

# The Idea of Humanity

Anthropology and Anthroponomy  
in Kant's Ethics

David G. Sussman



Studies in Ethics

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OUTSTANDING DISSERTATIONS

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# Abbreviations

A	<i>Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View</i>
CB	“Conjectural Beginning of Human History”
CF	<i>The Conflict of the Faculties</i>
CPR	<i>Critique of Pure Reason</i>
CPrR	<i>Critique of Practical Reason</i>
E	<i>Education</i>
ET	“The End of All Things”
G	<i>Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals</i>
LP	<i>Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion</i>
MM	<i>The Metaphysics of Morals</i>
R	<i>Religion within the Boundaries of mere Reason</i>
TP	“On the common saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice.”
WE	“An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?”
WOT	“What does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?”

# Preface

I began this thesis as an attempt to understand the place of Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* in his practical philosophy as a whole. The *Religion* is one of Kant's last major works (1793), and was clearly of great importance to him. To have all four of its sections published together, Kant had to tread carefully around the Prussian censors who had become much less tolerant with the ascension of Frederick William II. In this Kant was not entirely successful—the second book of the *Religion* drew a royal rebuke that prompted Kant's famous promise (perhaps violated) to no longer write on religious topics. Apparently, there was something Kant very much needed to say about religious faith and its relation to the morality of pure reason, a need he took to be satisfied by the 1793 work.

Despite its importance to Kant, the *Religion* has received surprisingly little attention from recent commentators. Such neglect is particularly surprising given that the *Religion* contains some of Kant's most sustained discussions of the nature of evil, self-deception, atonement, and moral reconstruction. For those concerned with Kant's moral philosophy, one would expect the *Religion* to be a central text. However, the *Religion* seems designed to frustrate and alienate anyone already sympathetic to the moral and moral-psychological vision of Kant's *Groundwork* and *Critique of Practical Reason*. The moral conception that emerges from those works seems to present the human agent as divided between the rational,

“intelligible” side of her nature, and her merely sensible or “empirical” aspect. Morality consists of those laws we can give ourselves insofar as we are rational intelligences, and is thus expressive of our autonomy and freedom as rational creatures. Evil, in contrast, locates us in the causally-determined order of nature, an order that has no place for free action or indeed any real sense of agency. No appeal to God is either needed or able to ground basic moral principles; any morality worthy of the name must flow from our own self-legislative capacities as rational agents. On this view any appeal to authority, no matter how perfect, would reduce us to the “heteronomy” incompatible with true freedom.

Many have found in this vision a celebration of a kind of existentialist hero: profoundly free and detached from any merely given desire, authority, or tradition, committed above all to her own freedom and to the free choice of her commitments. The Kantian agent appears as a kind of radical self-creator, facing no external limitations on the kinds of laws she may legislate for herself consistent with her own reason. This picture has both attracted and repelled, but it sits uneasily with what emerges in the *Religion*. In this latter work, Kant develops his account of “the radical evil in human nature,” a source of corruption necessary to all humans, which we are in principle unable to overcome individually. To triumph over this limitation, we must be members of something that Kant recognizes as a church, and we must actively have faith in the grace of God, as the only route through we can be morally redeemed.

Kant had seemed to free morality from the encumbrances of religion: here, however, he brings back some of the most morally problematic tenets of Christian theology: original sin and God’s saving grace. The free and autonomous agent now confronts some kind of necessary constraints on who and what she may morally make of herself—constraints for which she is nevertheless to bear ultimate responsibility. Kant presents these constraints as inherent limitations of *human* reason. Our problem is not just that various non-rational aspects of our psyche present obstacles that reason may stumble over. Rather, there seems to be a kind of ineliminable corruption of that reason itself in us, a state of fallenness, that the individual cannot address without the community, and which the community cannot address without faith in God. Without such “rational faith,” human beings cannot be coherent, autonomous agents. Kant here does not abandon his fundamental position that

morality is an aspect of a deep sort of freedom and autonomy. Rather, the *Religion* presents us with the paradox that autonomy might require attitudes and commitments seemingly characteristic of supposedly clear forms of heteronomy.

The *Religion* is thus hardly receptive to those who might look to it for resources to address shortcomings in Kant's moral philosophy. The nature of culpable wrongdoing has always sat uneasily in Kantian ethics. The *Religion* certainly offers a sustained account of such transgressions, but one that involves reconceiving the nature of the human will, and of morality's relation to it, so drastically as to be no longer recognizably "Kantian." The second *Critique's* insistence that morality is not based on, but nevertheless demands "rational faith" presented something of the same difficulty. However, in the second *Critique* religious commitment appeared to be wholly derivative of morality, such that should that derivation be rejected, the basic moral story would remain intact. In the *Religion*, however, the basic structure of the will, and of human rationality, seem to be thoroughly entangled with the religious ideas. The latter cannot be neatly excised while leaving the rest of the practical philosophy unharmed. Kant's account of rational faith has often been dismissed as the product of personal attachments rather than philosophical motives: attachments to the simple faith of his parents, or in Heine's famous quip, to his valet Lampe. Whatever the merits of such treatments of Kant's earlier views, such a strategy will not work for the *Religion*. Religious faith is there too deeply intertwined with Kant's fundamental accounts of agency, morality, and human reason to be dismissed as a mere excrescence of sentimentality.

This thesis attempts to take Kant's philosophy of religion as seriously as Kant himself took it, to understand these views as both a natural development from, but also a profound revision of, Kant's fundamental conception of the human will and of morality's place in it. The practical philosophy that emerges still revolves around our rational autonomy and freedom. However, such autonomy comes to be represented as something that cannot be understood apart from the ways through which it is realized in distinctively human psyches and distinctively human communities. The importance of Kant's philosophy of religion to his moral philosophy has been obscured, I believe, by an anglophone tendency to see Kant as part of the history of modern liberalism, in a trajectory that begins with Locke and reaches its apex perhaps with Rawls. I do not mean to suggest that this story is false, only that it

does not leave room for some of Kant's stranger and richer reflections on sin, repentance, and faith: reflections that are as essential to Kant's moral vision as is his political philosophy. Kant was, in many respects, a sensible liberal; but this should obscure the fact that he was also, in his way, a crazy Protestant. This thesis attempts to do justice to the insights arising from the latter perspective, with the hope that they remain compatible with those of the former.

I am indebted to my advisors for their constant support and helpful criticism. Michael Forster was especially patient with such an apparently reclusive student, usually at great distance from his home institution. Allen Wood did me the great, if difficult philosophical service of calling into question much of what I took for granted in my readings of Kant. My debts to Chris Korsgaard are incalculable; suffice it to say that she, more than anyone else, showed me why it is important to do moral philosophy, and what it is to do moral philosophy well.

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# Introduction

*Any high praise for the ideal of humanity in its moral perfection can lose nothing in practical reality from examples to the contrary, drawn from what human beings now are, have become, or will presumably become in the future; and anthropology, which issues from merely empirical cognition, can do no damage to anthroponomy, which is laid down by a reason giving law unconditionally. (MM 6:406)*

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant suggests that we consider the critical philosophy as an account of the possibility of human self-understanding.<sup>1</sup> In the preface to the first edition, Kant tells us that the *Critique* comes as a response to:

a call to reason to undertake anew the most difficult of all its tasks, namely, that of self-knowledge, and to institute a tribunal which will assure to reason its lawful claims, and dismiss all groundless pretensions, not by despotic decrees, but in accordance with its own eternal and unalterable laws. (Axi-Axii).

Later in the Canon, Kant explains that the three basic aspects of such rational self-knowledge are comprehended by three fundamental questions: "What can I know, What ought I to do, What may I hope?" (A805/B833). Kant devotes the *Critiques* of Pure and Practical Reason to the first two questions; the third *Critique*, along with Kant's writings on religion, history, and politics, is addressed to the third. In each *Critique*, Kant attempts to establish the proper scope and limits of a particular power of reasoning or judgment by a kind of reflexive self-examination of that power by itself. Each critique thus represents a way a particular power of thought comes to a kind of self-knowledge, recognizing its own

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1. Here I follow Allen Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion*, 2.

rights and limits as flowing from its own basic principles.<sup>2</sup> Toward the end of his life, however, Kant added a new question to the list from the Canon. In the introduction to the Jäsche *Logic* of 1800, Kant claims that philosophy in the “cosmopolitan sense” consists in the above three questions, plus a fourth: “What is a human being?” (*L* pp.28-9), which Kant takes to be the proper subject of anthropology. For Kant, such anthropology is not just another field for critical investigation, but rather the critical philosophy itself, conceived as a whole: “At bottom all this could be reckoned to be anthropology, because the first three questions are related to the last.” (*L* p.29). Seen in this light, the critical philosophy is more than just an account of reason coming to knowledge of itself. This philosophy is also an account of the sort of self-knowledge that becomes possible for human beings through the exercise of reason upon their own sense of themselves, as finite rational beings.

However, Kant’s answer to the second question, “What ought I to do?” seems particularly removed from any distinctively human sort of self-knowledge. In the first *Critique*, Kant examines the possibility and nature of empirical cognition, relative to the pure forms of characteristically human intuition, space and time. In the third *Critique*, Kant examines aesthetic and teleological judgments, drawing on characteristic features and needs of the human understanding and imagination. Beauty and natural teleology, like science, mathematics and geometry, are all relativized to the human subject: their claims cannot be extended to thinking subjects generally. In his moral philosophy, however, Kant sets out to answer the question of “What ought I to do?” by analysis of rational agency *per se*, independent of any considerations that might distinguish human beings from any other sort of rational agent. From the beginning of the *Groundwork*, Kant insists that a proper moral philosophy must exclude any distinctly human aspects of feeling or motivation from the foundations of morality, declaring that

[A]mong practical cognitions, not only do moral laws, along with their principles, differ essentially from all the rest, in which there is something empirical, but all moral philosophy is based entirely on its pure part; and when it is applied to the human being it does not borrow the least thing from acquaintance with

2. see Onora O’Neill, “The Public Use of Reason” in *Constructions of Reason*, 38.

him (from anthropology) but gives to him, as a rational being, laws a priori...(G 4: 389)

Not only does morality have no need of any empirical considerations to establish its rights, but any such reference would only diminish or compromise that authority:

[I]t is clear that all moral concepts have their seat and origin completely a priori in reason, and indeed in the most common reason just as in reason that is speculative in the highest degree; that they cannot be abstracted from any empirical and therefore merely contingent cognitions; that just in this purity of their origin lies their dignity...that in adding anything empirical to them one subtracts just that much from their genuine influence and from the unlimited worth of actions...(G 4: 411)

Kant sets himself the task of deriving the authority and basic principles of morality from an analysis of rational agency in general, abstracting away from any specifically human qualities altogether. Human nature is here excluded in both its psychological and teleological senses. Against Hume, Kant denies any fundamental role to the common sentiments, feelings, and non-rational affective and motivational forces of the human mind. Against Aristotle, Kant excludes any substantive notions of human well-being or perfection, along with any prior conceptions of true human needs or characteristic human virtues.

Kant distinguishes himself from both sorts of naturalism by arguing that morality is essentially a matter of freedom, autonomy, and rationality in action. For Kant, any morality worthy of the name would have to possess a kind of necessary authority over our actions, which must be able, at least in principle, to motivate any agent capable of recognizing its dictates at all. Insofar as the motivating power of morality depends on some special feature of the constitution of the human subject, its authority would be restricted to whoever possessed those features. Morality still might have an authority over those subjects, but it would still be a fundamentally contingent sort of authority; “escapable” at least insofar as those particular features are.<sup>3</sup> By tying morality to the idea of rational

3. Kant has been taken to task for thinking that if morality is relativized to some condition of the subject, it thereby becomes escapable or optional, something one might release oneself from by the right kind of act of will. As Philippa Foot and Harry Frankfurt have noted, much of what we hap-

agency in general, Kant hopes to secure it a motivational basis adequate to the scope of its supposed authority, a scope that is to exceed even that of mathematics.

For Kant, the authority and motivating power of morality are to be found in what it is to be a creature that can act from reasons at all. The distinctively *human* being, with all her contingent psychological and conative peculiarities, seems to come into play for Kant as only a particular substitution instance of this general type. The distinctively human appears as a kind of philosophical afterthought: relevant to the application of morality, perhaps, but not to its fundamental hold on us. This claim may seem surprising in light of Kant's insistence on the intrinsic "dignity" of humanity that is above all price, and his fundamental injunction that we always treat such humanity never merely as a means but always also as an "end-in-itself." At first glance, it seems that appreciating the special status of such humanity is what Kant's moral philosophy is all about. Yet in the *Groundwork*, this celebration of humanity seems to be nothing more than a rhetorical flourish, effectively concealing the rarefied nature of Kant's real moral concern. The problem is not merely that Kant ultimately seems to equate such humanity with the constitutive capacities of finite rational agency in general.<sup>4</sup> Kant goes on to suggest that, in philosophical strictness, we could translate all such reference to finite

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pen to care about can seem as binding, and as independent of our choices, as anything moral. see Philippa Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," and Harry Frankfurt, "The Importance of What We Care About." Yet this sort of escapability cannot be Kant's real target here: he is primarily concerned with showing that morality cannot be based on our desire for happiness, yet he recognizes such a desire to be "subjectively necessary" for all human beings. The problem is not that humans necessarily desire happiness, but that necessity is somehow not of the right kind to support the aspirations of morality. "Escapability" cannot be the real issue for Kant, but rather the particular form of bindingness appropriate to morality for which inescapability may only be a necessary, but not sufficient, condition.

4. Although this has its particular problems: in particular, how we are to understand those "humans" that do not, and perhaps may never, manifest those capacities. Some might see this as a virtue of Kant's, in avoiding some sort of objectionable "speciesism." Whether or not this is a virtue or vice of a view, it should be noted how it is achieved: by eliminating any fundamental moral or metaphysical role for the concept of "human being" altogether, and reducing the idea down to some more basic elements. See Cora Diamond, "Eating Meat and Eating People," 319-334.