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ANTHROPOLOGY

CHAPTER I

SCOPE OF ANTHROPOLOGY

IN this chapter I propose to say something, firstly, about the ideal scope of anthropology; ⁽¹⁾ secondly, about its ideal limitations; ⁽²⁾ and, thirdly and lastly, about its actual relations to existing studies. ⁽³⁾ In other words, I shall examine the extent of its claim, and then go on to examine how that claim, under modern conditions of science and education, is to be made good.

Firstly, then, what is the ideal scope of anthropology? Taken at its fullest and best, what ought it to comprise?

Anthropology is the whole history of man as fired and pervaded by the idea of evolution. Man in evolution—that is the subject in its full reach. Anthropology studies man as he occurs at all known times. It studies him as he occurs in all known parts of the world. It studies him body and soul together—as a

bodily organism, subject to conditions operating in time and space, which bodily organism is in intimate relation with a soul-life, also subject to those same conditions. Having an eye to such conditions from first to last, it seeks to plot out the general series of the changes, bodily and mental together, undergone by man in the course of his history. Its business is simply to describe. But, without exceeding the limits of its scope, it can and must proceed from the particular to the general; aiming at nothing less than a descriptive formula that shall sum up the whole series of changes in which the evolution of man consists.

That will do, perhaps, as a short account of the ideal scope of anthropology. Being short, it is bound to be rather formal and colourless. To put some body into it, however, it is necessary to breathe but a single word. That word is: Darwin.

Anthropology is the child of Darwin. Darwinism makes it possible. Reject the Darwinian point of view, and you must reject anthropology also. What, then, is Darwinism? Not a cut-and-dried doctrine. Not a dogma. Darwinism is a working hypothesis. You suppose something to be true, and work away to see whether, in the light of that supposed truth, certain facts fit together

better than they do on any other supposition. What is the truth that Darwinism supposes? Simply that all the forms of life in the world are related together; and that the relations manifested in time and space between the different lives are sufficiently uniform to be described under a general formula, or law of evolution.

This means that man must, for certain purposes of science, toe the line with the rest of living things. And at first, naturally enough, man did not like it. He was too lordly. For a long time, therefore, he pretended to be fighting for the Bible, when he was really fighting for his own dignity. This was rather hard on the Bible, which has nothing to do with the Aristotelian theory of the fixity of species; though it might seem possible to read back something of the kind into the primitive creation-stories preserved in Genesis. Now-a-days, however, we have mostly got over the first shock to our family pride. We are all Darwinians in a passive kind of way. But we need to darwinize actively. In the sciences that have to do with plants, and with the rest of the animals besides man, naturalists have been so active in their darwinizing that the pre-Darwinian stuff is once for all laid by on the shelf. When man, however, engages on the subject

of his noble self, the tendency still is to say: We accept Darwinism so long as it is not allowed to count, so long as we may go on believing the same old stuff in the same old way.

How do we anthropologists propose to combat this tendency? By working away at our subject, and persuading people to have a look at our results. Once people take up anthropology, they may be trusted not to drop it again. It is like learning to sleep with your window open. What could be more stupefying than to shut yourself up in a closet and swallow your own gas? But is it any less stupefying to shut yourself up within the last few thousand years of the history of your own corner of the world, and suck in the stale atmosphere of its own self-generated prejudices? Or, to vary the metaphor, anthropology is like travel. Every one starts by thinking that there is nothing so perfect as his own parish. But let a man go aboard ship to visit foreign parts, and, when he returns home, he will cause that parish to wake up.

With Darwin, then, we anthropologists say: Let any and every portion of human history be studied in the light of the whole history of mankind, and against the background of the history of living things in general. It is the Darwinian outlook that

matters. None of Darwin's particular doctrines will necessarily endure the test of time and trial. Into the melting-pot must they go as often as any man of science deems it fitting. But Darwinism as the touch of nature that makes the whole world kin can hardly pass away. At any rate, anthropology stands or falls with the working hypothesis, derived from Darwinism, of a fundamental kinship and continuity amid change between all the forms of human life.

It remains to add that, hitherto, anthropology has devoted most of its attention to the peoples of rude—that is to say, of simple—culture, who are vulgarly known to us as “savages.” The main reason for this, I suppose, is that nobody much minds so long as the darwinizing kind of history confines itself to outsiders. Only when it is applied to self and friends is it resented as an impertinence. But, although it has always up to now pursued the line of least resistance, anthropology does not abate one jot or tittle of its claim to be the whole science, in the sense of the whole history, of man. As regards the word, call it science, or history, or anthropology, or anything else—what does it matter? As regards the thing, however, there can be no compromise. We anthropologists are out to secure this: that there

shall not be one kind of history for savages and another kind for ourselves, but the same kind of history, with the same evolutionary principle running right through it, for all men, civilized and savage, present and past.

So much for the ideal scope of anthropology. Now, in the second place, for its ideal limitations. Here, I am afraid, we must touch for a moment on very deep and difficult questions. But it is well worth while to try at all costs to get firm hold of the fact that anthropology, though a big thing, is not everything.

It will be enough to insist briefly on the following points: that anthropology is science in whatever way history is science; that it is not philosophy, though it must conform to its needs; and that it is not policy, though it may subserve its designs.

Anthropology is science in the sense of specialized research that aims at truth for truth's sake. Knowing by parts is science, knowing the whole as a whole is philosophy. Each supports the other, and there is no profit in asking which of the two should come first. One is aware of the universe as the whole universe, however much one may be resolved to study its details one at a time. The scientific mood, however, is uppermost when one says: Here is a particular lot of

things that seem to hang together in a particular way; let us try to get a general idea of what that way is. Anthropology, then, specializes on the particular group of human beings, which itself is part of the larger particular group of living beings. Inasmuch as it takes over the evolutionary principle from the science dealing with the larger group, namely biology, anthropology may be regarded as a branch of biology. Let it be added, however, that, of all the branches of biology, it is the one that is likely to bring us nearest to the true meaning of life; because the life of human beings must always be nearer to human students of life than, say, the life of plants.

But, you will perhaps object, anthropology was previously identified with history, and now it is identified with science, namely, with a branch of biology? Is history science? The answer is, Yes. I know that a great many people who call themselves historians say that it is not, apparently on the ground that, when it comes to writing history, truth for truth's sake is apt to bring out the wrong results. Well, the doctored sort of history is not science, nor anthropology, I am ready to admit. But now let us listen to another and a more serious objection to the claim of history to be science. Science, it will be said

by many earnest men of science, aims at discovering laws that are clean out of time. History, on the other hand, aims at no more than the generalized description of one or another phase of a time-process. To this it may be replied that physics, and physics only, answers to this altogether too narrow conception of science. The laws of matter in motion are, or seem to be, of the timeless or mathematical kind. Directly we pass on to biology, however, laws of this kind are not to be discovered, or at any rate are not discovered. Biology deals with life, or, if you like, with matter as living. Matter moves. Life evolves. We have entered a new dimension of existence. The laws of matter in motion are not abrogated, for the simple reason that in physics one makes abstraction of life, or in other words leaves its peculiar effects entirely out of account. But they are transcended. They are multiplied by α , an unknown quantity. This being so from the standpoint of pure physics, biology takes up the tale afresh, and devises means of its own for describing the particular ways in which things hang together in virtue of their being alive. And biology finds that it cannot conveniently abstract away the reference to time. It cannot treat living things as machines. What does it do,

then? It takes the form of history. It states that certain things have changed in certain ways, and goes on to show, so far as it can, that the changes are on the whole in a certain direction. In short, it formulates tendencies, and these are its only laws. Some tendencies, of course, appear to be more enduring than others, and thus may be thought to approximate more closely to laws of the timeless kind. But x , the unknown quantity, the something or other that is not physical, runs through them all, however much or little they may seem to endure. For science, at any rate, which departmentalizes the world, and studies it bit by bit, there is no getting over the fact that living beings in general, and human beings in particular, are subject to an evolution which is simple matter of history.

And now what about philosophy? I am not going into philosophical questions here. For that reason I am not going to describe biology as natural history, or anthropology as the natural history of man. Let philosophers discuss what "nature" is going to mean for them. In science the word is question-begging; and the only sound rule in science is to beg as few philosophical questions as you possibly can. Everything in the world is natural, of course, in the sense that things are