

History and Methodology of Philosophical Anthropology

i) The History Of Philosophical Anthropology

Over different epochs, philosophy has always studied man, however, the expression 'philosophical anthropology' only came into use in the recent decades. Before, other terms were adopted to designate this part of philosophy.¹

In the ancient and medieval period the most common expressions were *De anima* (on the soul, or *peri psyché* in Greek) or *De homine* (on man). These expressions remained in use up until when they were substituted by Wolff with the term psychology. Wolff also distinguished between Empirical psychology – the experimental research about man and Rational psychology – the philosophical research about man.

The term anthropology was brought into use by Kant in one of his minor works which he entitled *Anthropologia in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (anthropology from a Pragmatic point of View). He defined anthropology in this work as, "a systematically ordered doctrine of the knowledge of man."²

Though the expression philosophical anthropology came into use in recent decades, the history of philosophical anthropology coincides with the history of philosophy which started with the Greeks when they abandoned the mythical expression of reality and posed rational questions on the nature of things. Man also became part of this rational inquiry on the nature of things.

In fact, over the history of philosophy, we can identify three principal phases which has prevailed in the study of man. These are: cosmocentric, theocentric and anthropocentric. These three principal phases correspond to three major periods in the history of philosophy, that is, ancient, medieval and modern.

a) Cosmocentric phase

In the ancient period, the Greek philosophers studied man on the plane of nature or cosmos and understood him in the cosmo-centric perspective. In their thought, man realizes himself only when he behaves according to the laws of nature.

¹ B. Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, 13.

² *Ibid.*, 14.

The cosmocentric perspective or understanding of man is well exemplified in the thought of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus. Plato considered man as essentially soul, that is, spiritual and incorruptible soul. This means that the human soul, which according to Plato is incorruptible is endowed with a character of immortality. In Plato's thought or philosophy, the immortality of the soul does not pose a problem, the only true problem for him is to free the soul from the prison of the body.

According to Aristotle, the beings of this world are composed of matter and form and man being one of them he is also a composite of matter and form. However, in man the matter corresponds to the body while the form corresponds to the soul. This means that according to Aristotle's understanding, man is not essentially a soul but a composite of body and soul.

In Aristotle's thought, the soul which carries out the role of the form in man is superior than the body, however, "in spite of its evident superiority with respect to the body, it does not seem able to escape from the corruption of the body, and therefore from death."³

Plotinus accepts the dichotomy between the soul and body and he insists that the *noesis* (that is, the intellectual knowledge) belongs exclusively to the soul, whereas all the other cognitive operations are exercised by the body, which is informed by the soul

b) Theocentric Phase

In medieval period there was a shift in the understanding and study of man from a cosmocentric perspective to a theocentric perspective. In the Christian patristic and generally in medieval period, man was understood in a theocentric perspective in the sense that he was studied on the plane of God. According to this theocentric perspective, man behaves correctly and reaches his full realization of himself if he conforms to the law of God and considers himself as *imago dei* (image of God).

In other words, in medieval period and especially during the patristic age and scholastic periods, the background (plane) on which human activity develops is no longer that of nature, of cosmos, as it was for the Greeks, but rather that of the history of God's relationship with humanity.⁴ The anthropological reflection becomes theocentric in the sense that God becomes the point of reference in the understanding of man since man is an *imago dei*.

³ Ibid., 15.

⁴ Ibidem.

In the light of the Christian revelation, St. Augustine speculated on the problems and notions such as evil, sin, liberty, the person, self-transcendence. These notions were missing in the Greeks thought. Of more important, St. Augustine deliberated on the question of the origin of the soul. In fact, in his work Soliloquy, Augustine states clearly that he will tackle the question of the soul and God. He considers the soul as the place where God manifests himself most clearly.

In affronting this question on the origin of the soul, St. Augustine examined two opposing theories, that is, the theory of creationism and that of traductionism.

Creationism theory holds that each soul is absolutely and independently created at birth and united with the body while traductionism theory claims that the soul is propagated by traduction, that is, spiritually transmitted from the soul of the parent (the human spiritual soul is transmitted to the offspring by the parents). The creationism is opposed to the idea of the spiritual generation of the soul from the souls of parent which is affirmed by traductionism.

In short, St. Augustine who in his philosophical thought followed Plato's philosophy and therefore he upholds the same dichotomy of the soul and body and like Plato reduces man essentially to soul and sees a complete autonomy of intellectual knowledge with respect to any contribution of the body.

St. Thomas who in history comes later after St. Augustine also approaches the study of man in a theocentric perspective. Unlike St. Augustine who was platonic in his thought, St. Thomas follows the thought of Aristotle but with consciousness that Plato offers a solution which is in substantial concords with the Christian faith. St. Thomas is also aware that though the Aristotle's concept of man is somehow incompatible with Christian faith, it is more philosophically sound.

With this background in his mind, St. Thomas develops his philosophical anthropology in which man is essentially a composed of soul and body. In his concept, though man is a composed of soul and body, the soul is not subordinate to the body but rather the body is subordinate to the soul.

According to this St. Thomas anthropological concept, "the soul possesses being directly, that is, it has its own act of being (*actus essendi*), in which it makes the body a participant."⁵ This

⁵ B. Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, 16.

implies that according to St. Thomas, there is a “profound and substantial unity between the soul and the body, precisely because their act of being is the same.”⁶ Again, since according to St. Thomas, “the soul has a relationship of priority with the act of being, the death of the body cannot involve the soul.”⁷ It follows logically therefore that the soul is of an immortal nature.

c) Anthropocentric Phase

In modern period, man was understood in an anthropocentric perspective, that is, he was studied not on the cosmos plane neither on God’s plane but on the plane of man. In other words, in modern period man becomes the Supreme Being and the measure of all things and therefore, there is no scope bigger than him under which he should be studied.

In an anthropocentric perspective, “man constitutes the point of departure from which philosophical research moves, and around which this research remains constantly polarized.”⁸ This fact is clearly seen in Descartes philosophy where “the critical inquiry which is the necessary starting point of every correct philosophizing has man as its object.”⁹

This fact of making man the central point upon which everything departs and revolves around is also exemplified in other modern philosophers such as Spinoza, David Hume, Heidegger, Leibniz, Vico, Pascal etc. For instance, in ethics, “Spinoza intends no other objective than to establish the scope of human life and the means to reach this scope.”¹⁰ Hume in his work *Treatise on Human Nature* offers a definitive picture of man as a social being while Heidegger on his side considers man as a quarry of possibilities. Others consider man as a social being (Compte) or as a complex of instincts (Freud).

In spite of the fact that the modern philosophers (Descartes, Pascal, Melabranche, Vico, Leibniz etc) consider man to be the central point of reference, they still elaborate anthropologies of metaphysical character influenced by Plato’s thought. However, this trend change with Kant.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

Kant denied any possibility of the human mind acquiring the absolute knowledge, not of the world, man or that of God. For Kant, the human mind can only reach knowledge of a practical, moral character. Thus, Kant elaborated an anthropology of a practical character.¹¹

In his anthropology, Kant demonstrated that man is a being different from others: in his value, dignity, and personal character and owing to these characteristics unique to man there must be a behaviour that is proper only to him.¹² Kant's anthropological reflections are found in his work entitled *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View (Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht)* published in 1778.

The Kantian thought and especially his critique of metaphysics has performed a decisive change of direction of the anthropological inquiry. It has made the philosophers after him to abandon the terrain of metaphysics on which anthropologies before Kant were constructed and instead adopt other terrains such as history, science, culture, sociology, psychoanalysis, phenomenology among others.

Basing themselves on these new terrains, the modern and contemporary philosophers have presented man in new images. For instance, Kierkegaard sees man as anguished man, Marx conceives man in an economic way and describes him as an economic man, Freud conceives him as an erotic man, Heidegger sees him as an existent man, while Marcel conceives him as a problematic man.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Ibidem.