In recent years, Kant’s lesser-known works on anthropology, education and history have received increasing scholarly attention, illuminating his views on human nature (rather than his better-known and more formalistic account of rational nature), moral psychology and historical development. This scholarship has enriched our understanding of what we might call the embodied aspects of human life, which Kant explored in the post-critical writings of the 1790s, challenging the view of Kant’s ethics as overly rationalistic, formal, and – in a word – unfeeling, initiating an important examination of an often-neglected side of his corpus.

This paper contributes to this literature by exploring, and hopefully clarifying, the role of culture in Kant’s moral and political philosophy. What exactly is culture for Kant, and why is it important? Culture appears to occupy a privileged and rather particular position in Kant’s thought, appearing at the intersection of his writings on anthropology, history, pedagogy and ethics. From his conjectural account of the origins of human societies, to his teleologically-driven theses on history, to the most comprehensive discussion of the subject in the Critique of Judgment, Kant’s thoughts on culture are elaborated across a range of fields of inquiry. And yet his central contention – that culture bridges the space between nature and freedom – stands in need of unpacking if we’re to understand the role that culture plays in Kant’s broader account of humanity’s moral nature and development.

I begin by examining an influential recent commentary addressing Kant’s view of culture: Sankar Muthu’s Enlightenment Against Empire. In his broad-ranging examination of Enlightenment thinkers’ opposition to imperialism, Muthu turns to Kant’s writings on anthropology and history to argue that his concern for the preservation of different cultures and forms of social life led him to reject European expansionism. Muthu suggests that Kant saw human beings as constitutively cultural, and that his concern for
“cultural agency” animated both his cosmopolitanism and his critique of European imperialism. I argue that this misinterprets both Kant’s understanding of what culture is and his view of why we should value it at all. Where Muthu describes cultural agency as the expression of a particularly human form of freedom, and so, as a constitutive good, I argue that culture – in the sense that Muthu understands it, as a form of collective life articulating our freedom as “cultural agents” – is, for Kant, a transitory good, a necessary formative influence pushing humanity towards its natural end: the perfection of our moral capacities. Kant values culture only insofar as it contributes to the formation of morally-progressive agents; thus, only certain kinds of culture – those that “prepare [humanity] for a sovereignty in which reason alone is to dominate” – are good in Kant’s eyes. The first section of the paper considers two of Muthu’s central arguments regarding “cultural agency” to address what I see as a misperception of Kant’s view.

The second part of the paper both clarifies Kant’s conceptualization of culture as a sphere of individual and collective cultivation and fleshes out my own contention: the value of culture is inextricably bound to Kant’s teleological understanding of humanity’s moral development. Where Muthu maintains that Kant values all cultures as constitutive conditions for human freedom, I argue that only particular social and cultural contexts are capable of, in Kant’s words, “bring[ing] about the perfection of the human being”. I consider the problems this presents for the “savage” societies that fail to acculturate their populations to properly moral ends, questioning whether and how these might participate in humanity’s broader moralization. Given this, the concluding section of the paper argues that Kant’s view of culture in fact presents far greater problems than prospects for theorizing an anti-imperial and cosmopolitan politics.