

Between duty and contingency. On some figures of the humanistic tradition in Kant

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Abstract. One must distinguish between the Enlightenment concept and the humanistic concept of humanity. The former indicates a universal deontological ideal; the latter a selective set of personal and social virtues. Kant is a champion of Enlightenment but inherits various aspects of the humanistic tradition that began at the end of the fourteenth century. This tradition, which largely coincides with the so-called *Hofliteratur*, eclectically combines elements of ancient and Christian ethics and adds a strong pedagogical, aesthetic and socio-political trait to outline a secular morality of self-government. After briefly presenting the Enlightenment “humanist family”, the article examines some figures of the humanistic tradition present in Kantian ethics: the *Weltbürger*, self-improvement and *humanitas*. Through them I show the substantial role of education, taste and social interplay. They converge in the sphere of pragmatic anthropology, the moment morals become involved in the dramatic theatre of the world with its dialectic and rhetoric of appearance. Here the ethics of the imperative intersect with ethics as prudence and the art of living. Rational freedom intersects with the contingency of reality and the inscrutability of the psyche. Morality becomes more impure, but also richer and more suited to take up the challenge of being human.

Keywords: Kant, *humanitas*, contingency, ambiguity, prudence, art of living, self-government, humanity

1 *Humanitas* between duty and contingency

The Latin concept of *humanitas* has three main meanings: the fallibility of the human being exposed to chance and fate; benevolence towards others; and culture as a tool for personal and civic education (Høgel, 2015, p. 44). The Italian Humanism of the fifteenth century gave new emphasis to this term, making it the cornerstone of a cultural programme that focuses on the human condition and the primacy of moral philosophy. On this basis, the modern history of the concept of humanity developed, a history intertwined with the emergence of anthropological knowledge and the construction of a morality of autonomy. The line of continuity between the humanistic tradition and the Enlightenment is clearly discernible here.

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However, there are also significant differences. In order to grasp these differences, I will distinguish two semantic levels. The first concerns the Enlightenment concept of humanity: the project to emancipate the human through the human in the struggle against privilege, dominion and authority. It is based on the moral and intellectual autonomy of the individual as well as the universality of some fundamental rights. The second concerns the pre-Enlightenment concept of humanity: the reformulation of the classical ethics of virtue within a horizon dominated by the contingency of reality and the inscrutability of the psyche. Here humanity indicates an art of living that is never fully universalisable, i.e. education, good manners, but also strategy and balancing become fundamental: ways of giving shape to individual existence in a society made unpredictable by the instability of human nature and the vagaries of fortune. Humanistic *humanitas* remains a set of personal and civic virtues; it has a paradigmatic value for producing good citizens, but it is not a value in itself nor does it constitute a normative foundation of rights and duties. Because it is rooted in the anthropological terrain, humanistic morality is ‘pragmatic’, aimed at everyday training. It neither can nor wants to construct a moral system that provides a steady framework for good action. It is therefore useful to distinguish between the morality of self-government and the morality of autonomy; the former being based on a regulated art of self-cultivation and the latter on a normative science valid for all.¹ The recent revival of the ethics of virtue (referring to Kant: Betzler, 2008) demonstrates the importance of this distinction. Kant is emblematic from this point of view because he is a champion of Enlightenment humanity, and yet he retains significant traces of humanistic *humanitas*. This coexistence allows for a fruitful comparison to verify how compatible the two approaches are and whether the resources of humanistic ethics are still interesting today.

2 The Enlightenment “humanist family”

“The distinctive feature of modernity is constitutive of humanism: man also (and not only nature or God) decides his fate. In addition, it implies that the ultimate end of these acts is a human being, not suprahuman entities (God, goodness, justice) or infrahuman ones (pleasures, money, power). Humanism, finally, marks out the space in which the agents of these acts evolve: the space of all human beings, and of them alone” (Todorov, 2002, p. 30). Todorov’s passage establishes the core of modern humanism from which a series of epistemological, metaphysical and ethical-political implications derive. If we look at the ethical-political aspects, the typological scheme proposed by Todorov states that there are four cultural “families” that combine in various ways: conservative, scientific, individualist and humanist. The “humanist family” believes in the primacy of subjectivity, of reason and therefore of freedom, but accepts its limitation in the name of shared values and universal duties. The basic formula of this perspective is “the *autonomy of the I*, the *finality of you*, and the *universality of they*. [...] *I* must be the source of my action, *you* must be its goal, *they* all belong to the same human race” (*ibid.*). These three instances do not always appear together in the course of early modernity, but it is in their convergence that modern humanism is fully defined.

Todorov dwells solely on the French area and mentions Kant only in passing. But Kant certainly falls within the humanistic Enlightenment family. Indeed, he represents an extreme of the modern anthropological turning point, which, in the ethical-political sphere, means the search for rules and principles to build a wholly human society. “Human” in the sense that it is consciously produced by human choices and criteria with the aim of a progressively less

¹ In its foundations the morality of autonomy can have the purity of geometry (*V-Anth / Collins*, AA 25: 301). And if we want to speak of art, of a technical doctrine, it would be equivalent to a system of natural laws (*MS*, AA 06: 218).

conflictual and unjust coexistence of all human beings. It is a society based on intellectual and ethical autonomy, where “being a human being” means having rights, which in turn implies an assumption of responsibility towards the rights of others in a network of mutual limitations and recognition. The Kantian enlightenment therefore seems to be one of the most decisive answers to the question that began to be asked explicitly during the seventeenth century, but whose premises date back to the Renaissance: What would be left of us if God no longer assisted us? Can a purely human community exist with no foundation other than human history?² Kant’s answer requires that the notion of humanity take on an axiological and autarchic character. Humanity is an absolute end capable of conveying any other relative end within itself; it becomes the teleological principle of ethics. There are duties for the human being, among other reasons because “humanity itself is a dignity” (*MS*, AA 06: 462; Kant, 1999a, p. 579). This raises the human being above all things and obliges everyone “to acknowledge, in a practical way, the dignity of humanity in every other human being” (*MS*, AA 06: 462; Kant, 1999a, p. 579). Dignity joins humanity as an absolute ideal and as a practical reason that guides individual choices; it articulates the passage from unfathomable subjectivity (the fundamental freedom of ethics) to moral imperatives and interpersonal legal rules (duty as the reality of freedom). So, the *dignitas hominis* of the Renaissance tradition has been transformed from a selective virtue-paradigm into an absolute end which encompasses the destiny of the human species; not a comparative possibility, but an unconditional imperative. Therefore, the explanation of the supreme principle of the doctrine of virtues states that “the human being is an end for himself as well as for others [...] it is in itself his duty to make the human being as such his end” (*MS*, AA 06: 395; Kant, 1999a, p. 525).

Through the link between reason and freedom, choice and obligation, Kant contributed to the forging of humanity as a universal ethical ideal that is realised over time through individuals, in a type of implicit pact between generations. The humanists had already stated that men are not born but made: “*at homines, mihi crede, non nascuntur sed finguntur*” (Erasmus quoted in Buck, 1987, p. 154). *Humanitas* meant the best way to be human, i.e. the best way to possess a set of qualities³ obtained through self-cultivation. Instruments and, at the same time, expressions of this cultivation were the *studia humanitatis*, “the cognition of those things concerning life and customs; such studies are called of humanity, because they perfect and adorn man” (Leonardo Bruni quoted in Buck, 1987, p. 155). In Kant, however, humanity goes beyond itself, in a sort of self-transcendence, where culture and humanistic qualities are only the external means for an absolute ultimate end, which is the very image of the original freedom that characterises pure practical reason.

Alongside the deontological version of humanity, we must now consider humanity as self-government based on *ars vivendi*.

3 Figures of the humanistic tradition in Kant

3.1 From the *honnête homme* to the *Weltbürger*

From the end of the fourteenth century with Petrarch, and then with a host of more or less famous authors like Baldassare Castiglione, Stefano Guazzo, Francesco Guicciardini, Michel de Montaigne, Erasmus, Baltasar Gracián and others, humanistic ethics took shape. It eclectically combines elements of ancient and Christian ethics and adds a strong pedagogical,

² “The conception of morality as self-governance provides a conceptual framework for a social space in which we may each rightly claim to direct our own actions without interference from the state, the church, the neighbors, or those claiming to be better or wiser than we” (Schneewind, 1998, p. 4).

³ In addition to the classical virtues of prudence, justice, constancy, temperance, there are the new aesthetic and civic virtues such as benevolence, affability, good taste, urbanity, *politesse*.

aesthetic and socio-political trait; its development is intertwined with that body of knowledge that in the eighteenth century would be called *anthropology* (Garin, 1965; Buck, 1987; Zammito, 2002; Sturm, 2009; Lines and Ebbersmeyer, 2013). As Aristotle and Cicero had taught, morality is a performative competence; its study is also a reflection in continuous movement, made up of structurally incomplete arguments because they focus on unstable realities. By accentuating the almost ontological background of insecurity, contingency becomes now a mirror of the intimate contradictions of the human condition. This is why the notion of government becomes central – government of self, government of things and of men. Prudence, as well as a tool for adjusting means and ends, becomes the ability to mediate a multiplicity of conflicting (psychological, political, social) parties. But a series of other virtues are required to regulate conduct. Thus is born a moral literature on how to shape oneself by mastering gestures, words and judgements while observing oneself through others in a game of mutual adaptation. This is the so-called court literature (*Hofliteratur*) with its new prototype of the virtuous man: first the elitist courtier, then the more generic *honnête homme*, the gentleman, the civilised and well-mannered man (Bury, 1996; Bryson, 1998). The good, which is plural and relative, can assume unitary traits through form and convenience: codes of conduct that tame impulses and orient behaviour, not through an abstract norm but through historically selected duties and social values such as esteem, appreciation and mutual recognition. Form is measure and institution, but it also has a strong aesthetic value of demeanour and urbanity, as well as taste, touch and exploratory attention, forged with time and experience. Appearances matter because in uncertainty they are the key to maintaining order, to understanding what it consists of, how it works and for what purposes one might modify it.

Kant's *Weltbürger*⁴ incorporates the various transformations of the humanistic *gentleman*. The *Weltbürger* is the interlocutor of pragmatic anthropology, understood as a school of life: instructions for transforming knowledge into a rule of conduct (*Anth*, AA 07: 189); in fact, it seeks “to know the human being according to what can be made of him” (*Anth*, AA 07: 246; Kant, 2007, p. 349). We can consider this anthropology as the Kantian version of humanistic training manuals (Wilson, 2001). The *Weltbürger* is the *honnête homme* in a bourgeois and cosmopolitan configuration. Of course, his main art of self-government, prudence, is now downgraded from a moral virtue to a pragmatic skill. It is, however, an indispensable skill to be a good citizen, something like a civic virtue. Prudence is the shrewd use of others to one's own ends; it includes tact, powers of observation and foresight (*GMS*, AA 04: 415-16; *V-PP/Collins*, AA 25: 211). Therefore, the man of the world *must* have a political side; he knows how the world is and through this he learns to know how to act in various circumstances. His social prowess is the external sign of self-government, a reflective practice that takes place in the world theatre,⁵ where everyone is an actor and a spectator, a means and an end. In worldliness dominates the *savoir-vivre* supported by the acquaintance of people, places and customs, which becomes a competence in doing the right thing.

Knowledge is put to the test of experience and becomes a dialectic of points of view, an enlarged vision built in constant comparison with others (*Anth*, AA 07: 219, 227-333). From a pragmatic point of view there is therefore a close connection between morality, worldliness and virtue; together they determine how to be in the world. Like the art of balancing sense and sensibility, rule and exception, duty and power, prudence is the master virtue (Graband,

⁴ Sporadically Kant speaks precisely of *Weltmann*, a German mould for *homme du monde*, which in turn is a variant of *honnête homme* (see for examples *Refl*, AA 19: 197; 110; 189, 197; *TP*, AA 08: 177; *V-PP/Powalski*, AA 27: 104, 117).

⁵ “World” and “worldliness” are fundamental indicators of the secularisation process. An evident result of this process is the philosophy for the world, that *Populärphilosophie* with which Kant measured himself through the lessons of anthropology (Binkelman and Schneiderei, 2015).

2015; Wehofsits, 2016). Self-knowledge and the formation of a virtuous character develop in parallel to that school of life intended by the expressions “to know the world” and “to have the world” (*Anth*, AA 06: 120; Kant, 2007, p. 232). The supersensible root of morality operates in the world, understood in the physical sense (geography, characters, passions, peoples) as well as figuratively (history, society, customs, works).

It is precisely this radical worldliness, however, that makes Kant retreat. Modern moralist literature has ruthlessly revealed the black centre of human nature,⁶ how the ambiguities and deceptions of the psyche are multiplied and confused in the game of social fiction: the poisoned fruits of civilisation. For this reason Kant demands a clear separation between morality and civilisation, prudence and virtue, humanity as a sense of dignity deriving from moral rationality and humanity as a social and pragmatic virtue. The prudential norm that regulates the pragmatic sphere and the moral norm respond to a different logic (*GMS*, AA 04: 413-419). The first is always hypothetical, based on the modality of the possible and the real, while the other is apodictic, based on the modality of necessity. It is this difference, observes Kant, that moralists of every age have not grasped, inevitably destabilising every ethical foundation, which is sometimes placed in happiness, sometimes in good manners, sometimes in human nature – that is exactly where it falls apart.

The human being is only educated, civilised but he is not yet moralised (*IaG*, AA 08: 27). The *Weltbürger* as a conscious, skilled and open-minded citizen, is only the worldly prefiguration of the moral man, the citizen of the intelligible world. However, he is perhaps the best example of *vir bonus* that we have. Civilisation, an intrinsically pragmatic operation, is in fact an indispensable tool for mitigating the overwhelming tendencies of the human being: “The pragmatic predisposition to become civilized through culture, particularly through the cultivation of social qualities, and the natural tendency of his species in social relations to come out of the crudity of mere personal forces and to become a well-mannered (if not yet moral) being destined for concord, is now a higher step” (*Anth*, AA 07: 323; Kant, 2007, p. 418). Pragmatic humanity is therefore a necessary moment for intelligible humanity. Think of when Kant even accepts the tricks of reason in guiding the course of history (*IaG*, AA 08: 20-22) or the efficacy of fictions to induce the good, or the usefulness of deceiving the deceiver in us (*Anth*, AA 07: 150-151)!

3.2 *Perfice te ipsum*

The doctrine of virtues included in the *Metaphysics of Morals* is a particularly interesting text for our issue. The doctrine makes extensive use of the traditional ethical lexicon. That lexicon makes its weight felt, even causing tension with the deontological logic in which it is reformulated.

The doctrine re-proposes the classic theme of *how* to make a morally better human being of oneself, how to put certain behaviours into practice in the theatre of the world where the prudential dimension of pragmatic worldliness dominates. The solution lies in conceiving ends that immediately apply *a priori*, which immediately gain the value of commands called “duties of virtue”. These duties bring about ethics. A human being becomes righteous by learning to carry out a series of duties towards himself (as a bodily and moral being) and duties towards others. Thus, although the motives and circumstances of acting are innumerable, the supersensible reason exerts its power.

⁶ “Larochefoucauld and the other French masters of psychical examination [...] are like skilful marksmen who again and again hit the bullseye – but it is the bullseye of human nature” (Nietzsche, 1996, p. 32). Moralist literature is part of the conglomerate of genres that constitutes *Hofliteratur*, which in turn flows into Enlightenment anthropological knowledge, to which pragmatic anthropology also belongs (Schneiders, 1983; Wilson, 2001).

The duties of virtue are not a catalogue of vices and virtues nor are they *exempla*, but they are prescriptions derived from the logic of self-obligation, capable of triggering self-constraint and the internal struggle between pleasure and duty, which is symptomatic of moral strength and therefore of virtue. Kant specifies that virtue does not lie in the middle and does not derive from experience, two key characteristics of the Aristotelian prudential tradition. Thus the transformation of virtue is evident, from a socially recognised habit guided by prudence to a free obedience towards a rationally determined and universally valid objective duty. Nonetheless, virtue remains the formation of character, habit and lifestyle which is conquered by means of self-control. All this requires inner work and self-discipline; but sooner or later this work encounters the world, i.e. once more the pragmatic sphere of the psychological and social games.

In the metaphysical framework of morality this world appears on the margins, conveyed by the lexicon of the humanistic tradition: formation, character, constancy, then humanity as a paradigm of benevolence, friendship and sympathy, up to virtues of social intercourse (courtesy, affability, kindness, decorum). The executive core of authentic virtue is *perficere te ut finem, perficere te ut medium* (*MS*, AA 06: 419):⁷ a command that translates into practical exercise, an ethical typology that humanism had revived with the idea of *humaniora* as an integral and permanent formation (Høgel, 2015, p. 59). Not surprisingly, that command finds its pragmatic background. It is our duty to cultivate our natural faculties (mind, body, soul) as a means to every kind of end, “to be in a pragmatic respect a human being equal to the end of his existence” (*MS*, AA 06: 445; Kant, 1999a, p. 565). Of course, the pragmatic command must find a balance with the purely ethical command to accord one’s will with the dignity of humanity that resides in the person (*be holy, be perfect*): the imperfect duty to be perfect. Similarly, the inscrutability of the heart (*MS*, AA 06: 447), while requiring the reinforcing of the unambiguous absoluteness of the duty, reveals the infinite multiplicity of the heteronomous aspects of the human experience (the infinity of desire, passions, vices, habits, appearances) which require the duty to be remodelled into numerous specific obligations.

3.3 *Humanitas kantiana*

The lexicon of *humanitas* appears in Kant with some punctuality when dealing with culture, proxemics and aesthetics. He notes that, in order to hear the voice of duty, we need “concepts of what is presupposed on the part of feeling by the mind’s receptivity to concepts of duty as such” (*MS*, AA 06: 399; Kant, 1999a, p. 528). This natural predisposition produces no effects if it is not cultivated. The *perficere te ipsum* requires culture, understood as moral wealth, active perfection of oneself. It includes, in addition to technical skills, a discipline for the control of drives that proceeds together with the development of social attitudes.

In this worldly sense humanity is the form of coexistence itself; it is the social game where one learns and experiences one’s skills, which are one’s civic virtues. Recognition, appreciation, authority and influence are indispensable for assessing one’s social value, and are all linked to *savoir-faire* and *politesse* (*V-PP/Fried*, AA 25: 583, 586, 701). In words that we could easily have read in a humanistic treatise, Kant writes that “the way of thinking characteristic of the union of good living with virtue in social intercourse is humanity” (*Anth*, AA 07: 277; Kant, 2007, p. 378). The balance between physical and moral good is the goal of the “well-behaved human being” (*Anth*, AA 07: 277; Kant, 2007, p. 377). Sociality, especially in some of its ritual moments (music, dance, play, conversation, banquet), is an important part of this balance, which can produce something like a “moral happiness” (*Anth*, AA 07: 277; Kant, 2007, p. 377). Purism and cynicism are indeed degeneration of virtue:

⁷ *Perficere te* was a formula used by Baumgarten and in general by the German scholastic philosophy well known to Kant (Klemme, 2017, p. 251). Recall that the *studia humanitatis* are so called because “*hominem perficiant*” (cf. the quotation above, Buck, 1987, p. 155).

“being forsaken by the graces, they can make no claim to humanity” (*Anth*, AA 07: 282; Kant, 2007, p. 382).

Humanity as *humanitas* means considering the sensitive aspect of man. That is, it has to do with feeling, or rather with the communication-sharing of one’s feelings (*MS*, AA 06: 456). It is therefore opening oneself to others. Openness can be rational or emotional. If the other is considered as a free being, the bearer of humanity (in the sense of the idea of reason and the final ethical destination) then we have *humanitas practica*, where the participation of feelings (benevolence, beneficence, gratitude) occurs as a result of duty. In the case of simple empathy there is instead only *humanitas aethetica*, which acts like the contagion of a disease; it does not derive from a choice and has only instrumental value (*MS*, AA 06: 456). However, *humanitas aethetica* has its own specific value if taken as a set of social virtues that make virtue lovable and strengthen its social effect. The adjective “aesthetic” clearly recalls the area of sensitivity, both physical (feelings, emotions) and symbolic-figurative (beautiful appearances), i.e. it recalls the themes of the art of living and knowing how to behave, dealt with in the *Critique of Judgment*, but considered now in their worldly aspect. This is demonstrated in particular by the fact that they are called virtues of social intercourse or *virtutes homileticae* (*MS*, AA 06: 473), a supposed aristotelic term⁸ that immediately evokes the art of conversation, one of the cornerstones of humanism. Conversation contains more than mere eloquence. It refers to rhetoric, which in turn refers to the sphere of the likely, the contingent, the practical syllogism, the conflict of interpretations. And it refers to the public sphere made up of appearances, role plays, rituals; a stylisation of social competition, a domestication of physical and psychological conflict.

Compared with “humanity”, Kant’s way of using the term *humanitas* is quite conventional. It concerns the sphere of taste, cultivated with the *humaniora* (humanities), the canon of studies useful to the formation of the good citizen. Kant repeats that the *humaniora* are knowledge of the ancients, “the unification of science with taste, which rubs off coarseness and furthers the communicability and urbanity in which humanity consists” (*Log*, AA 09: 45; Kant, 1992, p. 554). He also notes that the humanist (*Humanist*) is cultivated as far as he understands language and literature, and is civilised because he knows classical authors (*Log*, AA 09: 46). He therefore does not seem to grasp any significant relationship between rhetoric as the art of appearances and passions, and the theoretical problem of taste and fine arts (Van der Zande, 1995, pp. 440-441).

Most relevant issues that Kant deals with in his anthropology are those derived from humanistic *humanitas*. They become interesting precisely because of the tension they generate with respect to deontological morality: the pragmatic of virtue should only be a propaedeutic to morality, but it ends up reaffirming an alternative way of exercising virtue.

4 Conclusion

I have reported some elements of a wider research. The interest of this research lies 1) in the exploration of the modern concept of humanity; 2) in the reconstruction of the background of Kantian anthropology; 3) in the evaluation of the *liaisons dangereuses* between deontological ethics and the ethics of virtues. A better knowledge of the humanistic tradition can yield useful historiographical and theoretical results. Humanistic *humanitas* broadens Enlightenment universalism thanks to an approach that we could define as phenomenological-hermeneutic, where human ambiguity is explored and taken into account. The relationship between freedom and reason is complicated by the structural presence of the contingency of things and the inscrutability of the psyche. This forces us to give importance

⁸ In a well-known dictionary of the Kantian period one can read that the homiletic virtues were invented by Aristotle and “they serve the witty and polite entertainment of a company and they make the man skilled and polite, who knows how to win everyone’s affection and respect. He [Aristotle] counts among them truthfulness, friendliness and civility” (Zedler, 1739, p. 243).

to the dialectic and rhetoric of appearances in the realisation of ethics, i.e. in the formation of the person and his capacity for moral judgment.

The morality of autonomy has never ceased to deal with pragmatics, i.e. with humanistic *humanitas*. In problematic form, Kant inherits its words, models and precepts: the idea of morality not only as a construction of absolute imperatives and universalisable maxims, but as a way of being, in which there is an inescapable political and prudential component.

It is certainly possible to argue that the humanistic approach renders *impure* morality (Louden, 2000). However, it certainly enriches its perspective. To stay with the key term *humanity*: we learn that it cannot be simply an absolute value but it is, *must* be – because it always manifests itself in this way, challenging to moral research – even disorder, uncertainty and dialectical interplay. It is life in its elusive ambiguity, its innovative and destructive power. After all, it is precisely to face this ambiguity that the humanist gentleman had to make himself a man of the world and the classical virtues had to come to terms with the subtle arts of the government of contingency.

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