and unjust situation “have often motivated such struggles in the first place” (Mills 1998, 31).

## **2. IV. Standpoint, impartiality, and rationality**

So these are the tenets of Mills’s standpoint theory. The right way to look at it, I argue, is as a radicalization (not rejection) of Enlightenment epistemology and Kant’s in particular.

In order to see that, let us first consider variants of standpoint theory that clearly conflict with the principles of objectivism and impartiality and appreciate their differences from Mills’s. Some postmodernist varieties reject the possibility of an impartial perspective and objective knowledge. It views all standpoints and truths as local and socially constructed. If some conception of objectivity is granted, it is only in the sense of a political

agreement between people with distinct perspectives (Grasswick 2018). Because objective reality is insignificant in this account, it is susceptible to the charge of relativism. As already noted, Mills fiercely rejects relativism. Note that even the term ‘white ignorance’ presupposes the possibility of (objective) knowledge. This “would be lost if all claims to truth were equally spurious, or just a matter of competing discourses” (Mills 2017a, 51). Thus, although his focus is social, Mills is explicit about his decision to retain a ‘mainstream’ commitment to the possibility of objective knowledge (Mills 2017a, 51-2).

Another variant of standpoint theory has an essentialistic account of epistemic locations. As Alcoff puts it, “[t]he principal argument against identity politics has been that it assumes an essentialist, coherent identity that is efficacious over one’s political orientation [and] epistemological standpoint” (Alcoff 1996, 8). On such a view, social groups are presented as homogenous, ignoring individual differences or even the capacity of individuals to question hegemonic ideologies within their group. Interestingly, Francis Fukuyama (a centrist liberal) attributes to Mills a similar view. Discussing Mills’s criticism of Rawls’s ahistorical and raceless social ontology, Fukuyama argues that “Mills in this regard constituted a subset of the ‘communitarian’ critics of Rawls, arguing that there was no choosing individual prior to that individual’s specific attributes such as race, gender, or sexual orientation” (Fukuyama 2022, 70). Communitarians often entertain a ‘thick’ view of subjects that is conventionalist and role-conformist, showing skepticism towards the possibility to distance oneself from and question the content of one’s social embeddedness (Benhabib 1992, 74). Fukuyama’s reading raises doubts, from a liberal perspective, about the extent to which Mills’s social epistemology and conception of subjectivity are compatible with the principles of objectivity and impartiality (including rationality as the faculty that enables reflective self-distancing).

But Fukuyama’s reading is mistaken. Mills actually warns against the communitarian “claims about the general good that deny or marginalize the dynamics of group domination in actual societies represented as ‘communities’” (Mills 2017a, 15). Put differently, he affirms that communitarianism has the tendency to essentialize subjects and thus block subversive minority positions from view. Mills conceptualizes race as “existential without being essential” (Mills 1998, xiv). Discussing Mills’s early work on race, Alcoff argues

that its conception of racial identity is not essentialistic and should be understood “not as sameness opposed to difference but as substance opposed to absence” (Alcoff 1996, 13). Mills is well aware that social groups are not a monolith, and that “[s]tandpoint theory implies neither the infallibility of the oppressed nor the unfailing wrongheadedness of the oppressor” (Mills 2002, 20). *The Racial Contract* is dedicated not only to non-whites but also to “the white renegades and race traitors who have refused it” (see also Mills 1997, 107-9). He goes as far as saying that, since whiteness is not merely a color but a set of power relations, whiteness and white ignorance are not limited to whites (Mills 1997, 126-9; 2017a, 57). Hence, people do not possess an automatic epistemic advantage/disadvantage simply by virtue of their identity; he strictly rejects this claim (Mills 1998, 23). Mills believes standpoint theory is best understood as a cognitive tendency (Mills 2002, 21; 2017a, xvii, 58). One’s social location may ‘push’ in a certain direction, leading to more or less cognitive and motivational obstacles and, respectively, worse or better chances of making correct judgements.

I maintain that, for Mills, individuals belonging to subjugated groups *are more likely to be impartial*, i.e. free of socially induced, particularistic cognitive-motivational distortions and biases, which are more likely to impact members of advantaged groups. In Mills’s (long) passage about standpoint theory cited above, he asserts that “the perspective of those at the bottom is more likely to be the foundation of an objective assessment” of the workings of oppressive societies. Whites “will be more prone to illusions, more susceptible to rationalizations and denials” (Mills 2021, 25). Elsewhere he writes that “[n]o material or ideological blinders have prevented blacks and other people of color from seeing” the racial aspects of Western polities. Mainstream white political philosophers, in contrast, evade confronting this non-ideal reality because of “a set of constructed deafnesses and blindnesses” (Mills 2017a, 43).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In the normative realm, Mills’s black radical liberalism employs a modified version of Rawls’s original position in order to mitigate the cognitive distortions that prevent impartiality – the same distortions that oppressed people are less likely to have (see chapter 3).

We can now recognize that objectivism and impartiality form an integral part of Mills's standpoint theory, even while undergoing a non-ideal transformation. Objectivism, he explains, could be idealist or materialist (the latter also called "situated" objectivism). Whereas the first seeks epistemic advantage by abstracting away from particularities, the second builds upon a theory informed by an account of actual oppressive socio-political systems and is mindful of the perspectives of the oppressed (Mills 2016, 110; 1998, xvi). Mills does not see the latter as a deviation into distorted particularism (Mills 2016, 112):

"At the risk of self-parody, it could be said that if the paradigm cognizer for the mainstream Enlightenment is the 'ideal observer', the heavenly and disembodied eye [...] in the view from nowhere, the paradigm cognizer for the radical Enlightenment is the 'materialized actor', the handicapped black lesbian working at McDonald's, [...] representing the gritty synthesis of the view from everywhere" (Mills 2002, 13).

It is primarily in this sense that I see in Mills's social epistemology a radicalization of the Kantian account of enlightenment. Kant asks that we put ourselves into the standpoint of others and, in so doing, distance ourselves from potential subjective biases. As noted, Kant is sometimes interpreted as encouraging a solipsistic exercise of reason fully detached from what others actually think. I have argued that this interpretation is false. Yet Kant focuses primarily on individual cognition. History, social embeddedness, social mechanisms of knowledge and ignorance, and a critique of group relations of domination (definitely racial domination) are all mostly outside his scope. Mills's radicalization consists in locating impartiality within a social ontology of racial groups, asking us to look at the actual testimonies and judgments of oppressed others (or, rather, Others). Note that being impartial does not mean being a disinterested observer. Obviously non-whites have an interest in presenting the facts about racial oppression. But such an interest reflects a universalistic and unbiased way of thinking, thus conforming with Kant's ideal. Furthermore, Mills does not at all contradict Kant's demand that we rationally scrutinize beliefs and their sources with good reasons. Mills argues that standpoint theory is consistent with the epistemic norm of striving to have rationally grounded beliefs, yet he also emphasizes the importance of social reasons. Beliefs stemming from one's attempt to make sense of one's experience of structural racism are grounded beliefs (Mills 1998, 31-2). Additionally, just as Kant's ethos of enlightenment is normative (one has a moral duty to think for oneself), Mills states that his social epistemology is normative, establishing a "continuity



with classic epistemology”. The normative task lies in understanding the social and psychological processes whereby ignorance instead of knowledge is produced, “to personally extricate oneself from them”, and contribute to undermining them for others (Mills 2017a, 59).

But is Mills’s view linked specifically to Kant’s (rather than to ‘mainstream epistemology’ more generally)? The answer is yes. Mills invokes Kant’s Enlightenment essay in his 2018 piece, *Black Radical Kantianism*. Under a non-ideal social ontology, representing the actual racial state of affairs, “Kant’s famous ‘What Is Enlightenment?’ essay can [...] be reconstructed as a demand to develop the moral ‘maturity’ necessary to overcome the racialized cognitive obstacles generated by society”, including “dogmas and formulas” (another reference to Kant’s essay) of a racial kind which prevent the autonomous use of one’s reason (Mills 2018b, 13, see also 19, 21-2).<sup>21</sup> Additionally, Fleischacker illuminatingly points to the legacy of Kant’s Enlightenment essay in Marx’s social epistemology, in which Marx seeks to surmount Kant’s individualism but shares with him the idea that freedom consists in acting as a universal being, free from self-imposed illusions (Fleischacker 2013, 80-7). Mills’s social epistemology is deeply indebted to Marxism, and so Kant’s legacy enters also through the back door.

Finally, it should be pointed out that Mills has no problem with mainstream epistemology regarding topics which have no or little connection to social domination – say, astrophysics or logic. He thinks that, contra “parodistic versions of standpoint theory”, there is an overlap among the experiences of different people by virtue of their common humanity – having particular perceptual and cognitive faculties (Mills 2002, 21). This “makes the Cartesian [or Kantian, for that matter] project plausible in the first place” (Mills 1998, 28). Notice that this common human-cognitive dimension is also important in debating social issues. Obviously not all non-whites agree on everything, so a way to

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<sup>21</sup> Mills makes an analogous reference to Rawls, who has a very similar view to Kant. Rawls asserts that “in public questions, ways of reasoning and rules of evidence for reaching true general beliefs that help settle whether institutions are just should be of a kind that everyone can recognize” (Rawls 1980, 539). Principles resting upon false beliefs or those uncommonly understood are to be rejected, even if they work well (Rawls 1980, 540). He calls this condition *publicity*. Mills claims that non-ideal liberalism would have to reorient publicity to address cognitive distortions of a social kind (Mills 2017a, 208).

adjudicate competing claims would be necessary – for instance by appealing to canons of rationality, pointing out logical fallacies, etc. (Mills 2002, 26).

## 2. V. Conclusion

I have argued that factual objectivism plays an essential role in Mills's attempt to disclose the history and current workings of structural racial domination, which tend to remain invisible under mainstream theoretical paradigms. This aspiration renders the radical Enlightenment more objective and epistemically privileged in comparison to the mainstream Enlightenment (Mills 2002, 17-8). Objectivity is spelled out positively in Mills's work. It is not only possible to make true claims (in some subjects, at least), but it is also an ideal. Truth – for example, the claim that modern societies are white supremacist – is objective. Truth is ultimately primary, as standpoint theory does not imply a necessary and automatic epistemic dis/advantage. But attention to social-epistemic mechanisms is crucial if one takes seriously the ideal of factual objectivism. Moreover, adherers of social epistemology will be especially aware of the risks of misrepresenting reality. I have also suggested that impartiality, as an objective and rational stance that facilitates knowledge attainment, is central for Mills, and that his position is influenced by Kant's account of enlightenment. Even while rejecting Kant's individualism and ahistoricism, Mills still believes, like Kant, in impartiality as an epistemic ideal. The notions of thinking from the standpoint of others, distancing oneself from particularistic biases, and striving to have rationally grounded beliefs are preserved in his radical Enlightenment work. However, attention is given to racial group hierarchies, social mechanisms of knowledge and ignorance, and the perspectives of subjugated non-whites.

I have dealt with the principle of the supremacy of rationality through the prism of factual objectivism. This conforms with how Mills defines it in his *Radical Enlightenment* essay – that we can and should know the social world. For both Kant and Mills, beliefs and claims must be rationally grounded. Scrutinizing beliefs and justifications, as well as thinking from the standpoint of others, are vital for realizing the ideal of impartiality. Rationality, moreover, enables the definition of concepts such as 'white supremacy' and 'the

racial contract'. Such concepts mediate the production of knowledge and have an emancipatory potential (Mills 2010, 180-1). Furthermore, a central aspect of Mills's career has been the facilitation of a discursive sphere between different paradigms, in which the marginalized can directly engage with the mainstream (Mills 1997, 3-4, 132; 2002, 26-7; 2017a, 192; 2017b, 36; Pateman and Mills 2007, 115). Yet he also criticizes what he sees as the idealization of human cognition in ideal theory (Mills 2017a, 76). He insists on the importance of group motivations and vested interests in determining people's beliefs and actions. Furthermore, epistemic confidence is not automatic for the historically oppressed; one must develop "faith in one's ability to know the world" (Mills 1998, 112).

According to Mills, having an accurate description of the social facts will lead to radical outcomes in the normative sphere. This is the subject of the next chapter.

### 3. Moral objectivism

#### 3. I. Constructivism

Whereas factual objectivism implies the possibility of knowledge, whereby what is true is generally so for everyone, moral objectivism suggests that there are generally valid ('true') values, rights, or normative principles. Moral objectivism differs from moral relativism, which rejects objective criteria for morality, and with moral conventionalism, whose only such criteria are *actual* social agreements about morality. Hence objectivists can, on moral grounds taken to be objective, argue for and against certain actions, policies, political and economic institutions, and so on. This is characteristic of Enlightenment philosophy. Locke, for example, advocates moral *realism*. He believes that all persons are free and equal by virtue of natural laws: universally binding moral rights external and antecedent to humans that reason can discover (Rickless 2014, 169). The competing objectivist position, often associated with Kantianism, is *constructivism*. Kantian constructivists such as Rawls judge moral realism as incompatible with autonomy and self-legislation, viewing morality instead as depending on reason. Constructivism considers objective normative principles as (A) reasonable, unbiased, and non-particularistic (i.e. not reflecting the subjective interests of a particular person/group). It is claimed that they would be accepted by everyone in a fair set up procedure of rational deliberation and justification, often in the form of a reflective thought experiment, and under conditions of impartiality and universality. The objectivity of the procedure renders the resulting normative principles 'correct' (Bagnoli 2021). Normally, constructivism sees normative principles also as (B) universally binding on all agents – though often more modestly than realism, justifying principles for a *specific* kind of society (not all possible societies). Let us call these two senses, respectively, 'objective-as-reasonable' and 'objective-as-universally-binding'.

Mills, it will be argued, utilizes Kantian constructivism for contesting racial domination and justifying principles for its elimination. In doing so, he modifies and radicalizes Rawls's idealized contractualism by acknowledging the legacy of white supremacy. Kantian constructivism attempts to establish an impartial perspective by abstracting away from

contextual substance that may bias the choice of normative principles (e.g. natural inclinations, tradition, history). This view, propagated by Kant and Rawls, has been extremely influential in mainstream moral and political philosophy. Perhaps this is the reason that critics, both liberal and radical, see Mills's empirically informed contractualism as unable to justify objective normative principles, or argue that it ultimately depends on Rawlsian ideal theory for doing so. This chapter rejects these claims. I maintain that despite his empirical focus, Mills manages to set up a fair and impartial rational choosing procedure that blocks particularistic tendencies (at least as well as Rawls). I moreover argue that Mills incorporates a descriptive (empirical) picture in a similar way to Rawls, but that Rawls's factual picture is idealized and distorted, while Mills draws extensively on the ignored realities of racial domination. Finally, I emphasize Mills's claim that recognizing white supremacy is the only way to avoid white particularism and be able to generate objective racial justice principles. Nevertheless, while my argument reinforces the case that Mills's radical contractualism is morally objectivist substantively, it is not a comprehensive defense of this claim.

I begin with an overview describing the constructivist devices of Kant and Rawls before moving on to discuss Mills. Simplifying things, Kantian constructivism has three elements: (1) *Setup*, i.e. the framing of the moral choice situation and how the choosing agents are conceptualized; (2) *testing*, i.e. the process of rational deliberation whereby normative principles are chosen; (3) *application*, i.e. deciding on the actions/policies that will realize the normative principles (moral judgment). All three stages involve some level of critical distancing from context for ensuring objectivity. My focus is on (1) and (2) because I am interested in the objectivity of the normative principles themselves, not their application.

### **3. II. Kant's categorical imperative**

Kant's constructivist device is his supreme moral principle, the categorical imperative (CI), which requires one to only act on maxims that one could also will to become a universal law (a maxim is a freely chosen plan of action including its circumstances and its

end) (O'Neill 2003, 354; GMS 4:402). Let us first examine the (1) setup of the CI and how it frames moral deliberation. Kant holds that the concept of a moral *law* presupposes necessity and universality (in contrast to a recommendation). Subjective inclinations and empirical facts are contingent, fleeting, and changing and thus cannot be the ground of a universal and necessary morality. Thus Kant seeks

“a pure moral philosophy which is fully cleansed of everything that might be in any way empirical and belong to anthropology; [...] the ground of obligation here is to be sought not in the nature of the human being or the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but *a priori* solely in concepts of pure reason” (GMS 4:389).

Devoid of empirical substance, what is left is to turn to reason itself, to the “lawfulness” (the form) of the concept of morality, from which Kant derives the universal formula of the CI (GMS 4:402). So Kant goes to great lengths in making sure (according to him) that the particularities of life will not frame moral deliberation. The set up of the CI is meant to ensure an impartial and universal perspective.

This gives us the constructivist device, but not concrete moral duties. In the (2) testing phase, the permissibility of maxims is to be assessed. The CI demands that we do not privilege ourselves with respect to others by acting on a maxim while simultaneously rejecting that possibility for others. Particularistic maxims, i.e. maxims that cannot be embraced by all, are to be rejected, and a moral duty is generated which prohibits acting on them (GMS 4:403; O'Neill 2003, 355).<sup>22</sup> As Onora O'Neill explains, “[a]n agent's maxim is a particular. Unlike principles and instantiations of principles, it can be individuated only by referring to a person, and so to a place and a time” (O'Neill 2013, 62). So contextual substance, embodied in the agent's maxim, plays a crucial role in the generation of moral duties. Kant poses some limitations on the maxims that could be tested, e.g. their phrasing cannot be too specific (O'Neill 2013, 156-7). But appropriately formulated maxims can generally represent all kinds of real or hypothetical situations.

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<sup>22</sup> I focus here on perfect duties (of prohibition).

On Kant's account, then, moral objectivity has two senses. Firstly, the CI is meant to establish an impartial, unbiased, and non-particularistic frame for rational moral deliberation. While contextual substance plays a vital role in the construction of moral duties, it enters only in the testing phase and is subject to the condition of universalizability. The resulting moral duties are then to be considered objective-as-reasonable. Secondly, since moral duties stem from a universal and necessary principle, uncontaminated by 'anthropology', Kant sees them in terms of what I called objective-as-universally-binding (on all rational beings in all possible societies) (GMS 4:416).<sup>23</sup>

### **3. III. Rawls's Kantian constructivism**

The CI was a major influence on Rawls, who adapted it from a device concerned with individual moral relations to deal with justice for the basic structure of society. In Kantian constructivism, says Rawls, objective normative principles are those which appear as the most reasonable for persons defined as free, equal, and rational ('a Kantian conception of the person') (Rawls 1980, 519). So Rawls seeks to develop a device which would enable persons so conceived to mutually justify principles of justice for regulating the institutions of their society (Rawls 1980, 516). His proposed device is the original position (OP), a thought experiment describing a fair procedure of moral deliberation. The OP is (1) set up in this way. In order to guarantee fairness, the deciding parties are symmetrically situated with equal bargaining power behind a veil of ignorance, deprived of certain information about the real society (for which they choose justice principles) and their own particular social situation, including their class status, natural talents, dispositions, and conception of the good (Rawls 1980, 522-3). In the (2) testing phase, the parties are to rationally agree on the principles most likely to advance their interests, whatever they turn out to be on the other side of the veil (Rawls 1980, 524). They do not test maxims as in Kant's CI but rather assess pre-given conceptions of justice from the history of philosophy (Rawls 1971, 122-4). General and uncontroversial facts from the social, political, and natural sciences

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<sup>23</sup> I do not consider objections to Kant's position because Mills's constructivism is more Rawlsian than Kantian. My discussion of Kant provides the necessary background for understanding Rawls's constructivism.

are also available behind the veil, in order to facilitate decision-making (Rawls 1980, 541-3). Nevertheless, as stated, the choosers lack knowledge about themselves and their society; only empirical information consistent with a conception of persons as free, equal, and rational is available behind the veil. Rawls argues that the following two principles would be chosen: (i) equal basic liberties for all and (ii) fair equality of social and economic opportunities whereby economic inequalities are only legitimate if they are to the advantage of the worst-off (Rawls 1971, 60-1).

Commentators including Mills and Samuel Freeman maintain that Rawls's aspiration to moral objectivity transformed over the course of his career. The early Rawls of *A Theory of Justice* (1971), they argue, aspired like Kant for a conception of justice valid for all societies. However, from the 1980s he gradually began to retreat in scope to focus on modern democracies (Mills 2017a, 38; Freeman 2019). In *Theory*, Rawls claims that taking the perspective of the original position "is to regard the human situation not only from all social but also all temporal points of view" (Rawls 1971, 587). He explains the OP "as a procedural interpretation of Kant's conception of autonomy and the categorical imperative" (Rawls 1971, 256; Freeman 2019). The idea, which is retained but formulated less strongly in his 1980 essay on Kantian constructivism, is to adapt the CI to model an impartial perspective that takes a critical distance from particularities which might bias rational deliberation about justice. Such a perspective is supposed to be respectful of the Kantian conception of persons as free, equal, and rational, and any empirical information inconsistent with the latter must be unavailable to the choosing parties behind the veil (Rawls 1971, 256; 1980, 549). As Freeman argues, Rawls believed that in this way he had, like Kant, allowed reason to give principles to itself (Freeman 2019). Nevertheless, already in *Theory* Rawls raises the worry that his justice conception might not be adequate for non-ideal societies, although he believes it would have some relevance (Rawls 1971, 245-6). Later, in his 1980 essay, Rawls proposes (alongside the Kantian interpretation) a more modest argument. He says that the conception of persons as free, equal, and rational is "implicitly affirmed" in the public culture of modern democracies. So, unlike Kant, he does not seek justice principles (for Kant: moral duties) suitable for all societies. His explicit focus is on modern (and well-ordered; more on that later) democracies where the ideals of freedom and equality are affirmed (Rawls 1980, 518). Hence, on this second



interpretation, Rawls frames the OP with more than a hint of conventionalism, which Kant would have rejected as contingent. While the 1980 essay is somewhat ambiguous, offering both a Kantian-objectivist and a more conventionalist argument, in his later writings, Freeman claims, “Rawls detaches the ideal of free and equal moral persons from the Kantian Interpretation”. “Rawls ‘brackets’ (he neither affirms nor denies) claims about the nature and possibility of moral truth and universal objectivity” (Freeman 2019).

In my subsequent analysis of Rawls’s moral objectivism, I refer to his 1970s-80s work. In it, Rawls definitely thinks of his principles of justice in the objective-as-reasonable sense (non-particularistic, justified by a fair and impartial constructivist device), and his conviction is also shared by commentators (Shelby 2013, 150; Freeman 2019). (Of course, Mills disagrees, arguing that the veil’s blocking of social-knowledge results in representing the particularistic white male perspective. I discuss this below.) There is more debate regarding the extent to which Rawls’s principles are objective-as-universally-binding. Some claim that his theory depends too strongly on real-world contingent facts and is limited in scope (Valentini 2012, 657-8). As stated, Rawls himself was unsure about the extent to which his principles of justice are valid in contexts other than modern democracies with fully compliant citizens who respect equality and freedom. However, he did not rule out that his principles could prove helpful (Rawls 1971, 245; Rawls 1980, 518). According to Tommie Shelby, Rawls’s theory *does* include oppressive societies within its scope of assessment. Rawls does not remain agnostic on whether undemocratic, racist, and exploitative societies are unjust, since the principles that govern them would not be chosen in the OP (Shelby 2022, 51). This does not mean, however, that Rawls’s theory is fitting for *correcting unjust societies* (as Mills argues, see below). In any case, if one affirms the objective-as-reasonable status of Rawls’s principles, then they would at least be objective-as-universally-binding in a limited sense – applying universally *within societies such as the one he describes* (while, admittedly, such societies have likely never existed). I do not take a stance on these issues but am proceeding under the assumption that many of those who question the objective validity of Mills’s normative principles accept Rawls’s theory as objective in at least a minimal sense.

### 3. IV. Mills's radical constructivism

In Mills's view, the problem with Rawls is his commitment to ideal theory. Rawls seeks principles of justice for well-ordered societies – whose political institutions satisfy the demands of justice and are designed for the benefit of citizens who, in turn, follow the rules (Rawls 1971, 4-5). But Mills argues that modern Western societies are ill-ordered, coercive, and exploitative ventures with rules and institutions designed for white advantage (Mills 2017a, 211). Race, as a social construct brought into existence by racial domination, cannot even exist under ideal theorizing which ignores racial domination by definition (Mills 2017a, 34-5). Hence, Mills claims, Rawls's ideal theory and its justice principles cannot provide proper guidance for actual racist societies. Instead, principles of *corrective* justice are necessary, aiming at eliminating racial domination and illicit white advantage (Mills 2017a, 211).

Mills does not dismiss Rawlsianism altogether but attempts to radically revise it and turn it non-ideal. He views the OP as the essence of Rawls's theory and attempts to modify it to represent a different choice situation wherein racial domination is acknowledged behind the veil (but the choosers still lack self-knowledge). In this way, 'Rawlsian' principles of corrective justice would be generated (Mills 2017a, 212). His proposal, black radical liberalism, begins with a theoretical recognition of white supremacy as central to the modern world and is concerned with overcoming the ill-ordered, unequal, hierarchical, and exploitative societies it created. This background picture, radically different from what he takes to be Rawls's idealized social setting, drives black radical liberalism to "rethink the categories, crucial assumptions, and descriptive and normative frameworks of liberalism" (Mills 2017a, 203, 207-8). The principles envisioned by Mills non-ideally mirror Rawls's. They are tasked, firstly, with eliminating non-whites' unequal civic status (rights and liberties) and unproportional political power; secondly, with stopping non-whites' exploitation, economic marginalization, and establishing equality of opportunities; and, thirdly, with realizing and publicly recognizing the equal moral status (respect) of non-whites (Mills 2017a, 214-5).

Black radical liberalism locates the empirical reality front and center, unlike Kant and Rawls. What does it mean for its objectivity? According to Basevich (discussing the reception of Mills's work), liberals tend to see race and the experience of oppressed groups as contingent matters "that detract from a sound normative political theory".

"In Kant/Rawls circles, to say that one's work is not 'normative' is akin to dismissing it as *meaningless*. [...] The standard objection implies that if an argument unfolds in a non-ideal empirical context, then it pertains to contingent empirical matters that are irrelevant to higher-order theoretical matters. Even if Charles is right, it doesn't matter because his critique does not concern the more 'essential' issues of 'real' philosophy, such as the moral validity of first principles" (Basevich 2021, 76).

In other words, those liberal critics claim that Mills's empirically informed theory is unable to justify objective normative principles. In a sense, their worry is legitimate. If a theory hinges on contingent empirical matters, it is liable to generate normative principles on the basis of subjective biases or particularistic interests. In such a case, the normative prescriptions would cease being objective. Another worry is that introducing a factual picture into the theory would result in an uncritical defense of the status quo (Valentini 2012, 659). This worry is intensified by the fact that the Counter-Enlightenment has traditionally been concentrated on the particular distinctions between peoples and cultures and castigated the universalist ideal of the classical Enlightenment (Sternhell 2010, 28-9). This is why Kant and Rawls try to ensure impartiality by blocking, in different ways, the influence of contextual substance on normative reasoning. However, while I agree that normative theory should beware of particularism, I claim that Mills's constructivism is not susceptible to the mentioned issues and is no less objective than Rawls's.

Firstly, for Mills, attention to the empirical non-ideal reality is not a bug but a feature that constitutes objectivity (as also discussed in chapter 2). He argues that Rawls's ideal theory collapses into white subjectivism and particularism *because* it abstracts away from actual racial oppression. It is impossible to develop concrete proposals for corrective justice without first theorizing the latter, including its history and legacy in the present, and its impact on institutions and agents. Ignoring racial domination can only reflect the unrepresentative experience and serve the interests of those who benefit from it (Mills 2017a, 80). So if objective normative principles are supposed to be reasonable, unbiased, and non-particularistic, then Rawls's idealized methodology is hardly the way to go.

Secondly, even if one rejects this critique of ideal theory, notice that Mills's radical OP retains the Kantian framing that is meant to guarantee a fair and impartial procedure of normative reasoning. Moral objectivism is crucial for Mills, its merit being the possibility "to abstract away from the biases and contingent perspectives, the 'parochial outlook', of the tribe, and strive for 'impartiality'" (Mills 2015b, 24). In this way, it is possible to 'externally' challenge racist practices (Mills 2015b, 23-5).<sup>24</sup> Thus, while the parties in Mills's revised OP know that the society for which they choose corrective justice principles has been shaped by white supremacy – "[s]elf-knowledge is still blocked by the veil (so as to guarantee objectivity)" (Mills 2017a, 213). Rawls, discussing the application of his justice principles (the 'four-stage sequence'), writes that even if more social knowledge becomes available to the parties, "[p]rovided they have no information about particular individuals including themselves, the idea of the original position is not affected" (Rawls 1971, 198). The parties in Mills's radical OP are all the same situated symmetrically and fairly with equal bargaining power behind a veil of ignorance that blocks self-knowledge. Mills points out that in oppressive societies, "the group interests of the privileged and their differential group experience will generate rationalizations of the existing order", posing difficulties for social justice projects (Mills 2017a, 177; see also chapter 2 in this thesis). The revised OP is supposed to correct such distortions, enabling whites to have a more objective (reasonable, impartial, non-particularistic, and non-subjective) perspective on racial matters that can recognize the impermissibility of racial injustice and the need to eliminate it. So the parties are to test different social possibilities that have a white-supremacist state as an ancestor. Worried they might turn out as members of a subjugated racial group, they would prudentially choose principles for transforming the social structure (Mills 2017a, 213). Mills's motivation is precisely to challenge the unjust status quo.

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<sup>24</sup> Already in 1989, during his early Marxist period, Mills suggests a "re-examination" of the relativism and nihilism often attributed to Marx, so as to "open up the theoretical possibility of an objectivist ethic influenced in its development by alternate (non-distorting) paths of determination" (Mills 2010, 70). So although his position was not yet Kantian/Rawlsian, his radical Enlightenment outlook was already present.

Thirdly, notice that empirical matters have always played a role in liberal philosophy, even if this has been largely implicit or unacknowledged. Mills reminds us that Enlightenment liberalism was once a revolutionary ideology that motivated political revolts against absolutism and totalitarianism. The radical Enlightenment simply suggests additional legitimate targets – class society, patriarchy, and white supremacy (Mills 2002, 11, 23; Pateman and Mills 2007, 87). Rawls, I argue, implicitly takes such contextual substance into account. Behind the veil, Rawls’s parties opt for a modern democratic republic with basic liberties and separation of powers. They make this choice based on basic knowledge in political science and political philosophy which they possess. But this liberal discourse emerged and developed in opposition to absolutist and totalitarian domination. Rawls takes this contextual substance for granted. Mills proposes that racial (and gender) domination has been so central to the making of the modern world, and as such is also not contingent. Thus it should also form part of the political knowledge available behind the veil (Pateman and Mills 2007, 233-4; Mills 2009b, 175; Basevich 2021, 76). Additionally, Mills argues, to the extent that Rawls’s concern with fair equality of opportunity and economic redistribution is informed by actual class inequalities, Rawls is doing non-ideal theory (Pateman and Mills 2007, 120; Mills 2017a, 227n15). Remember, furthermore, that Rawls is concerned with a conception of justice for modern well-ordered democracies. So a conception of corrective justice for white-supremacist societies should not raise any problems with respect to moral objectivity that Rawls’s theory does not.

Finally, the stage at which empirical substance enters the constructivist device is decisive. According to Kant, the CI is derived a priori from reason, independently of ‘anthropology’, but he generally does not pose limits on the contextual information (embodied as a maxim) which the CI can test. Rawls’s setup of the OP is more modest, but on one interpretation it appeals to a Kantian conception of persons as free, equal, and rational – a conception ‘thin’ on ‘anthropological’ substance. In the OP’s testing phase, contextual matter plays a larger role. Since Mills appropriates the OP, he arguably also borrows the thin Kantian conception of persons from which the OP is derived.<sup>25</sup> In other words, real-

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<sup>25</sup> Chapter 4 discusses Mills’s appropriation of Kantian personhood, which might also vindicate the claim that Mills subscribes to a Kantian conception of persons as free, equal, and rational.

world knowledge about white supremacy has nothing to do with the justification of the constructivist device itself; it plays a role only in the testing phase. In sum, I do not believe that Mills's empirical focus yields a non-normative, subjective, or particularistic theory. If one accepts Rawls's method as objective-as-reasonable (as many liberals do), the same must apply to Mills. And that would also mean that his principles of corrective justice are objective-as-universally-binding for white-supremacist polities (and similarly structured societies of racial/ethnic domination), although not for 'all possible worlds'.<sup>26</sup>

At this point, consider Shelby's challenge to Mills. Shelby is sympathetic to Mills and his radical project but thinks his total rejection of ideal theory is wrong. For Shelby, non-ideal theory logically depends on ideal theory (Shelby 2013, 153). The purpose of ideal theory is "to justify general principles", while that of non-ideal theory "is to assess the degree to which the actual world diverges from the ideal principles of justice and to chart a feasible course, *from where we now stand*, to the realization of these principles" (Shelby 2013, 151). Shelby holds that ideal theory is necessary in order to spot an injustice in the first place, for how can Mills characterize modern societies as unjust and in need of correction? (Shelby 2013, 153) Non-ideal theory "cannot succeed without knowing what the standards of justice are". Without ideal theory, he concludes, "we could not be confident in the direction social change should take" (Shelby 2013, 156). Paraphrasing Shelby, I take the relevant challenge to be this: Absent ideal theory, Mills's non-ideal theory is both (i) unable to identify injustice unless it resorts to subjective common sense and (ii) lacks a vision of an ideal society that corrective justice should realize. Both (i) and (ii) are necessary for justifying corrective justice principles. So Mills's principles are unreasonable and thus not objectively valid.

In response to (i), I maintain that non-ideal theory *is* in fact able to identify injustice independently from ideal theory. In a discussion of non-ideal feminist liberalism, Mills points out that the choice behind the veil is not ethical but prudential. The choosing parties enter the feminist revised OP knowing about gender inequality, e.g. women's confinement

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<sup>26</sup> This paragraph does not contradict Mills's claim that ideal theory is ahistorical. For him, the problem is not that ideal theory has no background picture of society but that the picture it does have distorts and misrepresents actual societies (Pateman and Mills 2007, 234).

to the domestic sphere and underrepresentation in politics and well-paid jobs, but this is not yet a normative conviction. They do not judge such inequalities as *unjust* but acknowledge them as a factual description of gender-based social differences. Since the parties know they might turn out as women in the real society, they would choose, on self-interested grounds, principles for realizing gender equality (Mills 2009b, 174). As Rawls explains, prudentially chosen principles become normative only in the ‘real’ society on the other side of the veil, that is, only ‘outside’ the thought experiment (Rawls 1980, 567-8). It is possible to think of a parallel argument for black radical liberalism. The parties would evaluate racial inequalities (in the descriptive sense) and judge, on prudential reasons, that they are undesirable. They would then choose principles accordingly. Even if Shelby is right, and it is impossible to know which principles to choose without knowing what an ideal society looks like, the choosers would at least have the conviction that *some* change is desirable. Hence non-ideal theory is capable of identifying injustice.

However, even if this is conceded, Shelby would repeat (ii) that deciding between conceptions of corrective justice requires a picture of ideal justice for guiding our way. Consider, for example, that one set of principles could drastically improve a situation in the short term but would, somehow, make it more difficult to achieve full justice later on. One would have to adjudicate between different normative possibilities – more justice now or full justice later – and that would mean that ideal theory and its picture of an ideally just society must figure in deliberations about corrective justice (Valentini 2012, 661-2). Therefore, it will be argued, if Mills rejects ideal theory, he is unable to reasonably justify normative principles.

Mills would have replied that Rawlsian ideal theory obscures too much about real societies and thus fails to provide a genuine theorization of ideal justice. One needs non-ideal theory in order to see those oppressive structures in the first place. Consider gender again. Following Susan Moller Okin, Mills argues that prescriptions for realizing equality for women in the family cannot be deduced a priori from the ideal of equality itself. Such prescriptions require empirical knowledge about the workings and intersections of modern families, political institutions, and market economy. To the extent that justice in the family is part of an ‘ideal’ conception of justice, it may be that non-ideal theory is all that is

needed (Mills 2017a, 86-7). Non-ideal theory is also more helpful in dealing with injustices committed in the past, which would give rise to principles of rectification (e.g. reparations for slavery). Shelby agrees that ideal theory hardly helps with determining principles of rectification (Shelby 2013, 154). Moreover, arguing in favor of rectification does not require a vision of full justice. Rectification need not be justified instrumentally as a way to realize equality but may simply be advocated as part of a deontological duty of respect. Shelby makes this point, stating that even if full substantive material equality for oppressed groups were achieved, reparations may still be in order on grounds of repentance, reconciliation, and establishment of trust (Shelby 2013, 159-60). To sum it up with Mills, “one could say epigrammatically that the best way to bring about the ideal is by recognizing the non-ideal” (Mills 2017a, 90).<sup>27</sup>

### **3. V. Conclusion**

Certainly, I have not supplied a full defense of black radical liberalism’s moral objectivity. As stated, Rawls’s own account of moral objectivism is heavily debated. Kantian constructivism itself has many objections, and philosophers within the tradition have disagreements (for an overview, see Bagnoli 2021). Nor did Mills fully work out his normative theory before his passing. Nevertheless, at the very least, I have argued that a commitment to moral objectivism plays a fundamental role in Mills’s black radical liberalism, allowing him to challenge white supremacy and propose corrective principles on objective grounds. At the same time, recognizing actual racial domination is necessary in order to avoid white particularism and subjectivism and substantively realize the objectivist commitment.

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<sup>27</sup> Let me qualify my claims in this passage. I restrict them to Rawls’s ideal theory. I do not consider other varieties of ideal theory, whether by other authors or pertaining to ethics (not justice). Mills might not have rejected “ideal” Kantian moral duties such as to develop one’s moral character or refrain from using others merely as a means, but he would have insisted that understanding many of the failures to realize these ideals, and eventually overcoming them, requires a radicalization in the form of a theory of social domination (Mills 2018b, 12, 17; see also chapter 4). I am also by no means arguing that the concepts and devices developed in ideal theory are useless.



In moral as in factual objectivism, the principle of rationality is central. Kantian constructivism is based on the idea that human reason can justify normative principles. Objective normative principles are those which appear as most reasonable for rational beings. Supplementing the OP with an accurate account of white supremacy should, according to Mills, correct the cognitive distortions of white particularism.

As argued, particularistic perspectives are antithetical to moral objectivism. The next chapter is concerned with another aspect of the particularism-universalism divide.

## 4. Universalist and egalitarian humanism

The principle of universalist and egalitarian humanism describes what Benhabib simply calls “moral universalism”: “the principle that all human beings, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, bodily or physical ability, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious background, are entitled to equal moral respect” (Benhabib 2007, 12). Unlike in the previous chapter, then, I do not use ‘universalism’ to refer to the validity of normative claims. Rather, a universal normative theory would generally be committed to the emancipation of all people; it would contrast with a particularist theory, which aims only at the good of a particular group and/or argues for the incommensurability of social struggles.

This chapter argues that universalist egalitarian humanism, understood through the Kantian notion of personhood, has a key function in Mills’s radical work. I begin by introducing personhood, a moral status that entitles human beings to equal respect – a revolutionary and emancipatory view in its time. I then present Mills’s claims that personhood has in fact been predicated on the exclusion of non-whites, who have been considered unequal sub-persons. However, I argue that Mills retains the notion of Kantian personhood in a radically transformed version, now informed by the historical legacy of sub-personhood. The normative task becomes the substantive *realization* of personhood and equal respect for sub-persons. According to Mills, such a theory would be more universalistic than idealized Enlightenment accounts, which presuppose an already-recognized personhood and are therefore complicit in the perpetuation of non-white sub-personhood. I end the chapter by examining and replying to challenges regarding the universality of Mills’s theory.

### 4. I. Personhood and sub-personhood

Kant defines humanity, or personhood, as the rational capacity for morality. Universal self-legislation – the ability to give oneself the moral law (the categorical imperative) and respect it in action – has a unique worth in itself (GMS 4:435-6; Moran 2022, 28-9). Thus

he argues that rational beings (i.e. humans, but in principle any rational creature) are persons who must be considered as ends in themselves (GMS 4:428).<sup>28</sup> Personhood is “that which is elevated above all price, and admits of no equivalent” and, therefore, that which “has a dignity” (GMS 4:434). One of the CI’s formulations is precisely this: to always treat humanity, in one’s own person and in the person of others, as an end and never merely as a means. So persons have moral duties to respect other persons’ freedom and rights, never harm them, and assist them in pursuing their respective ends. Moreover, persons are to have self-respect, refrain from harming themselves, and perfect themselves by developing their own talents (GMS 4:429-30).

Now Mills views Kant’s notion of personhood as the best expression of Enlightenment egalitarianism. He notes its historical emancipatory potential in positioning the absolute value of all persons in defiance of the feudal world of differentiated moral and political standing. “It is a noble and inspiring ideal” (Mills 1997, 55; see also 1998, 68). Yet he argues that Kant has applied race as a demarcator of personhood. Non-whites were characterized as lacking the rational and moral capacities of whites, so that white personhood is introduced together with non-white sub-personhood. Kantian ‘egalitarianism’ was limited to the white population (Mills 1997, 69-72; 2018b, 13-4). In this inegalitarian ethics, “[p]ersons give each other respect but give disrespect to subpersons, who in turn, to show that they know their place in the scheme of things, are normatively required to show deference to persons” (Mills 1998, 72). This phenomenon is, of course, not limited to Kant’s philosophy but is rather a characteristic of modern history.<sup>29</sup> Non-whites were thought of as uncivilized, uncultivated, unreliable cognizers, and thereby as incapable moral and political agents (Mills 1997, 42-3, 59-60; 1998, 6). In reality as in mainstream philosophy, sub-personhood becomes the status of those who are denied the absolute moral worth as well as the civil rights and freedoms that are due to persons (Mills 1997,

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<sup>28</sup> Some interpret Kant as arguing that personhood is the general rational capacity to set any end and act in pursuit of that end (and not to recognize and respect the moral law specifically) (Moran 2022, 28-9).

<sup>29</sup> Fleischacker rejects the claim that Kant worked with a concept of sub-personhood (Fleischacker 2013, 121-2; 212n18). Anyway, this does not affect the argument presented here if one accepts the uncontroversial claim that non-whites have historically been treated as sub-persons.

56; 1998, 70). In fact, Mills asserts, (white) personhood itself was predicated on the disrespecting of non-whites. White self-respect depended on non-white deference (Mills 1997, 96; 1998, 111; 2010, 171). Modernity is often portrayed as contradictory, proclaiming universal equality and liberty but simultaneously giving rise to killings, slavery, conquest, and expropriation. This contradiction is solved, Mills claims, by noting the fact that the victims were sub-persons undeserving of equal respect (Mills 1997, 63-4). (As I discuss below, Mills argues that non-white women have been *non-persons*, located below sub-person non-white men.)<sup>30</sup>

The present time is generally defined by formal (nominal) equality and liberty for non-whites, but discrimination and oppression persists (in education, employment, housing, welfare, political power, law enforcement, etc.). It is often triumphantly claimed that non-whites enjoy equal personhood, so that no attempt is made to transform the oppressive structures which preserve non-white disadvantage (Mills 1997, 73-5; 2017a, 128-9). This unaddressed legacy marks the perpetuation of racial domination; non-white sub-personhood remains operative (Mills 2017a, 125). This, of course, echoes Mills's complaints against ideal theory, which in presupposing universal equality fails to notice inequality.

Thus Mills takes issue with personhood both in its white-supremacist and idealized versions. But far from rejecting the Kantian ideal of personhood altogether, he appropriates it for explaining what is wrong with racial domination. I want to emphasize, as I show in chapter 1, that Mills explicitly defines personhood in Kantian terms, implying the duty to respect persons and never treat them merely as a means; it is not a generic notion of respect, and he moreover defines it in opposition to Lockean-proprietarian personhood. Like contemporary Kantians, Mills states that non-whites *are* objectively persons. But in contrast to the former, he is interested in a normative theory that registers the fact that non-whites have not been *recognized* as such (Mills 2015b, 13-4; 2017a, 210). Because this historical non-recognition resulted in non-white disadvantage, truly overcoming sub-personhood will require more than extending the moral operator of personhood to non-

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<sup>30</sup> According to Mills, the white working class in modernity, while oppressed, does achieve personhood status (Mills 2017a, 8). White women, however, have historically been sub-persons (Mills 2017a, 31, 93). Nevertheless, he thinks race has been more dominant than gender in shaping the modern Western world. I discuss this below.

whites (Mills 2017a, 209-10). Instead, it demands a transformation of the social structures that perpetuate sub-personhood.<sup>31</sup> He calls for “a self-reconstruction more radical than anything to be encountered in Western philosophy” (Mills 2010, 175). The struggle is both personal and political:

“It is a political struggle, insofar as it involves demands for independence, the challenge to imperial relations of power and domination. It is a cultural struggle, insofar as it involves a repudiation of pejorative depictions of oneself, or of depictions in which one’s self is completely absent. It is a moral struggle, insofar as it involves questions of fair treatment and ethical entitlement, debates over fundamental rights. It is an epistemological struggle, insofar as it involves the contestation of what counts as knowledge, the official version of history, and what sources of knowledge are deemed legitimate. And it is [...] an ontological, a metaphysical struggle, insofar as it involves an overturning of the accepted hierarchy of social being” (Mills 2010, 166).

Since this project is based on a Kantian conception of personhood, it is not surprising that Mills, as he developed his position further, suggested how it “can illuminatingly be translated into a Kantian discourse reshaped by the realities of racial subordination” (Mills 2018b, 2). Self-consciously working with a social ontology of racial groups (instead of abstract individuals) will have radical consequences for a Kantian moral and political philosophy. In the ethical realm, acknowledging and actualizing the imperative to treat persons as ends in themselves will require attention to social-racial factors and hardships. While mainstream Kantianism is mainly concerned with ahistorical forms of particularism, e.g. the natural inclination to selfishness, here white particularism will have to be theorized. The phenomena related to white ignorance will need to be overcome if whites are to treat non-whites with equal respect and successfully decouple their own self-respect from white superiority. Considering the perspectives of non-whites (more likely to be universalistic) will be a crucial corrective measure. Mills is nevertheless aware that non-whites will experience significant moral challenges of their own, including surmounting the internalizations of stigmas and refusing immoral and unjustified forms of resistance (Mills 2018b, 18-24).

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<sup>31</sup> Here Mills follows feminist critics of Rawls, who argued that that the nominal inclusion of women in the theory (‘add women and stir’) is insufficient; equality must be substantively realized by transforming oppressive social structures (e.g. unpaid care work) (Mills 2017a, 86-7).

Politically, Mills's radicalized contractualism asks what principles we should choose for correcting an unjust society given the commitment to Kantian personhood and the imperative to refrain from using others merely as a means (Pateman and Mills 2007, 19; Mills 2018b, 28; see chapter 3). Black radical liberalism locates equal respect front and center, "as a basic social good in keeping with both Kantian and Rawlsian norms", in attempting to correct the structural disrespect of non-white sub-persons on which modern Western societies were founded (Mills 2017a, 211). In a sense, respect is even more explicit and central in black radical liberalism than in classical Kantianism/Rawlsianism because of the self-conscious attempt to correct disrespect (Mills 2017a, 214).

Mills's radicalization of universalistic egalitarian humanism can now be appreciated. Firstly, this project is potentially more universalistic than classical Enlightenment liberalism, which takes personhood for granted and, therefore, does not confront illicit white advantage. Black radical liberalism "seeks to correct the (anti-universalist, anti-egalitarian) distortions in mainstream white liberalism, whether de jure or de facto, introduced by the complicity of that iteration of liberalism with white supremacy" (Mills 2017a, 201). Secondly, this entails a structural transformation of society, the necessity of which contemporary liberalism fails to appreciate. The struggle for realizing personhood "intrinsically poses a threat to the existing order insofar as that order has been constructed on the foundation of nonwhite inferiority" (Mills 2010, 177). This point is elucidated if we think of Mills's radical project in terms of what Tomba calls insurgent universality. In contrast to top-down universality, which descends on abstract citizens from above in the form of a presupposed juridical equality, "insurgent universality [...] is constituted by individuals who act in common and put into question the hierarchical organization of the social fabric" (Tomba 2015, 117). The oppressed, as a group, cannot achieve equal inclusion without challenging the social order in its entirety (e.g. women as a whole cannot attain a privileged status under patriarchy) (Tomba 2015, 119). Hence, modern struggles of insurgent universality have not been about formal inclusion within an unjust order but called into question "the politics of race, gender, and poverty undergirding the aristocracy of the white, male property-owner enshrined as the citizen in the new configuration of exclusions, hierarchies, and inequalities" (Tomba 2015, 130).

## 4. II. Criticisms

Some commentators have challenged Mills's commitment to universalist egalitarian humanism or his theory's capacity to realize it. In what follows, I present these challenges, explain their relevance to the subject of Mills's universalism, and respond to them by combining Mills's direct replies and my own exegesis.

To begin with, consider Glenn Loury's (who works on racial justice from a liberal perspective) comments on *The Racial Contract*. On his reading, Mills's critique of the Enlightenment's white particularism is a rebuttal of Enlightenment universalism as such, and Kantianism in particular:

“What are we to do? Overthrow Kantian ethics? And put what, exactly, in its place? Do we think democratic ideas are bad ideas? Do we think that striving for a racially transcendent, non-particularistic understanding of how we should interact with one another is an unworthy quest? To recognize the flaws of the liberal tradition is one thing; to replace it with something workable is quite another. [...] These are all the fruit of the Enlightenment, these ideas. One cannot throw them off because some of the Founding Fathers were themselves duplicitous or hypocritical. Thus a historically oriented effort to expose the particularity at the core of universalistic arguments may be interesting, but it is not a refutation of the universalistic claims” (Loury 2002, 120-1).

What I have so far argued suggests that Loury's reading is simply mistaken. Loury is not the only one who thinks that Mills's intention is to 'thrash' Enlightenment liberalism (see my introduction), so addressing this point is important. In a response to Loury, Mills makes the claim (familiar by now) that registering the facts about racial domination would make the theory more universalistic and potentially more effective in terms of correcting injustice and realizing equality (Pateman and Mills 2007, 244). I would add that, as I have shown, Mills is not only committed to universalism, but much of his manner of realizing it is predicated on Kantian concepts and devices. (It could be argued, in Loury's defense, that as he wrote this in 2002, Mills was still mainly preoccupied with a 'negative' critique of actual liberalism, that is, before turning to develop his alternative liberalism. But given Mills's explicit endorsement of Enlightenment ideals in *The Racial Contract*, and his appropriation of a Kantian conception of personhood in *Blackness Visible* (1998), Loury's reading seems strange.)

Challenging Mills's universalist egalitarian humanism requires something else: the claim that his commitment to universalism fails on a substantive level. Some theorists have questioned whether Mills's account is really committed to class justice (Sullivan 2017, 12; Slack 2020, 93). In the mid-2000s, Mills has argued that racial justice does not require the correction of class inequalities. As long as racial discrimination no longer occurs, even a libertarian polity with great class inequalities would count as racially just (Pateman and Mills 2007, 121-2). This point is not merely analytic but also strategic. A commitment to racial justice does not require endorsing "a left-liberal position on distributive justice. Rather, what we want is an uncontroversial, more minimalist position that can be accepted by all committed to redressing racial inequities" (Pateman and Mills 2007, 132).<sup>32</sup> In the same place, Mills sketches an early version of the revised Rawlsian thought experiment and argues only in favor of principles of corrective *racial* justice. He emphasizes that these principles would have to meet the approval of libertarians (Pateman and Mills 2007, 124). This has the ironic result, noted by Mills, that Rawls (who advocates redistribution and equal opportunities) is more radical with respect to class inequalities than Mills, for all his Marxist sympathies (Pateman and Mills 2007, 131). Despite his avowed radicalism, Mills ends up arguing, in his own words, "for a 'non-white-supremacist capitalism'" (Pateman and Mills 2007, 31). Such a non-racial polity arguably entails the correction of the legacy of disrespect towards non-whites, such that the latter would count as persons (although, admittedly, patriarchy would have to be considered too). However, as Mills only requests proportional representation of non-whites in each class, not all non-whites will escape class domination and poverty. Moreover, one might question whether a non-white-supremacist capitalism is even possible (in actuality, not analytically) because capitalism has been deeply racialized from the start, intertwined with conquest, the Atlantic slave trade, and expropriation – an objection that Mills also notes (Mills 2017a, 126). This, it may be contended, raises serious questions regarding the extent of Mills's universalistic commitments.

The crucial thing to note in response is that Mills makes different claims elsewhere. For a start, he thinks the project of racial justice can be integrated with class justice *as a*

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<sup>32</sup> For similar statements, see Mills 1998, 106; 2017a, 126, 177-9.



*strategy* for winning over white support. The plan (either Marxist or social-democratic) would be to convince white workers that splitting the working class along racial lines perpetuates class inequalities, so that a combined race-class justice project could lead to the improvement of their situation (Mills 2017a, 9, 133, 206). Notice, furthermore, how in the previous argument, bracketing class justice was a strategy for winning over white conservatives and libertarians, just as in this argument, foregrounding class domination is meant to appeal to white workers (because non-whites will need some white allies). However, in the latter case Mills uses the term class *justice*, demonstrating that not merely strategic but also normative aspects are involved. More importantly, in his 2017 outline of black radical liberalism, his anti-capitalist commitments are even more explicit. He states that “black radical liberalism would obviously be a left-wing variety”, able to reconcile liberalism and Marxism (Mills 2017a, 205). It would moreover be shaped by the recognition that liberal ideals

“are necessarily undermined by racial/white-supremacist capitalism. The traditional mistake of the white left has been to focus just on capitalism and class exploitation in the shaping of the modern world and not give sufficient attention to race, white supremacy, and racial exploitation. Any serious theorization of social justice needs to correct this omission” (Mills 2017a, 204).

These remarks suggest that a fully developed black radical liberalism could readily address class inequalities conjointly with the project of racial justice, in either a social-democratic or a more radical anti-capitalist form. In this citation, Mills also accepts the thesis of racial capitalism, suggesting that eliminating racial injustice cannot be achieved without addressing class domination and vice versa. Broad and universal emancipatory prescriptions, aiming at the realization of equal respect for non-white sub-persons as well as working class white persons (arguably treated merely as a means under capitalism), would then result from black radical liberalism.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> A similar line of response could be made with respect to Juliet Hooker’s claim that “it is not clear how black radical liberalism addresses black feminist critiques that stress the need to move beyond formal equality and economic exploitation in conceptions of racial justice” (Hooker 2018, 768). Indeed, the principles of corrective justice included in the outline of black radical liberalism do not explicitly address some of the specific issues identified by black feminism. However Mills did register the particular oppression of non-white non-person women, and discussed the insights of feminists of color at length (Pateman and Mills

It is furthermore important to notice that his earlier claims do not *reject* a project of class justice. His point is that non-white sub-personhood is linked to violations of basic liberties (e.g. slavery, apartheid, expropriation) that all liberalisms are arguably supposed to be committed to, despite their disagreements about economic redistribution (Mills 2017a, 177-9). Since Mills also expresses his doubts “about the current possibilities for [a Marxist] antisystemic change” (Pateman and Mills 2007, 32), he advances an argument for racial justice that brackets the controversies about class justice. But Mills was fully in favor of a class justice project and this is reflected in black radical liberalism.

However, consider the following weighty challenge. Kathryn Gines, confronting Mills’s radical contractualism from a black feminist perspective, maintains that it fails to properly address intersectional concerns. Intersectionality, of course, investigates the interlocking and co-constituting nature of oppressive social systems and the identities produced by them. Gines’s objections are made in response to Mills’s attempt to develop an intersectional contractualism, combining the racial and the sexual contract. There, Mills outlines four positions with differential social advantage/disadvantage and political power: white men (persons, full contractors), white women (sub-persons, partial contractors), non-white men (sub-persons, partial contractors), non-white women (non-persons, non-contractors). So whites (men and women) participate in the subjugation of non-whites; men (white and non-white) participate in the subjugation of women; white women are advantaged with respect to non-white men; and white men are the main beneficiaries and the dominant political power in the constitution of race- and gender-based oppression, while black women’s social position and political input is the lowest (Pateman and Mills 2007, 173-5). Gines’s first objection is directed against Mills’s claim that “race generally trumps gender”. This statement, she argues, is absurd because “Mills bypasses one of the central insights of feminists of color and intersectionality – the necessity to push beyond

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2007, 191-9). I maintain that this analysis (or other theorizations by black feminists) could readily be integrated into black radical liberalism – and Mills might have done that had he managed to develop it in full. In what follows I examine another black feminist challenge.

a singular, additive, comparative, or competing analysis of intersecting identities and interlocking systems of oppression” (Gines 2017, 27). The second objection is that Mills fails to register multiplicities other than gender and race (Gines 2017, 28n2).<sup>34</sup>

If important facts about oppression are misrepresented by Mills or, worse still, cannot be adequately grasped by his framework, then his theory is unlikely to offer a route towards universal emancipation. After all, Mills himself claims that philosophy needs an accurate factual picture of the non-ideal reality if it is to help in correcting the latter. Gines’s challenge is not grounded in an explicit avowal of Enlightenment ideals. But as Robin Kelley suggests, black feminists have been responsible for “some of the most sophisticated statements of [universalist] radical humanism”, which is truly inclusive, anti-separatist, and committed to the emancipation of all people regardless of class, race, gender, and sexuality (Kelley 1997). Hence, if one accepts that Enlightenment philosophy must contain a substantive commitment to universalist egalitarian humanism, then Gines’s critique must be taken seriously. Let me turn to a possible response.

With respect to the first objection (that Mills separates race from gender), Mills argues that endorsing an intersectional framework does not preclude one from claiming that certain systems of oppression are more constitutive of others and/or are generally more dominant than others at a given point in time. This must be investigated empirically (Mills 2017b, 44). Nazi Germany, for instance, exemplifies a case where race is primary (Mills 2017b, 47). More generally, he points out the different standard periodization of gender, class, and race; gender seems “to go back to the origin of the species, but class and class societies arise only in the last few thousand years”, while race is normally held as a modern category (Mills 2017b, 43). While race is ‘newer’, he insists that it has become more predominant than gender (Pateman and Mills 2007, 173; Mills 2017b, 39). A framework that can register such differences is more realistic than one that cannot. A commitment to investigating the intersections of oppressive social structures is most welcome, but insisting aprioristically on a thesis of co-constitution that prevents claims about the asymmetry

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<sup>34</sup> Shannon Sullivan (2017) makes similar claims against Mills.

of such structures runs the risk of dogmatism. So it seems that Mills's framework is generally more accurate.<sup>35</sup>

Let us turn to the second objection (that Mills fails to register a multiplicity of social categories). For starters, it should be remembered that Mills's focus on race was meant to fill a theoretical void, supplementing the more established and developed socialist and feminist critiques. In his eyes, the following logical step was synthesizing race with gender. However, he adds, it was never supposed to deny other dimensions of racial patriarchy (e.g. class). Rather, it was proposed as a possible starting point for subsequent developments, which he strictly invites. His endorsement of social epistemology (chapter 1) demonstrates his conviction that integrating the alternative viewpoints of the oppressed is philosophically valuable. It must be noted that incorporating intersecting variables is a messy theoretical business, and that there is a limit to what can be theorized at any given time. Nonetheless, Mills thinks his theory is sufficiently accurate in terms of registering the general disadvantage of non-white women (which he defines in terms of non-personhood), even while ignoring that some non-white women are even less privileged (Mills 2017b, 37-8). However, when taking the insights of intersectionality seriously, it must be conceded that a project of racial and gender justice will have to simultaneously acknowledge and address the intersections with class, sexuality, and other multiplicities. Otherwise, genuine racial and gender justice could not be achieved. Given the practical impossibility of theorizing all forms of oppression at once (which moreover change over time), it may be that a comprehensive account of universal justice is simply unattainable. Instead, the strategy would have to be a gradual approximation of universal justice through concrete contributions. Note, however, that this conclusion vindicates the radical Enlightenment: the methodology would remain to incorporate theorizations of social domination into a normative theory aiming at the universal realization of equal respect. Mills's reply to Gines suggests that, since his account provides a generally accurate description of on-

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<sup>35</sup> Gines holds that a by-product of Mills's claim that "race trumps gender" is that he does not address the patriarchal role of non-white men (Gines 2017, 25). However, in the text on which Gines is commenting, Mills explicitly writes that "nonwhite women are at the bottom of the structure, dominated by all three groups", including "by nonwhite men through the racia-sexual contract (primarily) in its gender aspect" (Pateman and Mills 2007, 175).

going domination, it is able to reflect a relatively close approximation of substantive universality. Yet it is true that his universalism can be radicalized further by examining more dimensions and intersections of oppression. Moreover, the fact that Mills is conscious of the gaps in his theory and encourages supplementation is to his credit.

The last issue I will address has to do with black radical liberalism's capacity to facilitate a solidaristic struggle together with whites. Universalism entails the dedication to confront a wide array of social concerns – and Mills, as argued, is ready to do that. Yet some think his commitment cannot be realized. I have mentioned one such argument by Derrick Darby in the introduction. Juliet Hooker has similar doubts:

“[R]acial dynamics in the Trump era seem to point to white voters' increasing focus on symbolic rather than material losses manifested in a politics of white grievance [...]. This suggests that it would be difficult to recruit them to the kind of cross-racial antiracist alliance that Mills envisions” (Hooker 2018, 768).

Let us assume, for the discussion, that Hooker is correct. Two relevant conclusions could follow from this. First, it may be asserted that Mills's project, with its focus on rectifying past racial wrongs, has a narrower reach than an ideal theory that generates justice principles in abstraction from historical racial oppression. Darby goes in this direction, arguing that “[w]ith white social psychology being what it is, [Rawls] may offer us a surer, steadier, and stabler route to making reasonable headway on the race problem than [Mills]” (Darby 2019, 378). However, there is a sharp difference between a theory's reach and its normative commitment to addressing a broad range of wrongs that inflict a diverse population. Mills's radical Enlightenment project may be questioned regarding the former. But, as I have argued in this chapter, it is universal in the latter sense. Mills might have replied to Darby that the racial justice potential he sees in Rawls has certainly not been apparent in the decades since the publication of *A Theory of Justice*, and that this probably has to do with Rawls's inattention to racial injustice. Hence, on substantive-normative grounds, something like black radical liberalism is necessary. Moreover, it would be unfair to judge a theory mainly by its real-world impact, especially since its impact may be weakened by the same structures of oppression it seeks to undermine. Certainly, intersectionality does not lose its universalistic credibility only because it attracts even less mainstream philosophical attention than Mills.

A second possible conclusion is that one should abandon the liberal universalist project and advance the claims for racial justice through an alternative framework, e.g. a black radical project of “racial transformation *in spite of whites*”, as Lewis Gordon proposes (Mills 2010, 221), or even black separatism. Yet I think that Mills, being a universalist, believes that a particularist/separatist theory is neither a just alternative to white supremacy nor could it attain enough power to defeat it. He argues, “[a]n aggressively resurgent white nationalism seeking racial scapegoats and driven by (of course unjustified) *ressentiment* will not be defeated by an Afro-pessimist withdrawal either into quietism or separatist fantasies” (Mills 2018c, 769). Moreover, he does not believe that racial justice can be realized ‘in spite of whites’. One will have to debate with and win over white policy makers and legislators (Pateman and Mills 2007, 245-6). Furthermore, one of his frequent claims is that if whites are so reluctant to accept liberal proclamations about equality for non-whites, then they would be even more hostile towards non-liberal (non-mainstream) proposals (Mills 2002, 22). So if Rawlsian ideal theory liberalism is substantively uncongenial for racial justice, and if radical, non-liberal alternatives are both substantively and strategically problematic, then black radical liberalism seems like the better choice in terms of fostering transracial solidarity against racial injustice.

#### **4. III. Conclusion**

I have sought to demonstrate the key task of universalist and egalitarian humanism in Mills’s work, understood through Kant’s ideal of personhood and the imperative to treat persons as ends in themselves. The radical twist consists in acknowledging the legacy of non-white sub-personhood and non-personhood, and this highlights the unique challenges in the way of realizing equal respect in white-supremacist societies. In this sense, Mills’s suggestion is more radically universalist than idealized theories that take personhood for granted. I have also argued that the radical Enlightenment framework (and black radical liberalism concretely) is able to incorporate further multiplicities (e.g. gender and class), including their intersections, with the aim of approximating substantive universality. Mills’s work already started to move in this direction.

## Conclusion

As I have shown, the principles of Enlightenment – factual and moral objectivism, rationality, and universalist egalitarian humanism – play an essential role in Mills’s mission to reveal and condemn the structures of white supremacy that subordinate non-whites, and to sketch out a normative theory concerned with the elimination of illicit white advantage and achievement of substantive universal equality. Working in the tradition of oppositional Afro-modern philosophy, Mills heavily critiques the dominant Kantian variety of Enlightenment for its early overt racism and later idealizations that obscure racial domination. Yet he adopts central components of the Kantian apparatus and supplements them with a theory of racial domination in his endeavor to undermine the latter. Only such an act of radicalization, he believes, can lead to the true realization of Enlightenment ideals.

One reason why I find Mills’s radicalization project appealing is its methodology for harnessing the critical and emancipatory potential of the Enlightenment in attempting to challenge real-world injustice and offer principles for its correction. He offers an attractive model, in my opinion, for bridging the traditional philosophical opposition between, on one hand, universalism and objectivism and, on the other, context and difference (to paraphrase Alcoff, whose claims I mention in the introduction). In Basevich's words, “the distinctive challenge of his lifework compels philosophers to treat the likes of Rawls, Kant, and Du Bois as *interlocutors*” (Basevich 2021, 76).

I hold that Mills’s substantive commitment to the Enlightenment tradition should be given more attention in scholarly discussions. I believe that his liberal critics are mistaken to see his philosophy as antithetical to the main tenets of the Enlightenment, and Kantianism in particular. Mills may be right that white liberals will be inclined to reject his radicalization on ideological grounds that reflect particularistic white experiences and interests (Mills 2017a, 79). Yet, as argued, his work is faithful to and substantively predicated on the principles of the Kantian Enlightenment, so liberals who are likewise genuinely committed to the Enlightenment vision should be able to find good resources in it. Similarly, radicals misrepresent Mills when they read him as ‘thrashing’ the Enlightenment as

such or praise his challenge to classical liberalism while neglecting that his critique comes from within the Enlightenment. Many radicals denounce the philosophy of the Enlightenment without acknowledging its radical potential. But I would claim that Mills's work should provide them with good reasons to rethink that. In addition, contra realists and pragmatists who overstress the strategic aspects of his radical Enlightenment liberalism, I have demonstrated that Mills's endorsement of the latter is genuine and essential to his project. His argument would not have been the same without a substantive commitment to Enlightenment principles. Moreover, he asserts repetitively that black radical philosophy necessarily exists *in opposition* to racial subordination and hegemonic white philosophy – and much Afro-modern thought has historically involved the appropriation and transformation of the latter's concepts and devices. Finally, he adopted a radicalized Kantian apparatus as early as 1994 (as he began working on race), so his late black radical liberalism/Kantianism should not at all be seen as a break with his early critical period.

I want to briefly note several qualifications and reservations regarding my argument as well as possibilities for further research. Firstly, I have examined the principles identified by Mills as belonging to the core of Enlightenment philosophy. Yet the Kantian Enlightenment is predicated also on the principle of *autonomy* (individual and political). Autonomy is central for both Kant and Rawls (GMS 4:433; Rawls 1980, 527-8). It is moreover intertwined with rationality, universality, and objectivity, but it cannot be reduced to them. Hence the place of autonomy in Mills's philosophy could be investigated. While he does not say much explicitly, there are reasons for seeing autonomy as integral to his work, e.g. his view that it is possible to overcome (for whites) socialization into whiteness and (for non-whites) internalized stigmas and socially induced lack of self-respect; his rejection of communitarian conformism, which I have mentioned, and of poststructuralist accounts about the socially produced subject (Mills 2017a, 19-20); and his position that social structures are human-made and can be transformed for the better.

Secondly, I have been primarily concerned with Mills's critical philosophy of race and his close engagement with Enlightenment liberalism, both beginning in the 1990s. However, this is but one aspect of Mills's radical project; one can also look at his radicalization of Marxism, which would require an examination of his earlier work. My argument



has been that the principles of Enlightenment, understood through Kantianism, have a fundamental function within Mills's corpus and should receive more scholarly attention, but it undoubtedly does not tell the whole story. Concentrating on Marxism would enable a view of Mills's work from a different angle.

Thirdly, we must consider the possibility of radicalizing Mills further. Future integrations of theories of domination and marginalized viewpoints, which are missing from his account, may vindicate his radical methodology but also reveal the incompleteness, or even inadequacy, of his proposed principles of corrective justice. Moreover, applying his methodology in contexts significantly different from the USA is likely to produce different normative prescriptions.

Finally, I want to remark on how philosophers seeking to defend the Enlightenment, and Kantianism in particular, should go about in the light of Mills's argument. Dilek Huseyinzadegan refers to Mills's black radical Kantianism as a "plot twist" for Kantians. Mills puts forward the most developed demand from Kantian philosophers to face Kant's racism (and European white supremacy in general) as well as their own "methodological complicity in the racial sanitization of Western political and philosophical thought". Given racial domination, the discipline must be reoriented towards projects of corrective justice (Huseyinzadegan 2022, 652). In my view, Mills provides a great example for earnestly confronting the Enlightenment's darker side while retaining and modifying some of its core assumptions and normative ideals that are loaded with radical potential.

I close with a suggestion for another possible strategy for defending the classical Enlightenment. The idea would be, perhaps ironically, to look for its radical moments, scarce and rare as they may be. Mills describes the radical Enlightenment according to a narrative of supplementing the abstract and idealized classical Enlightenment with a theory of social domination. This narrative, while generally correct, has the drawback of obscuring the instances in which the classical Enlightenment has been radical. To be sure, Mills does mention some of those moments, for example in his depiction of liberalism as a political philosophy that arose in opposition to absolutism, by noting Kant's denunciation of religious domination (Mills 2018b, 28), and in his relative praise of Rawls's egalitarianism (which must involve, to some extent, non-ideal theory). But such claims occupy a minor

place in his work, sometimes relegated to footnotes. In that respect, Darby might be right that Mills “overlooks the possibility that left-wing liberals (black, white, and other) may see considerable radical potential [on class justice] in Rawls’s conception of justice as fairness as it currently stands” (Darby 2019, 375). And Mills may have downplayed the relative radicalism of Kant, too. Kant did not shy away from normative reflection on the real social and political world. His late “vocal critic[ism] of colonialism and slavery” (Kleingeld 2019, 8) is one example.<sup>36</sup> Various scholars argue furthermore that, underneath Kant’s abstract formulations in his political writings, a subversive theory, which was quite critical of political figures and oppressive social structures in Prussia, is to be found (Cavallar 1993, 117, 129-30; Fleischacker 2013, 13; Laursen 1996, 256, 266-7).<sup>37</sup>

Yet even if Mills does not generally mention these (relatively) radical moments himself, he supplies us with the standards and methodology for identifying such potentialities, finding out their relevance to present-day normative challenges, and radicalizing them further by incorporating the missing dimensions of race, gender, and class.

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<sup>36</sup> Mills is “agnostic” on whether the late Kant was a staunch critic of colonialism and slavery but insists that most of Kant’s normative texts are underwritten by white supremacy (Mills 2018b, 8).

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Kant’s condemnation of the Prussian “guardians” – military officers, tax collectors, and clergymen – who objected to freedom of expression and intimidated their subjects against exercising their reason in public, which for Kant is a precondition for the realization of enlightenment and a just polity (WA 8:35-7).

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