

Panayot Butchvarov  
**Anthropocentrism in Philosophy**

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Foundations of Ontology

Edited by  
Javier Cumpa Arteseros, Jorge J. E. Gracia,  
E. Jonathan Lowe, Peter Simons and Erwin Tegtmeier

## Volume 8

Panayot Butchvarov

# **Anthropocentrism in Philosophy**

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Realism, Antirealism, Semirealism

**DE GRUYTER**

ISBN 978-1-61451-792-4  
e-ISBN (PDF) 978-1-61451-849-5  
e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-1-61451-947-8  
ISSN 2198-1841

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

**Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2015 Walter de Gruyter Inc., Boston/Berlin  
Printing: CPI books GmbH, Leck  
♻️ Printed on acid-free paper  
Printed in Germany

[www.degruyter.com](http://www.degruyter.com)



For Karter, Kole, and Norah



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# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1 Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism, the belief that humans enjoy special, central, even cosmic significance, is present in everyday thought as an attitude toward other animals and the environment generally, and in religion as the Biblical teaching that humans alone were made in the image of God. “I am unable to believe that, in the world as known, there is anything that I can value outside human beings, and, to a much lesser extent, animals,” wrote Bertrand Russell.<sup>1</sup> Many think that such anthropocentrism mars our relationship to other animals and the environment, just as egocentrism mars our relationship to other humans. Speciesism, they would say, is no more acceptable than is egoism, androcentrism, or ethnocentrism. Many also think that the anthropocentrism in religion mars our conception of God. They would agree with Spinoza that, contrary to standard religious doctrine, “neither intellect nor will pertain to the nature of God,”<sup>2</sup> and that “God is free from passions, nor is He affected with any emotion of joy or sorrow.”<sup>3</sup> To attribute to God human characteristics such as intellect, will, joy, or sorrow, they would say, is to think of God as a sort of superhuman.

These instances of anthropocentrism are well-known and have been amply discussed for centuries. They are not the topic of this book. Its topic lies deeper: the anthropocentrism present, though seldom discussed or even acknowledged, in philosophy, the discipline charged with our most fundamental thinking – about knowledge (in epistemology), goodness (in ethics), and the world itself (in metaphysics).

Ethics is commonly understood as concerned with human well-being, even happiness, and epistemology with human knowledge, especially perception. But these are empirical matters, investigated today in psychology and neuroscience, philosophers generally lacking the qualifications or even inclination for empirical research. Ethics and epistemology remain anthropocentric even when concerned only with language, because the language in question is surely human and investigated properly in linguistics and lexicography. In metaphysics, anthropocentrism takes the form of antirealism, the orientation that has dominated philosophy since Berkeley and especially Kant. Broadly understood, it claims that the world depends, at least insofar as it is knowable, on our cognitive ca-

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1 Paul Arthur Schilpp, *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989), 19–20.

2 Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics* (New York: Hafner, 1963), Part One, Proposition VII, Note.

3 *Ethics*, Part Five, Proposition XVII.

pacities. The claim seems absurd if taken to mean, as it often is, that we, humans, “make the world.”

I shall argue that, if properly understood, epistemology is not about human knowledge and ethics is not about the human good despite the fact that we all desire the human good and respect human knowledge, and that metaphysics is not about “us,” despite the tautology that we can know the world only as it can be known by us. My argument will rest not on abstract and often enigmatic philosophical premises but on specific and readily understandable truths.

Whatever the nature of the world may be, humans are only inhabitants of it. The world can hardly depend on them. And knowledge of humans, like knowledge of its other inhabitants, is credibly sought only by empirical, evidence-based methods. But philosophy is not an empirical discipline, and its claims are seldom supported with empirical evidence. Philosophers perform no experiments, maintain no labs, use neither telescopes nor microscopes, embark on no field trips. The moral to be drawn, however, is not that philosophers are experts on nonempirical things or facts. If numbers are such things, it is mathematicians, not philosophers, who specialize in them.

Concern with human beings, of course, is natural and morally expected of us all. It is a professional concern, however, only for some: neuroscientists, psychologists, psychiatrists, economists, sociologists, anthropologists, demographers, linguists, lexicographers, physicians. Aristotle did engage in biological investigations, but at the time biology was hardly a science. Today it is.

Philosophers’ willingness to assume authoritative stands on human beings became especially incongruous when the experimental sciences devoted to the study of humans emerged. For most of the history of philosophy and science, if a topic did not belong in mathematics, astronomy, medicine, or theology, it was dispatched to philosophy – there seemed to be no other place to put it. Even today, in some institutions psychology is called “mental philosophy” and physics “natural philosophy.” But neither is considered part of philosophy, and few philosophers today can claim expertise in psychology or in physics.

I shall be concerned here with the ways anthropocentrism has affected epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics, arguing that it has no place in them, that all three should be radically refocused. The same reasoning would apply, directly or indirectly, to the other branches of philosophy – from the philosophy of art and of science to political philosophy and the philosophy of education – but they will not be discussed here. They all depend in part on theories developed in metaphysics, epistemology, or ethics, but also on developments in fields like history, economics, or psychology. Logic is an exception, for reasons to be explained shortly. Suffice it to note here that, insofar as it belongs in philosophy rather than mathematics, it is a part of metaphysics.

Some may say that not all of human nature is empirical, that humans also have immortal nonphysical souls. But this is a matter of faith, not investigation, empirical or not. Others may say that even if humans have no immortal souls they have nonphysical minds, entirely distinct from both their brains and their behavior. But there has been an empirical science investigating such minds: the introspective psychology of James, Wundt, Titchener, and many others. To be sure, it was largely unsuccessful, though not because its subject matter called for nonempirical investigation – the introspective psychologists explicitly relied on experience, often in collaboration with others, sometimes in “laboratories.” Much the same can be said about continental phenomenology in its early stages, which was a close relative of introspective psychology and was summed up in Husserl’s slogan “We must go back to the things themselves,” back to what we actually find before us, rather than what philosophical or scientific theory, or even common sense, says is there.

In Husserl’s later works, and especially Heidegger’s and Sartre’s, phenomenology evolved into a kind of metaphysics, similar to Kant’s transcendental idealism, Hegel’s absolute idealism, or even Nelson Goodman’s “irrealism.” Its chief tenet became that the empirical world itself is in some sense human, “made by us,” as Goodman put it. This was essentially the thesis of antirealism, in a very broad sense of the term that would apply to Berkeley’s “immaterialism” as well as to Kant’s, Hegel’s, and Goodman’s views. Much of this book will be devoted to that thesis.

More likely today is to be told that in fact philosophical inquiries are not about human beings, that they really are conceptual or linguistic. They are about concepts or words, not about the things or facts, human or nonhuman, those concepts or words stand for. For example, it would be said, in ethics philosophers investigate the concept of happiness or the use of the word “happiness,” not any facts about happiness, which indeed are usefully investigated today by psychiatrists and pharmacologists, and in epistemology they investigate the concept of perception or the use of “perceive,” not any facts about perception, which for centuries have been investigated by psychologists and in recent years also by neuroscientists. But surely the concepts and words in question are themselves human, not platonic or divine, and thus are part of an empirical subject matter. The investigation of them calls for observation and sometimes experiment – as in psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, and lexicography – not philosophical speculations, intuitions, a priori arguments, analyses, or definitions.

That this is so is hardly news. It was powerfully argued more than half a century ago by W.V. Quine in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” where he attacked philosophical appeals to meanings. At about the same time Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investiga-*

tions was published, arguing in part that words in ordinary language are not used in accordance with necessary and sufficient conditions, and therefore that their use cannot be captured in definitions. In the same decade Gilbert Ryle castigated “the confusion between a ‘use’, i.e., a way of operating with something, and a ‘usage’.... A usage is a custom, practice, fashion or vogue.... The method of discovering linguistic usages are the methods of philologists.”<sup>4</sup> Also in that decade, Chomsky began publishing articles and books that stressed the biological, largely inherited, core of linguistic competence, and urged that the study of language employ the standard methods of scientific research.

The traditional claim of philosophy to a distinctive place among the cognitive disciplines has rested on its absolute fundamentality, supreme abstraction, and unlimited scope. In these respects it surpasses even mathematics: one of its topics is the subject matter of mathematics itself. Its scope includes that of physics and astronomy – space, time, and whatever is in them – but philosophy is also concerned with anything that is not or might not be in space and time. Philosophy presupposes nothing and conceals nothing. This is why philosophers court paradox when preoccupied with things as concrete, literally “down to earth,” as humans. The paradox is no less glaring than it would be if they were preoccupied with cetaceans. If some do not see the paradox, the reason presumably is that they are human. Had they been cetacean, they might have been preoccupied with cetaceans.

The concern in philosophy with humans is not a trivial consequence of its unlimited scope, of its interest in “all time and existence.” It is not the trivial application to humans of general philosophical propositions, like the application to humans of arithmetic by the Census Bureau or of physics by a pilot monitoring takeoff weight. It is supposed to be a substantive concern. It may be woefully misguided, but it is natural. The reason is obvious. Plumbers or philosophers, we all are humans. We are deeply interested in ourselves and other humans. We see ourselves as the center of the universe even when we know that we are at its periphery. To suggest that philosophy should not be about humans, that it ought to be in this sense “dehumanized,” may seem even offensive. “Dehumanized” is an ugly word, but it does capture literally and succinctly the aim of the drastic change needed in philosophy – freedom from anthropocentrism – just as “humanized” captures much of the current state of philosophy.

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<sup>4</sup> Gilbert Ryle, “Ordinary Language,” *Philosophical Review* LXII (1951), 173–74. See also Gilbert Ryle, “Use, Usage, and Meaning,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* XXXV (1961).

A familiar thesis in ethics is that one ought to treat others “humanely,” as ends, not just as means, perhaps even love them. The claims of kings and barons to special dignity were rejected in the past by declaring the dignity of all humans. “Inhuman” and “inhumanity” are standard terms of condemnation, “humane” and “humanitarian” of approbation. Politicians’ handlers try to “humanize” their clients in order to get them elected. The “human condition” is a perennial object of despair but sometimes of marvel. Works of art are often praised for their “human quality.” A favorable review of a recent novel emphasizes its being “deeply human.” Many demand that space exploration be funded only if it leads to cures for human diseases. A recent television commercial announces, “The human element, nothing is more fundamental, nothing more elemental,” and advocates adding it to the periodic table. A distinguished contemporary philosopher writes of the “heart-breaking specialness” of the human.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, we all think humans are special, and even feel their specialness. But the reason is not that we think we are angelic and thus special in a way that, say, cetaceans are not, or that we are intellectually, aesthetically, morally, etc., superior at least to all other terrestrial life. The plain reason is that we happen to be human. We all desire and seek pleasure, happiness, well-being – for ourselves, for those we love, often for strangers. So, ethics has devoted itself to investigating the human good, even happiness and pleasures, and the habits, actions, and institutions conducive to it, rather than to the good of cetaceans, extraterrestrials, or angels. We all treasure our ability to see and hear, and to remember and think. So, epistemology has devoted itself to investigating the nature and sources of human knowledge, not cetacean, extraterrestrial, or angelic knowledge.

That human happiness and human knowledge are empirical matters, belonging today in the subject matter of developed empirical sciences, has been pointed out repeatedly and eloquently by the proponents of naturalism, the dominant orientation in current philosophy. Its most prominent defender, W.V.O. Quine, called it “the recognition that it is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described.”<sup>6</sup> Quine limited the substantive claims in his “epistemology naturalized” to mentioning the role in cognition of what he called “surface irritations,” but wisely left the investigation of these irritations to biology.<sup>7</sup> Other naturalists, however, seem to lack the courage of their convictions and continue to engage in “analyz-

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<sup>5</sup> Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 35.

<sup>6</sup> W.V.O. Quine, *Theories and Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Willard Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

ing concepts” or describing the “workings of our language,” as if concepts and language were not themselves parts of nature and thus belonging in the province of empirical science, not philosophy.

Anthropocentrism has been fueled by various assumptions, some true and some false. We assume that – with the possible exception of gods, angels, or extraterrestrials – humans alone are “rational,” capable of reasoning. We assume also that only humans are capable of moral and aesthetic judgment, and perhaps that only humans enjoy the moral and political status, “dignity,” of possessing “rights.” The monotheistic religions, which were the home of medieval philosophy and also profoundly influenced modern philosophy, assure us of humans’ unique origin and special place in nature. Some of these assumptions and assurances are matters of faith, e.g., that, though all things were created by God, only man was created in God’s image. Some are essentially scientific but now abandoned, e.g., geocentrism, the Ptolemaic view that the Earth is the center of the Universe. Other assumptions are also essentially scientific but of unknown and perhaps unknowable truth-value, e.g., that there is no intelligent life elsewhere in the Universe. But many do seem to rest on scientific fact, e.g., that no other terrestrial animals equal humans in intelligence. These assumptions not only encourage our special interest in ourselves but also seem to justify it. They help explain the presence of anthropocentrism in epistemology and ethics.

But antirealism, the form anthropocentrism assumes in metaphysics, is a purely technical philosophical orientation, exemplified by positions ranging from Berkeley’s “immaterialism” to Kant’s “transcendental” idealism, Hegel’s “absolute” idealism, and recent positions such as Michael Dummett’s “antirealism” and Nelson Goodman’s “irrealism.” The term “antirealism” may be too strong to apply to all these positions, but there is no convenient alternative to it. “Nonrealism” might be one, but it is too indefinite.

According to the metaphysical antirealist, reality depends, at least insofar as it is knowable, on our ways of knowing it, our cognitive capacities – sense perception, introspection, intellectual intuition, imagination, memory, recognition, conceptualization, inductive and deductive reasoning, use of language and of other symbolism. The rather stilted word “cognition,” rather than “knowledge,” is needed to refer to the employment of these capacities, which leads to knowledge when successful but to error when unsuccessful. So understood, antirealism allows for the possibility of an unknowable reality, e.g., Kant’s “things-in-themselves,” which is independent of our cognitive capacities, even if, as Goodman claimed, it might not be “worth fighting for or against.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), 6.

The essentially Kantian claim that the world is “shaped,” “sculpted,” by our cognitive faculties, and thus that it depends on us, who of course are humans, amounts to the humanization of metaphysics. It rests on the tautology that we have no cognitive “access” to the world except through our cognition of it, that whatever we know, perceive, understand, believe, imagine, or say about the world depends on our cognitive capacities. The world, of course, is cognized also by nonhuman animals, as well as, perhaps, by extraterrestrials and angels, but in order to know or understand and say even this we must rely on *our* cognitive capacities, if only our imagination and language.

Anthropocentrism is paradoxical in all branches of philosophy, though for different reasons. Epistemology and ethics claim expertise about what they must and usually do regard as certain animals. But animals are part of the subject matter of the empirical sciences, not philosophy. Metaphysical antirealism holds, however tacitly, that reality, the whole world – at least insofar as it is knowable – depends on the cognitive faculties of those animals. But common sense – the mature and thoughtful judgment we all share and all theorizing, scientific or philosophical, begins with and must respect even if not accept – finds such cosmological humanism, human creationism, bizarre.<sup>9</sup> How could the whole world, it asks, depend on some members of one of its planets’ fauna?

In the case of epistemology and ethics, anthropocentrism faces only the paradox of implying that philosophers, supposedly the spectators of all time and existence, engage really in zoological investigations. In the case of metaphysics, it faces the paradox of implying that the world itself is zoological. To avoid the former paradox, we need only to redirect our efforts in epistemology and ethics. But to avoid the latter paradox, we must do much more than redirection. We must understand the first-person pronouns used in the formulation of antirealism as impersonal and thus as not referring to humans. This would require a radical rethinking of their role. When used in philosophical contexts like Cartesian doubt or the realism/antirealism debate, which question the existence of the world itself, consistency requires that “I” and “we” are not taken to refer to parts of that world. The rethinking of the role of these pronouns would require also a radical rethinking of the distinction between oneself and the world.

To redirect epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics away from anthropocentrism is not, of course, to abandon them. Metaphysics understood as ontology, the listing and description of the most general kinds (“categories”) of entities and the relations among them, would be unaffected. The realism/antirealism

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed and incisive discussion of common sense, see Noah Lemos, *Common Sense* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

issue is irrelevant to many metaphysical inquiries, especially those in pre-Kantian philosophy. Also unaffected would be epistemology as tasked with the appraisal of certain fundamental but nonformal inferences, for example, from what has been the case to what will be the case,<sup>10</sup> and ethics as the home of non-anthropocentric theories of goodness like Plato's, Aquinas's, and Moore's.<sup>11</sup>

Although in epistemology and ethics anthropocentrism is natural and understandable, though indefensible, in metaphysics it is unnatural and almost incomprehensible, but at least as defensible as Kant's transcendental idealism and 20<sup>th</sup> century antirealism. In epistemology and ethics, we can reject anthropocentrism unqualifiedly, however painful this might be. In metaphysics, such rejection would be a blunder. The reason is that it is present there as antirealism, which is made plausible even if not entailed by a tautology and therefore truth. The tautology is that whatever we know, perceive, understand, believe, imagine, or say about the world depends on our cognitive capacities. So, in metaphysics we face the challenge of finding a way to reject anthropocentrism without rejecting this tautology. For we ought not to return to pre-Kantian metaphysics just in order to avoid anthropocentrism, much as we ought not to return to pre-Socratic philosophy just in order to avoid Platonism. Yet human creationism is hardly acceptable. We must therefore interpret antirealism as making no reference to humans.

Hence, the unusual dialectical structure of this book. Part One is devoted to defense of the dehumanization of epistemology and ethics, Part Two to explanation and provisional defense of the antirealist humanization of metaphysics, and Part Three to the dehumanization of antirealist metaphysics. In Part One anthropocentrism in epistemology and ethics is rejected, in Part Two it is defended in metaphysics, and in Part Three it is rejected in metaphysics. There is no need for an explanation of the humanization of epistemology and ethics. The anthropocentrism present in them is easily understood, and so is what motivates it. Not so in the case of metaphysics. Its humanization was strictly a philosophical event, obscure to virtually everyone outside philosophy and even to many professional philosophers.

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<sup>10</sup> See my "Epistemology Dehumanized," in Quentin Smith, ed., *Epistemology: New Essays* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> See my "Ethics Dehumanized," in Mark Timmons and Terry Horgan, eds., *Metaethics After Moore* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

## 2 A Glance at History

The history of anthropocentrism in philosophy is illuminating, though we can devote to it here no more than a passing glance. It was preceded and encouraged by the anthropocentrism already present in religion. According to Genesis, after creating the heaven and the earth, including the earth's flora and fauna, God created man in the image of God. But Genesis attributed to God actions such as resting from work, speaking, and inflicting punishment. Thus it also appeared to depict God in the image of man. Its anthropocentrism with respect to Creation seemed accompanied by anthropomorphism with respect to the Creator. Cosmological anthropocentrism seemed to lead to theological anthropomorphism. This personification of God became essential to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Pre-Socratic philosophy focused on the cosmos – the heavens and the earth, the four elements (earth, air, fire, and water), ensouled animals. The Socratic revolution shifted the focus dramatically. It moved philosophy from concern with all things to concern with just one. Its slogan became “Know thyself!” It did not go unchallenged. The stand most distinctive of Plato's philosophy was both anti-PreSocratic and anti-Socratic. The chief concern of philosophy, he taught, is neither the cosmos nor oneself, but rather what lies beyond both: the abstract entities he called Forms (“Ideas,” *eidos*). Almost immediately, however, Aristotle urged a return to the cosmos, away from both Socrates' preoccupation with the innermost and Plato's preoccupation with the uttermost. Medieval philosophers – Christian, Jewish, and Muslim – sometimes followed Plato, sometimes Aristotle, but all took for granted the declaration in Genesis that humans were made in the image of God.

Following the scientific revolution in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, when Copernicus, Galileo, Boyle, and Newton became the authorities on space, time, and matter, philosophers came to hold, in sharp contrast to their ancient and medieval predecessors, that their concern was only with “minds” and “ideas.” The new physics compelled them to adopt the “new way of ideas.” Anthropocentrism thus became firmly established in philosophy, since it was not cetacean, extraterrestrial, or angelic minds and ideas that attracted the attention of the early modern philosophers. But their anthropocentrism consisted in preoccupation with just one part or aspect of human beings: their minds and their ideas. It eventually led many to idealism, the view that minds and ideas are *all* that there is.

Early in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Descartes began his *Meditations* by arguing that “I exist” was the only truth he could not doubt, presumably referring by “I” to himself, Descartes, a certain human. Such reference, of course, would have been inconsistent, since humans have bodies, the existence of which he still doubted. But after his propaedeutic dalliance with epistemology, and thus with human matters like

the possibility and extent of human knowledge, Descartes focused on the existence of God and the nature of mind and matter. This focus was metaphysical and non-anthropocentric. It was shared later in the century by Spinoza and Leibniz. But it was vigorously opposed by the British empiricists, who returned to Descartes' epistemology and thus to anthropocentrism. The titles of their chief works spoke volumes: *An Essay Concerning the Human Understanding* (Locke), *The Principles of Human Knowledge* (Berkeley), *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Hume).

In 1781, less than half-a-century after the publication of Hume's *Treatise*, Kant rejected in his *Critique of Pure Reason* both continental metaphysics, which he called dogmatism, and British epistemology, which he called empirical idealism. He described his own philosophy as transcendental idealism, arguing, for example, that space and time are not "actual entities" because they belong only to "the subjective constitution" of the mind as "forms of appearances."<sup>12</sup> But Kant allowed for what he called "things-in-themselves," entities independent of that subjective constitution of our minds, i.e., of our cognitive faculties.

Transcendental idealism is often described as part of the humanism characteristic of the Enlightenment. But this is misleading, and so is the vague term "humanism." Like any antirealist position, transcendental idealism does rest on the tautology that our knowledge of the world depends on our cognitive faculties. On the basis of this tautology, Kant went on to assert also that the world as knowable by us depends on our cognitive faculties. But whether there is a world that is not knowable was a further question. So was also the question whether there are parts or aspects of the knowable world that are not knowable.<sup>13</sup> The latter question makes Kant's distinction between things-in-themselves and things-for-us appear less unreasonable, and his antirealism more plausible, by allowing that, even if only the things we can know exist, these things may have parts or aspects that we cannot know. Neither science nor common sense need disagree.

When Kant wrote that space and time belong only to the subjective constitution of the mind, he was explicitly referring to humans. "We can ... speak of space, extended things, and so on, only from the human standpoint," he wrote, and explained that this is why space is "transcendentally ideal," though also empirically real in the sense that it is not an illusion, or mere fancy.<sup>14</sup> But when he wrote

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<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B 37 ff.

<sup>13</sup> E.g., *Critique of Pure Reason*, B xxvii-xxviii.

<sup>14</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 42–44. For the general distinction between transcendental and empirical idealism, see A 369–370. Heidegger remarked that Kant's "transcendental conception" was "possible only on the basis of the subjectivity of man's essence." ("On the Essence of Truth," in D. F. Krell, *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977, 118.)

that space and time belong only to the subjective constitution of the mind, he could not have meant Kant's or any other human's mind. For humans themselves, including Kant, would be inhabitants of the transcendently ideal space and thus transcendently ideal. To be sure, they also are empirically real: although Kant held that our knowledge is limited to appearances, he made a sharp distinction between appearance (*Erscheinung*) and illusion (*Schein*).<sup>15</sup> Transcendental idealism was thus anthropocentric insofar as humans are empirically real, but it was not anthropocentric insofar as humans are transcendently ideal. Nonetheless, it has been understood by many as unqualifiedly anthropocentric. So have its immediate successors: Fichte's absolute idealism, as defended in *The Vocation of Man*, and Hegel's absolute idealism, according to which the Absolute achieves self-knowledge through the human mind. We shall find that a nonanthropocentric reading of all three – Kant, Fichte, and Hegel – is not only possible but plausible. To explain this reading would be part of the challenge of dehumanizing antirealist metaphysics, which will be attempted in Part Three.

Standard ethics, of course, is not concerned with humans – their well-being, happiness, pleasure, etc. – as transcendently ideal. It is concerned with them only as empirically real. Kant called such ethics practical anthropology, which he described as an empirical discipline, and reserved the term “metaphysics of morals” for what he considered the properly philosophical inquiry into morality. Standard epistemology also regards humans – their cognitive capacities – as empirically real. Kant did not have a special name for the empirical study of humans' cognitive capacities, but presumably would have agreed today that it is the task of what we call cognitive psychology and neuroscience. The properly philosophical inquiry into our cognitive faculties, he thought, was exemplified by his transcendental aesthetic and analytic.

Nevertheless, Kant certainly thought, as everyone does, that all disciplines – the transcendental aesthetic and analytic as well as the physics of space and time, the metaphysics of morals as well as practical anthropology – are anthropocentric, indeed literally human, in the straightforward sense that they employ human cognitive powers and thus are constrained by the demands and limitations of those powers. Whether we contemplate all time and existence or just snails and tomatoes, we cannot transcend our sense organs and brains, just as we cannot get out of our skins. Understood as the tautology, on which antirealism rests, that our knowledge of the world depends on our cognitive faculties, this truth is not grounded in facts about human beings, just as the truth of

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<sup>15</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 69.

the tautology “All humans are human” is not grounded in facts about humans. Both enjoy the certainty of logic.

Antirealism became dominant after Kant in the form of straightforward idealism. Early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hegel declared that Spirit (mind, *Geist*) develops or “unfolds” logically (“dialectically”) from “subjective spirit” (individual mental states like sensations) to “objective spirit” (society as exemplified by the family, customs and traditions (*Sittlichkeit*), the state, and institutions such as corporations and guilds, among which would be today’s academic disciplines), and reaches its fulfillment in “absolute spirit,” the three stages of which are art, religion, and philosophy (in Hegel’s sense of philosophy as the perfect system of knowledge). Thus, seen superficially, Hegel appeared to endorse not only metaphysical anthropocentrism but also a sort of metaphysical anthropomorphism. But his anthropocentrism involved a major epistemological innovation: a dramatic move from earlier philosophers’ cognitive individualism, the view of knowledge as a personal achievement, to what, for the lack of a better term, I shall call cognitive collectivism: the view of knowledge as a social, often literally collaborative, achievement. It is especially evident today that the cognitive disciplines are inherently social and, at least to users of Wikipedia, that so is virtually all cognition beyond the infantile stage. Cognitive collectivism, of course, need have no political implications. The state is not the only “collective.”

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Wittgenstein declared in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, “I am my world,” seemingly referring, though if so inconsistently, to a human being, namely himself.<sup>16</sup> Heidegger focused his *Being and Time* on human being, “the inquirer,” using *Dasein* as a technical term for it,<sup>17</sup> though two decades later he insisted that “[e]very kind of anthropology and all subjectivity” should be “left behind.”<sup>18</sup> Sartre referred in *Being and Nothingness* to being-for-itself as *réalité humaine*, which he contrasted with being-in-itself<sup>19</sup>, and wrote the famous article “Existentialism is a Humanism,” to which Heidegger responded in the not less famous paper titled “Letter on Humanism.”

While the scientific revolution of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century motivated philosophers to confine their subject matter to minds and ideas, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

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**16** Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1972), 5.63. In references to the text, I shall use Wittgenstein’s numerical designations of sentences. All italics, upper-case letters, and parentheses in the quotations will be Wittgenstein’s.

**17** Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: HarperOne, Revised edition, 1962), 27.

**18** Martin Heidegger, “On the Essence of Truth,” section 9, Note, in *Basic Writings*, 138.

**19** Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956).