point of concentration—the compression of a sphere. The treatise a plane or circle. The treatise is the letter. The fragment the spirit" (*ibid*.).

In comparing the fragment and the treatise rather than fragment and system Fischer has simplified his task and certainly shortened his book. Both fragment and treatise originate in personal insight and an individuality clings to them no matter how moving or convincing their insight. But system touches on the possibility of public truth, the possibility of deception (and self-deception), and the health of cultural (i.e., conventional) standards that underpin the practice of politics and science that were the achievements of the Enlightenment. The world could use a dose of the Athenian multi-tasking that the Jena romantics so much admired.

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Karl Ameriks, *Kantian Dignity & Its Difficulties*. Oxford: OUP, 2024, 226pp. ISBN: 9780198917625

It seems standard for reviewers in their opening remarks to provide a brief overview of the problem at large, as if they are the expert, before turning to describe their interpretation of what the book under review aims to achieve. That would only serve me with a defeating endeavor, as Karl Ameriks in lucid and poignant fashion lays out the various intricacies related to Kant's theory of human dignity. Throughout the book, Ameriks speculates on the historical reception of Kant's theory, indicating its many turns in history, some of which are less than genuine. But *Kantian Dignity & Its Difficulties* is no simple and straightforward affair, as Ameriks posits challenging and thoroughly thought-provoking questions—some of which have no real answer, but must be asked anyway. Why didn't Kant—the champion of reason and enlightenment, the philosopher of human dignity and rights—say anything about the Declaration of Independence with its demand to fulfill universal equality and to promote the pursuit of happiness? Why did subsequent generations of Germans not carry on the Kantian project of dignity and instead dive headlong into obsessions with art and anti-democratic values? These are some of the heavy questions that Ameriks will deal with in the book and, I believe, he offers satisfying and sound responses.

In his introduction, Ameriks describes the many approaches to Kant's moral theory by other commentators, insisting himself on the moral realism standpoint in defense of Kant's commitments. Along the way, Ameriks

begins developing a cogent and much-appreciated argument concerning how moral realism contains hallmark Kantian notions—some of which have previously been deemed too ambiguous and indefensible—such as dignity, respect, character, and worth. Indeed, Ameriks points out the double feature of such terms and how less than careful attention to Kant's usage of those terms often leads to an unwarranted dismissal of his (misunderstood) position (20). As a whole, Ameriks claims that human dignity and the constellation of aforesaid moral concepts amounts to the *universal capacity of every rational agent to respect other moral agents*. His commentary takes the reader through the many moral entanglements of western philosophy like a rabbit making its way in a thicket of briars, but finding passage by way of reliance on Kant's textual guidance. Though, as the subtitle states, those concepts are not without difficulties.

The book is composed of seven chapters that trace the impact of Kant's notion of dignity throughout the subsequent generations of German history and literature, drawing into the philosophical foreground the works of J.G. Herder and Thomas Mann, against the historical background of Germany's moral relapses and catastrophes, with an eye toward expanding Kantian hope for universal happiness beyond the narrow constraints of its troubled twentieth century. At no point does the reader lose touch of the moral thread of the highest good woven into Kant's notion of dignity, as Ameriks often laments at narrow readings that, burdened by slovenly take-aways, quickly dismiss Kant's conception of humanity.

Chapter 1 sees Ameriks staking his ground on the moral realist position with his claim regarding the universal dignity of all humans being the result not of an achievement but simply from the status of being human. In other words, *all humans have basic capacities contributing to dignity including the capacities for respect, duty, character, and worth*. Of course, one simple criticism would be that these qualities would surely increase and decrease depending on the life and actions of a particular human being. Early on, I have the impression that Ameriks anticipated such a question and, as such, notes that these terms, like many others, carry with them an ambiguous and double character, namely, an empirical and intelligible character, which will "vary from person to person" (20). Throughout the chapter, Ameriks meets competing interpretations head on, noting both advantages and problems to what he calls a "mainline interpretation." He notes that, for Kant, it must be that all humans have a basic capacity—which is sort of like the potential that we all have to learn language—for dignity that "grounds a universal duty of respect on account of a capacity for morality that we all have, independently of any specific degree of accomplishment, moral or otherwise" (40).

In the second chapter, Ameriks offers a reappraisal of the Kant-Herder relationship. Given that the following generations would inherit their notions of culture, race, humanity, and so on from these two philosophers, Ameriks views such a reassessment as softening the often-dramatized distinctions between the two. Ameriks consistently rejects the achievement-based model of Kantian morality. However, one cannot help but wonder if the normative concept of worth—especially as Kant employs the term in the context of aiming for the highest good, which then provides the moral condition that makes one *worthy of happiness*—is, in fact, not something that is merely given on account of belonging to the human species, but is rather a worth that is earned. This is not to say that one ever denies dignity for all human persons from the point of view of myself as a moral agent. But certain horrific crimes that strip the life and dignity of others would, one must assume, destroy the dignity and humanity of those offenders. As Ameriks notes, the moral complexity and slippery slope of achievement-based arguments has rendered some of the world's most horrific outcomes in recent centuries.

More than any other, Ameriks has the keen and subtle ability to clearly express the philosophical spirit of an age. In Chapter 2, he returns to his notion of philosophy taking an *elliptical* or spiraling path in which a great thinker, such as Kant, expands his thought beyond the (Wolffian) sphere of his given cultural-philosophical time and reaches back to find a home in thinkers and poets such as Milton and Plato, who share more in common with a Kant in their indestructible search for universality than with their contemporaries. Similarly, Hegel viewed the history of philosophy as an upward and spiraling dialectic through which the revolutionary "turn" of the dialectic contains within it intellectual vestiges of the past while also reaching for a higher rational principle than hitherto expressed. One can also think of the divided line in Plato's *Republic* as signifying the thrust of the individual philosopher from *eikasia* toward *noeisis* and back again, such that every rational achievement leaps from its prized mantel and surges back into an imaginative genesis toward newer and greater ideas. Ameriks exhibits a reverence for the history of western philosophy in his astute understanding and generous offerings of his interpretations. Chapter 2's focus on the relationship between Kant and Herder also carries with it an injunction to our present cultural-academic attitude that the appreciation of other cultures and ideas should not be evaluated from our standpoint alone but should rather appreciate those ideas on their own ground. There are probably zero philosophy departments today that would advocate the exclusion of students or staff on the basis of people deriving from different cultures and ethnicities—

yet, very few programs actively promote or pursue any kind of philosophy outside of Euro-American traditions.

In Chapter 3, Ameriks turns to the themes of race and religion with the historical development of Fascism in Germany as a kind of embarrassing indication of unfinished business with regard to Kantian idealism. Ameriks responds to the allegations by Charles W. Mills that Kant laid the foundation for Nazism in his alleged distinction between a master race and *Untermenschen*. Ameriks quickly indicates how such accusations cannot be reconciled with Kant's developments of the categorical imperative and universal notion of human dignity (72). That Kant's time was, however, punctuated with both silent and overt anti-Semitism is an issue that Ameriks takes seriously but without dismissing Kantian ethics. The putative development of both anti-Semitic ideas and Fascism as a whole, Ameriks claims, owes to distorted and misleading interpretations of Kant. This is especially evident in the nineteenth century when Houston Stewart Chamberlain, among others, reduced Kant's conception of dignity to that of national allegiance. Ameriks comments that "it is necessary to reiterate that any kind of non-universal position regarding human dignity and duty is inconsistent with what Kant had in mind in speaking of the seeds that in part constitute the distinctive and essential identity of all members of our species" (73). It is our task to interpret Kantian ethics in the light of which it was shone in his texts, not through twisted drivel rendered to suit a racist and misguided agenda. Ameriks believes that critics deserve a fair hearing, but in most instances serious oversights stem from almost always neglecting Kant's insistence on universal human dignity and equality, arguably the foundation of his moral theory. More recent sloppy mischaracterizations of Kant's moral theory that Ameriks points out include coupling Kant's remarks on the "feelings" of Africans stated in the *Observations* (1764) with his claims regarding moral feelings in the second *Critique* (1788) (78).

The bulk of Chapter 3 seeks to sort out which allegations against Kant merit serious attention or not. Most of them turn out to be a waste of time, though Ameriks does view Paul Franks's argument regarding some anti-Semitic statements as deserving attention. What is often not taken into consideration is that, while Kant indeed casts seemingly thoughtless aspersions on Judaism, Ameriks indicates that a more charitable view notices that Kant dismisses all organized religions (or any kind of "isms") that prioritize the performance of rituals over individual freedom (89). Moreover, as Ameriks claims, Kant was especially fond of his Jewish student, Marcus Herz—who arguably allowed Kant's critical endeavor to begin through their letters—and Moses Mendelssohn. I would add Salomon Maimon to the list,

for Kant claimed that he achieved a better understanding of critical philosophy than any other thinker of his time.

Chapter 4 takes on a critical attitude of Kant concerning the events in America and in Prussia in the 1770s and 80s. Particularly, Ameriks questions Kant's silence on the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, and also Germany's eastward expansion that, according to Ameriks, resembled a nascent form of Fascism. Admittedly, the silence on these historical events in Kant's enlightenment essay in 1784, for instance—a publication that appears eight years after the Declaration and five years prior to the American Constitution—strikes one as bizarre, given that the tone of the text is saturated with arguments concerning a just republic built on universal human dignity (97–8). As an American whose hero philosopher has been Kant for many years, I have been equally disappointed and perplexed on such silence, left wondering, *what could have been*. What Ameriks does not mention is that the American concept of an individual's inalienable rights, protected by a government whose sole function is to bind together the collective and individual freedoms of the citizenry, is not an idea that derived from Locke, Kant, or any other European thinker. That idea was a uniquely American idea inspired by the Iroquois confederacy.

Just why Kant never commented on American independence *may* owe to the fact that no one had ever seen a revolution such as this, let alone there wasn't any indication that it would succeed. The 1780s saw the American states loosely held together by weak Articles of Confederation, mounting tensions between Federalists and anti-Federalists, rising debt (with no prospect of paying it off), open rebellion over taxes, small and large states quibbling over representation and slavery, etc. Kant may have been suspicious of the possible success or simply believed that the inclinations of most are such that a republic of this sort could only be protected by an elite ruling class. Whatever the case, Ameriks takes umbrage with critics (such as Jeremy Bentham) over the idea regarding the universal capacity of equality (104), a criticism he views as setting Fascism into motion, for it denies universal dignity in favor of ascribing such dignity to talent or achievement alone. As a whole, Ameriks is right to indicate the peculiar absence of any direct commentary by Kant regarding events and figures in the American 1770s and beyond, a time in which Kant was, however, critical of the British *form* of government, but had nothing to say about the Declaration, and so on. Ameriks concludes that rather than assuming that Kant pursued either a racist or chauvinistic form of thinking about America, he simply held to an elitist view in which he likely assumed that, at some point, America would require the introduction of a noble class to sustain its government (111–12).

Moreover, according to Ameriks, this elitist attitude can also explain Kant's remarks on certain ethnicities and cultures in which he clearly views them as inferior in some ways to more advanced cultures.

Chapter 5 compares the now relatively unknown and forgotten contemporary of Kant, Richard Price. The chapter carries the tone of *why couldn't Kant have been a little more like Price, in that the latter was both a renowned intellectual and commentator on major political events of his day?* Though mocked by Burke, Price's notion of "transcendental dignity" would seem to pair well with Kant's notion of universal dignity. No extant evidence suggests that either philosopher influenced the other. Ameriks has many points to make in this regard, but one of the more philosophical reflections in the chapter features comments on the notion of *self-evidence*. Significantly, the most emphatic claim of the eighteenth century was asserted by Jefferson's unforgettable assertion in the Declaration: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among them are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." Kant in the first and third *Critiques* supports the legitimacy of subjects aiming for universal truths insofar as their judgments are "holding true" (A822/B850). Moreover, it is nothing less than the apex or telos of Kantian ethics that moral subjects bestowing dignity upon all other moral subjects are promised hope and the worthiness to be happy. Ameriks's attention is focused on what makes these claims *self-evident* (132). He notes how Franklin suggested to insert the term *self-evident* on the basis of his reading of Price, who referred to self-evidence as a belief that requires no special investigation, for it is of such an obvious nature (134–5). Just why then do these obvious shared ideas connecting Kant, Price, and the Declaration not warrant any direct commentary from Kant? Ameriks claims that when one views his sharp condemnation of slavery and treatment of Indigenous peoples, Kant may have decided to remain silent to avoid appearing critical of a new democratic republic (135).

The remainder of the book across chapters 6, 7, and 8 support the view that the German writer Thomas Mann took a revolutionary moral turn late in his life by way of a reform in his interpretation of Kant via his reading of the American poet Walt Whitman. Ameriks characterizes the reception of Kant early in Mann's life throughout Chapter 6 as being typical of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Germans: "The unfortunate fact is that, in many ways, the viewpoints that have . . . been characterized as subjectivist Kantianism, irrationalist Romanticism, and nihilist Nietzscheanism have probably had more influence (on many philosophers as well as on culture in general) than the genuine insights of the real Kant, Early

Romantics, and sane Nietzsche" (154). Chapter 7 discusses the relevance of Hegel, Kierkegaard, Wagner, and Nietzsche for Mann, arguing that investigating the aesthetic basis of their philosophies was what attracted modern Germans to their works, but at one point Mann realized the need to throw off the "excessive pride" in German culture and return to "core Kantian values" (167).

In Chapter 8, Ameriks cites the growing distrust of liberal democracy in 1914 Germany and views Mann's attitude toward German values as essentially corrupted by the German neglect of Kant in favor of Nietzsche, among others (183). The growing fondness for Bismark's "expansionist" project coupled with his nation's lack of interest in Kantian morals would, for Mann, eventually give way after WWI. This is evident in a 1922 lecture in which he combined the "universalist and democratic doctrines" of Whitman with the early Romantic philosopher Novalis (185). According to Ameriks, through this outward appeal to American democratic principles conjoined with the ideas of a Romantic from his own country, Mann was able to reform his interpretation of Kantian duty and dignity. From duty construed as a mere *call to serve one's nation* to the universalist Romantic appeal to humanity as a whole, Mann transformed the "warlike" brand of the categorical imperative into a doctrine of humanity aiming to promote a "cult of peace" (187). Thus, by way of this "roundabout route" through Whitman, Ameriks claims that Mann was finally able to return to the more authentic interpretation of what Kant had intended all along (188).

Perhaps had Kant offered any reflections on the principles of liberty bestowed in the Declaration, Ameriks speculates, then just *maybe* German thinkers such as Mann would not have wandered so far away from cosmopolitanism to begin with (189). To my mind, this is the only substantive connection that I have seen being made between Kant and the much later rise of anti-democratic institutions and governments in Germany. As a whole, Ameriks views Mann as being able to cross the bridge with Kantian philosophy to democratic principles, giving the moral concepts of duty and dignity a home not in the overly fetishized aesthetics of German culture, but rather a real political application through liberal principles, a bridge that Kant himself did not cross (192).

One wonders what Ameriks was searching for in the book by traveling down so many historical paths in which he discusses the (misguided) transformations of both Kantian ideas and German culture—if not to rescue a liberal and more redeemable version of Kant that the author had wanted to exist in previous eras. Hence, I was delighted that such wonder was rewarded

in the conclusion, in which he reflects on the peculiar nature of philosophy as a whole.

The book closes with a reflection on the ambiguous and often disregarded pursuit of philosophy that, very often, does not proceed in a "straightforward" manner, as the public expects, nor does it always succeed in bringing about its ambitious plans. Ameriks notes the personal nature of expressing ideas, how they refuse instrumentation or measurement as "rigorous sciences" employ, and that the varieties of competing "normative perspectives" are just some of the elements that prevent philosophy from ever achieving a united standpoint (197). I would add, however, that these elements support Ameriks's insistence on the need for diverse cultural perspectives. And it isn't as if a synthesis of cultural-philosophical attitudes has not ever achieved a new world philosophy. The Kyoto School incorporated western philosophy and Christianity into their novel works that also included East Asian traditions. Kant was at the very heart of that movement, for every graduate student in Japan, for years, was required to write a thesis on Kant.

In any case, Ameriks comments on the fact that two philosophers in the same time period can—and have—championed very similar notions, such as human dignity without having any interaction with another. He claims that the two versions of dignity could support the validity of the idea itself, but it could also point more to the fact that cultures are "more out of touch with another than is generally supposed" (197). We wrongly assume, I think, that, *deep down, we're all the same*. This has the harmful consequence of presuming that some cultures have values that are more advanced than others, which is a rather undemocratic and anti-liberal point of view.

Ameriks suggests that such misleadings can result from, for example, philosophers in subsequent generations "too quickly dismissing" the fundamental but "complex" meaning anchoring Kant's moral philosophy (198). He reminds us that we should recognize, as well, the route that the core ideas of the Declaration took in the history of America and that seemingly perfect ideas, such as *all men are created equal*, followed a roundabout trajectory. As a whole, I find the book to be outstanding. I had said to myself while reading the book, at times, *where is this leading?* And *just how is 'this' related to Kant's notion of dignity?* That attitude owes to an expectation of an ordinary academic history of philosophy. Ameriks instead masterfully rotates in and out of the foreground and background the history of Kantian ideas and the socio-political developments of liberal democracy, with its less than perfect turnings since the birth of liberty. One must celebrate his efforts to interrogate the greatness of ideas in their complexity without relenting to

the fact that such ideas may indeed require *an elliptical path* in which beginning and end are not to be feared, as one must keep going and keep thinking.

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