

Christian and social scientific understandings of human beings in society

DCM Social Sciences and Law stream

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Outline

Five understandings of human beings in society:

- Theological
- Evolutionary psychology
- Rational choice theories (including behavioural economics and cooperative game theory)
- Social theories
- Critical realism: persons (the social theory of Christian Smith)

Group Discussion

Within the mainstream of your discipline, what is the dominant understanding of what it is to be a human being? Do you find that understanding satisfactory?

Why does it matter?

1 Theological understanding: Christian anthropology

1.1 Creation:

- from dust of the ground (Genesis 2: 7)
- in the image of the Triune God (Gen 1: 27): relational, man and woman (Gen 2:20-24)
- relationships grounded in capacity for real communication (Genesis 2 and 3): Jesus as the Word made flesh (John 1: 14): hence the self as a 'communicative agent' (see Vanhoozer, 1997) in covenantal relationships.

Christian anthropology (cont)

- rule and responsibility for the created order, exercised through work and rest (Gen 1:26, 28)
- capacity for understanding: naming the animals (Gen 2: 19, 20)
- capacity for making moral choices (Gen 3)

1.2 What is the purpose of human life?

Persons in *relationships*, with *purposes*

- to love God and serve him with all our being (Luke 10: 27)
- to love our neighbours as *ourselves* (Luke 10: 27)
- to benefit from, and to care for, the created order (Genesis 1: 26, 28-30)

with the goal of *flourishing* as persons.

1.2 (cont.) Human flourishing

- Smith (2010): six basic goods comprise the goal of flourishing as persons: bodily survival, security and pleasure; knowledge of reality; identity coherence and affirmation; exercising purposive action (agency); moral affirmation; social belonging and love.
- Tyler Vanderweele (2017): human flourishing programme in the Institute for Quantitative Social Science at Harvard (see PNAS, 31, 8148-56)

1.3 Fall and disobedience: Genesis 3

The dark side of Christian anthropology.

Fall presupposes capacity to make autonomous decisions

Consequences: all three relationships fractured and broken

- separation from God: Adam and Eve try to hide: Babel
- power and deception in human relationships: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel
- interaction with created order becomes 'toil and sweat' (Genesis 3: 17-19)

1.4 Implications of the Fall for human nature?

- Paul's concept of the 'sinful nature' (Romans 8: 5-8): predisposition to sin, enslaves us
- Consequences for human behaviour (Romans 1, Galatians 5: 19-21): 'acts' of the sinful nature
- Image of God is grievously marred and distorted, but not completely destroyed (see for example, Matthew 7: 11)

[Remember: salvation: renewed relationship with God in Christ, enabled to 'crucify' the sinful nature, and to live by the Spirit: fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5: 16-18, 22-25)]

(Augustinian theology).

Group discussion

Propositions:

- Social sciences are studies of human sinfulness
- The effect of sin is to create disorder in society

Are these a helpful framework for Christian social scientists?

2. Rational choice theory

2.1 Enlightenment conception of a human being (Locke, Hume, rather than Hobbes):

- individual autonomy – expressed in preferences or passions
- rationality – ability to analyse alternatives, ability to make choices – resulting in action, behaviour

[Three elements: the basic model; behavioural economics – individuals; game theory – social interactions]

2.2 Basic rational choice model

Preferences and rationality

- Agent evaluates available alternatives with full information e.g. choice of goods within a budget, choice of career or marriage partner
- Chooses alternative that maximises 'utility', or maximises 'well being', or satisfies preferences of the agent
- Preferences etc. undefined, but presumed unchanging and complete across all states of the world, well ordered and no contradictions

2.3 Rational choice: evaluation from within the social sciences

- Asserts human autonomy, rationality and ability to choose – basis for these assumptions? (Elster's critique)
- A decision rule, not an explanation, since silent on preferences
- 'Just so' critique – whatever a person does is presumed rational, reflecting their preferences – only testable content is consistency
- Objection to 'self interested' choices: excludes commitment (Sen)

Doubts about *empirical realism* of rational choice in behavioural sciences.

2.4 Behavioural economics

Questions the empirical relevance of rational choice:

- Behaviour that does not conform to rational choice: for examples, framing effects, menu effects, wealth effects
- Flaws in calculating probabilities: for examples, salient events, sequential events, 'following the crowd'.

2.4 Behavioural economics (continued)

- Prospect theory: role of reference points
- Games: players motivated by concepts of fairness and reciprocity: the ultimatum game.

3 Game theory

Rational choice where outcomes depend on other peoples' choices as well as one's own:

- favourite example is Prisoners' Dilemma
- 'common knowledge'
- concept of Nash or non-cooperative equilibria
- but cooperative outcomes are better than non-cooperative

Comments:

- implicitly normative – 'the best thing to do'
- better defined where payoffs are easily measurable
- apparent failure of rationality in interactive games – strong tendency to cooperate

3.2 Supercooperators

[Reference: M Novak and R Highfield (2011), Supercooperators, Canongate Books, Edinburgh)

Five ways to solve the problem of cooperation in human communities:

- Direct reciprocity – tit for tat
- Indirect reciprocity – key role for reputation
- Spatial – proximity in geographical space – cooperation among neighbours
- Group selection – why will individuals sacrifice self interest to interests of the group?
- Kin selection – cooperating with near kin promotes their genes which are to some extent shared with you

3.2 Supercooperators (cont)

Factors enabling cooperation in *complex* communities: three social characteristics

- Language
- Resolving the problem of public goods
- Role of punishment

4. Evaluation: rational choice and game theory from standpoint of Christian anthropology

- Christian understanding of ‘rationality’: reasons arising from God’s purposes for humanity, rather than cost-benefit calculation
- Multiple and diverse goods contribute to human flourishing, and hence inform preferences and behaviour
- Fallenness of human nature – consequences for purposes, flourishing?
- Cooperative ‘altruism’ or genuine altruism (agape)?

5. Social theory

Starting points:

- Human beings give reasons for their behaviour
- Reasons are culture specific: related to accepted social norms
- Human beings become 'socialised': internalise norms, which are applied 'automatically' or 'intuitively'

What is the origin of 'norms'?

5.1 Social construction

P Berger and T Luckmann, *The social construction of reality* (1966)

‘Strong’ version, as described by Christian Smith, *What is a person?* (2010):

‘Reality itself for humans is a human social construction, constituted by human mental categories, discursive practices, definitions of situations, and symbolic exchanges that are sustained as ‘real’ through on-going social interactions that are in turn shaped by particular interests, perspectives, and, usually, imbalances of power – our knowledge about reality is therefore entirely culturally relative, since no human has access to reality ‘as it really is’,, because we can never escape our epistemological and linguistic limits to verify whether our beliefs about reality correspond with externally objective reality.’

5.2 Social constructionist analysis

I Hacking (1999) *The Social Construction of What?*

Social construction of X: (1) X is taken for granted, X appears to be inevitable; but (2) X need not have existed or need not be as it is, X is not determined by the nature of things, it is not inevitable. Add: (3) X is quite bad as it is, and (4) we would be much better off if X were eliminated or at least radically transformed.

Example: gender (roles of men and women in society) is socially constructed, not an inevitable result of biology, and highly contingent on social/ cultural processes. Moreover current understandings of gender are harmful, and should be eliminated or modified.

Contra **essentialism** – no human nature other than ‘constructed’.

5.3 Evaluation of social constructionism

Areas of study: gender, sexuality, family, race, mental illness, science, and many others.

Critique of social constructionist claims:

- Unclear whether claim is that X itself is socially constructed, or just that our ideas about X are socially constructed
- Self defeating on moral grounds – exponents often express strong moral judgements about the areas they study
- Not clear what ‘constructs’. Is it personal agents, or is it impersonal – cultures, conventions, institutions?

5.4 Evaluation from standpoint of Christian anthropology

Questions that might be asked:

- Is social constructionism compatible with characteristics of humanity in the 'image of God'?
- Are purposes in life entirely socially constructed?
- Is social constructionism compatible with idea that fallen humanity is 'enslaved' by sin?

Group Discussion

Rational choice theory/ game theory, and social constructionism are the mainstream in Oxford social sciences: from the standpoint of Christian anthropology what do they most lack in understanding human nature?

6. The challenge for Christian social scientists

- How as Christians should we work with social science paradigms that are limited in their understanding of human beings in society?
- Could there be a specifically *Christian* social science? If so, what would it look like?

6.1 How do we understand our socioeconomic world? Midgley's metaphor of 'maps'.

- Mary Midgley, What is philosophy for? (2018), G McElwain Mary Midgley: an introduction (2019)
- Complex realities and the metaphor of maps: nothing wrong with multiple alternative explanatory paradigms

6.1 (cont) Alternative maps

The range of social science paradigms as alternative 'maps':

(a) identify the underlying anthropologies

(b) be alert to strengths and weaknesses

(c) avoid hubris – assertion that one 'map' is the only way to understand particular social phenomena

(d) assumptions about what makes for human flourishing, and policy implications

6.2 What should a Christian social scientist do?

Three approaches:

- proceed with standard paradigms, but with caution
- provisional acceptance, but critical dialogue with Christian anthropology
- a specifically Christian alternative?