

# Kant's anti-humanism: An outline

Wojciech Kozyra<sup>1</sup>\*

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Philosophy, University of Warsaw, 69 Nowy Świat, 00-330 Warsaw, Poland

**Abstract.** Kantian ethics is widely associated with a dictum stating that the human being possesses an absolute value. This position is famously articulated by Kant in the formula of the categorical imperative which states that each person should always be treated as an ultimate end – not as a mere means. Arguably, we face here a good *prima facie* case for reckoning Kant among the humanists. In spite of this, I argue – contrary to the popular view – that Kant's ethical theory should be understood as “nomocentric”, and to that extent as anti-humanistic. Obviously, human beings are special for Kant in a morally important way, but their unique significance is not due to their nature as such, but consists solely in their capacity to fulfil the demands imposed on them by the moral law. While establishing this thesis, I discuss various examples of anti-humanistic pronouncements from Kant's texts, ranging from the pre-critical period up to the late writings, and thereby show that e.g. Kant's (in)famous insistence on the claim that saving an innocent human life does not justify a white lie (*On the Right to Lie From Philanthropy*, 1797) is anything but a slip of the pen on Kant's part. In the course of the argument I also emphasise the subjective component to all teleology in Kant including the teleological account of the categorical imperative, and suggest that Kant's apparent ambivalence towards humanism is rendered intelligible by paying close attention to his dualistic anthropology.

**Keywords:** Kant, humanism, anti-humanism, dignity, ethics, morality, Yeshayahu Leibowitz

## 1 Introduction

The title of this paper is modeled on the title of Yitzhak Melamed's chapter *Spinoza's Anti-Humanism: An Outline* from the volume *The Rationalists: Between Tradition and Innovation*. In his work Melamed contrasts Spinoza's anti-humanistic attitude with Kant's alleged exemplary humanism (Melamed, 2011, pp. 149-150, 165). Here I want to challenge the view that reckons Kant among humanist philosophers. This, however, does not mean that I attempt to undermine the well-grounded thesis which states that Kant's philosophy constitutes something that might be called “epistemological humanism”. I have in mind the shift from the theocentric to the anthropocentric paradigm of cognition which we face in Kant, described in detail e.g. by Henry Allison, who treated the issue under the label of Kant's

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\* Corresponding author: [wojciechkozyra01@gmail.com](mailto:wojciechkozyra01@gmail.com)  
ORCID: 0000-0003-2210-4559

“transcendental humanism” (Allison, 1971). I also have no wish to deny such claims as those made by Ann Loades in the article entitled “Immanuel Kant’s Humanism”. Loades emphasises Kant’s immense contribution to establishing “the centrality of the human subject in all disciplines”, the study of anthropology being the most vivid example (Loades, 1981, p. 302).

I have no quarrel with these claims or with other valid insights which I will mention at the end of this paper.

I want to approach the issue of Kant’s humanism from a different angle. The question I seek to answer is whether Kant’s *ethical theory as such* can be called humanistic or humanism-friendly. General accounts of Kant’s ethics are usually presented based on the assumption that he is a humanist who cherishes the notion of *Menschenwürde* (Melamed’s example). Some interpreters even seem to suggest that, unless we try to render Kant sufficiently “plausible” (I take this to mean sympathetic towards humanistic ideals) in his ethical pronouncements, there is no reason at all to bother with interpreting his writings concerned with moral issues (*cf.* Reath, 2006, p. 1). I principally disagree with this interpretative attitude. Here I agree with Melamed, who devoted to this issue an important paper on the spurious character of the so-called “interpretative charity” (Melamed, 2013), where “charity” means attempting to make our past intellectual history as present-friendly as possible, even at the cost of what Dieter Schönecker dubbed *Textsvergessenheit*. In his hermeneutical manifesto Melamed argues that such a “charitable” interpretative stand deprives us of the possibility of stimulating creatively our contemporary worldview and thus condemns us to a vicious circle of self-affirmation. I agree on this point with Melamed and I will simply adopt the method of interpretation which gives primacy to the multi-dimensionality of the textual evidence and not to our normative expectations and demands that we tend to make – wittingly or not – on Kant’s ethical corpus.

Elsewhere I have pointed out that “charity” understood in this way hinders any attempt at an unbiased interpretation of Kant’s theory of will and freedom (Kozyra, 2018). In the present context, on the other hand, I should point out that it is common to downplay such statements of Kant as that from the (in)famous *On the Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy* (hereafter: “essay on lying” or “VRML”), where Kant asserts that the cause of preserving life of an innocent human being gives us no reason and no right to tell white lies when necessary (VRML, AA 08: 423-431). This is obviously *inhumane*, we are told, but this is not a representative sample of Kant’s views. This position is shared by H.J. Paton (1954, p. 201) among others, who put Kant’s view on lying expressed in VRML down to his old age and momentary bad temper. Moreover, Paton claims that the essay on lying is the sole testimony to Kant’s moral “rigorism”, and for that reason it should not be taken very seriously (*ibid.*).

Contrary to such dismissals, my claim is that arguably inhumane aspects of Kant’s moral thought should not be seen as a deviation from the norm and that they can in fact be justified within the body of Kant’s ethical doctrine. I will also show that Paton is wrong in saying that VRML is an isolated example of Kant’s ethical rigorism.

As I said before, relevant problems with Kant’s humanism are often neglected or minimised. However, there are exceptions to this rule – we can find a clear expression of the problem at hand in an article from the *Kantian Journal* by B.V. Meerowsky under the evocative title “The Limits of Kantian Humanism”. Meerowsky (1991, p. 22; tr. W.K.) writes: “On the one side Kant recognises man as the most important entity in the world, but on the other he rejects the principle of human happiness as the fundament of morality. He proclaims love of humanity the highest virtue but at the same time thinks it impermissible to lie in order to save oneself or somebody else from the threat of atrocity. Specific idiosyncrasies of Kant’s humanism to a significant extent can be explained by his treatment of man as a dualistic being, who simultaneously belongs to two worlds: sensibly perceptible

and intelligible.” This paints the exact picture of the tension (and its cause within Kant’s theory) on which I want to elaborate.

I need to clarify, perhaps, that by humanism I mean the view which places the ultimate value on the dignity of the human being and his flourishing, stating that each person possesses this dignity – and thus is entitled to flourish – simply by virtue of being “a token” of humanity. It is indeed very easy to assume that Kant satisfies this description given his famous formulation of the categorical imperative, i.e. the one which states that the human being should always be treated as an end in itself and not as merely as a means (*KpV*, AA 05: 167; Kant, 2002, p. 131). This view also seems to be reinforced by Kant’s many statements about persons or “the humanity in them” as possessing an absolute worth or constituting an absolute value *vis a vis* mere nature.<sup>1</sup> It is exactly for these reasons that one of the most important contemporary Israeli philosophers, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, considered Kant to be an exemplary humanist and contrasted him with his own anti-humanistic construal of Judaism.<sup>2</sup> Leibowitz’s aim was to explicate the God-oriented attitude of the observant Jew by way of contrasting it with the allegedly human-oriented attitude of Kantian morality. Concerning Kant’s humanism Leibowitz states the following: “[...] humanism, in the spirit of Kant, envisages the human person as the supreme value and end within any reality which man is capable of knowing. It follows that all thought and action are to be judged and evaluated in terms of their relation to this end” (Leibowitz, 1995, p. viii).

In the following pages, I will comment on and cite the textual evidence which contradicts the kind of humanistic rendition of Kant’s ethics depicted above and show how the relevant anti-humanistic pronouncements of Kant are theoretically embedded in the structure of his moral philosophy. In particular, I will attempt to resolve the conflict between Kant’s apparent humanism (which derives justification from the teleological formulation of the categorical imperative) and outright inhumane tendencies which quite often appear in Kant’s writings. At the end of the paper I add a disclaimer in order to avoid possible misunderstandings concerning my position.

## 2 Anti-humanism in Kant’s writings

Let us start with Kant’s short polemical essay on lying mentioned above. The moral test-case described there is well known – its protagonist is faced with a dilemma: Should I lie to the aggressor about the whereabouts of his potential victim and thus protect the victim’s life or should I tell the truth and imperil an innocent human being? Kant’s way out of this dilemma

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<sup>1</sup> For example: “The fact that the human being can have the ‘I’ in his representations raises him infinitely above all other living beings on earth. Because of this he is a person, and by virtue of the unity of consciousness through all changes that happen to him, one and the same person – i.e., through rank and dignity and entirely different being from things, such as irrational animals, with which one can do as one likes” (*Anth*, AA 07: 127; Kant, 2007, p. 239). This fragment from the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* is quoted by Melamed as evidence for Kant’s humanism (Melamed, 2011, p. 165). But, first, in his later (and, arguably, more authoritative) *The Conflict of the Faculties* Kant substantially qualifies – if not rejects – the foregoing view about the ground of human dignity. He says: “Understanding [immediately after these words Kant pairs “understanding” with “the unity of consciousness” – W.K.] must [...] belong merely to nature; and if the human being had only understanding [...] without morality, there would be nothing to distinguish him from the beasts – he might merely stand at the top of their ladder. But because the human being does have morality he is completely and essentially different [...] from the beasts [...]” (*SF*, AA 07: 70-71; Kant, 1996f, p. 289). And, second, later in this paper I will bring to light an anti-humanistic tendency lurking in *this* view of Kant.

<sup>2</sup> I have devoted a separate publication specifically to the relationship between Kant and Leibowitz (Kozyra, 2019).

is equally well-known: he claims that lying is forbidden under all circumstances and therefore the aforementioned circumstance – as far as it is a circumstance – obviously cannot count as a counterweight to the alleged moral necessity of truthfulness defended by Kant. In this connection I want to emphasise Kant's "nomocentric" attitude expressed in *VRML*. It is apparent from the work that, if anything according to Kant is to possess an "absolute value", it is (moral) law and not the human being. This is so because the main theme of the essay on lying is that the human being has to be sacrificed for the sake of observing the law, which demands something that we tend to identify as inhumane. In this context it is indeed ironic that Kant himself provides a moral criticism of the biblical story of the sacrifice of Isaac ("Akedah" in Hebrew) by Abraham (*RGV*, AA 06: 187), where we seem to face a similar demand to put aside our "instinctive" morality and follow a higher command. Notably, this "moral instinct" is what Kant calls a "good-natured inclination", about which he writes that "[...] inclination, whether it be good-natured or not, is blind and servile; and reason, where morality is at issue, must not merely represent the guardian of inclination but must, without taking account of inclination and as pure practical reason, attend all by itself to its own interest" (*KpV*, AA 05: 118; Kant, 2002, p. 150). This fragment from the second *Critique* accurately describes what "pure practical reason" does in *VRML*. It thus cannot be argued *à la* Paton that the latter text is a lone island of Kant's rigorism. It is the *benevolent* instinct and the "good-natured inclination" that in the case of *Akedah* and in the scenario presented in the essay on lying need to capitulate before a higher instance – God and *Sittengesetz*, respectively.

The analogy is imperfect, because in the case of the essay on lying we are dealing with an inhumane command issued by intelligible and transparent law, while in *Akedah* Abraham is commanded merely by God's *Willkür*. What is relevant for us here, however, is that both cases are similar with respect to the demand to sacrifice the intuitive, humanistic morality, which gives preference to reducing human suffering over intransigent abiding by supposedly higher values.

To further explain and illustrate the issue discussed, we can easily imagine the substitution of Abraham and Isaac in the story Kant refers to in the essay on lying for abstract agents. After this substitution, we are left with Abraham who does not obey his human instinct to tell a white lie to the aggressor in order to save his son, because the categorical imperative forbids him to do so. This is comparably as inhumane as the original case of *Akedah*, but nevertheless is still consonant with Kant's ethical thought. The fact that Kant's ethics is inhumane in the above sense – putting the highest value in observing the law even when it demands the sacrifice of our benevolent instincts – is evidenced across his writings (which additionally undermines the supposedly "isolated case" of *VRML*). A perfect case in point can be found in the *Metaphysics of Morals* where Kant explicitly distances himself from the Italian humanist Cesare Beccaria, who "moved by overly compassionate feelings of an affected humanity" (*MS*, AA 06: 335; Kant, 1996a, p. 475) argued for the abolishment of the death penalty, which Kant – by contrast – firmly supported. In the same book, several pages before he mentions Beccaria, Kant ponders the possibility of allowing for some local injustice, provided it is necessary for restoring the general social equilibrium. Kant passionately denies this possibility and says that "if justice goes, there is no longer any value in human being's living on the earth" (*MS*, AA 06: 332; Kant, 1996a, p. 473). This *fiat iustitia pereat mundus* claim is evidently anti-humanistic, given that the "mundus" is populated by humans whose well-being and prosperity should constitute the primary concern of every humanistic ethics. But not Kant's ethics – the stress is put on *iustitia*, which makes it clear that for him the human being does not constitute an "absolute" value, while any value he might possess is contingent upon the extent to which he internalises the demands of "justice" or, for that matter, of the categorical imperative.

Further examples of Kant “prioritising” moral law over the human being are to be encountered in his lectures. In *Lectures on Philosophical Theology* we read: “It is only through making it his purpose to do his duty that anyone becomes a human being, and otherwise he is either a beast or a monster” (*V-Phil-Th/Pölitz*, AA 28: 1011; Kant, 1978, p. 41). This theme is further radicalised in *Moralphilosophie Collins*: “[...] if [a human being] disposes over his life, he sets upon himself the value of a beast... he can be treated by others as an animal or a thing; he can be dealt with like a horse or dog, for he is no longer a man; he has turned himself into a thing, and so cannot demand that others should respect the humanity in him, since he has already thrown it away himself” (*V-Mo/Collins*, AA 27: 373; Kant, 1997, p. 147). All this stands in harmony with the already quoted fragment from *SF* (see footnote 1).

### 3 Anti-humanism in Kant’s doctrine

In this part of my paper I will attempt to ground Kant’s anti-humanism in his practical philosophy in three distinct steps. Firstly, I will refer to Oliver Sensen’s article on Kant’s notion of dignity, which is particularly helpful for this discussion. Secondly, I will stress the subjective component of Kant’s teleology, including the teleological account of the categorical imperative; and thirdly, I will elaborate on Meerowsky’s suggestion that Kant’s ambivalence towards humanism can be accounted for by his radically construed *homo duplex* anthropology.

In an article entitled “Kant’s Concept of Human Dignity”, Oliver Sensen exposed the spuriously anachronistic way of reading Kant’s account of human dignity. Sensen pointed out that nowadays many scholars tend to impose on Kant what he calls the “contemporary paradigm” of dignity, according to which human dignity is “absolute, inner or unconditional” (Sensen, 2009, p. 311). Contrary to this, Sensen argues, Kant does not subscribe to this contemporary paradigm, but instead supports the “traditional paradigm” of human dignity, according to which the distinct worth of a human being is contingent upon something extra-human. Within the traditional paradigm, the worth of a person is proportional to their respective performance. According to Kant, such performance – and hence the distinct value of persons – is to be estimated according to the extent to which they observe the moral law. This analysis couples well with the examples I have described above, which were meant to exemplify Kant’s anti-humanist attitude inasmuch as they strongly suggest that Kant understands *Menschenwürde* not as an absolute quality human beings possess simply by virtue of being human, but as a value relative to their moral performance. Therefore we can say with Sensen that for Kant “it is not humanity *as such* that has an absolute inner worth, but morality” (*ibid.*, p. 323).<sup>3</sup>

With regards to teleology, it is easy to take Kant for a humanist after learning about his famous formula which says that man should always be treated as an end in itself; in other words – that the human being cannot be instrumentalised. However, what often goes unmentioned in this context is that the teleological version of the categorical imperative is the imperative’s subjectivised rendition, of which Kant says that its import is to bring the categorical imperative “closer to the feeling” (*GMS*, AA 04: 436; Kant, 1996b, p. 85). But the truth remains – Kant assures us in the *Groundwork* – that the very fundament of moral legislation does not lie *subjectively* in the end (the “end in itself” included) but *objectively* in

<sup>3</sup> Kant vindicates this qualification of *Menschenwürde* e.g. in the *Groundwork*. He says that “[...] morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself, since only through this is it possible to be a lawgiving member in the kingdom of ends. Hence morality, and humanity insofar as it is capable of morality, is that which alone has dignity” (*GMS*, AA 04: 435; Kant, 1996d, p. 84; emphasis W.K.).

the “form of universality” (*GMS*, AA 04: 431; *cf.* Kant, 1996b, p. 81), characteristic of the concept of law as such. This thesis is just a particular exemplification of Kant’s general account of teleology. Though complex, Kant’s view on teleology ultimately renders purposiveness a subjective contribution to our understanding of nature. We should keep in mind that this also includes “supersensible”, i.e. *moral* nature, described by Kant in the second *Critique* (*KpV*, AA 05: 43; Kant, 2002, p. 62) as the totality of objects under moral law (while nature as such is described as the totality of objects under laws (*ibid.*)). Given this, we can say that the teleological version of the categorical imperative should not be taken at face value and presented as the most representative rendition of moral law as Kant understood it. Based on the examples I have provided, it is clear that – *objectively* speaking – it is the law and not the person that is the ultimate “end in itself”. Accordingly, the teleological exposition of moral law belongs rather to the field of pedagogy (which illustrates moral concepts with *Gefühle*) and hence should be treated with some reserve.

The present discussion would not be complete without emphasising the importance of the fundamental duality of the Kantian subject (pointed out above by Meerowsky). Although it is generally acknowledged that Kant supported dualistic anthropology, it appears to me that the consequences of this fact are rarely fully appreciated. Let us go back to the situation of the person in the essay on lying, who needs to suppress his pity and compassion for the sake of the law. If we ask ourselves what the exact nature of the object of this sacrifice is, having Kant’s *homo duplex* anthropology in mind, the answer will be that the human being is sacrificed to the law *as a phenomenon*. But what about the human being as a noumenon? Does the human being as a noumenon, according to Kant, act against his own interest when he refrains from deceiving a potential murderer? The answer is negative because it lies in the innermost interest of the homo noumenon – which Kant sometimes calls man’s “proper self” (*GMS*, AA 04: 457; Kant, 1996b, p. 104) – to preserve his own moral and rational being even at the (negligible) cost of his phenomenal “adjunct”. Therefore, when a truly autonomous Kantian subject is put in circumstances described in *VRML*, it does not sacrifice anything, as long as to sacrifice something it has to give up its own interest for the sake of something with which it cannot fully identify. But this is not a situation of the homo noumenon from the essay on lying. Far from it – he does not sacrifice anything by the act of saying the truth, but instead realises his innermost self and as “pure practical reason attend[s] all by itself to its own interest” (*KpV*, AA 05: 118; Kant, 2002, p. 150).

It is important to note here that in *What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?* Kant describes the categorical imperative as “the maxim of reason’s self-preservation” (*WDO*, AA 08: 146; Kant, 1996c, p. 18). Reason preserves itself *via* the execution of the categorical imperative performed by the homo noumenon. Arguably, it is therefore only in this highly idiosyncratic sense that Kant might be called a “humanist”. In this “noumenal humanism” the term “human” would refer not to the interest of a palpable human being like you and me, but would mark the noumenal self of a person who is preoccupied solely with observing the moral law. This interest would be realised with every instance of observing the law, even if it radically contradicted the eudaimonistic interest of the human being as a phenomenon.

## 4 Conclusion (A disclaimer)

Last but not least, I would like to soften this “uncharitable” picture of Kant (my doubts about the value of hermeneutical “charity” notwithstanding). Yet, in saying this, I also do not wish to qualify claims I have made to make them seem more temperate. Rather, I mean to say that this “radical” and anti-humanistic account of Kant I have provided stands in no contradiction to deriving inspiration for unambiguously *humanistic* causes from Kant’s writings. For instance, I have no issue with recent attempts of various contemporary “Kantian constructivists” (Habermas, Apel, Rawls, O’Neill, Korsgaard, Forst) to turn Kant “from his

transcendental head onto his social feet” (Forst, 2012, p. 48). I am also sympathetic towards Claus Dierksmeier’s *Kant’s Humanist Ethics* where we read e.g. that Kant’s “procedural humanism” “allows the formulation of [...] an ethics [...] of the unconditional demand for the priority of human dignity [...]” (Dierksmeier, 2011, p. 91).

The only thing I would add here is that it is not Kant’s ethical theory *as such* that lends itself to a neatly humanistic interpretation because, as I have shown, Kant’s ethics is much better described as “nomocentric” than “humanistic”. This should not, however, discourage us at all because, unless we need Kant’s direct moral tutelage or otherwise suffer from “contradictophobia”, we can firmly agree with the main claim of the present paper and at the same time keep cherry-picking with confidence the elements of Kant’s moral theory which can be of use for a variety of noble aims.

Even though Kant did not intend to be a humanist in our sense of the term, an intentional action often brings about more than is initially intended by the agent, as Joseph Raz once said (Raz, 2009, p. 230). This certainly applies to Kant and his ethics, and it is also where the distinction between the edification-oriented *Kantian* ethics and the scholarship-oriented *Kant’s* ethics comes to the forefront (see Wood, 2008, pp. IX-XI, 1-4). Both are legitimate but – I would say – separate endeavours.

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