
UNIT 2 PHILOSOPHY OF HUMAN PERSON AND OTHER PHILOSOPHICAL DISCIPLINES

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to introduce the students to philosophy of human person, particularly in the context of India. It also tries to relate philosophy of human person to other disciplines in philosophy and to anthropology in general. Finally we want to affirm the uniqueness of this study as part of human quest to understand themselves.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Who am I? What can I really hope for? How can I know? Some of these fundamental questions are seriously taken up in philosophy of human person. In this unit we want to study the relationship of philosophy of human person (also called philosophical anthropology) to other disciplines in philosophy. Finally we shall see what is general anthropology and how it is related to philosophical anthropology.

2.2 POSING THE QUESTION BEFORE US

In this part an attempt is made to situate this course in the Indian context. For that purpose let us get our sights straight. Let's get our perspective clear from the start. The question we have posed ourselves in this opening chapter is a "mystery-question", not a "problem-question" (according to Gabriel Marcel). Hence it would be most naive, not to say foolish and unreasonable on our part, to aim at

anything like an authoritative and exhaustive definition of the human person, something like a chemical formula that nails the issue once and for all. Because we are part of the question and so cannot detach ourselves from it, it is unsuceptible to cold scientific investigation and analysis. Instead of speaking about finding an “answer” to this question (“answer” is a very definitive-sounding word), let us rather aim at a *response*: a humble, rough framework attempt to come to grips with its challenge, one that will ever remain open to further elucidation and clarification. When faced with a mystery, we can only hope (at best) to be able to throw a little more light on the matter and progress but one step further along the road to an “answer.” We can never arrive at our destination fully: ours is a pilgrimage towards an ever-receding horizon. For some people this is bad news, something offensive to the autonomy and power of human reason. For others, this is what makes philosophy – and life. – more exciting

And so our discussions are not mere academic issues. Understandably, many of us might question the procedure of beginning our study of such a vital issue as the Philosophy of Human Person with such an abstract sounding theme: What is Human Being? After all, are there not many more existential and burning matters that fly in our face? Leaving aside vital social themes like hunger and poverty, are there not more urgent philosophical queries to delve into – like human freedom and life after death? Why not plunge into these straight off? Well, the answer is simple enough. It is precisely in order to enable us to make an in-depth study (and one that, hopefully, full furnish guide-lines for action) that we begin with a reflection on what it means to be a human person. For it is in terms of how we understand ‘the human reality’ (as some phenomenologists like to put it) that we approach (consciously or not) all other issues, even the most action-oriented matters. As G.K. Chesterton put it so rightly, “Nothing is more practical than a good theory.” A hasty rushing into action while one brushes aside uncritically his/her possible prejudiced pre-concepts will just add one more doomed project to schemes and pseudo-revolutions that have only brought new and worse forms of repression and suffering for the “little ones”. The import of what is being said now should become more evident as we proceed with this chapter.

2.3 OPPRESSIVE AND LIBERATIVE UNDERSTANDINGS OF HUMAN PERSON

“An error is an exaggerated truth.” This old adage is especially true when we are busy with such a many-faceted and rich reality as the human person. It is all too easy to seize one dimension of dear old *anthropo*, get so mesmerised and enamoured of it, that one forgets about other dimensions. Thus some people speak as if human being were merely an individual and nothing more, forgetting her/his social responsibilities. Others approach the matter vice versa. Some are so taken up by humans’ spiritual and mystical aspects that they (like Plotinus of old) regret that we have flesh and blood bodies too, alas. Still others, in order to right this imbalance, canonise the body and its needs and pooh-pooh any talk of man’s trans-physical goals, desires and aspirations. Each of these one-sided emphases begins with something that’s very true and must not be overlooked in elaborating any sane and sound vision of human being. But inasmuch as they overstress that element and ignore or deny the others, they end up with a truncated and thereby oppressive vision of the human being ... which will be carried over into all their schemes of action. An authentically liberative philosophy of the

human person is one which affirms all the various complementary and/or contrasting traits in this mysterious being and seeks to promote them *all*. It may not ever or always be possible to attain this equilibrium. But we can always have it as our constant goal and seek to evaluate all that we and others say and do in this vital area. Such will be the approach we will adopt in our study

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) How is a ‘response’ different from an ‘answer’? What do we seek in philosophical anthropology?

2) “Nothing is more practical than a good theory.” - Elucidate.

2.4 HUMAN BEING TODAY IS HUNGRY AND POOR

The human person which we are going to study in this treatise is not an abstraction but a wonderful creature that is spread all over the face of the globe, living out a multiplicity of cultures, religions and even differing in physical and physiognomical detail. What are the adjectives that we could cite which could be used to point out some of the characteristics and qualities that are most common to all human beings? It is a sad and ghastly fact that among these we would have to include *hungry* and *impoverished* (not the innocuous word “poor”). More than 500 million people (an eighth of the world) suffer from malnutrition, 15 million infants die each year from hunger and related causes, while approximately half the entire population of the earth goes to bed not having had enough to eat. Our reflections on the *Philosophy of Human Person* cannot overlook this, the “human condition on mad planet earth” – very specially since we are not studying this topic as more effete academic hair-splitters.

This is true specially in India. We are living in a land of the very poor. Of the 1200 million inhabitants of India today, some 40% millions live on or just above the so-called “poverty line” (which the Central Government Pay Commission defined as “the minimum required for moderate activity” – whatever that means)

– at the Government’s own admission. Almost the same number live just above it, so that some 70% of our people are undernourished, lacking not only the special kinds of foods (vitamins and proteins) for healthy growth and functioning but lacking the minimal 1500-2000 calories a day which are necessary. All this is unnecessary. For we have either enough food in our country to feed all our people, or the know-how or money to obtain it. It’s just that we have other priorities in mind. It’s not lack of food or money that is the problem – just lack of caring and sharing.

2.5 A SHORTAGE OF JUSTICE, NOT FOOD

The most devastating truth about starvation in Ethiopia or malnutrition in India is that there is no need for it to happen. The world is not suffering from lack of food production. On the contrary, world food supplies are at record levels. The trouble is that food is being grown in the wrong places and at prices that the poor cannot afford. Statistics reveal that enough food is produced on earth to feed 10% more than the entire population of the earth. But that food remains out of the reach of the poor. If Henry Kissinger could claim in the mid-seventies that “for the first time we have the technological capacity to save mankind from the scourge of hunger,” the fact is within that same space of time the number of hungry people has doubled, world-wide. It is not food that is in short supply, as an Oxfam report so tellingly puts it, but justice.

The rich nations, which comprise 25% of the world’s population, consume over 87% of global wealth produced each year. In addition, they dominate international organisations (UNO, UNESCO, The World Bank), control international trade which is heavily weighted in their favour and exercise unchallenged military supremacy, often using force to attain their ends. As for the Indian elite, they account for 12% of the population, own 60% of our urban and rural property and consume over 30% of our annual production. At the same time they supply 80% of Indian administrative and police cadres (IAS, IPS, IFS). Thus both the national and international elite use their power to maintain their privileged position and assure a steady drain of resources from the masses who produce them to the rich minority.

Therefore what we have is a crisis of values. What has gone wrong? Our creeping consumer-society-mentality and its inter-related “built-in-obsolescence” values have taught us that “to have more” (power, wealth, influence) is far more important than “to be more” (human). Success, maturity, dignity – all these are measured solely in terms of what one has been able to accumulate, either by her/his own (questionable?) efforts or by inheritance. If I can have more money/power/influence by being less human – fine go ahead. And so the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and all sorts of nice “sociological” arguments are churned out to keep elite consciences clear. After all, it is argued, the poor are lazy and do hardly any work (but let one of those critics see how much work he’d be able to do with the “nourishment” and living conditions of the poor). Again it is asked: “Why upset them when they’re happy with their lot?” Resigned would be a better word: it is the resignation that has been borne out of black despair and helplessness in the face of a bureaucracy that’s bigger and stronger than any. Maybe it’s a bit clearer now as to why we should focus a bit on what it means to be human, right at the start of this enterprise.

2.6 PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND OTHER PHILOSOPHICAL DISCIPLINES

How is philosophy of human being related to other disciplines in philosophy? How is our “philosophical anthropology” related to anthropology in general? These are issues that we shall consider next. We know that the quest to understand oneself is the basic human and philosophical quest. Therefore the most fundamental philosophical question, “Who am I?” is an anthropological one. In that sense we can paraphrase Karl Rahner and claim that “philosophy is anthropology.” Therefore it is understandable all the treatise that we do in philosophy are intimately connected to anthropology. For example epistemology speaks of human being as the knower, while hermeneutics relates to human being as one who understands and makes sense of reality. Logic deals with the human capacity to think with precision and coherence. Metaphysics is a human attempt to make sense of the larger world in which we live. Ethics, of course, deals with the right actions of human being. Philosophy of God, including theodicy, is not an empty enquiry into God as such, but it is a human enquiry into God as humans understand it progressively and creatively. In general the history of ideas is a human way of understating themselves as part of a larger, social phenomenon. Further, aesthetics studies the human ability to admire and create beauty.

Seen thus all philosophical disciplines may have their own distinct identities, but they are all connected to philosophical anthropology.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) “It is not food that is in short supply, but justice.” Give your philosophical response.

2) How are other philosophical disciplines linked to philosophical anthropology?

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2.7 ANTHROPOLOGY IN GENERAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN PARTICULAR

In this section we want to make a distinction between philosophical anthropology that we are busy with in this course and the other anthropology, called cultural anthropology. Succinctly we may define general anthropology or cultural anthropology as “The scientific study of the origin, the behaviour, and the physical, social, and cultural development of humans.” Thus it is the study of humanity. Anthropology has origins in the natural sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences. The term “anthropology”, was first used in 1501 by German philosopher *Magnus Hundt*.

The basic questions that anthropology poses are: “What defines *Homo sapiens*?”, “Who are the ancestors of modern *Homo sapiens*?” “What are humans’ physical traits?”, “How do humans behave?”, “Why are there variations and differences among different groups of humans?”, “How has the evolutionary past of *Homo sapiens* influenced its social organization and culture?” and so forth.

In the United States, contemporary anthropology is typically divided into four sub-fields: cultural anthropology (also called “social anthropology”), archaeology, linguistic anthropology, and physical (or biological) anthropology. The four-field approach to anthropology is reflected in many undergraduate textbooks as well as anthropology programs. At universities in the United Kingdom, and much of Europe, these “sub-fields” are frequently housed in separate departments and are seen as distinct disciplines.

The social and cultural sub-field has been heavily influenced by structuralist and post-modern theories, as well as a shift toward the analysis of modern societies (an arena more typically in the remit of sociologists). During the 1970s and 1980s there was an epistemological shift away from the positivist traditions that had largely shaped and influenced the discipline. During this shift, enduring questions about the nature and production of knowledge came to occupy a central place in cultural and social anthropology. In contrast, archaeology, biological anthropology, and linguistic anthropology remained largely positivist. Due to this difference in epistemology, anthropology as a discipline has lacked cohesion over the last several decades. This has even led to departments diverging, for example in the late 1990’s at some universities, where the “scientists” and “non-scientists” divided into two departments: anthropological sciences and cultural and social anthropology, which were fortunately later reunified.

2.8 DIVISIONS IN GENERAL ANTHROPOLOGY

As already indicated, anthropology is traditionally divided into four sub-fields, each with its own further branches: biological or physical anthropology, social anthropology or cultural anthropology, archaeology and anthropological linguistics. These fields frequently overlap, but tend to use different methodologies and techniques.

Biological anthropology, or physical anthropology, focuses on the study of human populations using an evolutionary framework. Biological anthropologists have

theorized about how the globe has become populated with humans (e.g. the “Out Of Africa” and “multi-regional evolution” theories), as well as tried to explain geographical human variation and race. Many biological anthropologists studying modern human populations identify their fields as human ecology, itself linked to socio-biology. Human ecology uses evolutionary theories to better understand phenomena among contemporary human populations. Another large sector of biological anthropology is primatology, where anthropologists focus on understanding other primate populations. Methodologically, primatologists borrow heavily from field biology and ecology in their research.

Cultural anthropology is also called socio-cultural anthropology or social anthropology especially in the United Kingdom. It is the detailed study of culture, and is mainly based on ethnography. Ethnography can refer to both a methodology and a product of research, namely a monograph or book. Ethnography is a grounded, inductive method that heavily relies on participant-observation. Ethnology involves the systematic comparison of different cultures. The process of participant-observation can be especially helpful to understanding a culture from an insider’s point of view; which would otherwise be unattainable by simply reading from a book. In some European countries, all cultural anthropology is known as ethnology, which is a term coined in 1783 by Adam F. Kollár.

The study of kinship and social organization is a central focus of cultural anthropology, as kinship is a human universal. Cultural anthropology also covers economic and political organization, law and conflict resolution, patterns of consumption and exchange, material culture, technology, infrastructure, gender relations, ethnicity, childrearing and socialization, religion, myth, symbols, values, etiquette, worldview, sports, music, nutrition, recreation, games, food, festivals, and language (which is also the object of study in linguistic anthropology).

Archaeology is the study of human material culture from artefacts (older pieces of human culture) carefully gathered as museum pieces. Archaeologists work closely with biological anthropologists, art historians, physics laboratories (for dating), and museums. They are charged with preserving the results of their excavations and are often found in museums. Typically, archaeologists are associated with “digs,” or excavation of layers of ancient sites. Archaeologists subdivide time into cultural periods based on long-lasting artefacts: the Paleolithic, the Neolithic, the Bronze Age, which are further subdivided according to artefact traditions and culture region, such as the Oldowan or the Gravettian. In this way, archaeologists provide a vast frame of reference for the places human beings have travelled, their ways of making a living, and their demographics. Archaeologists also investigate nutrition, symbolization, art, systems of writing, and other physical remnants of human cultural activity.

Linguistic anthropology (also called anthropological linguistics) seeks to understand the processes of human communications, verbal and non-verbal, variation in language across time and space, the social uses of language, and the relationship between language and culture. It is the branch of anthropology that brings linguistic methods to bear on anthropological problems, linking the analysis of linguistic forms and processes to the interpretation of sociocultural processes. Linguistic anthropologists often draw on related fields including sociolinguistics, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, semiotics, discourse analysis, and narrative analysis. Linguistic anthropology is further divided into its own sub-fields:

descriptive linguistics the construction of grammars and lexicons for unstudied languages; historical linguistics, including the reconstruction of past languages, from which our current languages have descended; ethno-linguistics, the study of the relationship between language and culture, and sociolinguistics, the study of the social functions of language. Anthropological linguistics is also concerned with the evolution of the parts of the brain that deal with language.

Anthropology developed from so many different enterprises, including but not limited to fossil-hunting, exploring, documentary film-making, palaeontology, primatology, antiquity dealings and curatorship, philology, etymology, genetics, regional analysis, ethnology, history, philosophy and religious studies today. Precisely because of this it led to instability in many anthropology departments, resulting in the division or reorganization of sub-fields. However, seen in a positive light, anthropology is one of the few places in many universities where humanities, social, and natural sciences are forced to confront one another. In this sense anthropology has become an inter or trans-disciplinary study. As such, anthropology has also been central in the development of several new (late 20th century) interdisciplinary fields including cognitive science, global studies, human-computer interaction, and various ethnic studies.

2.9 BASIC TRENDS IN GENERAL ANTHROPOLOGY

There are several characteristics that tend to unite anthropological work. One of the central characteristics is that anthropology tends to provide a comparatively more holistic account of phenomena and tends to be highly empirical. The quest for holism leads most anthropologists to study a particular place or thing in detail, using a variety of methods, over a more extensive period than normal in many parts of academia. The specific focus of social and cultural anthropology has significantly changed. Initially the sub-field was focused on the study of cultures around the world.

In the 1990s and 2000s, calls for clarification of what constitutes a culture, of how an observer knows where his or her own culture ends and another begins, and other crucial topics in writing anthropology were heard. It is possible to view all human cultures as part of one large, evolving global culture. These dynamic relationships, between what can be observed on the ground, as opposed to what can be observed by compiling many local observations remain fundamental in any kind of anthropology, whether cultural, biological, linguistic or archaeological.

Biological anthropologists are interested in both human variation and in the possibility of human universals (behaviors, ideas or concepts shared by virtually all human cultures). They use many different methods of study, but modern population genetics, participant observation and other techniques often take anthropologists “into the field” which means travelling to a community in its own setting, to do something called “fieldwork.” On the biological or physical side, human measurements, genetic samples, nutritional data may be gathered and published as articles or monographs. Due to the interest in variation, anthropologists are drawn to the study of human extremes, aberrations and other unusual circumstances, such as headhunting, whirling dervishes, whether there

were real Hobbit people, snake handling, and *glossolalia* (speaking in tongues), just to list a few, as noted in Wikipedia.

At the same time, anthropologists urge, as part of their quest for scientific objectivity and cultural relativism, which has an influence on all the sub-fields of this discipline. This is the notion that particular cultures should not be judged by one culture’s values or viewpoints, but that all cultures should be viewed as relative to each other. There should be no notions, in good anthropology, of one culture being superior or inferior to another culture. Ethical commitments in anthropology include noticing and documenting genocide, infanticide, racism, mutilation including circumcision and *subincision*, and torture. Topics like racism, slavery or human sacrifice, therefore, attract anthropological attention and theories ranging from nutritional deficiencies to genes to acculturation have been proposed, not to mention theories of colonialism and many others as root causes of Man’s inhumanity to man. To illustrate the depth of an anthropological approach, one can take just one of these topics, such as “racism” and find thousands of anthropological references, stretching across all the major and minor sub-fields.

Along with dividing up their project by theoretical emphasis, anthropologists typically divide the world up into relevant time periods and geographic regions. Human time on earth is divided up into relevant cultural traditions based on material, such as the Paleolithic and the Neolithic, of particular use in archaeology. Anthropologists and geographers share approaches to culture regions as well, since mapping cultures is central to both sciences. By making comparisons across cultural traditions (time-based) and cultural regions (space-based), anthropologists have developed various kinds of comparative method, a central part of their science.

As such the main difference between general anthropology and philosophical anthropology is the method employed. In philosophical anthropology we do not usually do any empirical study. No field study is undertaken. No experiments are carried out. Instead, based on the evidence suggested by other disciplines, philosophers analyse human condition theoretically. So philosophical anthropology is a critical and creative reflection on the human being, using primarily the human reason as its focus. Thus many of the central themes of philosophical anthropology – identity, freedom, love, life after death, etc. – are unique to philosophical anthropology.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What are some of the basic questions of anthropology?

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2) How do you differentiate general anthropology to philosophical anthropology?

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2.10 SOME QUOTES

*Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,
A Being darkly wise, and rudely great:
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,
With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,
He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;
In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;
In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer;
Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err;
Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
Whether he thinks too little or too much:
Chaos of thought and passion, all confused;
Still by himself abused, or disabused;
Created half to rise, and half to fall;
Great Lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
Sole Judge of Truth, in endless Error hurled:
The Glory, the Jest, and riddle of the World. (Alexander Pope , Essay on Man)*

*Behold, we know not anything;
I can but trust that good shall fall
At last – far off – at last, to all,
And every winter change to spring.
So runs my dream: but what am I?
An infant crying in the night:
An infant crying for the light:
And with no language to cry. (Alfred Tennyson, in Memoriam)*
*When I look at the heavens, the work of thy fingers,
The moons and the stars which thou hast established;
What is man that thou art mindful of him,
And the son of man that thou dost care for him?
Yet thou hast made him little less than God,
And dost crown him with glory and honour.*

*Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands;
Thou hast put all things under his feet. ...
(Psalm 8:23-6: RSV translation)*

Man is the only animal who can blush ... or needs to. (W. Rogers)

2.11 LET US SUM UP

We have seen how philosophical anthropology is a uniquely human discipline. After seeing some of the fundamental issues raised in this discipline, we have also seen how it is intimately related to other areas in philosophy and in general anthropology. Because we are part of the question of who human beings are and so cannot detach ourselves from it, it is unsuceptible to cold scientific investigation and analysis. Instead of speaking about finding an “answer” to this question (“answer” is a very definitive-sounding word), we aim at a *response*: a humble, rough framework attempt to come to grips with its challenge, one that will ever remain open to further elucidation and clarification. When faced with a mystery, we can only hope (at best) to be able to throw a little more light on the matter and progress but one step further along the road to an “answer.” We can never arrive at our destination fully. So philosophical anthropology attempts at response and not answer.

Today in India this statement what is lacking is justice not food, is really true. What we lack is not basic material necessities. What keeps India poor is our short supply of values. Human values are lacking in India. We do not care for justice, specially for the other. This is more a philosophical or ethical issue rather than a material or financial one. The treatise that we do in philosophy is intimately connected to anthropology. For example epistemology speaks of human being as the knower, while hermeneutics relates to human being as one who understands and makes sense of reality. Logic deals with the human capacity to think with precision and coherence. Metaphysics is a human attempt to make sense of the larger world in which we live. Ethics, of course, deals with the right actions of human being. Philosophy of God, including theodicy, is not an empty enquiry into God as such, but it is a human enquiry into God as humans understand it progressively and creatively. In general the history of ideas is a human way of understating themselves as part of a larger, social phenomenon. Further, aesthetics studies the human ability to admire and create beauty.

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2.12 KEY WORDS

- Anthropology** : “The scientific study of the origin, the behavior, and the physical, social, and cultural development of humans.”
- Homo sapiens* : Human Beings

2.13 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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