
UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF HUMAN PERSON

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit tries to introduce philosophy of human person (also called philosophical anthropology) to the students. It tries to evoke some basic issues in the philosophy of the human person.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

“Philosophical anthropology” is not a recognizable sub-discipline within contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. But the label “philosophical anthropology” might also be apt to describe “the study of human nature” that comes down to us through the Thomistic traditions of philosophical reflection. Somewhat in contrast to emphases in analytic philosophy of mind, “philosophical anthropology” tends to emphasize questions of social context, inter-subjectivity, and embodiment, and is focused on what Heidegger would describe as “being-in-the-world.” The philosophy of the human person could be roughly defined as that branch of philosophy which busies itself with trying to respond to those deepest and perennial questions about human beings – questions that have plagued us ever since history began. Note, we have spoken of ‘responding’ to such issues, not ‘answering’ them. That is because the word ‘answer’ seems to imply a more or less complete and thorough rejoinder to the matter, an exhaustive conclusion ‘once-and-for-all’.

Indeed, there are many people who expect philosophy to provide them with just that sort of thing and not a few philosophers who behave as if they can furnish us with precisely that. Such sophistry and their sophisms are well received by immature, insecure minds who cannot bear to think that there are mysteries in life and that much of our existence is based upon the apparent will-o-’the-wisp of ‘reasonable (or calculated) risk’. The human being, let us remember, is a mystery – in the Marcellian sense. That is why we cannot, in all fairness, demand of philosophy that type of authoritative, conclusive answers that we can – given

enough time and equipment – wrest from the world of problems. We should also be in a position, by now, to see all this as constituting the grandiose adventure of philosophy in general, and of human persons in particular, rather than lament it as a weakness.

1.2 OTHER NAMES

Old manuals of scholastic philosophy traditionally entitled this treatise *Psychologia Superior* (Superior Psychology), to distinguish it from *Psychologia Inferior* (which means what it looks like). The former was so called because it was concerned with the study of the superior type of psyche, or soul, that is proper to the human person. The latter studied the activities of sub-human life – ‘inferior’ souls, the life of animals (sentient activity) and plants (vegetative activity). Of course, in as much as human beings also share in these ‘inferior’ activities, the findings and conclusion of ‘Inferior Psychology’ had also a certain relevance for humans as well. We abandon this nomenclature because – among other reasons – it already pre-supposes a certain understanding of life in general and of human life in particular: namely, that human life is ‘superior’ to other forms of life because there is in human being a ‘soul’ which is essentially and radically distinct from that of an animal or a plant. This may or may not be the case. But we should not make such presuppositions at the onset of our reflections. It has also been called Rational Psychology and here the title is chosen not so much to insist that it is the study of the psyche that is capable of rational activity but to contrast it with Experimental Psychology, which is what is normally understood by the term ‘psychology’ in the most popular sense. The two adjectives aptly bring out the difference in method in the two disciplines. Whereas experimental psychology tries to understand the human person in terms of readings, measurements, behaviour-patterns etc., obtained from experiential observations, rational psychology tries to delve deeper into the human psyche by rational reflections on the implications of her/his activity. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* suggests one possible dissatisfaction with this approach when the Prince of Denmark tells his friend:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. (I, v, 1. 166.)

The ‘philosophy’ that *Hamlet* seems to be so critical of would seem to be that overly rational discipline which, because of its narrow rationalism, is unable to attain and understand many realities which are beyond the slender pale of reason. We are all aware of the (too) oft-quoted dictum of the seventeenth century French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, “The heart has its reasons which the reason does not know.” (*Pensées*, 4, 277) The human person, after all, is much more than pure reason and so an exclusively – or even exaggeratedly – rational approach to the human person results in the encounter with a truncated person or a monster.

We are thus left with the ‘more open’ titles Philosophical Anthropology (from the Greek *anthropos*, human being, and *logos*, science) and Philosophy of Human Person (which is more straight-forwardly Anglo-Saxon and so easily comprehensible). As regards the first, the epithet ‘philosophical’ serves to distinguish it from other scientific approaches to Anthropology that are more commonly studied in Universities.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) Human being is a mystery in the Marcelian sense. What is its implication?
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- 2) What are some earlier names for the philosophy of the human person?
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1.3 THE INDIAN SITUATION

The first records we have of the origins of Indian philosophy are to be found in the Vedas, Brahmanas and Aranyakas (ca. 1,500 BC). These writings are religious in character and are directly concerned with the ritual of Vedic sacrifice, the gods and the various myths (especially concerning the origin and end of the world and human beings) that are linked up with each aspect of the sacrificial action. These speculations are deepened in the Upanisads (800 BC). This group of treatises is also known as the Vedanta (literally, the end of the Vedas), either because they were written after the Vedas or because they are seen to contain the essence or the mysteries of the former. Many scholars see in them the dawn of Indian philosophy, as such. Finally, we have the famous *darsanas*, or systems – the various ‘schools’ of Indian thought – which developed the speculations of the Upanisads – often very polemically – along conflicting and frequently contradictory lines.

Indian thought is characteristically holistic and did not elaborate an isolated treatise on human beings or ‘psychology’. However, there is an implicit understanding of human person in the Vedas and, more markedly, in the Upanisads. A confusing variety of names were given to *prana* (originally, breath or wind; later on, vital breath and the principle of life). Closely related to *prana* is *atman* – from which the German *Atmen* (breathing) derives. This word, too meant the breathing principle in human being. The meaning slowly evolved to the trunk of the body, the innermost kernel of human person’s existence, the self-conscious aspect of the individual and, eventually, the highest being and Supreme Reality. Then there is *purusha* – the current word for human person – which was taken to refer to the soul or atman that dwells in every person. Finally, there is *jiva* (from the root *jiv*, to live), which frequently stands for the soul and the living principle of things.

1.4 OUR APPROACH

We shall focus our attention on the mystery that is the human person from the double stand-points of phenomenology and critical hermeneutics. That is, we shall begin with observing the data or facts that are manifest concerning the human person – as an individual and also in society. We recognize that this approach cannot but imply a ‘point of view’ and that our culture, religion, vocabulary and so on will inevitably colour it. An elaborately neutral and ‘objective’ view-point is quite impossible. At the heart of the phenomenological “method” is description, which requires attention, which in turns requires “bracketing” certain sorts of interests and involvements in order to attend to experience—especially “mundane” experience.

That is why we involve the moment of critical hermeneutics. We shall try to keep ourselves aware of the various factors that enter into our interpretation of these facts as well as have an interpretative role to play in the very viewing of these facts themselves. Particularly we shall be ‘on the alert’ for anything that smacks of an oppressive notion or point of view. We shall ever be seeking to purify our presuppositions and basic concepts to ensure that ours is nearer to an authentically liberative vision of human being, that is a way of understanding the human person that would inspire us and to action that builds up a person more “fully human, fully alive.” Just what all this means, in practice, will become evident right from the section on “What is the human person?”

1.5 PHILOSOPHY IS ANTHROPOLOGY

It may be noted along with Paul Ricoeur that “every understanding is self-understanding.” He was referring to human quest for knowledge and understanding. Every time a human person acquires more knowledge and understands something deeper, one is also improving one’s own self-understanding. In this sense understanding others (persons and things) add to one’s own self-understanding. Seen thus, everything we study, particularly in philosophy, contributes to my self-understanding. Seen from this perspective, the whole philosophy is an attempt to answer the basic philosophical question: “Who am I”? In this sense we can claim that philosophy is basically anthropology.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) Briefly state Indian way of understanding human person.

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2) “Every understanding is self-understanding.” Comment.

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1.6 CONTENT OF THE TREATISE

We begin by taking up the most basic question of all in the Philosophy of the Human Person, “What is the human person?” “Who am I?” At first it may appear that we have bitten off more than we can chew. How can a human being detach one’s ‘self’ from oneself so as to work out anything near to a satisfactory answer to that question of ‘who am I’? Well, let us remind ourselves that we are not so naive as to imagine that we can elaborate an exhaustive answer to that question which involves a full-fledged mystery (of Gabriel Marcel once again). We but try to throw a little more light on the issues involved, nothing more. After all, we shall pass along some of the popular as well as more ‘meritorious-of-study’ understandings of human being and view them critically to see whether they imply an oppressive or a liberative conception of ‘the human reality’, to use Jaspers’ phrase. It’s important to be critically aware of our implicit pre-understanding of the human being for it will underlie all that we shall say or do about human person, whether we notice it or not and will thereby prejudice our later studies and conclusions. From there we pass on to a reflection on the basic tension in the human being between her/his individual and communitarian dimensions.

At times we feel within ourselves the need to be ‘true to ourselves’ which may conflict with the demands and expectations of the society we live in. To which of these two should we give priority and when? Linked to the issue of the ‘dependence-independence’ dialectic is yet a further question, “Are we really free?” Given the findings of contemporary psychology (especially the research of Freud and Skinner) as also becoming more aware as to how the media and the State can – and do – manipulate us, can we assert our freedom of thought and action with as much assurance as in the past?) Here we could make a short excursus into Axiology, the Philosophy of Values, and analyse critically the implicit value systems open to humans as well try to discover what are the concrete values upon which contemporary society is based. We will not go much into issues of which free acts of the human person are morally wrong and which are morally right (the famous issue of ‘the criteria of morality’) for this will be gone into more thoroughly in the treatise on Ethics. But we shall speak a little bit at length on the option of violence and non-violence as possible alternative means to building up a just society – an extremely relevant topic today, especially in the Third World. Then we see how love constitutes one unique human phenomenon, enabling a human being to divest himself or herself so as to attain full self realisation. We also see the existential significance of love for our world. Finally we will come self-seeking to grips with another perennial human question and which seems to be gathering intensity in our ‘frantic and frenetic age’, “Is there

life after life?” As serious students of philosophy we must, in this connection, begin with the more basic question as to why we die at all. ... What is life? What is death?

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1)

What are some of the basic questions in philosophy of the human person?

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Give a brief outline of this course.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

Human being is a mystery in the Marcelian sense. That is why we cannot, in all fairness, demand of philosophy that type of authoritative, conclusive answers that we can – given enough time and equipment – wrest from the world of problems. We can see this as constituting the grandiose adventure of philosophy in general, and of human persons in particular, rather than lament it as a weakness. There are some earlier names for the philosophy of the human person; they are *Psychologia Superior*, Rational Psychology, Philosophical Anthropology. The basic questions in philosophy of the human person are “What is the human person?” “Who am I?” “Am I really free?” “What can I expect after death?” The focus of our attention is on the mystery that is the human person from the double stand-points of phenomenology and critical hermeneutics. Paul Ricoeur said that “every understanding is self-understanding.” He was referring to human quest for knowledge and understanding. Every time a human person acquires more knowledge and understands something deeper, one is also improving one’s own self-understanding. In this sense understanding others (persons and things) add to one’s own self-understanding.

1.8 KEY WORDS

Phenomenology : A philosophy or method of inquiry based on the premise that reality consists of objects and events as they are perceived or understood in human consciousness and not of anything independent of human consciousness. It bases itself firstly on reality as given.

1.9 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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