

**Patrick R. Frierson**

*What is the Human Being?*

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*What is the Human Being?* is the first of a five-part series of books on Kant taking its cue primarily from the following remark from one of Kant's classroom lectures on logic:

The field of philosophy... can be brought down to the following questions:

1. *What can I know?*
2. *What ought I to do?*
3. *What may I hope?*
4. *What is the human being?*

*Metaphysics* answers the first question, *morals* the second, *religion* the third, and *anthropology* the fourth. Fundamentally, however, one could reckon all of this as anthropology, because the first three questions relate to the last one (*Kants gesammelte Schriften*, Georg Reimer [Walter de Gruyter], 1900–, IX:25).

The titles of four out of the five books in the *Kant's Questions* series track back to this much-discussed declaration. But what about the fifth book, *What is Enlightenment?* This fifth question is one that Kant pursues in a famous short essay first published in 1784, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* At any rate, the question, "What is the human being?" clearly occupies top billing in Kant's list of questions. For it is his conviction that if we can answer this single question correctly ("What are human beings' dispositions, powers, and faculties for thinking, feeling, and choosing?"), then we will in effect have answers to all of the other remaining questions of philosophy, insofar as they are all asked by human beings and from the perspective of human beings. Although earlier Enlightenment thinkers such as Hutcheson and Hume also attached a similar supreme importance to the question, "What is the human being?" the issue acquires additional significance in the case of Kant because he developed a semester-length course on anthropology that he offered annually from 1772 until his retirement from teaching in 1796. Kant published the final version of these lectures under the title *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* in 1798, but earlier transcriptions of his anthropology lectures have also become available in recent years which enable readers to track the development of his views concerning human nature. However, an additional complication is that Kant's extensive anthropological work does not ultimately deliver on the bold claim that an answer to the question "*Was ist der Mensch?*" will somehow provide an answer to all of philosophy's questions. This is because Kant's anthropological works operate primarily on an empirical and pragmatic plane, and the traditional questions of philosophy are neither empirical nor pragmatic.

Patrick Frierson's book, *What is the Human Being?* attempts not only to answer the named question from a Kantian perspective, but also to engage Kant's position in active dialogue

both with contemporary debates about human nature as well as with significant nineteenth-century influences that brought us to where we are today. Accordingly, the book is divided into three parts. Part I (“Kant on the Human Being”) is divided into five chapters and focuses on different dimensions or types of Kantian anthropology, broadly construed. Part II (“Interlude: From Kant to the Twentieth Century”) consists of a single chapter, and surveys “five key post-Kantian figures who reflected on human nature in ways quite different from Kant’s own” (135) – viz., Hegel, Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud. Part III (“What is the Human Being Today?”) is divided into four chapters: it constitutes an ambitious attempt to bring Kant’s position into dialogue with the most significant contemporary approaches to human nature. Chapter 7 (“Scientific Naturalism”) looks at developments within neuroscience, evolutionary biology, and psychology. Chapter 8 (“Historicism and Human Diversity”) examines the rise of historicism regarding natural science (Kuhn), the human sciences (Foucault), and cultural anthropology (Ruth Benedict and Clifford Geertz). Chapter 9 (“Existentialism”) includes discussions not only of Heidegger’s and Sartre’s accounts of human nature, but also looks at the “heteronomous” existentialists (249) Levinas and Derrida. Frierson sees the existentialists as “arguably the most direct *heirs* of Kant’s work in... anthropology” (7, see also 231), primarily because of their strong emphasis on human freedom. At the same time, the existentialists are also criticized from a Kantian perspective for failing to provide sufficient normative guidance in human life (256). Indeed, because all of the contemporary approaches to human nature examined thus far are said to founder on problems of normativity (258), in Chapter 10 (“Normativity”) Frierson focuses on important contemporary approaches to human nature that pay more attention to how humans *ought* to think, feel, and act. Starting with the role of intuitions in both Husserl’s and Moore’s very different philosophies, he moves on to the “cheerful ethnocentrism” of Rorty (266ff.) and MacIntyre’s non-universalist approach to norms via historical traditions and narratives: Frierson concludes with a brief look at the nature and role of norms in the two “most influential contemporary appropriations of Kant” (259), Habermas and Korsgaard. The book also includes a brief Introduction and Conclusion, as well as a Bibliography and Index. Additionally, each chapter concludes with an annotated guide to further reading.

As the above summary of the book’s contents indicates, Frierson covers a great deal of intellectual ground in this work. Fastidious scholars will certainly have some qualms regarding the book’s ambitious scope. Can one say anything meaningful about Hegel’s account of human nature in three pages? Or Darwin’s in four? The Kant side of the project also lays itself open to a similar worry, particularly in Chapter 1 (“Kant’s Transcendental Anthropology”), which is in effect a whirlwind tour of Kant’s three *Critiques*. Additionally, in this opening chapter Frierson oddly connects the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, the foundational treatise in modern philosophical aesthetics, with Kant’s question, “What may I hope?” a question which, as we saw earlier, Kant himself says is answered by religion rather than art (13 n. 1, 14, 32–42).

But the largest concern that scholars concerned with Kant’s anthropology are likely to raise concerns Frierson’s extensive use of the term “transcendental anthropology.” Kant himself uses this term only once – in Latin (“*Anthropologia transcendentalis*”) – in a cryptic and unpublished note or *Reflexion* (*KgS* XV:395). Frierson (11) uses the term to refer to what Kant merely calls “anthropology” when he says that all of philosophy’s questions can be reckoned “as anthropology” (*KgS* IX:25), and he justifies this terminological usage in part by pointing out that Kant describes “each aspect of his philosophy as ‘transcendental’” (11). However, even if we

grant that this is true (I myself would not: there are significant aspects of his philosophy that Kant does not describe as transcendental – e.g., his writings on geography), in several of the Kantian texts that Frierson cites at this point, Kant himself is clearly not referring to transcendental *anthropology*. For instance, at *KgS* IV:390 (see 11), Kant describes “transcendental philosophy” as the attempt to present “actions and rules of PURE thinking.” He doesn’t say *human* thinking here, and in fact he goes on to emphasize that what he is concerned with are “not the actions and conditions of human willing in general, which are drawn largely from psychology” (IV:390, see also *Critique of Pure Reason* A 480/B 508). In renaming transcendental philosophy transcendental anthropology, there is a danger of reducing it merely to a kind of philosophical speciesism, and it is not at all clear that this was Kant’s intent.

Although I have drawn attention to some possible objections to and weaknesses in Frierson’s approach, my own view is that he acquits himself admirably in this ambitious project. He is careful to point out when his usage of key terms differs from Kant’s, and his discussions of Hegel, Darwin, and company, though brief, are insightful and clear. This is a bold book that wears its considerable scholarship lightly. In my earlier back-cover blurb for *What is the Human Being?* I said that its chief virtue is “its successful attempt to engage Kant’s anthropology in dialogue with a variety of competing post-Kantian theories of human nature in a way that is neither depressingly dogmatic nor bluntly dismissive,” and in rereading the book I find myself endorsing this judgment again. Frierson artfully builds on the extensive recent work done by scholars all over the world on Kant’s anthropology, and he extends it into new territory by bringing it into constructive contact with contemporary discussions of human nature.

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