

Anthropology

An Assessment of the Nature and Direction of the Discipline

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Intro

This essay is dedicated to the exploration of Anthropology as a subject within the *Humanities*. Anthropology first emerged as a subject of science in the 1850s. It spent some time existing only as a sub-category of sociology. Anthropology only gained its name and autonomy through the work of practitioners Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski in (Hendry, J, 1999). They successfully developed anthropology as a humanities subject and introduced practices such as ethnography and social anthropology.

I will begin by looking at the definition of anthropology. It is notably difficult to define; Joy Hendry, social anthropologist with a particular focus on Japan, completely avoids defining anthropology in her book *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*, instead opting to define what a social anthropologist does. Using her work, I will lay out a brief history of anthropology as it transitioned from science to humanities. This will lead directly into the second half of my essay, in which I will define the two categories, and speak on the issues anthropology has faced during its initial development, and how these effects working professionals in the present day.

To clarify, within this work, I will focus on the nature and direction of the discipline in future practice. I will be arguing that anthropology is, and will continue to be, defined and practiced as a humanities discipline for the foreseeable future.

Defining Anthropology

So, what is anthropology, exactly? As a student of anthropology, I dread being asked this question. As I began to put in place my plans to set off to study it, my mother created a game. Swelling with pride, she informed a family member of my sudden and exciting plans. Then she grew gleeful and asked if they knew what anthropology meant. More often than not, they didn't know, and I was expected to explain.

"The study of people, and culture." is the vague, nondescript answer I prescribed to them. Their brow unfurrowed slightly, and they gave an unsatisfied "Ah. Okay."

At the time, I knew there must be more to it, so I underwent some basic search.

The linguistic origin of the word *anthropology* comes from the Greek *anthrōpos*, meaning 'human/ man.' *Logy* comes from *logia*, (which in turn comes from *logos*) meaning 'to reason/ to study.' Natural word association will lead us to recognise the modern word 'logic,' in the old Greek *logos*. They are, ultimately, one and the same.

If we were to consider *anthropology* from a pedantic point of view, *anthrōpos* has no direct translation, but may be interpreted as 'he who looks up.' A romantic way of separating mankind from animals. We are scholars, learners. As astronomers, we look to the stars, as a species, we look to the future. This is the poetic interpretation of *anthropology*.

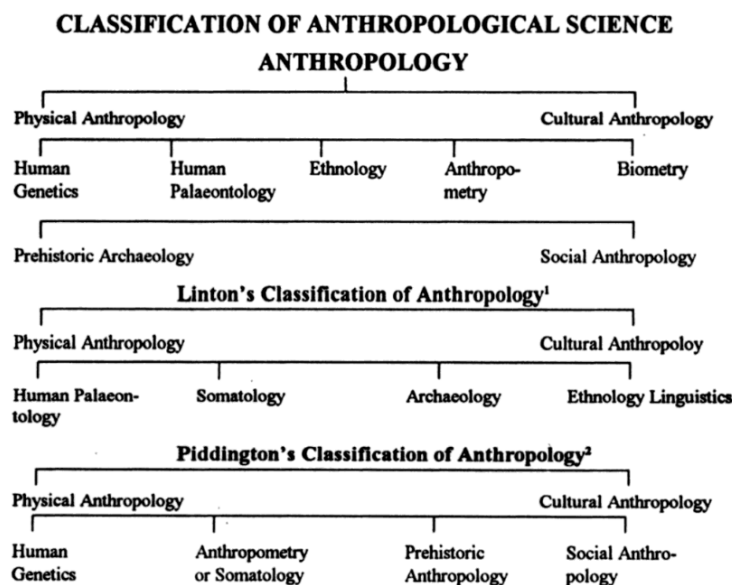
The London School of Ethics and Political Science Department of Anthropology defines anthropology as "*a social science devoted to the study of human societies, cultures, and the various ways people understand and organise their worlds.*" (LSE, 2026). The more elaborate version of my response. And in all immediate

respects, an accurate statement. But let me bring your attention to one particular word; “*science*.”

Can anthropology rightfully be called a science? How can a subject focused on culture, society and humans with an arguably holistic approach (Sociology Institute, 2023) be defined as a science? The statement provided by LSE contradicts itself. Therefore, let us consider another definition.

A summary provided by the UC Davies Department of Anthropology reads thusly, “*Anthropology is the systematic study of humanity, with the goal of understanding our evolutionary origins, our distinctiveness as a species, and the great diversity in our forms of social existence across the world and through time.*” (UC Davies, 2026).

Let this be a more accurate example of my argument throughout this essay. Anthropology should not be considered a science, but rather a discipline within the realms of humanities.



1. Linton, R., *The Study of Man*, p. 2.

2. Piddington, R., *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*, Oliver and Boyd, London (1952), p. 2.

This quote leads us nicely into our next discussion topic: types of anthropology.

In anthropology, there are four distinct subfields of study. UC Davies mentions evolutionary origins, social existence, and time. To translate these descriptions into more academic terms, we have biological anthropology, cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology and archaeology (Brown. A, 2023). Some, such as linguistic, or biological anthropology, could be viewed as a science, as they can be systematically assessed and mathematically measured. This is not the case with cultural anthropology as society and culture is a purely natural development, organic in its nature. Herbert Spencer would argue that the ‘superorganic’ nature of a society means it must be comparable to biological science. Spencer created the analogy that just as a body has organs – a heart, lungs, stomach, brain- which all work in tandem to create one functioning being, the organs of society are government, education, family and religion. The collapse of one means the collapse of the whole.

Condorcet argues that society is “*just as natural as organic and inorganic sciences and should therefore be studied by the same methods.*” (Hendry. J, 1999), supporting Spencer’s assessment. To delve slightly into the scientific side of the discipline, I will mention briefly sociology, which is a definite science.

A science of society was first proposed in France, in by Saint-Simon. Comte later termed the discipline *sociology* and created a list of applied sciences by which to study a society: mathematics, astronomy, psychology, etcetera.

Spencer encouraged scholars of sociology to look at the many different areas of society and consider how they may work together. This led to the creation of two distinct fields of anthropology; functionalism, led by Bronislaw Malinowski, and structural functionalism by Radcliffe-Brown. Functionalism was defined by Malinowski's work in Australia in the beginning of WWI. In his writings he described that all cultural and social behaviour were derived as a result of basic human necessities.

Radcliffe-brown, however, aimed to understand structures within society. His work took place between 1906 and 1908 in the Andaman Islands (Bay of Bengal) and studied social interactions and behaviours for the purposes of maintaining social networks and relations. He studied social structures, hence the self-explanatory term, structural functionalism.

both practitioners stressed the importance of spending an extended amount of time with a society and learning their language, cultural activities, and individual understanding of the roles in a group, as well as the overall hierarchy. This is what ultimately separated sociology from anthropology. Malinowski's students produced various works of ethnography, a practice in which the researcher looked to their own experience as a member of the given society, rather than objectively studying those around them.

this marked the transition from science to humanities. But let us define what these terms are, and what they mean in practice.

Science vs Humanities

The Cambridge Dictionary defines science as "*the careful study of the structure and behaviour of the physical world, especially by watching, measuring, and doing experiments...*" (Cambridge, 2026).

The defining feature between a science experiment and the holistic observation used in modern anthropology is the use of variables. While both require a question as a starting point, anthropology will not benefit from a hypothesis in the same way chemistry, for example, would.

Science is concerned with understanding the world through empirical observation and experimentation. It is systematic and mathematical, dedicated to making sense of that which baffles us through measured experiments defined by variables and theoretical predictions. There is often little room for error, superstition or emotional feeling of any kind. But these are the elements which create a culture. Beliefs, relationships, wants and needs, desire. The study of such scenarios cannot possibly be scientific. This brings us to the definition of Humanities.

The humanities seek to understand human experience through artistic expression, historical documents and cultural artefacts. (Drew. Q, 2026)

Art, for example is the most common example of a *Humanities* discipline. Expressive and creative arts such as visual art, music, literature and performance arts such as oral storytelling, from which cultures first began to develop inform us of the human experience throughout time. The humanities also include history, philosophy and linguistics. (Drew. Q, 2026)

subjects such as psychology, however, are a subject of debate within both scientific and humanities-based worlds. Psychology aims to understand the human experience by first understanding the brain. The methods used are scientific, but the subject matter itself is that of the lived human experience.

While psychologists dissect the brain and label the areas or strap a subject to a machine and watch their brain light up in response to stimuli, we cannot measure one's lived experience against another's. The way the brain responds will never completely reflect the subject's own response. What the unconscious mind thinks, or feels, what one might say next, is unpredictable. There is whole world inside their head that is invisible to everyone else. This is what psychologists

aim to understand and categorise, and what anthropologists aim to connect with. A collective mind, an emotional bond within a community.

Some may argue that anthropology first emerged during the *Age of Discovery*. What we do know for a fact is that it was first recognised as a science in the West and had close ties with the rise of colonialism. European settlers became curious about the new nations they were discovering and theorised that by studying the cultures of the indigenous people, they could learn about what life was like before the British Isles and Europe became the “civilised” societies that they had become. Vespucci placed the Native Americans in a distinctly unpleasant light. They were presented as godless, promiscuous and lawless. They were presented as cannibals and animals. Imagery such as this made its way into theatres in Europe, and so the public perception of such societies was created.

This history continues to pursue anthropologists of the modern day.

“Anthropologists are often accused of distorting the reality of the peoples they write about – in the colonies, in the Third World, among ethnic minorities or in marginal areas.” (Eriksen T.H, Nielsen F.S.)

While others, such as contemporary archaeologists Huguenot Jean de Léry and Bartolomé de las Casas, made attempts to repair the image of the natives with more truthful ethnographic accounts of life in a thriving Native American society, people tend craved adventure and sensation.

But anthropology is not just a discipline. It exists in everyday life. It is, put simply, curiosity. Anthropology exists in gossip, in folklore. This is why we see elements of anthropology in works dated as far back as the Classical Greeks. Herodotus of Halicarnassus (c. 484–425 BCE), often credited as being the ‘Father of History’ for his account of the Greco-Persian wars (Eriksen T.H, Nielsen F.S.), wrote extensively on the communities he encountered on his travels. Works such as these demonstrate the closeness anthropology has to its classical cousin, philosophy. They are much the same subject: informed in a similar artistic manner, but differing in practice.

Conclusion

By continuing to view anthropology as a science, not only do we exclude large portions of the society and culture concerned, but it is also not in alignment with the subject being studied. Humanity is immeasurable. Personality, culture, and life itself cannot be explained by numbers and graphs. Spencer makes a strong attempt to explain all cultures through his biological analogy but is ultimately disproved.

While anthropology most certainly fits best into the bracket of *Humanities*, it would be unwise to disregard the significance of science within the field. Anthropology has a similar relationship to sociology as that of philosophy, and fields such as linguistic or biological anthropology are just as significant and important as cultural anthropology. But we must understand the importance of the arts and history in future anthropological practice.

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