Philosophical Anthropology
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discipline within philosophy that seeks to unify the several empirical investigations of human nature in an effort to understand individuals as both creatures of their environment and creators of their own values.

Anthropology and philosophical anthropology: Origins and terminology

In the 18th century, “anthropology” was the branch of philosophy that gave an account of human nature. At that time, almost everything in the domain of systematic knowledge was understood to be a branch of philosophy. Physics, for example, was still known as “natural philosophy,” and the study of economics had developed as a part of “moral philosophy.” At the same time, anthropology was not where the main work of philosophy was done. As a branch of philosophy it served, instead, as a kind of review of the implications for human nature of philosophically more central doctrines, and it may have incorporated a good deal of empirical material that would now be thought of as belonging to psychology. Because the field of study was a part of philosophy, it did not have to be explicitly so described.

By the end of the 19th century, anthropology and many other disciplines had established their independence from philosophy. Anthropology emerged as a branch of the social sciences that studied the biological and evolutionary history of human beings (physical anthropology), as well as the culture and society that distinguished Homo sapiens from other animal species (cultural anthropology). In their study of social and cultural institutions and practices, anthropologists typically focused on the less highly developed societies, further distinguishing anthropology from sociology.

As a result of these developments, the term philosophical anthropology is not in familiar use among anthropologists and would probably not meet with any ready comprehension from philosophers either, at least in the English-speaking world. When anthropology is conceived in contemporary terms, philosophical thought might come within its purview only as an element in the culture of some society that is under study, but it would be very unlikely to have any part to play in an anthropologist’s work or in the way human nature is conceived for the purposes of that work. To put the matter somewhat differently, anthropology is now regarded as an empirical scientific discipline, and, as such, it discounts the relevance of philosophical theories of human nature. The inference here is that philosophical (as opposed to empirical) anthropology would almost certainly be bad anthropology.

These views reflect a positivistic conception of scientific knowledge and the negative
judgment of philosophy that typically goes with it. According to this view, philosophy, like religion, belongs to a period in the history of thought that has passed; it has been replaced by science and no longer has any real contribution to make to inquiries that conform to the rigorous epistemic or cognitive norms set by the natural sciences. It follows that the application of the adjective philosophical—not just to anthropology, but to any discipline at all—has fallen out of favour. The only exception would be when the philosophical aspect of the discipline in question is confined to epistemological and logical matters and remains quite distinct from the substantive inquiries in which that discipline engages.

Any mention of the “philosophy of physics,” the “philosophy of history,” or even the “philosophy of anthropology” almost always pertains to philosophy in this narrower sense. Many philosophers have signaled an acceptance of this limitation on their work by concentrating their attention on language as the medium through which logical issues can be expressed. When other philosophers claim that they still have something substantive and distinctive to say about human nature, their work is customarily categorized as “philosophical anthropology,” thus avoiding the confusion that the old usage might cause. This term is also applied to the older accounts of human nature by philosophers whose work predated such distinctions. For the purposes of this discussion, however, the primary reference of the term philosophical anthropology will be to the period in which these ambiguities developed.

The concept of the “soul-mind”

Despite the terminological changes that developed over time, philosophers who have considered questions of human nature have demonstrated substantial continuity in the types of issues they have studied. In both old and new approaches, the principal focus of philosophical interest has been a feature of human nature that has long been central to self-understanding. In simple terms, it is the recognition that human beings have minds—or, in more traditional parlance, souls. Long before recorded history, the soul was understood to be that part of human nature that made life, motion, and sentience possible. Since at least the 19th century the actuality of the soul has been hotly contested in Western philosophy, usually in the name of science, especially as the vital functions once attributed to it were gradually explained by normal physical and physiological processes.

But even though its defenders no longer apply the term widely, the concept of the soul has endured. Within philosophy it has been progressively refined to the point of being transformed into the concept of mind as that part of human nature wherein intellectual and moral powers reside. At the same time, many of the ideas traditionally associated with the soul—immortality, for example—have been largely abandoned by philosophy or assigned to religion. Among a wider public, however, the word soul is arguably more familiar and comprehensible than mind, especially as an expression of what humans conceive of as their “inner reality.” For the purposes of this discussion,
therefore, the two terms will be used in their appropriate contexts and, occasionally, in a compound form, the “soul-mind.”

The challenge of materialism

Despite the aforementioned continuity between ancient and modern philosophical accounts of the soul-mind, there is in fact a major difference between the two. During the 19th century the long-standing concept of the mind as an entity distinct from the body was challenged, causing it (as well as the concept of the soul) to become problematic in a new and quite radical way. Appealing to the authority of the natural sciences, the challenge issued in an explicitly materialist theory of human nature and of all the functions that had traditionally been thought of as “mental.” These developments in turn helped to determine the current situation confronting philosophical anthropology, in which it must decide whether or not to join a widening scientific and philosophical consensus on these matters.

In a sense, materialism itself can be treated as a new thesis within philosophical anthropology, and due note will be taken of it as such. Even so, it should also be noted that the philosophers who side with the new materialism do not refer to themselves as “philosophical anthropologists” but usually simply as “philosophers of mind.” It does appear, moreover, that those who do describe themselves as philosophical anthropologists remain committed to working out a conception of human personality that centres on the notion of a soul-mind, as well as on the various notions of intellectual, moral, and spiritual life that traditionally have been associated with it. As such a project, philosophical anthropology now has the status of what, in another context, the English political theorist W.B. Gallie called an “essentially contested concept.”

The fundamental issue between philosophical anthropologists who are sympathetic to materialism and those who are not is whether the discipline must espouse a materialist ontology if it is not to be dismissed as “unscientific.” That issue in turn raises the further question of whether a consistently materialist theory of human nature is really possible.

In dealing with these questions, it is important to acknowledge the deep affiliation of the traditional philosophical conception of human nature with the intuitive understanding that human beings have of themselves and of their fellow human beings. In that understanding, an attitude that is known to philosophers as direct, or “naive,” realism is well established. Philosophers regard it as naive because it claims that humans perceive things in the world directly and without the mediation of any impression, idea, or representation. Because no provision is made for any such direct apprehension in the scientific worldview, the concept has been summarily dismissed. More generally, intuitive
distinctions of this kind do not fare well within scientific thinking, which recognizes facts only when all their components can be reduced to a common level of physical process. Although, historically, philosophy has shared this distrust of commonsense distinctions and has not hesitated to override them with constructions of its own, contemporary philosophical anthropology typically treats such intuitions with more respect. It does not simply dismiss them as crude errors, and it does not treat the fact that they may be irreconcilable with assumptions made by the natural sciences as the last word on the subject. Wherever possible, it tries, instead, to incorporate them into a defensible conception of human nature that leaves the work of the sciences standing, though not necessarily within the kind of ontological framework that scientists may think is required.

There is a wide variety of views as to how this can best be done, but these do not seem to engage the attention of many contemporary philosophers. As Socrates discovered, many philosophers have regarded the natural world and its processes as being at least as interesting, if not more so, than the human mind and its vagaries. That attitude has maintained itself down to the present day and may even have become more extreme. The name of Socrates does, however, suggest a positive affinity for philosophical anthropology with humanism as a mode of thought that is animated by a strong sense of both the moral and the human importance of achieving an understanding of human nature. It can also be argued that interest in the character of one’s own being has been a major motive of philosophical inquiry as a whole. Humans do not, after all, ask large philosophical questions primarily in their capacity as workers in a specialized field of inquiry; rather, they ask them as human beings who feel the need to understand their own lives in as wide a context as possible. It may be that a candid identification of philosophical anthropology with that degree of humane interest would express its character better than an official designation of it as a subfield within the bureaucratized world of academic philosophy. It would then be, in effect, the philosophical rationale for the understanding of human nature that humanism has represented, typically without offering much in the way of supporting argument.

**Early conceptions of the soul**

The earliest origins of the concept of the soul are hidden in a remote prehistoric past. Human beings undoubtedly lived then, as most still do, in a state of deep absorption in the world around them. This has always made it very difficult to turn attention to whatever it may be about human beings themselves that makes it possible for them to “have a world” at all. What seems to have struck these early human beings most forcefully was the difference between what is alive and what is dead. This was the distinction that the idea of soul was originally designed to express. The soul was a life-principle, and, as such, it was regarded as something that leaves the body at death. As indicated by a variety of Indo-European words for soul, such as the Sanskrit atman and the Greek
psychē, it was often identified with breath; it was not so much immaterial as it was a finer, attenuated form of matter.

As thinking about these issues progressed, a variety of functions were assigned to the soul, which gradually came to be conceived as a kind of container in which the functions resided. The soul was what human thoughts and feelings were “in,” and it was itself each person’s inner reality. This connotation of inwardness survives to this day. The soul was considered a distinct individual entity—not unlike an organ of the body, but also very different, because its location in the body could not be determined. Furthermore, the concept of soul seemed familiar because it was spoken of in the way people speak about ordinary “things.” It also appears to have been modeled on familiar objects in the sense that, in perception, every property of an object outside the mind corresponded to a counterpart property within the mind; this was joined by the assumption that the latter somehow reproduced the former. In this way, each soul-mind came to be understood as one more entity in the world, yet one with the unique quality of containing simulacra of the other entities.

One of the facts that the soul-mind was supposed to account for was the knowledge that humans had of the world around them. However oblivious early humans may have been to the notion of themselves as “subjects,” they did not overlook the role that sense organs play in perception. It was sometimes thought—and children still often imagine—that rays of some kind emanate from the eyes and meet other rays emanating from the perceived object halfway, where perception supposedly occurs. Eventually, however, perception came to be understood as a process outside the body that reaches a sense organ and then produces some kind of facsimile of the object in the person whose sense organ has been affected. Knowledge is thus the production of a copy (or something like it) in the mind of the object that is outside it. Just how and where this occurred was unknown, but various parts of the body were usually held to be the locus of both perception and the other functions that were later referred to as “mental.”

The cognitive function thus assigned to the soul could be addressed to many different kinds of objects, and the emphasis given to one or the other of these has varied substantially from one period in the history of thought to another. The natural world was the immediate object of both perception and thought, but it was not long before God came to be considered an even more important object of knowledge. Indeed, knowledge of God eventually came to be regarded by some philosophers as a necessary condition for any other knowledge the soul might have, including that of the natural world. Still another object of knowledge for the soul was the soul itself; its ability to take itself, reflexively, as the object of its own awareness has been cited as one of its most remarkable characteristics.

Of these three types of knowledge—of the external world, of God, and of the soul itself—it is the first that has received most attention from philosophers. Although that
priority of interest will be observed in this discussion, the other kinds of knowledge will be touched on in appropriate contexts. (Oddly, one kind of knowledge, of the souls or minds of other human beings, did not become a major topic of philosophical discussion until late in the modern period, and since then it has been much controverted; see other minds, problem of.) But if the soul-mind had all of these different cognitive capabilities, it could not be a purely receptive or passive entity. It had its own spontaneity even in the area of cognition, where it could draw inferences about things or events not immediately present in space or time. Even more important, the soul-mind had the power to make decisions and undertake actions, and accordingly it held responsibility for the moral quality of those decisions and actions. The relation between judgments of the moral quality of action and other so-called “factual” knowledge was also much debated.

The soul in ancient Greece

A great many thinkers have contributed in one way or another to the philosophical understanding of human nature. In the history of Western thought, however, there has been a discernible series of turning points that are of special importance for appreciating the situation of philosophical anthropology at the present time. The first of these occurred in ancient Greece and coincided with the beginning of the Western philosophical tradition. The idea of the soul received its first major philosophical statement in Plato’s tripartite theory of the soul as consisting of reason, spirit, and appetite (see below Plato). A second turning point came in the modern period, between the 17th and 19th centuries, when René Descartes and succeeding philosophers pursued what was later called “the way of ideas” as a means of working out the skeptical possibilities inherent in the models of mind they had inherited from antiquity. They were followed by others who tried to reconstruct the concept of mind on a very different basis. A third such juncture, which occurred in the 19th century but extends into the present, amounted to a full-blown crisis in humankind’s understanding of itself. The significance of this juncture is so central to the viability of philosophical anthropology that further attention must be devoted to it.

In Greek thought, the soul was not conceived in terms of a dualistic contrast with the body, and there was certainly no analogue to the stark Cartesian conception of the mind as “the thing that thinks” amid a natural world of objects defined entirely by their spatial properties. In the thought of Plato and Aristotle, however, there was a clear philosophical conception of the soul as an entity that is somehow distinct from the body and is also the seat of functions like thought, perception, and desire. Because the soul comprised these different functions and because the principal interest of these philosophers was addressed to reason as the one function that made possible an apprehension of the true nature of things, these functions came to be regarded as different “parts” of the soul. Among these, the rational soul—in effect, the mind—was held to be peculiar to human beings, and thus the mind’s efforts to realize its own nature and to resist the distractions of sensation and desire were a primary theme of
inquiry. Even so, it has been said with some justice that in the ancient world the soul-mind remained an integral part of the world system; it was not conceived as an independent subject that stood over against the world in the way that “consciousness” has been held to do in the modern period.

**Plato**

Plato was the first great philosophical exponent of the soul in the West. He depicted its rational component as a ruler overseeing the jumble of constantly changing and often conflicting states that reach human awareness through perception and become objects of human attachment through desire. He largely dismissed truth claims that were made for perception and instead sought authentic knowledge in a very different quarter that would be free from the instability and impermanence of the spatiotemporal world revealed by perception. Plato’s conception of such knowledge was strongly influenced by the rigour of mathematical reasoning and the unchanging character of the objects to which it was addressed. Such knowledge appeared to be wholly independent of perception, having achieved a degree of necessity and universality that was unattainable by merely empirical methods. Accordingly, the proper business of the rational soul was thought, and the proper objects of thought were not concrete particulars but abstract essences, which he called Ideas, or Forms. Such Ideas make each particular thing the kind of thing it is, and it is the apprehension of these abstract Ideas, in their pure universality, that enables the soul to bring order into the chaotic jumble of things and processes in the world.

Plato claimed that the kind of knowledge that takes Ideas as its object could be generalized to ethical matters, and indeed this was a defining feature of his thought. It introduced a conception of human life as the effort to control the chaos of sensation and desire through an understanding of the ideal order that is appropriate to each kind of being. To this end, human nature must be shaped by a rigorous course of training so that each person’s distinctive capabilities may be formed for service within a harmonious whole and in accordance with the requirements of reason. Only the intelligence that comes from the deepest understanding of reality should preside over human affairs, while all the other criteria of legitimacy applied by human societies must yield to it.

It is hardly surprising in these circumstances that the conception of human nature that emerged from Plato’s work should have had such a pervasively intellectualistic cast. Indeed, it is reasonable to say that this primary emphasis on the intellect represented the point of origin for the whole Western conception of the character of an ideally complete human being and of the intellectual and moral order within which such a person is to function.

At the same time, however, the life of the intellect was conceived as being driven by a
passionate aspiration for what was eternal and universal. This unique fusion of the intellectual and the conative life—the life of desire and action—receives its most dramatic expression in Plato’s doctrine of love, or eros. At its deepest level, each life is driven by a passionate desire for what is at once beautiful and less time-bound than itself. For most people, eros takes the form of sexual love and the extension of a finite life through progeny. There is, moreover, an ascending order of objects of eros, encompassing not just beautiful bodies but beautiful souls, as well as laws, institutions, and practices that are, in their own way, beautiful. Given all that it incorporates, this ascending hierarchy becomes increasingly abstract and decreasingly time-bound. At its summit is the idea of the Good itself. The achievement of a vision of the Good is the ultimate goal and fulfillment of a human life, but it is strongly suggested that it lies beyond the power of words to express the content of that vision.

Aristotle

In Raphael’s painting of the School of Athens, it has been said, Plato appears to be pointing upward to an Idea while Aristotle points downward to a fact. It is certainly true that, whereas the primary business of the soul in Plato’s account was with abstract Ideas, his pupil conceived of the soul’s function very differently. Aristotle was a student of the natural world, and, unlike Plato, he assigned a much more important role to perception as the route through which humans gain access to that world. This divergence reflected the two philosophers’ very different conceptions of the soul and of the status of Ideas, or Forms. Aristotle denied that they can be separate from particulars, as Plato had claimed.

For Aristotle, form was one of the constituent “causes” of a particular entity. (The word Form, when used to refer to Forms or Ideas as Plato conceived them, is often capitalized in the scholarly literature; when used to refer to forms as Aristotle conceived them, it is conventionally lowercased.) Even amid all the accidents and changes in the world of space and time that Plato had emphasized, such forms provided an element of stability, because they made something the kind of thing it is and they guided its development toward an appropriate fulfillment. There are also clear indications in Aristotle’s writings that the concept of soul itself should be understood in terms of just this kind of higher-order, purposive functioning of the human organism as a whole rather than as a distinct immaterial entity. The orientation of a human being toward certain ends that are implicit in its essential form also supplies the basis for the distinctive kinds of excellence or virtue (aretē) that are fundamental to Aristotle’s ethics. Among these, the intellectual virtues occupy the highest
place, but the role of practical understanding in the conduct of life is also recognized. What most deeply differentiates Aristotle’s conception of human life from that of Plato is the absence of the existential urgency that is so evident in Plato’s account of the ascent of the soul toward the really real (to ontos on) and toward the Form of the Good.

Despite such suggestions that Aristotle conceived of the soul in terms of function rather than of substance, when it comes to cognition he spoke of it in ways that suggest a very different view. Unlike Plato, Aristotle understood perception as a form of knowledge of the surrounding world, and he spoke of it as the presence in the soul of the forms (later the “sensible species”) of the objects that are said to be perceived. Such forms are there without their matter—this was another of the “causes” of particular entities—and so perception had to be understood as a rather mysterious transfer of the object’s form to the perceiver’s soul. But if the soul itself is the form of the body, this would mean that there would be a form in another form, which is puzzling.

Aristotle tried to ensure the realistic character of this perceptual commerce with the world through the assumption that the form in the soul is necessarily identical with the form of the corresponding object in the world, but the warrant for this assumption proved very elusive in the further development of the philosophy of mind. What it did accomplish, however, was to obviate the need for any deeper examination of the relation between the form in the soul and the character of the object it was, in effect, supposed to represent. To speak of “representation,” however, is to move beyond the thought of the ancient world to the modern period, in which the concept of idea would undergo vigorous further development.

The way of ideas: Medieval prelude

Plato’s conception of Ideas or essences as the true objects of knowledge had fateful implications for the way the soul was understood in both the ancient and the medieval worlds. This can be illustrated by the semantic vicissitudes of the word Idea, which he introduced into philosophical parlance. Etymologically, the word derives from the Greek verb eidô (“to look”), and, in its original pre-philosophical use, it meant something like the visual look of a thing. In Plato’s usage, however, it was as if this visual form had been detached from the object in question (and from the particularity that accrued to it there) and elevated to the rank of a universal archetype. As such, it became an object of thought (rather than of perception) and of knowledge in its most authentic and rigorous form. Even though Ideas in Plato’s account were not housed in any soul or mind, in Christian theology such archetypes were thought to reside in the mind of God, who created the world using them as his models. But if the infinite mind of God was the locus of Ideas and if God created human beings in his “image and likeness,” it followed that the knowledge achieved by finite human minds must
also be knowledge through Ideas. By this route, Ideas were brought back down to earth again, albeit at one remove from the perceptual objects themselves out of which the concept of an Idea had originally been derived. In this way, the (now) familiar sense of the term has emerged in which it designates what is in one’s mind when one comes to know something, whether through perception or memory or thought. An “idea” is thus representative in the sense that it is a mental content that stands for something that is outside the mind and is known through this idea.

The thesis that intelligible forms are internal to the mind of God gave a very different character to the whole conception of the soul-mind and the goal of its knowledge. Mainly under the influence of the Christian philosopher St. Augustine (354–430), the vocation of the soul was redefined as an aspiration for a vision of and union with God. By comparison, knowledge of both the intelligible realm of Plato and the natural world to which so much of Aristotle’s thought was devoted were of secondary interest. This distinctly Augustinian tradition maintained itself through the Middle Ages and found expression in writings such as St. Bonaventure’s Journey of the Mind to God (1259), yet it was not the dominant strain of thought during that period.

That position developed from the Aristotelian conception of the mind as the form of a living body, as set forth in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. The soul-mind was also conceived as receiving the forms of the objects it comes to know in the same unhesitatingly realistic spirit as in Aristotle’s thought without any evident awareness of the skeptical possibilities inherent in the contrast on which this conception rested. Even in the early modern period, when a reaction set in against Aristotle’s doctrine of essential form, it was still axiomatic that the objects with which the mind deals in all its forms of knowledge are “ideas”—i.e., mental representations of things that are typically outside the mind.

**Descartes**

What did change at that time was the confidence that had resided in the representational fidelity of such ideas. Descartes’s whole philosophy was based on a recognition that ideas in the mind could not guarantee that their counterparts in the world outside the mind were like them. The outcome of his search for something indubitable that could give such a guarantee was the famous thesis cogito, ergo sum (“I think, therefore I am”).

Whatever perplexities it may have generated, Descartes’s dictum represented a great achievement, because it radically disengaged the human subject and its intellectual functions from the world and assigned to that subject the task of accepting or rejecting whatever beliefs about the world might be proposed to it. It is nonetheless true that Descartes went on to construe this subject as “the thing that thinks” and thus fell back into the very kind of thinking from which he had made such a radical break. “Thing,”
after all, meant “substance,” and this definition invited perplexing questions about the relation between the soul as a mental substance and the body as a material substance. These are questions about the relations between two entities in the world and not about the act of thought itself. The recognition of the latter in its own authentic character was the true inspiration of Descartes’s thought and the true beginning of modern philosophy. It was also a major turning point for philosophical anthropology, since its theme was now subjectivity itself and not merely the place of the soul-mind within the world system.

Under the influence of the physics and the physiology of their day, Descartes and, later, the English philosopher John Locke did not hesitate to specify the differences between the properties that were peculiar to ideas in the mind and those that could be attributed to corresponding objects in the world. Both were prepared to argue that neither colour nor sound had any extra-mental reality other than that of the physical processes that produce these ideas in human minds. In this way the modern distinction between the “subjective” (mind- or subject-dependent) and the “objective” (mind- or subject-independent) was introduced—a development that continues to play a crucial role in contemporary thought. What was not understood at this stage was the extent of the philosophical challenges that the way of ideas would pose for this confident distinction between the characters things have in the mind and those they have outside it.

Berkeley and Hume
This difficulty was demonstrated in the work of the empiricist philosophers George Berkeley and David Hume. Their initial premise was that it is not possible for the human mind, which knows the world only through its ideas, to compare an idea with anything except another idea—that is, with another one of the mind’s mental states. This is, of course, a straightforward requirement of empiricism, the philosophy of experience that bases all knowledge on the deliverances of the senses and thus on the ideas that are thereby produced in the mind. On the other hand, the conception of the “external” world, which Descartes and Locke had advanced as the philosophical basis for the new physics, presupposed the possibility of comparing, and thus distinguishing between, an idea within the mind and the external object the idea is supposed to represent. The irony here is that, for most of those who subscribed to it, the way of ideas had served mainly as a way of pulling high-flying abstractions down to earth by putting them to the test of sense experience. It was easy to forget that what the human senses deliver is a modification of a mental state, which is itself a mental state—an idea, rather than (as might be instinctively assumed) something that is unambiguously “out there” in the world.

Once it is acknowledged that the way of ideas applies to every bit of knowledge humans claim to have, the principle can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Some interpretations, in the manner of Hume, are highly skeptical—humans have no access
to a world of stable, perduring objects—while others, following Berkeley, are ambitiously metaphysical—the world itself is made of ideas. In either case, the conception of a reality that lurks behind sensible experiences has to be given up.

What is perhaps even more significant is the impact that this line of inquiry can have on the premises of the way of ideas itself. In his A Treatise of Human Nature (1739–40), Hume argued that he was unable to find any sensible idea—his word was impression—of a “self” or “mind” in which ideas were supposed to be received. He concluded that not only things in the world but also minds were only loose collections of impressions and their fainter copies, for which he reserved the term ideas. Although he understood very well that he was really undermining the entire notion of mind, his line of thought had other consequences of which he does not appear to have been fully aware. One of these is that, if each human being is indeed locked within a circle of impressions and ideas, the reasoning by which these come to be referred to in this way—that is, as mental contents—must itself be suspect. Because humans can think only in terms of the ideas that are supposed to be the products of actions involving things outside the mind, no human being can be in a position to claim any knowledge of the process by which ideas are produced in the mind—that would require familiarity with something that is not an idea. All that remains is a collection of qualities. Although the qualities themselves are neither mental nor material, they can be combined to form objects that may be either the one or the other. It may be said, then, that in Hume’s thought (and in much of the work of empiricist philosophers who followed him), the concept of the self or mind has been dispersed into just these atomic units, which supposedly combine and recombine to form a self and a world.

It is nevertheless difficult to see how many characteristic functions of human life can be understood in these terms. How, for example, would it be possible to explain action unless one is prepared to assume that units of this kind can have intentions? And what can be said about each person’s relation to other human beings if their minds, too, have to be analyzed as collections of such units? Is one such collection supposed to be able to divine the presence of another? It is not surprising that Hume himself acknowledged that it was impossible to live by these conclusions and that, upon quitting his philosophical speculations, his ordinary beliefs in selves and in an external world resumed their usual power.

The idealism of Kant and Hegel

It might almost seem as though Hume’s destructive analysis of the concept of mind had effectively abolished the way of ideas and with it the whole conception of human personality based on a philosophy of mind. That was not the case, however, and in the years that followed Hume’s death in 1776 a new and powerful conception of the human mind developed under the auspices of philosophical idealism. Idealism is commonly known as the view that everything is somehow “mental” or “spiritual,” but this description gives little hint of its real and considerable strengths. It is true that in
the thought of Immanuel Kant there were still vestiges of the old dualistic contrasts, most notably in his commitment to “things-in-themselves” behind sensible appearances, even though they proved to be quite unknowable. Nevertheless, the distinguishing feature of this new departure in the philosophy of mind was the effective abandonment, by Kant and those who continued his work, of what may be called the “copy” theory of knowledge—the idea that knowledge consists of the reception in the mind of a representation of some object in the world. In contrast to this view of the mind as essentially passive, Kant’s theory treated the mind as actively setting the conditions that make knowledge possible and as, in effect, ordering the domain of objects constituting the world. At the same time, the standing conception of the soul-mind as a mental substance that receives its contents from without gradually yielded to one in which mind is understood as a function of what Kant called “synthesis”: the establishing of the conditions of a common intelligibility and, most notably, of the categories of “thing” and “cause.”

This ordering function has often been confused with the claim that the mind somehow produces or creates its world—a claim that has been subsequently attributed to idealism as a proof of its extravagant absurdity. What idealism does stand for is the attenuation of a number of dichotomies that had become well established in philosophy as well as in everyday ways of thinking. Of these, the most significant is the distinction between “mind” and “world” as formulated in terms of a contrast between mental and material substances. What idealism actually brought about was a momentous reversal of the priority assigned to the “inner” world of the mind over the “outer” world of nature. Where Descartes had claimed that an absolute certainty characterizes one’s apprehension of oneself as a thinking being, Kant insisted that the very notion of this inner mental life presupposes an apprehension of the outer reality of a world of stable, reidentifiable things.

This thesis held extensive implications for the whole culture of the inner life that had played such an important role in the Christian tradition and had been greatly reinforced by the inward focus of Cartesian thought. Equally significant was the overcoming of established conceptions of the relation between different selves (different human beings) as one of an independence in principle that was qualified only by the contingent need for cooperation but without altering the separateness of the goals and purposes of the one from those of the other. In this area of thought as well, Kant abandoned the copy theory of knowledge and replaced it with a conception of moral autonomy—the capacity of rational human beings to be their own moral legislators—that became the model for a new understanding of moral personality and the standard for a deeply moralized humanism.

The issue of the relation of one self to another was of fundamental importance to idealism and represented a major theme in the thought of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. In a philosophical setting like that of idealism, in which the fact of society is accepted and is not simply an occasion for skeptical exercises, it becomes much harder
to maintain Hume’s thesis of the irreducibility of “ought” to “is”—the claim that judgments of morality cannot be logically inferred solely from statements of matters of fact. The reason is, quite simply, that in a milieu that comprises a multiplicity of selves and thus of minds, the idea of justifying what one does, not just to oneself but to others who may be affected by one’s actions, assumes an importance that it cannot have when such matters are considered by persons in the privacy of their own conscience. Perhaps the most significant achievement of idealism from the standpoint of philosophical anthropology was its replacement of the concept of an individual mind with that of Geist. Although this word is usually translated in English as “spirit,” it was never intended to convey something mystical but rather the essentially social and intersubjective character of knowledge and thought. Yet because idealism developed principally in Germany, the authoritarian traditions of that society have often been read into the doctrine of Geist, even when other interpretations were possible that would have been more compatible with the ideal of a liberal society. Hegel’s writings in particular have suffered under this kind of hermeneutic treatment, with the result that the extraordinary breadth and depth of his vision of the human world have been largely missed. Perhaps the greatest achievement of idealism was Hegel’s conception of the human world as what he called “objective spirit,” a world of shared practices and institutions that must not be identified either with the way the natural world is ordered or with the inwardness and privacy of an individual subject.

Nevertheless, it has been charged that idealism carries the embedding of human lives in their social and historical contexts too far and leaves scant room for individual choice and self-determination. There has recently been a strong polemic in the English-speaking world against the “positive” freedom that supposedly accrues to individual human beings through their identification with institutions and traditions of thought and practice. This kind of freedom is unfavourably contrasted with the “negative” freedom that is, in essence, the ability and the right to say “no,” and to disaffiliate from the institutional contexts into which one may have been born. It should, of course, be kept in mind that the liberal tradition from which these objections derive is itself a historical context in which individuals are formed.

Hegel has also been accused of portraying non-Western cultures in grossly oversimplified terms. The idealistic conception of human history as, at its deepest level, Geistesgeschichte (the movement of “spirit,” or, in contemporary terms, the concept of cultural history) nonetheless inspired a great deal of historical work that made the history of non-Western societies available in a way it had never been before. The ultimately fatal weakness of the Hegelian conception of world history as the history of mind was its presupposition of a teleological pattern in this succession of cultures, by which full human self-knowledge and, ultimately, the unity of the self and its world would be realized. Although that idea has provoked intense criticism and has been decisively discredited, it has nonetheless influenced a great deal of historical work. It is now commonplace among educated people to be at least somewhat familiar with the sensibilities and the outlook on life of people who are remote in time and
space from their own lives. The human world has become, as the French author André Malraux observed, a kind of “museum without walls,” in which humans are able to make the most varied comparisons and contrasts between with their own lives and senses of selfhood.

All this would have been unimaginable in other historical periods. It is the fruit of what the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) disapprovingly referred to as “historical humanism.” That kind of humanism, very different from the rhetorical and civic humanism of the Renaissance, itself developed out of idealistic traditions of thought and has until recently dominated the conception of liberal education in Western societies.

To mention the name of Nietzsche is to touch on a strain of 19th-century European thought that resisted the absorption of individual human existence into the wider syntheses of idealism. The other great name in this constellation of thinkers is that of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55), to whom the orthodox Christianity of his day seemed as lifeless as it did to Nietzsche but who reacted against it in a quite different manner. For Kierkegaard, an intensified consciousness of the incommensurateness of finite human life with the being of an infinite God—the very consciousness that had led so many into skepticism and religious despair—was the key to a revitalization of authentic religious faith understood as a “leap” into another dimension of reality. For Nietzsche, by contrast, the great task for human beings was to fill the gap left by what he called “the death of God,” and he held that the emergence of human beings who would be capable of creating for themselves whatever norms were to govern their lives would require as great an evolutionary leap as had the movement from apes to modern humans. In their different ways, both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard were to contribute to that ultimate form of philosophical individualism that went by the name of existentialism.

**Modern science and the demotion of mind**

A much more powerful ground of opposition to the ethos of idealism, as well as to many of its principal themes, was the fact that it was simply too much at odds with the rising tide of scientific progress in the late 19th century. If its most authentic inspiration was to show that the relation of “mind” and “nature” is one of a dialectical tension in which neither can wholly subsume the other, in actual practice it all too often sounded as though it were celebrating an absorption of the natural world by “thought.” Idealism was, therefore, at a decisive disadvantage in its relation to naturalism, a philosophical position closely attuned to the culture of science. Furthermore, naturalism dominated the thought of the 20th century and showed little interest in the traditional themes of philosophical anthropology and even less in the mind-centred conception of human nature with which philosophical anthropology was identified.
The most powerful and influential opposition to these ideas came from scientific developments that appeared to show conclusively that the exceptional status accorded to human nature had been invalidated. Three such movements of thought had an especially significant effect on the way human nature was coming to be conceived: the Darwinian theory of evolution, Freudian psychoanalysis, and the development of artificial intelligence (AI). These movements could hardly have been more different from each other, and while many would refuse to accord any real scientific status to Freud’s theories, it is hard to deny that, at the very least, psychoanalysis identified a stratum of human thought and experience that had never been incorporated into prevailing accounts of human nature. What is important here is the fact that, however different these three movements may have been, they shared a strong inclination toward demoting the conscious mind from its privileged position within human self-understanding and assigning a determining role to some very different part of human nature.

**Evolution**

In the first instance, the theory of evolution claimed that the various species of living things have a natural rather than a divine origin. These species evolve through random changes that occur in their members, though these changes themselves are not per se inheritable, as the French biologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck had supposed. In one way or another, such changes can influence an animal’s chances of survival and of reproducing itself. In this way, a process of natural selection takes place from which the human species itself emerged.

As a theory of human nature, evolution had a humbling effect on the pride associated with claims that humans held a privileged status among living things. Yet it did not have any direct bearing on the traditionally held distinction between the body and the mind. It was, in fact, hard to imagine what further influence evolution could have in the human case without appealing to changes that in one way or another would be of a mental character. All of this made evolutionary thought more of a threat to religious beliefs than to philosophical accounts of human nature, because the latter did not require any special assumptions regarding how the human species was formed.

Yet when evolutionary theory joined forces with genetics, as it did in the 20th century, it became possible to point to something within the human body—genes—that accounted for the heritable traits and mutations that occur in humans and in all living things. The inference has been widely drawn that human genetic makeup determines matters that had previously been thought to be controlled by rational thought and moral decision making. Now that the human genome has been completely sequenced, it may appear as though all the categories that have defined moral personality have been displaced by DNA, the organic chemical in which genetic information is encoded.
This at least has been the popular understanding of these developments, and apparently that of some professional students of these matters as well. Some of the latter have gone so far as to claim that the only meaningful possibility of human self-transcendence is that of passing one’s own genes into the next generation. These developments have been carried further by the emergence of evolutionary psychology, which equates the mind with the brain and views it as progressively modified by the same kinds of evolutionary changes that occur in all living things.

Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalytic theory has had a similarly displacing effect on human self-understanding. Although Freud originally conceived psychological processes in terms of energy exchanges within a physiological system, his mature theory was couched in a language of mind and consciousness that he modified for his own purposes. Since he was talking about matters of which humans are not normally aware and which cannot, therefore, be located in consciousness, he was forced to postulate the existence of what he called the “unconscious mind.” On its face, this term—normally used in its abbreviated form, the unconscious—is an oxymoron, since consciousness, understood as awareness, has always been the defining attribute of the mind.

This fact has sometimes been thought to justify a peremptory dismissal of Freud’s entire project. But it would be a mistake to deny on a priori grounds the reality of the facts to which Freud was calling attention. The issue is rather one of finding an appropriate way of conceptualizing the kinds of facts that have been described in this way—a way that does not entail these incongruities. Neither Freud nor his followers appear to have been interested in conceptual issues of this kind. Psychoanalytic theory has continued to deal in facts about intentions, motives, and feelings as though they belonged to a rather mysterious realm of which humans—in their “conscious minds”—remain quite unaware. As a result, a rather crude picture established itself of the conscious mind operating under the control of an external agency. At least in the popular understanding of Freud’s views, this further discredited even the ideal of rationality in human affairs by interpreting anything people might say as being mere surface manifestations of some unavowed and unconscious motive.

Artificial intelligence

Originating in the work of the British mathematician and logician Alan Turing, artificial intelligence involves the effort to produce machines (in most cases, computers) that are capable of executing tasks formerly thought to require human intelligence and thus mind. The distinction between computer hardware (the actual physical makeup of these machines) and software (the sets of instructions or programs
by which computers perform these tasks) has become the effective replacement for the old philosophical distinction between body and mind. Of the three scientific movements reviewed here, AI represents the most ambitious challenge to traditional conceptions of the soul-mind, because it is the one most explicitly associated with a materialist account of human beings. Thus far, however, the accomplishments of AI have been meagre. It has produced a chess-playing machine that has defeated the reigning world champion, but in areas such as language translation, where context is far more nuanced than it is in chess, the results have been uneven.

It is evident that the highest aspiration of supporters of AI is the production of an artificial human being. Even now, its partisans describe themselves and other human beings with metaphors drawn from their work with these machines; they talk, for example, about their own “memory banks.” These scientists have identified certain human problem-solving capabilities that can be reduced to a finite number of steps performed by a computer-guided robot; they then generalize this picture of human intelligence as computational activity and conceive of themselves on the model of the machines they have produced in this way. What goes missing in all this is any attempt to characterize the broader human context from which these capabilities have been abstracted and to determine whether there is anything—emotions, for example—that cannot be assimilated to the computational model. However, because the only general conception that is available to them of what a human being is like seems to them to be hopelessly outdated and ineptly philosophical, they conclude that the picture they are constructing is the only possible scientific one. They therefore maintain that science is necessarily materialist and that every departure from materialism is without cognitive legitimacy.

**Phenomenology as a response to materialism**

All this raises a question as to what resources may be available to any philosophical anthropology that proposes to represent that broader human context. In the English-speaking world there appears to be a widely shared disposition to assume that philosophy can be accommodated within a materialist framework, provided that the issues it deals with are couched in linguistic or broadly scientific terms rather than in purely mentalistic ones. The only large movement of thought that has not joined in this consensus, in fact, is phenomenology. Thus, if philosophical anthropology has affinities anywhere in contemporary philosophy, it is reasonable to assume that they are with the thought of some of the principal representatives of that movement. On closer inspection, however, it may seem doubtful that this is the case, since most phenomenologists have opposed the conception of the human subject as a soul or a mind. The history of this opposition thus deserves further attention.

**Foundations of phenomenology**
The phenomenological movement was founded by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl, whose influence on other philosophers drawn to phenomenology was both positive and negative. He wanted to advance beyond the work of Descartes by developing a “pure” concept of consciousness that would not be understood as a kind of thing or substance nor described with inappropriate metaphors (such as impression) from the natural world. In order to block all such false assimilations, Husserl held that it was necessary to set aside the very existence of the natural world—not in the sense of denying it outright but rather in the sense of not assuming it as a given or counting on it for the purpose of describing consciousness. What would be left to work with would be states of pure consciousness—states that, under normal conditions, are largely directed toward what exists in the world but which for these purposes must be taken simply as what is thought—that is, as meanings.

The exclusion of the natural world from this inquiry into consciousness also applied to the human self as an inhabitant of that world. This was the “empirical” self—the one with a name and a birthday and all kinds of involvements in the natural world. Husserl contrasted this everyday empirical self with a “transcendental” self—one that is more or less identical with the pure consciousness that is left by the exclusions he called for. It has been purged of everything that tends to confuse it with the body or anything else that is physical in character. The transcendental self is also the form of consciousness that registers whatever truths are accessible to humans about the world and about themselves. As such, it cannot be subject to any external or causal influence, because such influence would itself be registered by this transcendental consciousness.

Although Husserl insisted that his reduction of the world to its role in consciousness was purely methodological, he never canceled the suspension of belief that this reduction required. As a result, no status ever accrued to natural reality other than that to which it had been reduced—the status, namely, of something meant by pure consciousness. Although Husserl wanted to avoid a Cartesian dualism of mind and body, he spoke of a “sphere of immanence” that contained everything that belonged to consciousness. This sounded remarkably like what was supposed to have been “in” the mind as a mental substance under the Cartesian dispensation. Moreover, such a transcendental subject would plainly not itself be in the world whose existence it was suspending; thus another feature of dualism was reproduced in Husserl’s philosophy. It is hardly surprising that he eventually described his own thought as “transcendental idealism.”

**Heidegger and humanism**

Rejecting this kind of transcendentalism, the thinkers who followed Husserl came to be known as “existential” phenomenologists, because they treated the existence of the natural world as the great incontestable datum for their analysis of consciousness. Without doubt, the most original and influential among them was Martin Heidegger.
Any temptation to classify him as sympathetic to humanistic or anthropological concerns, however, was negated by his Letter on Humanism (1947), which he wrote in response to a lecture by the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre had argued that existential philosophy of the kind he had appropriated in good part from Heidegger had a humanistic character. Heidegger repudiated this suggestion by identifying humanism with a seriously deficient account of human being that reduces humankind to the status of an entity of a special kind. Heidegger also made it very clear that his own work should not be confused with philosophical anthropology. Yet, at the same time and in the same essay, he appeared willing to reinstate the honorifics that he believed the proponents of humanism had improperly applied to a misconceived human nature, provided that that nature was correctly understood in the terms he was himself proposing.

Paradoxical as it may seem, this invites the thought that Heidegger’s critique of humanism—and, by implication, of philosophical anthropology itself—can serve constructive rather than destructive purposes. The question thus posed is whether Heidegger’s conception of human being can replace the flawed conceptual apparatus on which philosophical anthropology has relied and thereby provide it with a means of handling its current crisis more effectively.

The concept of Dasein

For Heidegger, the human subject had to be reconceived in an altogether new way, as “being-in-the-world.” Because this notion represented the very opposite of the Cartesian “thing that thinks,” the idea of consciousness as representing the mind’s internal awareness of its own states had to be dropped. With it went the assumption that specific mental states were needed to mediate the relation of the mind to everything outside it. The human subject was not a mind that was capable only of representing the world to itself and whose linkage with its body was merely a contingent one. According to Heidegger, human being should instead be conceived as Dasein, a common German word usually translated in English as “existence” but which also literally means “being there.” By using it as a replacement for “consciousness” and “mind,” Heidegger intended to suggest that a human being is in the world in the mode of uncovering and is thus disclosing other entities as well as itself. Dasein is, in other words, the “there”—or the locus—of being and thus the metaphorical place where entities “show themselves” as what they are. Instead of being sealed off within a specially designed compartment within a human being, the functions that have been misdescribed as “mental” now become the defining characteristics of human existence.

There is one major difference between Heidegger’s account of human being and the humanistic inspiration of much philosophical anthropology. In his early work Being and Time (1927), Heidegger had interpreted the disclosive function of Dasein as being
closely bound up with its own active character and with the anticipatory temporality—its being referentially always “out ahead of itself”—that differs so significantly from the sequential character of world-time. This strongly pragmatic strain later yielded to a conception of the access to being as a kind of gift that humans are privileged to receive. There are also strong suggestions in his later writings that his earlier view had been contaminated by a certain subjectivist tendency—the idea that humanity is quite literally the “measure of all things” and, as such, the designer and author of being itself rather than its humble recipient.

It is plain that any humanism associated with Heidegger would necessarily avoid the heroic rhetoric that so often celebrated the uniqueness of “man” in the past. No traditional humanism, however, could endorse his conception of the near-complete passivity of humans in their commerce with being, and in this light it may be the case that not Heidegger but Sartre was closer to the authentic spirit of humanism.

What is perhaps most interesting about Heidegger’s concept of Dasein is that it is a concept of a human being as a whole rather than of a mind or of a human being as a compound of mind and body. The primary significance of this unitary treatment of human being is that it does not sequester the principal functions of a human being in a rather mysteriously conceived part thereof. This represents a genuine alternative to both the body-cum-soul conception of human being and to the straightforward identification of human beings with their bodies, which is the approach taken by most contemporary philosophers.

The Heideggerian alternative

If the Heideggerian alternative were ever to be widely understood and accepted, it would amount to a great transformation of both the philosophical anthropology that Heidegger rejected and, it may be surmised, of philosophy as well. The essential thesis that defines this alternative is that a human being is a unitary entity and that, as such, it is neither a material nor a mental thing. It is “in” the world as Cartesian minds are not, and it “has” a world as neither familiar objects like hammers nor relatively exotic ones like protons or black holes do. This thesis does not entail that there must be something wrong with what the natural sciences say in their own idiom about the human organism or anything else; it simply means that the materialist approach does not constitute an exhaustive account of human nature, and it misses altogether (when it does not positively obscure) what a human being is.

Stated more concretely, a human being inhabits the world as what might be called a milieu or presence, and it is itself at bottom simply the fact that “there is” a world. This is the deeply familiar but conceptually elusive fact that is prior to and presupposed by all the further distinctions between what is “objective” and what is “subjective.” Even more significantly, this fact also puts an end to the entire notion of
the soul-mind as an inner domain from which others are forever locked out. There are, of course, many such “others”—i.e., human beings who share this world with each other in a mode that is quite different from the coexistence of objects within the world. They do so, moreover, as active beings for whom there is always something that can either be done or not done at any given point in their lives. These actions and nonactions generate an order of fact that is distinctively different from natural reality and that has a moral dimension that the latter altogether lacks.

It needs to be understood that these facts about human beings as beings-in-the-world, which tend to be dismissed on the grounds of their supposedly “subjective” character, are, in fact, the very characteristics of human beings that make it possible for them to have a world at all. As such, they set the context within which the more ontologically restricted processes of the so-called natural world take place. Another way of saying this is to point out that the term nature, as conceived and delimited by a materialist ontology, cannot contain human beings, because it strips them of precisely the characteristics by which they are able to disclose the world instead of being mere pieces of it. As a result, the theory of the world that natural scientists elaborate stands alone as though it had no human author. This is the ideal of “objectivity” carried to its ultimate and perverse extreme.

What is clear is that the materialist picture of the world, considering all that it leaves out, is extremely rickety and correspondingly vulnerable. If philosophical anthropology is indeed an authentic form of humanism, it now has a great opportunity to propose another version of the way things are, one in which humans can recognize themselves better than they can through any strictly materialist approach.

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Additional Reading

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