SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY
AND POST-MODERNIST PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

The purpose of this paper is to draw the attention of social an-
thropologists to developments in philosophical anthropology which
may be relevant to their understanding of their own discipline.
I advance three main arguments. First, that philosophical anthro-
pology is in transition and needs to take a post-modernist turn.
Second, that philosophical anthropology, in so far as it takes
such a turn, is relevant to social anthropology. Third, that soc-
ial anthropology should cease to be confused with philosophical
anthropology, especially since post-modernist philosophical anth-
ropology contains the promise of a richer interchange provided
such confusion is avoided.

I

The term 'philosophical anthropology' is not in common use in
English-speaking countries, although historians of philosophy re-
fer to the 'philosophical anthropologies' of philosophers such as
Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Hume,
Kant, Adam Smith and Hegel. In Europe however the term 'philo-
sophical anthropology' is commonly used to refer to both the
philosophy of man in a comprehensive or speculative sense, and to
philosophical inquiries into more limited aspects of human be-
haviour. Indeed in Europe philosophical anthropology is an estab-
lished university subject with chairs in several countries and

an intimidating literature. The European movement in philosophical anthropology in the 'thirties and 'forties centred on the attempt to reassert the uniqueness of man against reductionism and objectivism. It sought to inherit insights from philosophical biology, *Lebensphilosophie*, existentialism and phenomenology in a way which would overcome the fragmentation of the special sciences with their tendency to totalise partial disciplinary 'images of man', and lead to a new unified image of man, capable of both sustaining human aspirations and acting as a critical standard by which dehumanising tendencies in contemporary society and culture could be judged. The works of Buytendijk, Uexküll, Plessner, Portmann, Scheler, Rothacker, Groethuysen, Gehlen, Cassirer, Landmann, Strasser, Donceel and Kamlah can be seen as attempts to realise this ambitious goal.

Today European philosophical anthropology is in transition. The older movement, with its attempt to establish the uniqueness of man showing an anthropological difference, is in some disarray, partly because the first attempts to show such a difference were rather premature. It may be true that man is fundamentally different from other animals by virtue of his possession of certain powers, for example the power to use language or to act rationally; but to show such a difference requires long-term empirical study of both human and ethological data, and conclusions based on very incomplete studies cannot support the 'grand ends in view' which the older generation of European philosophical anthropologists tended to entertain. Moreover, in so far as such research is empirical, it is inherently doubtful whether it could ever support the kind of affirmativist politics of the subject to which these philosophical anthropologists were committed.

It may be that man ought not to accept denigrating modes of self-ascription which tend to inhibit his powers of self-realisation, but, if so, this is a *political* decision which needs to be made on political grounds, which themselves can be rationally articulated. It is a mistake to look to empirical materials to make such decisions for us. In so far as such a naturalisation of the politics of human self-ascription characterised the work of many of the older philosophical anthropologists, contemporary European philosophical anthropology tends to distance itself from their achievements, to insist on a less phenomenological, less Romantic approach to natural scientific data and to break up the utopia of a unified philosophy of man into sub-departments, one of more of which may be given a leading role in organizing and interpreting the immense bulk of relevant data.

Hence, contemporary European philosophical anthropology has tended to dissolve into various sub-disciplines, called philosophical anthropology, but really requiring re-description, viz.: (1) theories of human nature; (2) the study of images of man; (3) accounts of the human condition; (4) phenomenology of action and experience; (5) philosophical psychology; (6) psychoanalysis; (7) artifical intelligence; (8) the study of formal languages; (9) philosophy of action; (10) philosophy of culture; (11) philosophy of history; (12) philosophical biology; (13) philosophical

ethology; (14) thematisations of the results of the natural sciences; and (15) social philosophy. Such a development may not be wholly undesirable, although current attempts to revive the utopia of a unified philosophy of man based on the philosophy of action suggest that it may not be permanent.

In contrast to the existing, established trends in European philosophical anthropology I argue that philosophical anthropology needs to take a post-modernist turn. Clearly the notion of a 'post-modernist turn' requires some explanation. The term 'post-modernism' can bear at least two distinct senses. Post-modernism in the first sense can be characterised as modernism without the subject, the death-gasp of modernism as avant-garde cultural politics. Post-modernism in this sense can now be found in almost all the arts, most strikingly in literature, painting, ballet and architecture. It is a theoreticist aesthetics, oriented to trends in criticism: the exhaustion of a style, not something genuinely new. As such, it has some value, especially as a demonstration of where its assumptions lead, but it is not seriously post-*modern*. It comes *after modernism*, but as something more modern and more up-to-date.

Post-modernism in the second sense can be characterised as an emerging trend which attempts to take account of the fact that the parameters which defined the modern period from 1500 onwards are coming to an end, and that other, radically different parameters are beginning to emerge. Post-modernism in this sense is not more modernism. It is not an 'ism' to be set beside post-impressionism or constructivism. It is not an aesthetic, but a set of open and still-developing responses to an emerging *post-*modern situation in world economy and society. In the case of philosophical anthropology, a post-modernist turn involves an attempt to re-think structures of priorities and question-orderings inherited from the modern period to deal with a situation to which the inherited collections and cohesions may cease to apply. Specifically, it involves a transformation of the inherited anthropological questions ('What is man? What is his nature? What properties and powers does he possess?') into questions *opened forwards*, towards both new developments and new levels of articulation and choice where both self-ascription and self-constitution are concerned.

Such a turn is substantive; it is also political, in that it implies that individuals may acquire opportunities to make conscious choices of conceptual and linguistic frameworks in the context of both new questions, and questions which in the past were not regarded as proper matters for the exercise of individual judgement. Above all, such a post-modernist turn is *procedural*. It has no answers to impose, no doctrines to invoke. Instead, it implies that a radical differentation of (1) questions, (2) discourses and (3) purposes is now becoming possible, which both delimits the scope and application of traditional answers and allows for unprecedented innovation at the level of multi-variable individual self-constitution.

A philosophical anthropology which has taken the post-modernist turn is relevant to social anthropology to the extent that it can provide differentiations which may illuminate social anthropologists' concerns. Many methodological controversies in social anthropology seem to insist on a confusion of strata or on monistic conceptions of the order of discourses, as if discourses formed a single uniform system, itself isomorphic with the way things are. Here the post-modernist philosophical anthropologist can assist the social anthropologist to make more complex distinctions between strata and between discourses and to expel the remnants of traditional philosophical anthropology from social anthropology on the grounds that philosophical anthropology is a different inquiry from social anthropology. He can also suggest differentiations which might allow the projects of earlier social anthropologists (Kardiner, Boas, Lévy-Bruhl, Malinowski, Kroeber) to be rehabilitated, provided those projects are disentangled from the ambitions and methodologies which encompassed their historical articulation.

Again, the post-modernist philosophical anthropologist can assist the social anthropologist by offering interpretative schema which can be used to interrogate rival psychological theories (Luria, Chomsky, Piaget) and to evaluate psychoanalytical systems. He can also provide delineations which may be relevant to contemporary anthropological debates about such concepts as 'natural logic', 'natural symbols' and 'natural categories'. To take the example of 'natural categories', post-modernist philosophical anthropology delimits the theoretical discourse or discourses in which 'natural categories' arise. It then insists that the precise meaning of both 'natural' and 'categories' be specified for such discourses, as opposed to what these terms may mean in ordinary language and analytical philosophy.

The question is particularly urgent since both words are used in contemporary anthropological discourse in unclear and inexact senses, and there would seem to be a special need to exclude from social anthropology senses of 'natural' and 'categories' which derive from Aristotle's metaphysics and may not reflect any results derivable from data. Those who speak of 'natural categories' often seem to mean either that such categories reflect abiding features of the 'natural' (i.e. physical) world, or that such categories are common because they reflect recurrent proclivities of the human mind. On the first view, the problem of how far the socially-interpreted perception of the physical world can be said to be 'natural' is occluded. On the second, it is unclear how it is proposed to show that such proclivities belong to an alleged natural (i.e. physical) substratum

(e.g. the brain) rather than to its socially-mediated operation after the emergence of social labour.

Similarly, talk of 'categories' is unhelpful unless clear distinctions are drawn between (1) categories in the sense of *classifications*, for example, according to kind or type; (2) categories in the sense of *concepts*; (3) categories in the sense of *aspects* (e.g. quantity, quality); (4) categories in the sense of *exclusive partitions*; and (5) categories in the sense of *divisions* which are held either by the actors or the anthropologist to be *categorical* in the sense of admitting no more basic re-description or referral. Moreover, even these distinctions may overlap and are insufficiently precise. In the context of post-modernist philosophical anthropology it is crucial to distinguish not only the classifications admitted by the actors from the re-descriptions of the social anthropologist, but also the metaphysical implications of the world hypothesis implicit in the social anthropologists's discourse from such features as might conceivably hold in other or all discourses, assuming a plurality of world hypotheses.

Again, post-modernist philosophical anthropology is relevant to social anthropology in so far as it is bound to investigate the politics and meta-philosophy of a variety of categorical schemes, to thematise the implications of different orderings and interpretations of world strata, and to develop historically-specific inventories and theories of the impostulates which currently govern such human activities as self-description, social explanation and self-ascription. This does not imply that social anthropologists should import the tentative conclusions of post-modernist anthropology, but only that a comparative awareness of the distinctions that others find useful, and where and how they choose to draw them, may be valuable.

III

Post-modernist philosophical anthropology also implies that social anthropology should cease to be confused with philosophical anthropology. The tendency to confuse social anthropology with philosophical anthropology runs through the whole history of social anthropology and has provided social anthropologists with many of their most ambitious goals. In a post-modernist context it is important to emphasise that such a thesis does not imply that social anthropology should not be 'philosophical' - in the sense of being philosophically literate, self-critical or self-aware. Nor does it imply that social anthropology cannot benefit from

the work of philosophers. On the contrary, it is clear that philo-
sophical considerations may be important in distinguishing genuine
from spurious questions in social anthropology, that a tolerance of
inexact and confused distinctions constitutes one of the major ob-
stables to the furtherance of social anthropology as a discipline,
and that a philosophically-informed clarification of the objects
of social anthropology (and so of the meaning of such central terms
as 'structure', 'symbol', 'category' and 'function') provides an alter-
native to eclecticism or the absolutisation of methodologism.

Nor does such a thesis imply the utopia of dispensing with
utopia. It does not denigrate or underestimate the immense contri-
bution made by social anthropologists who have pursued questions con-
cerning the philosophy of man in their social anthropological in-
quiries. Obviously, the subject would be poorer without Bastian's
concept of *Elementargedanken,* Lévy-Bruhl's postulate of a universal
mystical mentality or Lévi-Strauss's quest for the innate structure
of the human mind. Moreover, both Herder's project of a comparative
anthropology and the attempt to determine the question of the psycho-
logical, logical and moral unity of mankind have produced detailed
investigations of the highest order.

In a post-modernist context however it is necessary to define
the limits of disciplinary inquiries more precisely and so the
range of any general conclusions which they might reach. Post-
modernist philosophical anthropology implies a distinction between
the choice of a metaphysical scheme maintained in a philosophical
discourse for philosophical purposes, and the choice of a mode of
conceptualisation within a special science for purposes internal,
though not necessarily exclusive, to it. Because post-modernist
anthropology is procedural, and aims to leave particular decisions
about choices of conceptual and linguistic frameworks at the level
of self-ascription to the *proleptically* free decisions of individuals,
such anthropology rejects any attempt to decide questions *at this
level* by the special sciences. Such a move has the advantage that
it helps the special scientist, in this case the social anthropolo-
gist, to distinguish between the limited theoretical claims which
his researches may lead him to formulate, and the far wider need
to decide on frameworks of self-ascription for which such claims
are necessarily inconclusive.

The argument of this section however has wider implications.
Post-modernist philosophical anthropology implies that social
anthropology cannot be the philosophical study of man. It also
implies that social anthropology may need to break with the dream
of a unification of the sciences based on man. This dream has
taken many forms - the dream of basing a philosphy of man on a
unification of the sciences, the dream of using a philosophy of man
to interpret the various sciences, and the dream of developing a
'science' of man as a foundation for the sciences in general. Here
it is not uncommon to cite Hume's famous declaration in *A Treatise
of Human Nature:*

> 'Tis evident, that all the sciences have a relation,
> greater or less, to human nature; and that however wide
> any of them may seem to run from it, they still return back

by one passage or another .... There is no question of importance, whose decision is not compriz'd in the science of man; and there is none, which can be decided with any certainty, before we become acquainted with that science. In pretending therefore to explain the principles of human nature, we in effect propose a compleat system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new, and the only one upon which they can stand with any security.'[1]

It is less usual to notice the radical implications of Hume's project, including the implication that many questions cannot be decided 'with any certainty' until such a science is at hand.

Hume of course was by no means alone in his belief that a science if human nature could provide a foundation for the sciences in general. Indeed the quest for 'constant and universal' laws of human nature has influenced many social anthropologists. In a post-modernist context it is important to be clear about what a theoretically-informed empirical inquiry such as social anthropology cannot do.

No empirical inquiry can establish the metaphysical claim that there is such a thing as *human nature*, although such terminology could be pragmatically employed by one or more special sciences. Similarly, no empirical inquiry can establish the metaphysical claim that the human being has a *mind*, although empirical studies can influence the selection of distinctions used in describing human thought processes and behaviour. Similarly, it is difficult to see how any empirical inquiry could establish 'constant' or 'universal' laws of human nature, especially given the state of the pre-historical record and the difficulty of committing the future in advance to reproduce current characteristics. Such a conclusion provides no support for unduly narrow specialisms, but it does suggest that social anthropology, like many of the sciences dealing with man, would do well to clarify its objects and also the kinds and range of knowledges which can be achieved by the methods which it employs. In so far as the history of social anthropology can be read in terms of the asymmetries between its projects and the methods adopted to realise them, post-modernist anthropology can contribute a sense of the contexts in which various matters can be regarded as certain, and in which various theories can be treated as true.

The thrust of this paper may seem to reserve the wider questions for a new-fledged and little-known discipline, post-modernist philosophical anthropology. In so far as post-modernist philosophical anthropology is procedural, this is not the case. I simply argue that social anthropology cannot hope to settle questions which properly belong to philosophical anthropology. This may

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1.   David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* [1739], (ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge 1888), Oxford: Clarendon Press 1975, pp. xv-xvi.

imply that some of the high purposes which social anthropologists have set themselves cannot be achieved by the methods they propose. But in a difficult world, this may not be a wholly unwelcome implication.

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Oxford University Anthropology Society

Announcement

The Oxford University Anthropology Society was founded on January 28th, 1909 with Professor Tylor as President and G.C. Robson as Secretary and Treasurer. The Society has recorded minutes of its meetings since it was first formed. Beginning in the next issue of JASO a series of selected extracts from these minutes will be presented by the current Secretary, Mike Hitchcock.