

Practical Theology and Predominance of Practical Anthropology in the Modern Age*

Hossein Houshang¹ 

© The Author(s) 2024

Submitted: 2024.02.16 | Accepted: 2024.05.25



Abstract

Religion is intended for humans; as such, changes in humanity inevitably lead to changes in religious practice and, consequently, religious observance. This raises the question of which aspects of religion (such as ethics, beliefs, rituals, and other practices) should take precedence. The modern era and the Enlightenment have witnessed a transformation in anthropology, where humans, viewed through a naturalistic lens, are considered beings of compensation and social interaction. During the Enlightenment and after Kant's Copernican revolution, humans were recognized and introduced as subjects, creators of their perceptions. In this phase, the focus shifted to humans as agents rather than purely rational beings, emphasizing desires, will, and emotion more than rational thought. In such a perspective on humanity, concepts like freedom, commitment, responsibility, and emotions such as philanthropy, compassion, and modesty, which manifest in practical life, gain priority in anthropology. This focus also leads to the expansion and development of practical sciences (including ethics, politics, the philosophy of history, the philosophy of religion, and anthropology itself). Regardless of whether the shift towards modernity in human nature is seen as correct or mistaken, Christian theology has acknowledged this change in the concept and reality of human beings through the development of practical theology. Similarly, Islamic theology and doctrine cannot ignore this change either. The modern human is seen as an agent and not a mere subject, and from religion and theology, there is an expectation of practical and concrete guidance in life. Scholars of religion and theologians must utilize the total capacity of religious sciences—including theology, philosophy, ethics, jurisprudence, principles of jurisprudence, exegesis, and the science of hadith—along with relevant modern sciences to advance the development of practical Islamic theology as an interdisciplinary religious science.

Keywords: practical theology, Islamic practical theology, practical anthropology, theoretical anthropology

This paper builds upon and extends the work previously published in Persian as a chapter in: Akbari, Reza (ed.). 2023. *Practical Theology: Capacities and Challenges*. Mashhad: Bunyād-i Pazhūhishhā-yi Islāmī. ISBN: 978-600-06-0627-5.

Special acknowledgment is due to Rasoul Rahbari Ghazani's assistance in translating the paper from Persian to English.

1. Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy and Theology, Imam Sadiq University, Tehran, Iran. (h.houshang@isu.ac.ir)

1. Introduction

Anthropology varies depending on its origin (Murphy 2006, ix). Depending on whether its basis is reason, experience, revelation, or imagination, it manifests as philosophical, scientific, religious (theological), or ultimately mythological anthropology. This paper focuses solely on philosophical anthropology, not considering religious or mythological forms. However, from the perspectives of both biology and natural sciences and the social and human sciences, scientific anthropology will be relevant to the extent that it influences philosophical anthropology. Anthropologies derived from natural or human sciences are inherently fragmentary due to the limitations of empirical and scientific methods (Dierkes 2001, 4-5).

Philosophical or fundamental anthropology, consistent with its rational and philosophical nature, seeks a comprehensive, holistic, essential, and all-encompassing understanding of humans. This can be either *a priori*, relying solely on rational principles and aimed at discovering immutable, necessary, and universal truths, or *a posteriori*, based on empirical findings. Even the latter form remains rational as it infers from, but not reducible to, experience. In the tradition of Sadra's philosophy, there is a hint to this kind of reason called "inferior reason." It is concerned with particulars and sensory details and attentive to the diverse and changeable aspects of life (Mulla Sadra, 1981, 3: 361). Posterior anthropological studies typically consider humans in their natural state, examining their needs, emotions, and feelings.

Philosophical anthropology is also divided based on human spheres and faculties:

(1) Theoretical anthropology, typically *a priori*, explores human features based on his faculty of knowledge and theoretical character. This form of anthropology considers an ideal (as opposed to real), perfect, abstract, and spiritual human being, defined in comparison to God rather than other creatures. In this view, human reality is determined by the levels of theoretical reason, and ultimate perfection is rational and epistemological. This perfection is individual (attaining the level of acquired intellect and union with the active intellect, as per Islamic philosophy) and transcends temporal and historical life; it is objective and concerned with discovering objective truths. This type of anthropology should be pursued primarily in theoretical psychology as outlined by philosophers, framed in universal, necessary, and permanent propositions.

(2) Practical anthropology seeks to understand humans through the principles of human action. Prioritizing the realm of action shifts the focus from thought, knowledge, and truth-centered dimensions to the periphery, emphasizing ethical, social, freedom, responsibility, and commitment aspects instead. It considers

specific human emotions such as modesty, compassion, philanthropy, kindness, love, regret, despair, and a sense of inferiority. This form of anthropology is generally posterior because, in the practical realm, the human being has a objective and concrete life. The practical approach sometimes suggests that humans should be understood based on their mental constructs and things, such as language, art, mythology, and science (Cassirer 1994, 103). According to Islamic logic, propositions related to this anthropology are categorized as accepted propositions (*al-Maqbūlāt*) and endoxic (*al-Mashhūrāt*) propositions. These propositions are agentive, revolving around human needs, desires, and perspectives, focusing on human life's variable, diverse, and historical aspects. This approach should be explored in philosophies related to ethics, religion, history, culture, and politics, which, due to their *objective and concrete* nature, also engage with social sciences, biology, and natural sciences today.

Today, practical anthropology receives significant attention in modern and contemporary philosophical thought. Historically, classical philosophies, including Islamic philosophy, emphasized the intellectual and theoretical aspects in defining human essence and its perfection. While these philosophies did address the natural (instinctual and non-cognitive) and social (interactive with others) aspects of human nature, as well as human development, their approach was largely theoretical. Philosophers have explored these aspects mainly within the realm of practical wisdom. However, these practical considerations were often marginalized compared to theoretical anthropology and treated as supplementary to the pursuit of theoretical and intellectual perfection. Consequently, practical anthropology has not received the necessary attention in Islamic philosophy. Thus, a comprehensive and foundational anthropology that encompasses all human dimensions, both theoretical and practical, has remained elusive.

Among Islamic philosophers and thinkers, Tabataba'i stands out for his dedicated attention to practical anthropology within his philosophical discourse, alongside his theoretical, transcendent, and a priori anthropology. In his book on anthropology, *al-Insan*, or *The Human Being*, Tabataba'i has devoted sections "The Human Being before the Material World" and "The Human Being After the Material World" to a priori and theoretical anthropology. However, in the section "The Human Being in the Material World," he explores the human being within the context of worldly life, defining humans as beings who create social constructs, thereby entering posterior and practical anthropology (Tabataba'i 1992, 41-47).

2. Modern and Contemporary Philosophical Anthropology

Modern and contemporary philosophers, avoiding metaphorical implication of soul, mind, and spirit, distinguish their anthropological thought from classical

teachings by referring to humans as “self,” “ego,” and “psyche” (Solomon 1988). With the dominance of a posterior and empirical approach in modern culture, philosophy naturally interacted with new natural, social, and behavioral sciences. Consequently, the practical aspects of human identity and life have become central to the definition of humanity. This shift from the classical, theoretical, and spiritual view of humans has resulted in an anthropology that adopts practical, moral, and pragmatic approaches.

Beyond philosophy, three cultural currents have emerged in modern and contemporary anthropology. These include the Abrahamic tradition (understanding humanity through the narrative of Adam and Eve and the notion of humans as divine breath and vicegerents), the ancient Greek rational anthropology (relying on concepts such as Logos, Nous, Phronesis, and psyche), and the modern scientific tradition, encompassing natural, biological, and psychological sciences (viewed through the lens of Darwinian evolution). Theoretical perspectives dominate the first two traditions, while the scientific stream emphasizes a practical approach, following a posterior method and focusing on humans’ natural and concrete existence.

Following the interaction between modern philosophy and science, philosophers began to view humans as agents and self-determining, moral and political entities. Prominent thinkers such as Kant, Fichte, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud have produced works centered on anthropology. Max Scheler notably wrote independent works in philosophical anthropology (Scheler 1978; 2021). These works exhibit a practical orientation towards humanity. Along with his transcendental and rational anthropology—which also prioritizes a practical outlook (portraying humans as active agents shaping knowledge, ethics, and aesthetics)—Kant authored an independent work titled *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, which has a posterior and practical approach (Kant 2006). Even in idealism, the most abstract of modern philosophies, philosophers like Fichte and Hegel regard philosophy as focused on freedom and ethics (Solomon 1988, 50). The efforts of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Marx, among other philosophers, have also centered on action, ethics, and addressing how to live. Nietzsche particularly criticizes the belief that happiness is derived from discovering truth (Solomon 1988, 117). Existentialists emphasize on human as the origin of action, highlighting the importance of human emotions and feelings. In Marx’s thought, more explicitly than anywhere else, humans are characterized as laborers (Dierkes 2001, 104).

The dominance of the practical approach in modern anthropology can be explained under three models: (1) The departure from animalistic starting points, defining humans based on their distinctive features from other animals. This

includes humans being upright, possessing weaker instincts but compensating with reason, language, social life, and strong memory, thereby defining them as “homo compensators” (Mosleh 2014, 62-63). Philosophers like Herder, Portmann, and Gehlen have viewed humans from this comparative perspective, defining humans as such compensators (Berlin 1994, 73-74). In his book *Man, His Nature and Place in the World*, Gehlen links human path-finding to establishing institutions, which he believes shape human feelings, beliefs, and behavioral patterns through social constructs like schools, laws, families, markets, and churches (Mosleh 2014, 128-129).

(2) The nature-centered approach defines humans based on their fundamental natural drives. Here, human physical and natural aspects are emphasized, leading to physicalism and materialism. Naturalists like Schopenhauer, who attributed primacy to the will to live, have stressed the principle of self-preservation and the instinct for survival as the fundamental, innate, and practical tendency in defining human identity (Copleston 1994, 273). Physicalists such as Dolametri, proponents of philosophical-social and philosophical-historical Darwinism, and behaviorists like Skinner, who consider the mechanism of stimulus and response fundamental, support naturalism and prioritize the practical aspect of human behavior (Feist *et al* 2017, 491-492).

(3) The society-centered and civil approach recognizes humans as inherently social and political beings (Aristotle 2011, 5). This model emphasizes the practical aspect of human identity, with society serving as the arena for reciprocal human actions and as a product of practical virtues. Modern philosophers such as Hobbes and Rousseau have followed this model in their anthropologies. Hobbes views humans outside of society and devoid of culture as akin to wolves, dominated by selfishness and a propensity to exploit others (Brehier 2006, 183). While Rousseau also adopts a pathological view of human society, he considers it an inevitable condition and thus prioritizes the practical aspects of human nature (Rousseau 2002, 122).

3. Transformation in Theology

Human beings are the intended recipients of religion, which seeks to alleviate human suffering and promote their perfection. Consequently, religiosity can and should not be indifferent about changes occurring in human historically without evaluation of these changes as correct or false. As a systematic study of religion, theology must inevitably reassess itself in light of these changes. Modern humans differ eminently from their traditional ones, especially considering that in the modern era, the individual is increasingly regarded as an agent and subject. It remains to be seen under this new anthropology what transformations theology

must undergo. In addressing the multiple dimensions of religion—beliefs, ethics, rituals, and religious experiences—it is crucial to determine which aspects should be prioritized in modern conditions. Additionally, understanding, interpreting, and deriving teachings from religious sources must also consider which directions these efforts should take in light of contemporary conditions.

In the West and Christian theology, particularly during the medieval period, theology predominantly adopted a theoretical approach to humanity influenced by the teachings of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus. However, the Renaissance marked a gradual shift in human self-perception, and the Reformation movement recognized and legitimized this shift toward a greater focus on human action, will, and emotions, thus distinguishing Protestant theology from the rational and theoretical theology of the Middle Ages. Catholic theology, however, maintained its role as the guardian of Christian tradition against these changes until the 20th century, when it finally accommodated them. The recognition and prioritization of practical theology in the Christian world can arguably be considered a significant outcome of the impact of new anthropological insights on Christian theology.

In the Islamic tradition, the early centuries were characterized by a practical orientation in theology and Islamic jurisprudence, where even theoretical concepts were considered from a practical perspective and as an obligation (the notion of *tawhid*, or Oneness, as the first practical duty in theoretical analysis). In philosophy, too, the practical aspect was predominant; al-Farabi, for example, devoted his theoretical philosophical system entirely to serving his practical philosophy, as demonstrated in his book *Opinions of the Citizens of the Virtuous City*. The dominance of practical approaches in religious and civilizational sciences in Islam is so significant that contemporary German theologian Van Ess describes Islam as orthopraxy (correct practice), in contrast to Christianity, which he primarily views as orthodoxy (correct belief). However, with the rise of theoretical perspectives in philosophy and the marginalization of practical wisdom, Islamic theology subsequently took on a more theoretical dimension. Interestingly, in the early periods of Islamic philosophy, al-Farabi considered the rational defense of the practical decrees of religion as part of the duties of theology (al-Farabi 1996, 86-87).

However, Islamic theology and discourse in the current era must inevitably balance themselves with the changes affecting modern humans, whether Western or Eastern, to varying degrees. This adjustment is particularly accelerated by the pervasive spread of technology and the expansion of cyberspace, as both technology and cyberspace have emerged from and act as carriers of modern culture. Being agents and subjects, modern humans align with this level without denying their spiritual dimension. This means acknowledging natural, emotional

needs and desires integral to their identity. The role of civic and social life is fundamental in shaping their destiny and perfection. Consequently, the previously dominant theoretical realm has been deposed in favor of a transformation across the domains of knowledge, emotion, will, and action.

To address the transformation in the realm of theology and set the stage for the realization of practical theology, it is initially imperative to revise our understanding of anthropology, allowing true transformation to permeate our consciousness. This awareness must encompass human agency, subjectivity, and its prerequisites, grounded in reevaluating the potentials within Islamic philosophical and theological traditions. Traditionally, these potentials have been overshadowed by a dominant theoretical approach. Islamic philosophers' discussions on practical wisdom and the majority of theologians' debates provide a suitable source for deriving and reconstructing a contemporary, indigenous, practical anthropology. Topics such as the physicality of creation and the spirituality of the soul's survival (Mulla Sadra 1981, 5: 289) and discussions on the soul's faculties in psychology are also invaluable in this endeavor.

Tabataba'i's practical and conventional (*i'tibārī*) perceptions theory is particularly illuminating among contemporary philosophical theories. By introducing this theory, Tabataba'i has significantly advanced classical anthropology, emphasizing the practical aspects of human identity to develop a more comprehensive (theoretical and practical) anthropology. In this theory, Tabataba'i posits that a "convention" (*i'tibār*) in itself is an activity and mental act arising from vital needs and psychic desires aimed at achieving tangible goals and satisfying desires (Tabataba'i n.d., 130, 253). Thus, it is clear that from Tabataba'i's perspective, conventions are fundamentally created and innovated in human action. Because of this, the result of conventions is called practical perceptions (and also imaginary, unreal, and notional) (Tabataba'i n.d., 151). In this view, humans are primarily considered as the origin of action, not an epistemic subject.

From Tabataba'i's perspective, conventions profoundly connect with human nature and development. Human activities addressing their natural and developmental needs are based on conventional perceptions of obligation, goodness, harm, benefit, good, and evil. Essentially, human life is enveloped in and pursued through these constructed meanings and perceptions, which "act as intermediaries between the inherent imperfections of human nature and the subsequent perfections" (Tabataba'i 1992, 47). In this perspective, humans are seen as imperfect beings who attain perfection and emancipate themselves from the constraints of nature through action and conduct. In contrast, plants live by their inherent active nutrition, growth, and reproduction powers. Anthropology derived from the convention theory is empirical, posterior, and practical.

Conversely, the Islamic philosophical tradition's anthropology is rational, a priori, and theoretical. This type of rational anthropology focuses on the ultimate purpose and completeness of the perfect human, emphasizing the theoretical, perceptual, and rational aspects.

Therefore, to realize practical anthropology and, consequently, practical theology, it is necessary to focus not only on the higher, ideal, and spiritual aspects of human existence but also on the natural, physical, intermediate, and hence practical aspects. This is because human actions, which precede spiritual stages, occur in this state to address needs, deficiencies, and future perfections. This examination of humans in the stage of nature is seen in Tabataba'i's theory of the corporeality of the creation of the soul and the theory of conventions. A crucial aspect here is defining the relationship between the natural and spiritual human, essentially determining the link between natural perfection and spiritual perfection, or in other words, establishing the relationship between natural-experiential (prudence) ethics, which pertain to the level of nature and natural goals, and intellectual-spiritual and transcendent ethics, which relate to spiritual life and intellectual ends.

Based on this practical anthropology, all theologians and scholars must utilize the total capacity of religious sciences—including theology, ethics, jurisprudence and principles of jurisprudence, interpretation, and philosophy—along with social sciences and conventional sciences to pave the ground toward the realization of practical Islamic theology as an interdisciplinary religious science.

4. Conclusion

Practical theology, distinct from classical and theoretical theology and independent of its development within a Christian context, aims to direct religious beliefs and teachings toward addressing the tangible problems of modern human life and using these teachings to solve individual and social issues and enhance living conditions. Since humans are evolving beings and other aspects related to them, such as economics, politics, governance, law, science, art, and culture in general, revolve around them, the stability and change in these areas are dependent on the constant and variable aspects of humans. Theology, which focuses on human guidance and perfection, is no exception to this rule. Therefore, if modern humans have transformed and the predominant cultural perception is of humans as agents and subjects whose cognitive abilities serve their agentive powers, theology must also unavoidably acknowledge this transformation. The realization of practical theology in Christianity results from this synchrony and flexibility. Islamic practical theology fundamentally relies on an anthropological understanding. Achieving this is possible through a contemporary reinterpretation of that segment

of the rich theological and philosophical heritage about human nature's practical aspects. Such an anthropological approach is a prerequisite for developing practical theology.

References

- Aristotle. 2011. *Politics*. Translated by Hamid Enayat. Tehran: Shirkat-i Sahāmī-yi Kitābhā-yi Ḥabībī. (In Persian)
- Berlin, I. 1994. *The Magus of the North*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Brehier, Emile. 2006. *The History of Philosophy: The Seventeenth Century*. Translated by Ismail Saadat. Tehran: Hirmis. (In Persian)
- Cassirer, Ernst. 1994. *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*. Translated by Bozorg Naderzad. Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies. (In Persian)
- Copleston, F. 1994. *A History of Philosophy, Vol. 7, (Modern Philosophy, from the Post-Kantian Idealists to Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche)*. New York: Image Books.
- Dierkes, Hans. 2001. *Philosophical Anthropology*. Translated by Muhammad Reza Beheshti. Tehran: Hirmis. (In Persian)
- Fārābī, Abū Naṣr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad (al-Farabi). 1996. *Iḥṣā' al-'Ulūm*. Beirut: Dār wa Maktaba al-Hilāl. (In Arabic)
- Feist, Jess, Gregory Feist, & Tomi-Ann Roberts. 2017. *Theories of Personality*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Kant, Immanuel. 2006. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Edited by Robert B. Loudon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mosleh, Ali Asghar. 2014. *Philosophy of Culture*. Tehran: Intishārāt-i 'Ilmī. (In Persian)
- Mulla Sadra (Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī), Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm. 1981. *al-Ḥikmah al-Muta'aliya fī-l-Asfār al-'Aqlīyya al-'Arba'a*. Vol. 3, 5. Beirut: Dār al-Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī. (In Arabic)
- Murphy, N. 2006. *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 2002. *The Social Contract*. Translated by Morteza Kalantarian. Tehran: Āgah. (In Persian)
- Scheler, Max. 1978. "The Idea of Man." Translated by Clyde Nabe. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 9: 184–198.
- Scheler, Max. 2021. *Cognition and Work: A Study Concerning the Value and Limits of the Pragmatic Motifs in the Cognition of the World*. Translated by Zachary Davis. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Solomon, R. 1988. *A History of Western Philosophy*. Vol. 7, (Continental Philosophy since 1750: The Rise and Fall of the Self). New York: Oxford University Press.

Tabataba'i, Muhammad Husayn. 1992. *Man from the Beginning to the End*. Translated and Annotated by Sadegh Larijani. Tehran: Intishārāt-i al-Zahrā. (In Persian)

Tabataba'i, Muhammad Husayn. n.d. *Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism*, Vol. 2. Annotations and Footnotes by Morteza Motahhari. Qom: Intishārāt-i Şadrā. (In Persian)