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What Is the Human Being?

Kant’s *Anthropology* seems to suggest that the attempt to identify the distinguishing mark of humanity cannot be successful. For to do so, we would have to be able to compare what we think to be our distinctive features, namely the fact that we define ourselves in terms of terrestrial rational beings, with that of other rational beings in order to see what is specific to the human form of rationality. Because we have no empirical evidence of a non-terrestrial rational being, we are left without a term for comparison and ‘It seems, therefore, that the problem of indicating the character of the human species is absolutely insoluble.’¹ Human beings are creatures without compare, and yet in Section 1, I will show that Kant does not hesitate to imagine what he cannot experience in order to compensate for this empirical shortage.² Thus, and perhaps unexpectedly, ‘alienology’, which populates the Kantian corpus in various disguises, is in fact crucial for Kant, for it is the gauge by which the human being can measure his own humanity.³ This will allow me to argue that Kant’s answer to the question ‘what is the human being?’ entails a decisive re-evaluation of traditional conceptions of human nature. In Section 2, I examine three difficulties faced by the human sciences and suggest ways of overcoming them in order to preserve the viability of Kant’s project.

1. *Anthropology* vs. *alienology*

   (i) **The three levels of human praxis and their aliens**

   In *Anthropology*, Kant defines the distinctive features of human beings in the following terms:

   *[T]he human being is markedly distinguished from all other living beings by his technical predisposition for manipulating things*
(mechanically joined with consciousness), by his pragmatic predisposition (to use other human beings skillfully for his purposes), and by the moral predisposition in his being (to treat himself and others according to the principle of freedom under laws).

(Anthropology, 417 [7:322])

Regrettably, Kant has not drawn the full implications of these features for the human sciences and our understanding of the relationship between the human being and the world. However, I shall expand Kant's thoughts by analysing various allusions and remarks he makes throughout the Anthropology and the Lectures on Anthropology, in particular, by focusing on some passages he dedicates to human beings' 'others' or 'aliens'. On this basis, I will show that three types of aliens in Kant’s works can be used to illustrate, by contrast, each level of what I would like to call 'human praxis' (i.e. the ability to act in the world): the levels of technicality, prudence and morality. These types are aristocrats, sincere aliens (of which women will be a terrestrial form) and non-white races – they correspond respectively to the first, second and third level of human praxis.

(a) Aristocrats: The sterile aliens (first level of human praxis)

The first level of human praxis consists in man's technical ability to manipulate and produce things, and thus to secure his subsistence by cultivating nature. Kant understands this ability as corresponding to a natural imperative: 'The invention of his means of nourishment, his clothing, his external safety and defense [...] should be entirely his own work.' The fact that the human being is entirely responsible for his subsistence allows him to feel a form of self-esteem: he 'may have only his own merit alone to thank for it; just as if [nature] had been more concerned about his rational self-esteem than about his well-being'. Yet aristocrats – understood as representing the non-working classes – are certainly not entitled to this self-esteem. Insofar as they do not produce anything, they are not worthy of the life they live, and perhaps even not worthy of life itself: 'it appears to have been no aim at all to nature that he should live well; but only that he should labor and work himself up so far that he might make himself worthy of well-being through his conduct of life.' What sets aristocrats apart from all other human beings is that they believe themselves to be quite above labour: 'those who have enough to live on, whether in affluence or penury, consider themselves superior in comparison with those who must work in order to live. [...] All, in a word, consider themselves superior to the extent that they believe they do not have to work.' They consume goods and