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What Is Anthropology?

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Anthropology is a way—or rather a collection of many different ways—of studying human beings and their closest primate relatives. The term *anthropology* comes from two Greek words: *anthropos*, meaning “man” (in the sense of human being), and *logos*, meaning “to reason” (or study).

THE BRANCHES OF ANTHROPOLOGY

If one thinks of the overall discipline of anthropology as a tree, then it is a tree consisting of four major branches and many smaller branches and twigs. The four major branches are physical anthropology, archaeology, linguistics, and cultural anthropology.

1. *Physical anthropology* is the study of human biology—but not just biology alone. Whether studying the fossil remains of our ancestors, the distribution of diverse genes among the world’s contemporary populations, the mechanisms of genetic inheritance, the differing shapes and colors characterizing people in various regions, or even the behavior patterns of humans and their primate relatives, physical anthropologists are concerned with the manner in which all these things are related to the natural and social environments in which the subjects are living. So physical anthropology really is the study of the biological processes of humans and their primate relatives in their natural and social contexts or environments.

2. *Archaeology* is the retrieval and study of human remains. This includes not only their bodily remains (which certainly can tell us a great deal about how they lived and died), but also the remains of the things they built, produced, and made use of. In other words archaeologists attempt to find and study all the traces that human groups have left behind—of themselves and of all their activities—and they seek to understand the ways these remains are related to each other and the environments in which they occur.

3. *Linguistics* is the study and analysis of human communication systems, but most especially of language. Some linguists attempt to reconstruct the earlier

language forms from which our present languages have evolved. Others study modern languages in order to learn how they encode the range of human experiences, what grammatical forms they feature, or what separates language from the communication systems of other species. Some linguists are concerned with what language usage can reveal about the different social groups within a society. Others are interested in what can be learned about the nature of the human mind from the study of language. So linguistics is *not* what many people take it to be—the mere learning of a lot of different languages—rather it embodies the use of research into languages in order to better understand the nature of human beings as a species.

4. *Cultural anthropology* is the study of culture and cultures. Culture consists of the shared patterns of behavior and associated meanings that people learn and participate in within the groups to which they belong. Every group, down to each individual family, has its own culture, and each culture is unique. Of course some cultures are quite similar to each other (say, the family cultures of a specific community); others are very different (nomadic Arab culture and Eskimo culture, for example). Some anthropologists study the nature of culture in general as an element of human existence; others are more interested in studying a specific culture (perhaps the culture of a Norwegian fishing village or a *barrio* in Mexico City). Culture, by providing “designs for living,” enables humans to be extremely flexible and resourceful in solving problems posed by the natural environment, and our species is unique in that it inhabits virtually every niche that nature has wrought on our planet. The better we understand culture, the closer we shall come to understanding what it means to be a human being.