

Philosophy of the Human Person

Lecture #14

Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology

I. The Subject—Man

What is the subject of this course—man vs. person? And how do these concepts differ?

Man is the name of one of the things that we find in the world alongside animals, plants, minerals, machines, &c. By observation and introspection, we can define man as “a rational animal”

Person is a newer, and distinguishable, term.

It must be distinguished from the term *man* because it is possible to think of things other than men that are persons

In theology, God and the angels are persons

In science fiction, some space aliens might be recognized as persons; others not.

The term developed historically

It came from the Greek theatrical term *persona*—the mask worn by an actor.

The Latin term *persona* which translated it came to name the character himself (cf. Lat. *dramatis personae*)

Then it came to name a character on the “stage of life” (an individual)

It was theologically necessary to elaboration of two difficult Christian doctrines

the Trinity—the doctrine that there are three persons in one God

the Incarnation—the doctrine that Jesus is one person with two natures (divine & human)

The classical definitions were offered by

Boethius—“an individual substance of a rational nature”

Thomas Aquinas—“a substance that is

complete (hence, the human soul is not a person),

subsistent by itself (hence, Christ’s human nature is not a person),

separate from others (hence, the divine essence itself is not a person,

in contrast to the three Persons in God),

& of a rational nature”

Why single out “persons”? Persons have a special dignity (in contrast to things). This is a theme that will be developed in the ethics course

The course will address two kinds of question

“Natural” questions

the question of immortality

the nature of human action—free or caused?

Historico-conceptual questions

the concepts of “soul” & “mind”; their relation to above questions

Two basic approaches are possible

An existential approach, focussed on death & freedom.

This leads directly to ethics

An ontological approach, focussed on kinds of things there are in the world

How is man similar to & different from other kinds of things?

This can include the questions *Are we free? Are we immortal? Are we distinctive in this respect?*

It answers these questions in the context of a systematic account of the world and its contents

This approach will be the focus of the course

The ontological approach (in detail)

What kind of a being is man?

How are living things distinct from the non-living?

“Man, when deprived of his specifically human traits, can be reduced to a machine, as René Descartes pointed out in the 17th century”—Louis Mumford¹

“Can a machine think? “Of course. After all, we’re machines and we think, don’t we?”—Claude Shannon

“The cumulative results [of biochemical research since 1950] show with piercing clarity that life is based on *machines*—machines made of molecules.... Highly sophisticated molecular machines control every cellular process.”—Michael Behe²

How is man distinct from other kinds of living beings?

“Recent science shows that, even more than you might suppose, people are animals.”—*The Economist*³

A range of answers on the distinction between man, animal and machine has been offered

¹ *Encyclopedia Americana, International Edition* (1974), 18:57.

² *Darwin’s Black Box* (1996), pp. 4–5

³ Aug 30, 1997. (<http://www.economist.com/editorial/freeforall/current/ld4749row/.html>)

three kinds of thing	Aristotle Aquinas	Adler
two kinds— animal as machine	Descartes	
two kinds— man as an animal	Darwin	
one kind (machines)	Democritus	Crane

A second problem is the nature of the diversity of individuals within a common human nature

In what ways are all men the same

In what ways do individuals differ? What is the role of nature (genetics, plus ...) & of nurture (culture) in this diversity?