

Chad Wellmon

Becoming Human: Romantic Anthropology and the Embodiment of Freedom.

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Human nature remains a puzzle to us. Are the differences we attribute to human nature evolutionary or merely incidental? Is human nature evolving or is it immutable? Chad Wellmon's *Becoming Human* deals with these questions with a particular reference to the genesis of Western anthropology in the Enlightenment and Romantic period. Wellmon provides an overview of the historical evolution of this intellectual tradition, rightly focusing on the immanent tension between the empirical and the transcendental. The relevant questions raised are: What is the human being, and what could (or should) the human being become? And should anthropology be concerned with the latter question?

Wellmon takes anthropology to refer to a specific mode of inquiry in modernity, one that has roots in Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy. Conversely, Wellmon discusses modernity precisely from an anthropological point of view (in his sense of the latter). He discusses the contention between the material and the normative especially in the context of characterizing life in its variety.

Wellmon cogently argues that to understand the term 'human being' is a complex task, in that the human being is at the same time both the subject and the object of analysis. His fundamental concern lies with how the human being can be viewed from multiple viewpoints. Viewed from a Kantian perspective – if the human being is determined by the transcendental characteristics of human existence – such multiplicities may be thought to be of minor concern. Taken from the other side, proto-anthropology, poetics, and history combine to produce a kind of practical knowledge of life. Proto-anthropology develops its study of the human being in opposition to Cartesian dualism, which had not shown any attention to practical everyday life. Wellmon also correctly explains that proto-anthropology exposes the 'doubling of the human being' as both the subject and the object. One interesting aspect of this approach is the (re)signification of the body, where both the physical and the metaphysical are treated simultaneously. This approach refers to the human being as the product of both reason and nature. Emphasizing such a re-signification, proto-anthropology gave significance to 'lived truths' and temporal realities. Recasting the mind-body problem, it proposed to study the human and the soul in reciprocal relationships, blurring the line between the mind and body, inside and outside.

Wellmon discusses proto-anthropology's focus on sensed history. Here, the mind-body distinction is treated as something altogether superfluous. Proto-anthropology takes into account what is excluded by philosophical modernity, *viz.* the temporality of the human being. Wellmon rightly raises the question of how the categorical stability of the term 'human' could be maintained in the face of historical differences (36). The Kantian and proto-anthropological stances on human progress through cultural membership each argue in their own way for the idea of human perfectibility. Wellmon refers to Herder's notion that "we are not actually human

beings, but we are becoming human daily” (39). However, Wellmon identifies a problem in Herder: Herder refers to a singular culture, which makes diversity a mere modality of a universal and unified human species. What are the implications of this? And how does Herder’s perspective then differ from the transcendental approach, which talks of unity as well?

Taking the teleological aspect into account, Wellmon asks, “What kind of normativity emerges from a science that oscillates between the empirical and the philosophical?” According to Wellmon this is not only a matter of understanding what the human being is, but also a question about the various ways in which human ends are realized. The question is whether such “human ends” are to be treated as the ends of humanity – as something that enjoys universal appeal and as a means of avoiding pathological subjectivity or solipsism (51). Kant proposes a universal account of human morality where purity is not a state that is given, but one that is achieved (104). Claiming that experience can never ground moral norms, Kant seems to assume that engaging in metaphysics is an act of cleansing a certain kind of impurity. Speaking in Kantian terms, this can be done through grounding the particular in the realm of metaphysics. Freedom is thus actualized through transcendental principles. (Kant is also a peculiar kind of virtue ethicist – the responsibility of every individual is to realize one’s self, while “the world is what humans have made of it” [172].)

For Kant, though morals are grounded in finite human individuals, their being is realized within the universal reach of human reason. This realization becomes possible through three things: one’s recognition of the moral law and the holiness of duty (89), the emancipation of the will from dispositional desires (89), and the steering of the wild and subjectively pathological soul onto the track of the morally good (94). There remains a question nevertheless as to whether the Kantian scheme really differs that radically from the anthropological understanding of the human being. Wellmon highlights certain Kantian assumptions regarding the placement of different human beings in nature, a placement Kant took to be driven by “destiny”. Race is treated as the only marker for nature’s purposive distribution of human beings throughout the earth (150). Georg Forster would later go on to criticize the ‘monogenetic’ account of race addressing human diversity. However, he was not making any direct reference to ‘polygenesis’ except in the sense of being sympathetic to the same (153). This also characterizes his criticisms of the Kantian drive for a cosmopolitan sense of universal history, where realizing oneself is possible only when the species as a whole realizes itself.

The method of anthropological inquiry oscillates between the empirical and the transcendental, with its varying perspectives on the human being that belongs to the world and the subject of reason that makes its own world. Kant’s pragmatic anthropology, thus, is the reconciliation of the individual and the species, where the human being becomes the purpose of nature. That a human being is a species of being resonates even in the writings of Herder. For Wellmon, the risk in such a characterization lies in sacrificing an individual’s happiness for the sake of the development of the species. Kant may be referring to the unity of the human species when he talks about a ‘second age of discovery’ that has sufficiently testified to the variety and diversity of human beings. For him, there remains a hierarchical order that ranks individual human lives according to the contribution they make to the species as a whole. The unified sense of humanity is significant as all human beings belong to one species, not distinct in kinds but different sub-species only. Forster’s alternative anthropology seems to push past Kant’s

pragmatic anthropology: here, there is no necessity of confining anthropological inquiry to the resolution of the tension between the empirical and the transcendental. On the other hand, it is necessary to identify racial differences both physiologically and anatomically (177). Forster further explores the philosophical history of travel, by which is meant observation-driven ethnology and local geography.

Wellmon discusses at length three significant responses to Kant's pragmatic anthropology: those of (1) Schleiermacher, (2) Novalis, and (3) Goethe and Humboldt. Firstly, Schleiermacher in his critique of Kant puts the question thus: if anthropology is to emphasize temporal and spatial particularities, how can it assume a unified, universal, and transtemporal category of the human? (195) This then becomes an ethical problem. Once we recognize the temporality of the self, it becomes easier to acknowledge that the diverse situations in which humans find themselves lead to substantial differences between them. These differences exceed every attempt at rational analysis. Schleiermacher asks: How can peoples separated by oceans and historical epochs relate to one another? How can anthropological inquiry assume a common humanity without relegating some people to past moments of European historical becoming? As a consequence, Schleiermacher develops a proto-anthropology of religion in which attention is paid to how religion bears the traces of cultures of every age and the history of every human type (208–9).

Secondly, Novalis asks, “what does the human being as a natural being make of the human?” Combining life and sensibility, Novalis's preference for the senses further locates the fundamental problem in Enlightenment's very assumption of totality. This would also mean that there is no need to proceed with the presupposition of the presence of an antecedent notion of unity and totality. Fusing the philosophical and the empirical, reflection and feeling, reason and sensibility, all aim at the figuration of an ethos of human being. This process will address three questions: (a) How do people make sense of their experiences? (b) How do they understand possibility? (c) How do they delimit possibility?

Thirdly, Wilhelm von Humboldt refers to the significance of a plurality of anthropologies, resulting in the notion of a comparative anthropology. Goethe's search for a dynamic account of nature can be seen as a supplement to this. In his case, it is observation that is the mediating factor for both the transcendental and the empirical. For Goethe, the important aspect is the comparative anatomy of human beings. This way we find a way between crude empiricism and speculative metaphysics. It may also further enable us to explain and understand the peculiar telos of human beings, seen as distinct from that of other species. Goethe may talk about the internal diversity of the self-organizing being, but this creates a problem in the assumption of unity in diversity rather than diversity per se. Just as nature is characterized by a plurality of organisms and arrangements of its powers, so too humans are characterized by different human beings and their particularity (252). Even so: while the natural scientific method, which makes use of empirical observation, is important in ascertaining human diversity, Humboldt argues that the particular should not be emphasized at the expense of the universal.

The strength of the book is its phenomenal way of dealing especially with Kantian pragmatic anthropology and its critiques. The book also makes a compelling case for the relevance and need for a philosophical approach to anthropology.

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