

ONTOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN NATURE

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Abstract

Anthropology is the study of the origin of the man. It is basically concern with the concept of *Homo sapiens*, and it is scientifically questioning what are human physical traits as well how do men behave and the variation among different groups of human with his social and cultural dimensions. Ontology is a subfield in traditional philosophy which is mainly focuses on the nature of being, existence or reality as such. There are some similarities and differences among these two areas. However when we deeply study the philosophical basis of the anthropology it is proof that it was derived from ontology.

Anthropology discusses the social and cultural world or the physical entity of human nature. Ontology focuses the invisible aspect of human nature along with the ultimate reality. Therefore, it has a metaphysical aspect of human being; this philosophical notion has in fact, contributed to the development of the subject of anthropology. The present modern day has given very little attention to this philosophical combination of ontology to anthropology, rendering further investigation into the philosophical roots of anthropology.

This research paper seeks to evaluate the relationship between ontology and anthropology by paying attention to the ontological arguments about the concept of man and human nature within Greek and modern western thoughts, in comparing with modern anthropological arguments.

Identification of the Concept of Human Nature

It is indeed difficult to give a certain definition for the concept of man as well his nature. But many academic disciples tried to clarify the meaning and the usage of the above concept. The ancient Indian epic: Mahābhārata tells us that ‘there is nothing higher than man on earth’¹. Pascal tells us that man is a thinking reed superior to all the unthinking forces that fill the universe. Man is subject, not object. This subjectivity gives him inwardness and freedom. If he loses himself in the objective, he lapses into routine, rigidity, mindlessness. To understand man we have to get a clear view about man behind all his activities, scientific, ethical, and spiritual. According to Socrates the noblest study of mankind is man himself or ‘know thyself’. The Upanishads also revealed; ‘know thy self’ (ātmanam viddhi). Confucius also believes the same notion. According to him all thoughts and all theories of human activity, are to be based upon a proper understanding of man. In this scenario we can understand the concept of man is not an easy task because it is covering a vast area of human knowledge as well. It is going beyond the human intellect.

In that way man, is a material being, whose body acts on the material environment and is acted upon by it. He is also a living being with an internal purpose or immanent teleology, and strives to maintain himself intact in his surroundings. Again, he is a psychological being, whose body acts on the material environment and is acted upon by it. He is a psychological being with a mind of his own, looking backwards into the past and forwards into the future, and with an inwardness that is his own and is private. He is a social and ethical being, with emotions sentiments developing in the direction of other men, his personality developing and taking shape in a social environment. The ethical situation leads not only to an intensification of his inwardness but also to a recognition of the same inwardness in others. Man is also a religious being, craving and searching for cosmic and divine support for his life and activity and desiring communion with it. He is, in addition, a rational being, questioning himself, evaluating his thinking and acting, wondering if he is mistaking fancies for truths or truth for falsity, right for wrong and good for evil. He is thus a complex creature, leading an inward and outward life and craving stable support both ways. In that way

¹Edited, S. Radhakrishnan, (1960), The Concept of Man, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, p.09

Indian contemporary thinker S. Radhakrishnan has explained the nature and the role of the man².

Within the pre-Socrates period, Greek thinkers studied nature as a whole and they considered man simply as a part of the cosmos, and attention was never given to his peculiar nature as an object of special concern. For the first time in Greek history, a shift occurred and a man-centered philosophy developed. Protagoras was interested in man rather than the cosmos. According to him “Man is the measure of all things”³. But within the medieval period the common conception of human nature locates man on a scale of perfection, placing him somewhere above most animals but below God or superhuman or the divine being. This divine being is superior to man and He is the perfect and omnipotent, ever-active being. It was believed that man was created by God to similar to his image. But this idea changed after the development of modern science. It has experimentally analyzed and proves the evaluation of the man from the nature or from the primates.

The modern biologists are now able to locate, experimentally analyze, and manipulate DNA molecules in what has become known as genetic engineering. Being the structures responsible for physical development, DNA molecules represent the terms by which man can be biologically characterized. But if human nature is understood simply as man’s special form of that which is biologically inherited in all species, there remains the delicate problem of discovering, in any given case, exactly what the role environment plays in determining the actual characteristics; this may be far from straightforward.

Man is a rational being therefore; man is capable of taking responsibility for his own actions because he has the freedom to exercise his will. This view received two subsequent interpretations⁴

First, the human character is indefinitely plastic; each individual is given determinate form by the environment in which he is born, brought up, and lives. In this case, changes or developments in human beings will be regarded as the product of social or cultural changes, that themselves are often more rapid than biological evolution.

² Edited, S. Radhakrishnan, (1960), *The Concept of Man*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, p.6

³ Rogers, A.k (1901), *A Student’s History of Philosophy*, The Macmillan Company,, page.49

⁴ <http://www.crystalinks.com/anthropology.html>

It is thus to disciplines such as history, politics, and sociology, rather than to biology, that one should look for an understanding of these processes. But if disciplines such as these must constitute the primary study of man, then the question of the extent to which this can be a strictly scientific study arises. The methods of history are not, and cannot be, those of the natural sciences. And the legitimacy of the claims of the so-called social or human sciences to genuine scientific status has frequently been called into question and remains a focus for debate.

Second, each individual is autonomous and must “make” himself. Assertion of the autonomy of man involves rejection of the possibility of discovering laws of human behavior or of the course of history, for freedom is precisely not being bound by law, by nature. In this case, the study of man can never be parallel to the natural sciences with their theoretical structures based on the discovery of laws of nature.

Section two

Ontological Aspect of the Concept of Human Nature

Ontology is the philosophical study of the nature of being, existence or reality as such, as well as the basic categories of being and their relations⁵. Principal questions of ontology are what can be said to exist, into what categories, if any, can we sort existing things; What are the meanings of being? What are the various modes of being of entities? Various philosophers have provided different answers to these questions. In this sense we can see that ontology studies not only man but also all the being and the existence of the universe or the ultimate reality of the world.

Plato defends a clear **ontological dualism** in which there are two types of realities or worlds: the sensible world and the intelligible world or, as he calls it, the world of the Ideas⁶. **The Sensible World** is the world of individual realities, and so is multiple and constantly changing, it is the world of generation and destruction; and also the realm of the sensible, material, temporal and space things. On the contrary, **the Intelligible World** is the world of the universal, eternal and invisible realities called **Ideas** (or “**Forms**”), which are immutable and do not change because they are

⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ontology> last updated, 08/01/2011

⁶ Rogers, A.k, (1901), *A Student’s History of Philosophy*, The Macmillan Company, page.79

not material, temporal or spatial. Ideas can be understood and known; they are the authentic reality. The Ideas or Forms are not just concepts or psychic events of our minds; they do exist as objective and independent beings out of our consciences. They are also the origin of sensible things, but although they are authentic beings, Plato, unlike Parmenides of Elea, did not completely deny the reality of the sensible things; the sensible world, although ontologically inferior, has also certain kind of being which comes from its **participation or imitation** of the world of Forms. The task of **Demiurge** is to give the shape of the Forms to that shapeless sensible material that has always existed making it thus similar to the Ideas. So in this way Plato's 'Symposium' is given a philosophical approach of anthropology to the theory of man. According to him man is not only a finite being and his life is not end with death. As well there is a soul that has capacity to go beyond the finite reality.

Within the medieval period the Greek ideology of the metaphysics of form and matter was readily assimilable into Christian thought, where forms became ideas in the mind of God, the patterns according to which He created and continues to sustain the universe. The creation story in the book of Genesis made man a creature among other creatures, but not a creature like other creatures; man was the product of the final act of divine initiative, was given responsibility for the Garden of Eden, and had the benefit of a direct relationship with his Creator.

Augustine's God is a wholly immaterial, supremely rational, transcendent creator of the universe. The twofold task of the Christian philosopher, a lover of wisdom, is to seek knowledge of the nature of God and of his own soul, the human self. For Augustine the soul is not the entire man but his better part.⁷ But whatever the exact balance struck in the relation between the mind and body, the view of man was first and foremost as a creature of God; man was privileged by having been created in the image of God and given the gift of reason in virtue of which he also has free will and must take the burden of moral responsibility for his own actions. In order to fulfill his distinctively human nature man must thus order his thoughts and actions in such a way as to reflect the supremacy of religious values. It was in the cultural context of the Renaissance, and in particular with the Italian humanists and their imitators, that the centre of gravity of reflective thought descended from heaven to earth, with man, his nature,

⁷ Rogers, A.k(1901), *A Student's History of Philosophy*, The Macmillan Company, page.187

and his capacities and limitations becoming a primary focus of philosophical attention.

This gave rise to the humanism that constitutes philosophical anthropology. Man did not thereby cease to view himself within the context of the world, nor did he deny the existence of God; he did, however, disengage himself sufficiently from the bonds of cosmic determination and divine authority to become a centre of interest in his own eyes. So in this way human nature and the existence of man was discussed in early philosophy with supernatural explanation. But after the development of science and the study of man and his evaluation in martial aspect, the field of philosophy of anthropology came to the intellectual world to study man.

The term 'anthropology' was also used by, for example, Kant and Hegel to denote a specific field of philosophy. According to Kant's philosophy of *Anthropology* it deals not with physiological anthropology, the study of 'what nature makes of man', but with pragmatic anthropology, with 'what man as a freely acting entity makes of himself or can and should make of himself'. Hegel applies the term 'anthropology' to the study of the 'soul', the sub-rational aspects of the human psyche that do not yet involve awareness of external objects. But philosophical anthropology came into its own only in the wake of German idealism. For '*anthrōpos*', 'man', contrasts, in this context, not only with 'God', but also with 'soul', 'mind', 'spirit', 'thought', 'consciousness', words denoting the mental (or transcendental) and intellectual aspect of man that the idealists tended to stress. Anthropology is to study not some favored aspect of man, but man as such, man as a whole biological, acting, thinking, etc. being. It was in this spirit that Feuerbach called his own philosophy 'anthropology'.

The term 'philosophical anthropology' (in contrast to the empirical sciences of 'physical' and 'cultural' anthropology) was used by Scheler to describe his enterprise at a time when his allegiance to phenomenology was waning. The new discipline is given urgency, Scheler argued, by the variety of apparently incommensurable conceptions of man now available to us. These are:

1. The Judaeo-Christian account of man in terms of original sin and the fall from paradise;
2. The Greek and Enlightenment conception of man as a creature qualitatively distinguished from all other animals by his divine spark of reason;

3. The modern scientific conception of man as no more than a highly developed animal. Scheler also mentions two other variants:
4. Man is a biological dead-end, his life and vitality sapped by ‘spirit’, science, and technology (Klages and Nietzsche), and
5. Once relieved of the suffocating tutelage of God, man can take his fate into his own hands and rise to the heights of a superman (Nicolai Hartmann and again Nietzsche).

Scheler gives an account of the biological, intellectual, and religious aspects of man (‘life’ and ‘spirit’), attempting to combine what is true in all earlier conceptions. Philosophical anthropology should, he argues, show how all the ‘works of man—language, conscience, tools, weapons, the state, leadership, the representational function of art, myths, religion, science, history, and social life—arise from the basic structure of human nature’⁸. In *Man and History* (1926), he argued that different conceptions of man give rise to different conceptions of history, but that one of the tasks of anthropology is to give (in part to liberate ourselves from inherited preconceptions about man) a ‘history of man’s self-consciousness’, that is, a history of man’s ways of conceiving man. Helmuth Plessner, beginning with his *Man and the Stages of the Organic* (1929), attempted to give a similarly comprehensive and unitary account of man, both as a biological and as a rational creature.

Scheler regarded anthropology as an essential foundation for the social, historical, and psychological sciences. To this extent he is at odds with Husserl’s phenomenology, which purports to provide *the* foundation for all sciences. It is less clear that Husserl was correct in associating anthropology with psychologism, the attempt to justify logical and mathematical laws by regarding them as generalizations about human psychology⁹. Firstly, Scheler’s anthropology is not much concerned with *epistemology*, the justification of our beliefs, and secondly, he argued that values are wholly objective, regardless of the historical and cultural variations in the degree and mode of our access to them. Heidegger has a close affinity to Scheler’s anthropology, but apart from rejecting the presupposition-laden term ‘man’ in favour of *Dasein*, his central question is not ‘What is man?’ and ‘What is man’s place in the nature of things?’ but ‘What is being?’ He

⁸ E. Scheler, (1928 ; tr. New York, 1961), *Man’s Place in Nature* ,

⁹ Husserl’s (193) 1 lecture ‘Phenomenology and Anthropology’ mentions only Dilthey by name, but is also directed against Scheler and Heidegger.

argued that the nature and scope of philosophical anthropology and the grounds for assigning it a central place in philosophy are entirely unclear. These matters can be clarified not within philosophical anthropology, but only in a more fundamental discipline, namely ‘fundamental ontology’.

Section Three

Anthropological Aspect of the Concept of Human Nature

Etymologically, the word “anthropology” is derived from the Greek stem *anthropo-*(man) and the noun ending *-logy*(science). Its literal meaning is therefore, ‘the science of man’¹⁰ The manifold activities listed suggests that anthropologists have taken the literal definition of their science seriously and so intend to study man and his works. Not only the anthropology but the other sciences also study other aspects of man and his bodily apparatus. In this sense anthropology is probably the most comprehensive of the sciences dealing with man and his works. The anthropologist, in contrast combines in one discipline the approaches of both the biological and the social sciences. His problems center on the one hand, on man as a member of the animal kingdom, and on the other hand, on man’s behavior as a member of society. Furthermore, he does not limit himself to any particular group of men or to any one period of history. On the contrary, he is as much interested in the earlier forms of man and his behavior as in those of the present day. Both the structural evolution of mankind and the growth of civilizations are studied from the earliest times for which any record survives to the present. Anthropology therefore, like many other disciplines, is divided into numerous branches, each having to do with some specialized aspect of the general field. These may best be defined under two principal headings: physical anthropology and cultural anthropology.

Physical anthropology studies man, the animal. J.S. Weiner divides the subject into two main fields: the study of man as a product of evolutionary process, and the study and analysis of human populations.¹¹ Both approaches center about the common theme of human variation and this in turn is

¹⁰ Ralph L. Beals and Harry Hoiijer, (1959) *An Introduction to Anthropology*, Macmillan Company, p 03

¹¹ J.S. Weiner, (1957), “Physical Anthropology- An Appraisal”, *American Scientists*, vol, 45,, 79-87.

basic to the understanding of human adaptation, a central problem for both physical and cultural anthropology.

To understand man as a product of evolution requires some understanding of the development of all life forms and the nature of life itself. The physical anthropologists, however, concentrate much of their upon the history of man's physical characteristics. He searches the earth for trace of early man. Such early forms are carefully compared with one another and with modern man scientifically called *Homo sapiens*. In this way a given structural feature, or a whole set of them, may be traced from the earliest populations in which it appears to populations of the present day. We may discover when a given trait first appeared among men, how it became more widespread, and in some cases we may also note its gradual disappearance. Where set or clusters of physical traits are studied historically, we may note their first occurrence among a population and what happened to the trait or cluster when the population in which it occurred came into contact with structurally diverse groups. Though there are still many gaps in the historical sequences reconstructed by physical anthropologists, questions like the following may be answered, at least in part; where and when did the earliest human being first appear? What did these people look like and how did they resemble or differ from one another? How have the physical characteristics of man changed during his time on earth?

A major concern of the physical anthropologist then is with the early forms of man and his closer relatives among apes and monkeys. Although the fossil records are far from complete, and there is disagreement about the fossils, the main outlines of the evolutionary process are well established, fairly coherent, and clear. Behavioral studies of the higher animals are beginning to yield clues to the origins of human behavior. This holds true even though the qualitative differences in behavior between of modern men and animals are very great.

The men of today are all quite similar to one another in basic structure despite their differences in outward appearances. All of them belong to a single species, *Homo sapiens*, the history of which is fairly well known. In early prehistoric times, however, there appear to have been other species and perhaps genera. If we go back far enough in time we find a period in which no human forms existed. It is evident, then, that, man as we know him today has emerged from earlier nonhuman forms. The study of the processes whereby man developed from his nonhuman ancestors and the continuing processes of change still slowly altering his bodily form is also

a part of physical anthropology. From such studies we learn how men gradually became different from the other animals and assumed the bodily characteristics which mark them today. We also learn how men diversified among themselves, and something of the factors responsible for the infinite variety of human forms.

Men do not live in a vacuum; they are constantly interacting with the environment. The environment includes of course not only the land, the sea, the air, and the many other physical features of the world, but also the multitude of living beings who share the world with man. No study of man would be complete which overlooked his relationship, at all times and places, with environment. We want to know just how the environment has affected and continue to affect man's structure. A third important phase of physical anthropology is, then the study of the ways in which man interacts with the environment in which he lives and the effects this interaction may have upon his bodily structure. So we may add to our knowledge of the conditions responsible for diversity in human forms.

Under the cultural anthropological study of the origins and history of man's cultures, their evolution and development, and the structure and functioning of human cultures in every place and time; It is concerned with culture per se, whether it belongs to the primitive men of the stone age or to the European city-dwellers of today. The cultural anthropologist contribute some evidence of men's reactions in cultural forms to the ever-present problems posed by physical environment, the attempts of men to live and work together, and the interactions of human groups with each other. In this regard we can see the anthropological aspect of man also covers the vast area of human life. But it is address only the finite world, or the physical aspect and his cultural behavior. But there are other questions arising about man and his place in this universe. That means how he behaves as such, what is the main original form of the man, where he is going after death. What is the ultimate purpose of life? The anthropological studies of man are not concerned with the above nature in mankind.

Conclusion

In conclusion it is clear that there are some similarities as well the differences about both subject areas. This understanding of Anthropology is defined in the sense of a set of human properties and behavior which is taken

for granted in the frame of a theory. In the classical sense, anthropology can be taken as a subset of ontology. Ontology is the study of being as such. It asks a question, what sorts of things are there? Anthropology is the study of the human being. It asks a question what sort of thing is man? So, saying that there has been an anthropological change is the same as saying that man ontologically has changed. There was a misunderstanding that anthropology focuses on the human nature and that ontology focuses on divine nature or the divine being, that is not a truth. Both subjects are focusing the human nature but the subject of anthropology is studying the evolution of the man and his behavior with in different cultures. But ontology is covering the vast area of human life including the existence of the universe and it's origin as well as the place of man along with his destiny in human life. The both subject areas discuss man and his culture as an important element to understand human nature. When cultural anthropology scientifically studies man and his cultural differences and behavior, whereas ontological studies focus on the doctrine human culture and its role in bringing peace of the world within the universe. So in this way anthropological studies are relatively study man and his culture, and ontological studies focus on the absolute concept of human nature. ❖

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