Being Humans

Anthropological Universality and Particularity in Transdisciplinary Perspectives

Edited by

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The model thus adumbrated can well do without the concept of "essence". That of "family resemblance" would do just as well. This resemblance is not surprising considering the genetic relationship and historical cross-influences between all human beings. Yet for reasons of convenience, I continue to call it "human nature".

It depends on one's value judgements as to which of these four components one assigns the greatest weight. Whoever stresses (1) and (2) will take a sceptical view of meliorism and educational optimism, and vice versa. Those with such a perspective, among whom I include myself, are often characterized as "biologist". Those who believe in the unlimited powers of environment will deem (3) the most important, and enthusiastic meliorists even (4). Much so-called anthropological discussion is actually a controversy about such values.

Meliorism is a noble thought, focusing in the very best in human nature. Yet in spite of that (or is it because of that?) it has caused much evil. The somewhat reserved expression "utopian potential" has not been chosen inadvertently. Whoever strives to improve men opens up a gulf between the objects of their endeavours and the unimproved rest, and we are back with Aristotle and exclusion. If it is to be all mankind, this entails a universal compulsion to adopt the thus improved nature, and in consequence the oppression — and in last consequence the extermination — of all those who cannot or don't want to catch up with it.

Either because of the emotions involved here, or because of the inherent complication of the whole matter, anthropology, considered as the study of human nature, has so far not made the progress one could have expected of it. It has not succeeded in balancing the four above-mentioned components (and possibly others which I may have overlooked) in a sound, empirically substantiated and uncontested way against each other. The complication is great indeed. Anthropology remains a philosophically oriented super-discipline encompassing the natural and social sciences as well as the humanities; it uses various methods, thus arriving at propositions with different epistemological statuses. All this must sadden the lovers of simplicity. Yet it cannot be helped. However divergent in its components, human nature seems to be quite well integrated, even if "open towards the world".

I think that Gehlen was right in calling man a "special project" ("Sonderentwurf") not known before in nature, even if most of its elements had in some form or other already been there. Moreover, I am convinced that he was also right in stating that man must be analysed in terms of the accomplishments of the tasks posed to him by his life (Gehlen 1988, 3–13). This both connects anthropology with the natural sciences and detaches it from them. This also implies that its starting point (and the point to return to when lost on a wrong track) is the life-world, knowledge of oneself and of others. Thus, in spite of its lack of a characteristic method, its elusive subject matter and the heterogeneity of its findings, anthropology retains a unity, and this is the reason for its standing as a separate discipline.

“World-Openness” and the Question of Anthropological Universalism. Comments on Justin Stagl’s Paper

Neil Roughley

Justin Stagl’s paper closes with what he calls a "model of human nature", which is divided into four strata (p. 34f.). The content of level 3 is grounded in the claim that it is part of human nature to take on particular, culturally specific forms: the claim that humans are essentially cultural beings, supplemented by the premise that significant and unavoidable components of cultures are particular.1 Level 2 consists of those characteristics which occur in all human cultures. The second and third strata thus consist of properties which seem to differ merely in the extension of their applicability. Now, it is incumbent on any “model” which operates with different levels to provide some insight into the ways in which these are related, if it is to be legitimately called a model at all.2 Stagl’s metaphor of intermingling flavours hardly fulfills that task. In what follows, I want to focus on the most significant transition, that between the first, biological level and the rest. Its central significance lies in the fact that it is intended to explain the genesis of all three further levels: of the elements of universality (level 2), particularity (level 3) and potentiality (level 4) which Stagl sees as characterising the cultural life of all humans.

Stagl presents the transition in the following way: firstly, he lists the morphological characteristics of bipedal locomotion, upright position, enlargement of the field of vision and liberation of the hands. These biological characteristics are then qualified as symptoms of the reduced specialisation and increased adaptability of the Hominidae in comparison with the rest of the Pongidae. In a third step, the feature of increased adaptability is then equated with a property which plays a pivotal role in the German tradition of philosophical anthropology. This is the property of "world-openness". In my understanding of the writings in which the concept is to be found (Cf. Scheler 1991, 38; Gehlen 1983, 103f.), this refers to more than simply biological adaptability. In a preliminary move towards clarification of the concept, one can say that “world-openness” entails having a "world" of cultural surroundings, as opposed to a purely natural environment. Having the latter involves an organism’s perceptual apparatus and motivational constitution.

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1 Strangely, Stagl claims that the elements of particularity resulting from specific cultural contexts are themselves part of human nature. I will disregard this peculiarity in the following remarks.

2 No isomorphism, or structural analogy, between model and field of application can be established where the relationships within the model are unclear. Cf. Black 1962, 238.
being focused exclusively on specific aspects of its surroundings. An example from the literature is that a squirrel and a spider on the same tree don't exist for each other, as they have no role to play in each other's survival (Gehlen 1941, 45). As I wish to show, a great deal depends on the positive content which the concept of world-openness is given. At this stage, two points should be noted. Firstly, the concepts of increased biological adaptability and having culture are certainly not identical, although this is implied by the grammatical device of apposition (p. 26). Secondly, adding the feature of culturality alongside the aforementioned biological characteristics doesn't amount to its explanation. We simply have one further feature, one which we can express with Bernard Williams by saying that culture is a fact of human ethology (Williams 1995, 79f).

At the core of Stagl's paper is the justification of claims about level two of his model, claims about cultural universals. These have to be shown to be at least compatible with empirical findings, both of biology and of ethnology, as well as being plausible in the light of our everyday experience (anthropology "begins at home", p. 34). He proposes a certain conception of what such compatibility involves, a proposal which has to solve two kinds of problem: firstly, what I will call the difficulty of integrative theory and secondly, problems with the empirical testing of claims to anthropological universality. These problems arise as a result of apparent methodological difficulties of spanning the nature-culture divide, and because, on certain assumptions, it may look as if falsification of any universal claim is possible. It is in his solution to this second problem that Stagl makes it clear the significance he attaches to the biological level. And it is here that the argument from "world-openness" takes on its central role.

1. The Difficulty of Integrative Theory

The first difficulty Stagl sees with lists of cultural universals, such as that given on p. 29, is a difficulty of developing a theoretical conception which could accommodate all such phenomena. The extent to which one sees this as a significant difficulty for the validation of individual claims depends on how strongly one is committed to some kind of epistemological coherention. Even if one does take a strong coherentionist position, the lack of some such theory which integrates all those phenomena that are empirically found in every society investigated is hardly a sufficient reason to reject claims about the individual phenomena in the meantime.

Stagl adopts from Lévi-Strauss what he claims is an explanation for the difficulty with such theoretical integration (p. 29). It involves three claims, two of which appear to contradict each other: firstly that universals belong to nature, rather than to culture; secondly that there are cultural universals after all, but that these mark the transition between nature and culture; and thirdly that this pre-cultural or transitional status explains the impossibility of integrative theory. How can the first and second claims appear together? I would guess in the following way: if, with Aristotle, we conceive "nature" as that realm of phenomena which exists independently of any intervention on the part of human beings (Phys. 192 b 8ff.) and culture is seen as what is constructed by human beings, then the claim that cultural universals are in some sense natural would be the claim that there are certain forms of construction of the human environment about which human beings in general have no choice. The relationship between nature and culture would not be disjunctive, as certain forms of constructive human intervention would be determined by elements of the human condition – perhaps genetic – which are there independently of what human beings do. In this way, cultural universals could turn out to be natural, in the sense of being determined by natural universals. I presume that it is this understanding of the two concepts which makes it possible to claim both that universals are natural, rather than cultural, and that there are cultural universals which mark the transition from nature to culture.

What we then have is a certain conceptual structuring of the relevant domain and a claim about the relationships between the different aspects of that field. In certain forms that claim would be accessible to empirical testing. It is a central claim of evolutionary psychology that the disciplines it draws on do indeed provide information about determinants which culture has to follow. If I have reconstructed the argument correctly, then there is nothing here which explains why the trivialisation of cultural universals isn't possible. On the contrary, it provides the structure of such a theory. It should be noted that, even if one accepts that this is the theory-structure one needs here, then it would still not necessarily provide an exhaustive explanation of cultural universals. Perhaps there are general forms of construction of the human environment which come into being, not because there are causal mechanisms which determine what humans in general do, but because human beings have generally seen that certain forms of behaviour are rational, considering their own make-up and the environment around them. Such forms would be purely cultural in the sense of only coming into being because agents choose to construct them. They would however have a natural foundation, in the sense that there would be no reason for rationally choosing such forms if certain aspects of the environment and human constitution weren't already given.

2. The Difficulty of Operationalisation and the Status of Counter-Examples

The second kind of objection which for Stagl can sensibly be raised against a list of cultural universals is that they tend to be empirically contested. This can be the case for two reasons. Firstly, there is an obvious problem with any notion of
verification here: if universality entails not only applicability to all geographical regions, but also to all temporal regions inhabited by human beings, i.e. the past and even the future, then anyone after something called universal verification is going to be in big trouble. However, if this is supposed to be an objection, it is clearly a silly one. It is of course the old problem of induction. Without wanting to claim that either the problem of induction or the more general problem of scepticism have been solved, we should first of all hold onto the fact that these problems are there in the hard sciences, so that anyone who brings them up in the context of anthropology isn’t saying anything specific about the field in question.

Secondly, it might be shown that there are cultures in which no phenomena corresponding to the postulated universals actually crop up. It should be noted that Stagl appears to allow that there may be putative counter-examples to any feature that seems universal. I wonder whether this is plausible. At any rate, where we have such counter-examples, it would seem that we have straightforward cases of falsification of empirical claims. Now, as is well-known, even within the natural sciences, individual counter-examples are often insufficient to lead to the abandonment of a theory. In the words of that genuine empiricist, Nelson Goodman: “Most scientific laws are ... not assiduous reports of detailed data but sweeping Procrustean simplifications” (1978, 121). On the other hand, theories of the human are in a very different situation to theories of specific areas of particular natural sciences. We are precisely not dealing with a field with clearly delineated boundaries, within which there is a theoretical consensus up to a specific point, on the other side of which disagreements begin. And the kind of pressure not to see a specific counter-example as conclusive does not come from the constraints imposed by theoretical background assumptions shared within a scientific community. It stems instead from the everyday understanding acquired in the course of living within a culturally specific life-world.

3. “World-Openness”

Stagl offers one main reason why one should not be too hasty to abandon general claims about the human in the face of counter-examples: cultural universals have, he claims, a different status to the laws of natural science. They are regularities with the status of tendencies, so that nothing determines when they are realised. This claim presupposes a fundamental fact about being human, which Stagl, following the philosophical anthropologist Max Scheler, labels the capacity to “say No” to one’s own impulses (1991, 55). Following Arnold Gehlen’s modification of Scheler’s position, Stagl then relates this capacity to “say No” to the previously mentioned biological fact that the human animal is not adapted to any specific environment. He also adds the further concept of self-consciousness. The latter two attributes, he claims, explain the first (or at least: they make it possible, p. 30). The relationship between these three different notions seems to me however anything but clear.

Firstly, if Stagl is right that human beings have a unique capacity to take a stand on their own impulses or desires, that is, to decide whether or not they endorse such impulses and act accordingly, then the attribute in question is that of a specific kind of freedom. It is then a further question what that freedom precisely consists in: whether it is simply the capacity to make first-order impulses the object of further higher-order impulses, which are themselves causally determined, or whether the capacity to take such a stand has to be seen as including a stronger conception of independence from pre-existing states.

If one opts for the second possibility, then it is, secondly, difficult to see what the theoretical status is of the biological facts brought together under the concept of non-adaptation to a specific environment. They may be the preconditions for the development of such a capacity, but what seems clear is that they cannot take on anything like an explanatory role in relation to such a form of freedom. If, on the other hand, one opts for the first possibility, then the notion of human beings as entities with the peculiar capacity to take a stand themselves on their own impulses (Gehlen 1988, 24) loses much of its theoretical importance. For Gehlen, biological determination by pre-programmed responses to the environment is replaced by determination by social and cultural factors (1983a, 162). In the expression “openness to the world”, “openness” doesn’t then mean that the options an individual might take are open, that is, undecided in advance. Instead, it means that the organism is completely exposed to, subject to a moulding by the cultural environment. The notion of “world-openness” doesn’t clarify the issues, but rather lumps things together which ought conceptually to be taken apart.

Thirdly, although both Scheler and Gehlen see the attribute of self-consciousness as intimately connected with the capacity to take a stand on one’s desires (Scheler 1991, 52ff.; Gehlen 1983, 104), the relationship of this practical capacity to the theoretical capacity for reflection on one’s own condition is anything but clear. As Kant also plays a central role in Stagl’s paper, it is worth mentioning Kant’s position on this one. Kant originally believed that freedom could be derived from self-consciousness (Met. L, 269); but in his critical writings – and it seems to me, correctly – he came to the conclusion that such a theoretical capacity could be imagined without any necessary consequences for the ways in which the beings with that capacity bring about their own actions (CpR A 546ff./ B 574ff.).

3 The German “das stellungsnehmende Wesen” (1940, 32) is rendered in English by the somewhat abstract “being who must form attitudes”.

4 This is what is at stake when Kant wonders whether “reason can have causality”.

Narrowing the focus on human beings may no longer be possible. Autonomous human beings are no longer possible?
Awareness of something doesn't necessarily entail the interest in, or capability of, doing anything about it.

Of the three attributes mentioned together here then, self-consciousness is, taken on its own, irrelevant for the claim that cultural universals are to be understood as mere tendencies. Which of the other two characteristics is to be seen as explanatory depends on which reading of "world-opensness" is chosen. Either way, we have here a claim about a founding characteristic of the structure of what it means to be the human. How this claim is to be justified remains an open question. That of course depends on which option one takes. They are, as I hope to have made clear, principally different. How are we to establish which is correct? As I said, I don't see how the paleoanthropological and biological facts mentioned are going to help, however empirically well-documented these in themselves may be. They are compatible with either version. As Stagl rightly states (p. 30f.), putative discussions about descriptive characteristics of the human can often be shown to be disputes about values. Does this mean that we simply have to choose whether we prefer to think of ourselves as autonomous rather than as pre-programmed?

There is a further problem here for the descriptive universalist who postulates either version of "world-opensness" - either as the freedom of individuals or cultures to resist natural tendencies, or as the possibility of natural determinants being completely overridden by socio-cultural determinants. Either version is not only compatible with a large empirical variety of cultural phenomena. It is also a useful argument for the cultural relativist, who can use it to dispute the existence of any cultural universals at all. In fact, it appears that the second version is precisely the one anthropological proposition which Stagl attributes to historicism (p. 28).^5

I think we need more information on the status of the tendencies Stagl refers to. Are they dispositions which might not be realised at all, but which we can - safely? - assume to be present even where not actualised? And how far can such non-actualisation be accepted as compatible with universality? When merely a few individuals in a given culture don't behave according to such tendencies? When certain groups consciously resist them? Or even when a whole culture doesn't manifest them? One would be grateful for greater precision on these points. The argument that units such as cultures or societies are difficult to delimit (p. 30) doesn't help: it only increases the difficulty of knowing what is being claimed. Without some precision here, it looks rather as though we might be free to postulate all sorts of universals and simply argue that their non-instantiation is due to the human beings in question not conforming to tendencies they really have. This is obviously a very slippery theoretical slope.

4. Anthropology and Normativity

The last area I want to comment on is that of normative questions, which, as Stagl rightly reminds us, are closely bound up with questions of descriptive universalism in this context. I will touch briefly on two issues.

Firstly, there is the question of the classification of the cerebrally dead, the unborn, the radically mentally deficient and even possible future genetically altered relatives of our own species. Stagl asks whether we are to say that they belong under the category of the human or not. He argues that if we don't draw a clear dividing line between the human and the non-human, we leave it undecided whether certain entities are invested with the rights which all human beings have. This is, in a sense, correct. If someone refuses to apply the concept of the human equally to people from different cultural communities, then they are not going to apply the concept of human rights equally - if they indeed possess that concept at all. Nevertheless, Stagl's urging this point in relation to the kind of cases he mentions doesn't take adequate account of the fact that, even if belonging to the human species can be seen as a necessary condition of having full human rights, it is hardly a sufficient condition. A terminally comatose human being is undoubtedly a human being. He or she is however a human being with a very special further property, and one which is certainly morally relevant. Obviously, all the questions of so-called practical ethics loom here. Without entering into a discussion of the difficult issues involved, it seems to me clear that one cannot develop sensible argumentative strategies without differentiating within the sphere of the human. It would, I think, be an absurd category mistake to want to apply the full gamut of human rights to a foetus. Should we just say that foetuses generally don't make use of their right to freedom of speech? Being human is not an all-or-nothing moral category, which decides all the issues one way or another. On the other hand, if we take the plausible option of working within the more restricted category of the person, which is likely to be a sub-category within the class of human beings, one must certainly beware of concluding over-hastily that the descriptive property of not belonging to that class of beings has the immediate normative consequence of depriving the entity in question of all rights that persons have. A permanently comatose human being may no longer be a person. However, he or she was one before, and that certainly makes a difference.

Secondly, Stagl concludes his reflections on the boundaries of humanity with a historical narrative, which tells a tale of the parallel genesis of the descriptive and

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5 Something along just these lines is to be found in Clifford Geertz. Geertz argues that, because "man is ... an incomplete, an unfinished animal", he is desperately dependent on "cultural programs", "outside-the-skin control mechanisms", and that this is the reason why "to be human ... is to be a particular kind of man". See Geertz 1973, 44ff.
normative concepts of the human. His socio-historical claim is that reciprocity formed the basis of both descriptive and normative concepts. I think this tale of the constitution of the descriptive category has a high degree of plausibility. On the other hand, there is a logical and motivational gap between the recognition of forms of commonality which make such reciprocity possible and the acceptance of the equal value of the beings in question. Stagl himself asks: "if [human cultures are incommensurable], why should we not approve of unchecked enmity between human societies?" (p. 33). Intercultural understanding is indeed, at least ideally, a check on intercultural hostility. A commonality of descriptive characteristics is however not in itself a commonality of normative standards. What one would have to show here is that there are common descriptive characteristics of all human beings which make it rational for them to accept specific norms, independently of their particular cultural orientations and individual desires.

A Reply to Neil Roughley

Justin Stagl

Though well argued, Neil Roughley's comments do not seem to me to be altogether appropriate to what I have said. His main strategy is to produce an "alienation effect", thus making my text appear more idiosyncratic than it actually is. By inserting labels like "explaining", "explanatory" and "explanation", Roughley makes it look over-assertive. He reconstructs it in order to deconstruct it by applying to it a rigorous logic of science. He completely leaves out what I said about empathy, introspection and the relationship between anthropology and autobiography.

Some of his objections are constructive, especially those in his fourth section: Anthropology and Normativity. Others seem to me to be characterized more by ingenuity than by adequacy to their purported object. This is particularly the case in sections 2 (The Difficulty of Operationalization and the Status of Counter-Examples) and 1 (The Difficulty of Integrative Theory). These are, after all, both difficulties which were not raised by me, but which are part and parcel of the anthropological discussion. In my reply, however, I will focus on our main disagreement, which centres on my "model of human nature" and on the concept of "world-openness" (Roughley's introductory remarks and section 3: "World-Openness").

I probably have not made it sufficiently clear that the Hominidae do not form part of the Pongidae (pp. 25f.). Both are more distantly related; some people think that they are separate families of a single "superfamily", Hominoida. The paleoanthropological and biological facts about Homo sapiens are not as insignificant for human nature as Roughley holds them to be (p. 41). His approving quotation from Bernard Williams, "culture is a fact of human ethology" (p. 38), is, taken by itself, a mere sophism. By subscribing to it, one can be a "naturalist" (man is just an animal) and a "culturalist" (man is completely moulded by his cultural surroundings) at the same time. I do not think that I am being unfair to Roughley if I assume that this is his basic attitude in the question of human nature.

What does he gain by playing down the difference between man and the other animals in this way? He is able to dramatize the gulf between level 1 and the other three levels of my model. Yet after he has achieved this, biology recedes into the background; he is no longer interested in it. Concerning my levels 2 and 3, he says that they "merely" differ in the extension of their applicability (p. 37). He thinks it "strange" that particularism should be considered as a part of human nature itself (ibid.). Now this is precisely what historicists assume. With my insistence on
role of pre-given properties and dispositions would need to be integrated within such a project, whilst maintaining the conceptual differences. The not inconsiderable difficulties involved in such a theory of predicative centrality in turn cast doubt on the feasibility of an axiological conception of human nature. Beyond a theory of the characteristic human life-form, such a conception would also require the resolution of core problems within value theory. However, although no necessary and sufficient conditions for the validity of evaluations or norms can be derived from claims about the way humans are, facts about human capacities and their limits almost certainly provide defeating conditions for certain claims about the nature of normativity or the contents of specific norms. And perhaps more can be shown to be the case.

None of the contributions to the volume attempts to cover all the ground mapped out here. They represent very different approaches to the various senses of "human nature" and their interrelations. And they demonstrate clearly the relevance of the topic in the light of the developments in various disciplines in recent years. No-one can hope to have an adequate grasp of all these developments, but perhaps the transdisciplinary engagement with the various aspects of the topic brought together here can communicate some idea of what is at stake and what the consequences of resolving the issues one way rather than another would be.

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