The idea or the problem of human essence or human nature is central. The very way we try to articulate this statement, using the words like “idea” or “problem”, “essence” or “nature”, reflects our foundational beliefs and sets the bounds for further discussion – or immediately reveals its futility, betraying the incommensurability of our positions. However, the discussion is unavoidable, and the pace of science and technology makes it ever more urgent and complex.

Kant’s voice is prominent in this discussion. The notions of human dignity, autonomy, respect for persons that are cornerstone to contemporary legislation and underlying ethical theories are often grounded by references to Kant’s philosophy. And this in turn awards importance to the task of explaining what was - and was not - stated by the great philosoper regarding the question that he saw as encompassing the whole of our discipline. This important task has attracted much attention from Kant-scholars as well as from other quarters of philosophy. This resulted, on the one hand, in a large and consolidated output of Kantian literature, on the other hand, in a wide variety of interpretations and adaptations of Kant’s ideas to non-Kantian and even anti-Kantian philosophical contexts.

In my presentation I will try to bring together and relate within one general scheme four key meanings of Kant’s idea of humanity and their treatments in Kant-scholarship and beyond (sometimes - far beyond). For this I will, first, touch upon the intellectual context of Kant’s humanity, or Menschheit. Its roots lie in the discussions of Aufklärung concerning universal history and the purposeful development of human predispositions. These discussions, in turn, came as a reaction to mechanistic view of history espoused by the French and an attempt to marry it to Leibniz-Wolffian teleology. And Voltaire and Montesquieu themselves were working against the earlier Christian views of history and humanity, expressed in Augustinian and Thomist traditions. Second, I will proceed to examine Kant’s texts to pick out the meanings he attaches to humanity, some of which are relatively unattended in current discussions. I will argue that Kant’s Menschheit is used in four contexts that are separated by the metaphysical divides of natural vs. non-natural (transcendental) and element vs. whole. The four meanings one can discern in Kant's Menschheit could be named individualism, collectivism, essentialism and personalism. Finally, I will look into some current and historical interpretations of humanity that with varying degree of intensity accentuate different meanings of the term and examine where this takes us. These interpretations are liberal individualism and liberal essentialism of Rawlsian thought, collectivism of Soviet Marxism, and religious and secular personalism of Russian and French mid-XX century thinkers.

By showing theoretical and practical ramifications of one-sided accounts of humanity, I hope to illustrate that, although its four meanings stand in strenuous relations, they’re irreducible, and each needs to be present in current discussions.

Zur Person:
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