

Human beings are responsive beings

Manifest for existential anthropology; research project at Aarhus University, DK

Contact: Thomas Schwarz Wentzer, assoc. prof., filts@hum.au.dk

Getting personal

The question ‘what is the human being?’ is a peculiar one. Among other things it entails a reflexivity that draws the asking person into the question, interchanging otherwise clearly distinguishable parts of subject matter, addressee and interrogator. As the asking person herself is an instance of the object in question, she cannot but apply any possible answer to herself. In fact, posing this question means to accept to question oneself, as one immediately becomes subjected to the demand to answer in one’s own name. Approaching this question appropriately will in other words always involve a *response* of the questioner to her own being. Hence, the question ‘what is the human being?’ refers back to the question ‘what kind of being am I?’ or maybe even ‘who am I?’. The most universal question concerning humanity proves to be in requirement of an answer with a very special kind of individual dedication. It leaves no room for an evasive move that would allow individual commitment and responsibility to be avoided, as I myself am what I take human beings to be. Thus being drawn into the question concerning the human condition is in itself part of the human condition. That is to say, philosophical anthropology must be conceived as *existential anthropology*.

Challenging paradigms: naturalism, structuralism, relativism

Hence, the question regarding human nature cannot be dealt with in objective, observational discourse alone, but must recognise the authority of the questioning person too. It is therefore pertinent to have a perspective that supplements and critically reflects both naturalistic and structuralist attempts to explain human behaviour by means of its physiological and biological seating or as instantiation of social structures.

Currently such attempts can be observed in predominant discourses heavily infused with neuroscience or evolutionary psychology. Existential anthropology objects to this naturalistic paradigm. Its approach tries to save the phenomenon, exploring what it means to be human, conceptualizing how humans respond to the very project to exist.

The phenomenological approach also challenges the hegemony of (post-)structuralism and familiar theories (Foucault, Bourdieu) in recent anthropology and social science. Its approach tends to transform lived experience to anonymous elements and relations, leaving the existential dimension of *what it is to be like* being a socially or culturally shaped individual aside.

Existential anthropology finally challenges relativist attitudes, notably in recent empirical anthropology, that altogether dismisses the very possibility to refer to *the* human condition. But performing the question ‘what is the human being?’ does not necessarily imply to sign up for unwarranted essentialism that turns a blind eye to the multiplicity of human lifeforms.

The methodological consequences of existential anthropology are radical. *All* anthropological thinking must acknowledge the fact that its subject matter somehow already provides answers to the issue in question. This means that an elaborated theory of human responsiveness ultimately will provide the framework to human sciences in general. This framework supports an approach that is already widely acknowledged in empirical forms of anthropology, namely that the development of a conception of the human is not restricted to scientific discourse, philosophical reflection or the fine arts. It is a feature of the human condition. Any culture and every human being have some sort of understanding of what it means to be human. The methodological danger in this approach is to downgrade anthropological thinking to a purely biographical story telling. But this need not be the consequence! *Existential anthropology as a theory on human responsiveness* provides a conception that needs to be formal but can nonetheless determine the domain of anthropology in a more explicit manner. This is possible because the notion of responsiveness preserves the open character of the human being – but does so by explicating it in a very distinctive way. This will enable existential anthropology to help reflect methodological strategies, providing a conceptuality that is sensitive to a person’s individual way of understanding herself as a human being. It acknowledges the burden, the challenge and the prospect of *leading* one’s life as opposed to merely *living* it. The ensuing process of developing patterns of self-understanding and world-orientation is a task every individual has to cope with. It is mediated in techniques of the body, institutions of cultural learning, mutual understanding and normative responsibilities.

Existential Anthropology – Inquiring Human Responsiveness

Existential anthropology brings the term *responsiveness* in play to conceptualise this complex affair. Its main hypothesis therefore is:

Human beings are responsive beings.

Existential anthropology elucidates this claim by pursuing the following hypothesis: In responding human beings *interpret*, *express* and *preserve* their being. Even though this trinity is always enacted together in human responsiveness, it can be distinguished for the purpose of analysis. This gives rise to three separate sub-theses.

As responsive beings, humans interpret their existence.

This claim explicitly suggests thinking of responsiveness in terms of existential hermeneutics. It advocates the idea that the human way of being is closely related or even dependent on human self-understanding. What we are crucially depends on what we hold ourselves to be. This idea marks a 'hermeneutic turn' in philosophical anthropology. It radicalises the hermeneutical move in order to determine a pivotal characteristic of the subject matter of existential anthropology. Humans respond to the burden and the project of their existence via interpretation, thus establishing and altering personal identities and collective life forms. In its strong, almost idealistic version this thesis claims the primacy of the impact of our self-conception over our being. This however does not imply that self-understandings are a matter of wishful thinking or private invention, as they are mediated by historically transmitted modes of orientation, socially sanctioned processes of mutual recognition and complex systems of cultural symbolisation. Responding to our own being by interpreting it is in sum a highly complex phenomenon that cannot be analysed sufficiently in terms of classic existentialist categories such as decision, anxiety or freedom alone. But no matter how mediated, self-understanding essentially takes place in the first person perspective and thus remains a deeply existential issue.

As responsive beings, humans express their existence.

There is no understanding without expression. It may be helpful to illustrate this intimate link a very basic level. The extraordinary helplessness of the human infant has often been noticed. A significant implication of this observation is that human beings, physiologically speaking, are given to themselves as a challenge they must respond to. The question 'what does it mean to be a human being?' poses itself as early as at the level of acquiring basic bodily skills. This predicament, however, paves the way for humans advancing their bodies into astonishing forms of ascetic endurance and athletic performance. It is obvious that this full-scaled physiological mode of self-interpretation is immediately linked to the expressivity of our bodily behavior and gestures. But of course, also our cognitive, volitional and emotional life has numerous expressive aspects. Expressivity thus encompasses a multitude of topics attracting anthropological minded philosophy: pretending, pointing, gesturing, flirting, playing and story-telling to name but a few. If expressivity, however, is not to diffuse into a random collection of interesting phenomena, it must be rooted in an anthropological structure that pervades human expressivity. The notion of responsiveness provides this structure. It allows revisiting what traditionally has been presumed to be the subsidiary role of expressivity, according to which we think, want or feel first and then express our thoughts, volitions or feelings afterwards. This is not the case. In expressing thoughts, volitions or feelings we become what we are.

As responsive beings, humans preserve their existence.

Human beings must respond to their being in order to be at all. This means that by responding – by interpreting and expressing – human beings are always performing an act of self-preservation. The term ‘self-preservation’ has of course strong naturalistic connotations. It seems to imply ideas like ‘survival of the fittest’ and egotistic behaviour. The concept of responsive self-preservation, as suggested here, is of a different kind. It may be illustrated with a human child learning to walk. Observing the little tumbling makes it clear that vertical existence is something achieved and something to be maintained. To put it a little drastically, *homo erectus* would immediately cease to be if it did not perform a *conservatio continua*. Self-preservation, then, is the ground of its being. Taking this idea as a clue to an anthropological concept of self-preservation implies that human beings do not have a being, which they henceforth seek to defend by all means necessary. Rather, human self-preservation means that the being in question must be acquired through self-preservation.

Existential anthropology has its primary methodological advantage in being able to address and navigate in this manifold of intertwining interpretive, expressive and preservative layers of the human fabric that are always already in the process of responding to and thus modifying the design of being.