

Ethical Approaches in Anthropology

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ABSTRACT: The ethics of anthropology is culture-bound and the core identity of an ethical approach in anthropology is very simple. In its categorization, ethical approach in anthropology as a theoretical program should not be confused with any other philosophical approach. In this paper, an attempt has been made to show that the issue of concern in philosophical anthropology is simply that whether morality should be given separate status as a descriptive project. Also in this paper the relationship between philosophy of science, Kantian anthropology and moral philosophy is highlighted. Anthropology considers actual behaviour/observable actions and moral philosophy seeks to evaluate this behaviour. To dig out these assumptions and make the decision deliberate is a Kantian-anthropological task.

INTRODUCTION

Philosophers while speculating on the relationship between philosophy and anthropology is trying to establish by suggesting that philosophy is the mother of all sciences, thus, assigning parental authority. One may interpret the Kantian maxim by proclaiming that anthropology without philosophy is blind, and philosophy without anthropology is empty. But the intellectual value of this dictum may be merely that philosophers use anthropological materials to illustrate philosophical principles and by completing this exchange, the anthropologists probably use the philosopher himself as an anthropological specimen.

At the beginning of 20th century *Logical Positivism* is considered as a part of philosophy of science that rejected all ethical theories. For the logical positivists, all ethical theories or judgments are expressions of emotions, that are neither verifiable in principle nor in practice, therefore do not have meaning. But after World War II, logical positivism came under

attack. Critics started to look at those issues of sciences and what positivist's said about those issues. These issues of the critics are called *The Logic of Discoveries*. This helped common people to distinguish between making discoveries and justifying discoveries of the scientists. Parallel to these examinations in philosophy of science similar kind of examinations have also been undertaken in moral as well as linguistic philosophy. Thus, one may say that World War II proved to be a defining moment in terms of concern about ethics in anthropology. The second half of the twentieth century saw the development of formal ethical codes for most of the major anthropological organizations, including the American Anthropological Association, the Society for Applied Anthropology, and the Association of Social Anthropologists of the Commonwealth. These codes contain the central part of generally accepted principles, though controversy flourishes regarding other issues (Harris,'68; Krober and Kluckhohn,'52; Murphy and Joannsen,'90).

Anthropology was originated only during the mid-nineteenth century, and its early practice betrayed

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its colonialist roots. If we distinguish philosophy with anthropology, we can find that from the late 1920s onwards various texts have published under the heading of “philosophical anthropology.”¹ Say for example, Max Scheler’s *Man’s Place in Nature* in 1928, Helmuth Plessner’s *Man and the Stages of the Organic* in 1928, and Arnold Gehlen’s *Man: His Nature and Place in the World* in 1940, are commonly attributed to this phenomenon in the history of philosophy² (McMillan and Pillermer, ’88). But it is important to keep in mind, the differentiation between “philosophical anthropology” as a sub-discipline and “Philosophical Anthropology” as a paradigm. However, we can see that two distinct things have emerged since 1928. On the one hand, a new sub-discipline of philosophical anthropology was established by authors like Bernhard Groethuysen, Michael Landmann, and Christian Thies, who are interested in collecting and systematizing the questions and views on ‘man’ (*Mensch*) that have emerged during the history of philosophy (Edel, ’53; Garbarino, ’77; Harris, ’68). On the other hand there has emerged a certain paradigm with a characteristic approach to the concept of man — and this is the achievement of Scheler, Plessner, Gehlen, Rothacker and Portmann.³ (Fischer, 2008).

The concept, ‘Philosophical Anthropology’ indicates that, irrespective of their differences, there are fundamental theoretical similarities between these above authors. The word ‘anthropology’ indicates that each is concerned with treating, observing, quantifying, and describing various aspects of the human sphere, human living conditions, and human’s relationship to self, culture, and society. At the same time, ‘anthropology’ shows that each proceeds from an understanding that, from the nineteenth century onwards, anthropology is also considered a biological discipline. Therefore, the internal theoretical reference to biology is the pivotal point in Philosophical Anthropology for all above three authors. One may say that Philosophical Anthropology provides a theory on relationships to the self, the world, and others. One can compare “philosophical anthropology” as a discipline with other disciplines within philosophy, such as ethics, epistemology, metaphysics and logic. But to reconstruct “Philosophical Anthropology” as a paradigm, one must compare it with other twentieth

century approaches, such as phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutic philosophy, critical theory, naturalism, and structuralism etc. (Edel, 1953; Fischer, 2008).

Anthropology can be considered science, because it involves the accumulation of systematic and reliable knowledge about an aspect of the universe carried out by empirical observation and interpreted in terms of the interrelating of concepts refer to empirical observation. These traditional conceptions of anthropology, which are considered as the foundation, have been reviewed by postmodern anthropologists.

While some prefer to treat Anthropology as a separate work of cosmopolitan philosophy, there are others who distinguish it as holding the key to a new way of understanding. But could Anthropology be used to ground metaphysics, as Heidegger - for example, later seeks the transcendental conditions of *Dasein* in an ontological foundation - would compete Kantian perspective? Or must any such attempt to ground metaphysics in human finitude be abandoned in favour of an approach which would instead limit anthropology to the *a priori* conditions of human knowledge, as Foucault for example, would argue in his *Introduction to Kant’s Anthropology*?⁴ (Foucault, 2007). Does it not pose a contradiction to conceive man as both the transcendental condition of empirical knowledge as well as the very object of that knowledge?

ETHICAL APPROACH TO ANTHROPOLOGY

An ethical approach to anthropology tries to minimize negative effects of the anthropologist’s presence and behaviour upon the peoples being studied. Anthropology studies human culture and behaviour primarily through the observation of participants living intimately with and observing a community. Anthropologists risk negatively affecting a community or individuals within it by their presence, actions and information. Thus, the core identity of the ethical approach in Anthropology is very simple. In its categorization, Philosophical Anthropology as a theoretical program need not be confused with any other philosophical approach. The relative superiority of one theoretical program over another is not an issue here but the principal concern is the uniqueness of the approach (Rynkiewich and Spradley, ’76).

The ethical or moral codes and principles in anthropology emphasize upon the obligations of anthropologists to the people under study, the discipline, and the sponsors of research. The anthropologist's greatest responsibility is to the human/people under its study. These people are critical to the study and can be hurt by it (Cassel, '80). Furthermore, in some cases, cultural differences make people unlikely to understand fully the possible consequences of their participation for which an anthropologist must use extreme care to protect their informant-hosts⁵ (Fluehr Lobban, Carolyn 2003). The anthropologists need to have knowledge of the political or social structure of a community, even if it is divorced from the specifics of individual officeholders. This knowledge can be used by governments and others to control, terrorize, or punish a community. Individuals need to be aware of what level of risk they are taking by providing that information to anthropologists. If the informants find these above conditions acceptable, the research should continue⁶ (Edel, '53).

The anthropologists need to be prepared to withhold information if necessary to protect the people under study (Cassel, 1980). Many ethnographic reports use pseudonyms or nonspecific report in attempts to disguise informant and community identities. Recognizing the trust and power placed in them, an anthropologist should be very sensitive to the issues of confidentiality and reveal nothing that is likely to harm the study community or its individual members. Ethical obligations of anthropologists are obligated to publish the results of their studies, in case they become mere self-indulgent "custom collectors." In order to achieve the greater goals of anthropology, the broadest possible corpus of evidence is necessary.

There are many funding agencies that sponsor much research, and they typically are sympathetic to anthropological ethics. Other academic funding, however, may come from private foundations or government agencies that may be unfamiliar with ethical standards or even antagonistic towards them. Project Camelot, for example, was sponsored by the Special Operations Research Office of the U.S. Army between 1964 and 1967. As described in the

prospectus, which was communicated to many anthropologists and other social scientists, the goal of this project was "to predict and influence politically significant aspects of social change in the developing nations," particularly Latin America⁷ (Rynkiewich and Spradley, '76). This project can place an anthropologist in an indefensible position, since it may require providing information that will harm the people under study. While many anthropologists argue that anthropologists should never accept funding from agencies with questionable motives, ethical codes typically are less dogmatic. They stress the need for a clear agreement regarding what information is to be made available to the sponsor. It is clear that the anthropologist should reject funding if agreement cannot be reached. If agreement is reached, the anthropologist has an obligation to provide accurate, though not necessarily complete, reporting.

One may claim that the ethical perspectives discussed above are full of contradictions. Obligations to the discipline require that studies be published fully; obligations to the people studied require that sensitive information be withheld. These and other conflicts should be resolved by reference to the delicate balance of good. The anthropologist must examine the likely results of actions, assess their impact on all parties concerned, and follow the path that is most likely to lead to the best overall outcome.

In the early twentieth century, anthropology was committed to preserve information about traditional societies before they were transformed by Western civilization. This led to a nonintervention of ethics maintaining that anthropology should dispassionately describe and analyze societies but not try to change them. However, later twentieth century, showed that society is changing in response to Western civilization and would continue to do so. There are some applied anthropologists who argued that anthropology properly should help direct this change in the manner without causing damage to these societies. Not all anthropologists, however, have accepted the tenets of this kind of applied anthropology, but critics argue that anthropological understanding is too rudimentary to permit control of cultural change. Further concerns are derived from the fact that most of the funding for applied anthropological research comes from governments that may not be particularly concerned

about the welfare of the people under study. The amount of pressure placed on an anthropologist by such a sponsor can be considerable.

If we concentrate on the issues of relativism and cultural conflict, we find that culture or civilization in its wide ethnographic sense, is complex, includes knowledge, belief, art, morality, law, custom, and other capabilities and habits, acquired by human as a member of society. Culture or civilization is everything that people thinks, and do as members of a society. In response to ethnocentrism in early anthropology, some thinkers argued for cultural relativism, the recognition that all cultures are equally valid and worthy of respect. Cultural relativism remains entrenched in anthropology, but twentieth century ethno-genocide and human rights violations have led some anthropologists to reconsider. They argue that cultures advocating these and other unacceptable practices are not compatible with values/morality which must change. A related issue that occasionally arises, is that the ethics of anthropology are culture-bound, closely tied to Western precepts, and they may conflict with the ethics of another society. The question remains, when living in and studying a society whose ethics and moral principles are very different, should anthropologists adhere to their own culture's ethical standards and behaviour?⁸ (Rynkiewich and Spradley, '76).

Despite many differences in the various theoretical approaches that have been formulated in the discipline of anthropology - evolutionism, diffusionism, historical particularism, functionalism, culture and personality, neo-evolutionism, structuralism, sociobiology, and the new ethnography - there is at least one thing in common. Each was formulated on the basis of a unique set of epistemological and metaphysical doctrines in the context of a period of Western intellectual history typically called modernism. However, there is a newly emerging approach to the discipline of anthropology that separates itself and constitutes a line of demarcation from all of its modernist. Postmodern anthropology is, indeed, one of the developments brought on by the recent intellectual philosophy, which, with its method of deconstruction, is shaking natural sciences, social sciences, and all the intellectual edifices that were constructed upon the

foundation of modernism. Anthropology, in the context of the modernist paradigm, has defined itself, its central tasks, and its methods that have become its established tradition. This outline of postmodern anthropology barely resembles traditional anthropology at all. The question remains, 'is this really anthropology? How has anthropology progressed so far?' Postmodernism seeks to redefine if not dismiss social science disciplines entirely and postmodern anthropology seems to be critically explained in this context.

If we go through Kant,⁹ we can find that from 1772 until 1796, Kant lectured annually on anthropology, which helped to establish the subject as an autonomous academic discipline. During this period, these lectures documented a developing conception of anthropology with apparently ambiguous links to the entire critical project. The definitive edition of the lectures which Kant eventually published in 1798, however, makes no attempt to establish any such links, leaving scholars to debate its relative importance ever since. It can be said that *Kant's Lectures on Anthropology*, which he delivered regularly after 1773 and were the most popular lectures he gave, have not been widely studied and only recently some of the transcriptions have been published. Let us consider Kant as a Philosophical Anthropologist as for Kant, "anthropology" is not a study of other cultures like comparative ethnography. Kant referred to his critical view by saying that philosophy is an entirely rational and non-empirical enterprise, while anthropology is completely empirical. The very sources of Kant's philosophical anthropology include not only travel accounts of distant regions, but also plays, poetry, histories, novels, physiology, and philosophical works. Anthropology is not a description of human beings but of human nature, for Kant.

Let us point out that by 'pragmatic anthropology' Kant had in mind a rigorous science of moral motivation which would set down rules of prudence concerning the uses which could be made of other people to achieve one's own ends, while defining what a free human being can and should make of himself. Those who are familiar with the historical role which anthropologists played in the ruthless colonization of the non-Western world, this should make them

concerned. From this point Foucault resumes a critical project, with his historical genealogies of human sciences. The matter of concern in philosophical anthropology is simply that whether morality should be given separate status as a descriptive category that seems to depend on a network of assumptions concerning modes of discovery, descriptive aims, social or cultural dynamics etc.¹⁰ (Williams, '90). To dig out these assumptions and make the decision deliberate is a philosophical-anthropological task.

Morality, instead of being fragmentized, has recently entered into a commanding unity in cultural description. For example, it becomes almost absorbed in the value concept, and the systematic unity of a culture is sought in its value configuration which permeates all areas of life. The concept of value as an interdisciplinary study, is fruitful only if some unity is actually discoverable in the areas or materials that it draws together. It may be a unity in human psychological make-up, or in a systematic social or cultural structure, or in a well-ordered historical process. But it is doubtful whether there is any prior independent account of value as such to provide the unity. Thus, each of the separate fields in philosophical anthropology has to stand descriptively on its own feet. It follows that the responsibility for investigating morality as a separate category of culture is not dissolved by its absorption into an integrative value concept.

NOTES

1. *Philosophical Anthropology* does not deal with anthropology as a philosophical subdiscipline but a particular philosophical approach within twentieth-century German philosophy, connected with thinkers such as Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen.
2. A. Gehlen, *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*, in K.-S. Rehberg (ed.), *Arnold- Gehlen- Gesamtausgabe, Textkritische Edition unter Einbeziehung des gesamten Textes der 1. Man: His Nature and Place in the World*, 1988. trans. C. McMillan and K. Pillemer, New York: Columbia University Press.
3. J. Fischer, 2008. *Philosophische Anthropologie. Eine Denkrichtung des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Munich and Freiburg: Alber, pp. 14-15, pp. 483 - 488.
4. Foucault, M. *Introduction to Kant's Anthropology*. 2007. Semiotext (e), Wilshire Blvd., Suite 427, Los Angeles, CA 90057, pp.60-121.
5. Fluehr Lobban, Carolyn, 2003. edit. *Ethics and the Profession of Anthropology: Dialogue for Ethically*

Conscious Practice. 2nd edition, Walnut Creek, Calif.: Alta Mira Press.

6. Edel, Abraham. 1953. Concept of values in contemporary philosophical value theory: *Philosophy of Science*. 20 (3): 198-207.
7. Rynkiewicz, Michael Allen & Spradley, James P. 1976. *Ethics in Anthropology: Dilemmas in Fieldwork*, John Wiley & Sons Hopatcong, NJ, U.S.A.
8. Rynkiewicz, Michael, and James Spradley 1976. *Ethics and Anthropology*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
9. Kant's Anthropology has been translated three times into English, most recently by Robert Louden in 2006. (Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, 2006. trans. & edit. Robert B. Louden, with an Introduction by Manfred Kuehn, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.) The latest version is not without its own layers of sedimentation. Say for example, Louden notes that his translation builds on the two earlier versions, which appeared in 1974 and 1978. Kant's Anthropology indicates that he had been delivering his series of lectures for some thirty years before the text was prepared for publication; the lectures in anthropology took up the winter semester, while the summer semester was set aside for physical geography. In fact, that figure is not quite right. By 1756, Kant was already teaching Geography; the lectures in Anthropology, however, were probably not begun before the winter of 1772-1773.
10. Williams, Thomas Rhys 1990. *Cultural Anthropology*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.

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