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The quest to identify human universals within anthropology goes back at least to the claims of the renowned German linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1776-1835), who asserted that all humans shared a common nature (*Gattungs-Charakter*) despite their different languages and cultures (Bunzl, 1996, pp. 22, 31). Later, the German ethnologist Adolf Bastian (1826-1905), who was influenced by von Humboldt and Johann Gottfried Herder, promoted similar notions. Bastian, educated as a medical doctor, went on expeditions to collect artifacts and cultural knowledge in Central America, China, Southern and Southeast Asia, Africa, and Australia. Following publications detailing these expeditions, he was appointed as professor of ethnology at the University of Berlin and went on to establish the Royal Museum für Völkerkunde, where he trained many anthropologists, including the young Franz Boas. Bastian opposed the idea of distinct ‘races’ of humans and argued for “the psychic unity of mankind,” proposing that cross cultural studies would demonstrate that all human societies share a set of “elementary ideas,” (*Elementargedanken*). Bastian, like Herder before him, maintained that the world consisted of many different cultures and languages based on geographical locales, migration, and historical circumstances that resulted in particularistic “folk ideas” (*Völkergedanken*), which were local modifications of those elementary ideas. Later, these ideas were taken up by Boas in developing American anthropology in the early twentieth century (Bunzl, 1996).

In the mid-twentieth century, there were attempts at identifying human universals by neo-evolutionists such as Leslie White and cultural ecologists such as Julian Steward and other American anthropologists. In Ralph Linton’s 1945 edited volume *The Science of Man in the World Crisis*, George P. Murdock contributed a chapter entitled, “The Common Denominator of Cultures,” wherein he listed in alphabetical order 73 universals ranging from age grading to kinship nomenclature to food taboos to status differentiation. Eventually, Murdock’s efforts led to the development of the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF), which produced an enormous volume of cross-cultural research. Other American anthropologists such as Harvard University’s Clyde Kluckhohn discussed the various factors that resulted in universals in different cultures. This interest in the exploration of universals was dampened following Clifford Geertz’s relativist critique of universals as banal, vague tautologies, trivial, and as mere clichés in his 1965 essay, “The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man,” the study of universals languished for some time. But in 1991, anthropologist Donald E. Brown published *Human Universals*, which highlighted many fundamental commonalities and cross-cultural universals throughout the world. The book included a discussion of how most contemporary anthropologists have focused on cultural differences and tended to neglect or criticize any empirical studies of shared human universals. Brown’s consideration of universals became widely known beyond anthropology in Steven Pinker’s popular books *The Language Instinct* (1994) and *The Blank Slate* (2002) and in Francis Fukuyama’s *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (2002). In addition, Brown’s book was well received in some literary circles, as in the British novelist Ian McEwan’s essay “Literature, Science, and Human Nature” (2005).

Twenty-five years after Brown’s book, German anthropologist Christoph Antweiler has produced a comprehensive and detailed exposition regarding human universals in *Our Common Denominator: Human Universals Revisited*, translated by Diane Kerns. Antweiler, a Southeast Asia specialist, has been discussing human universals in various German and English

publications for many years. Within the contemporary intellectual atmosphere of postmodernism and anti-theoretical relativism in anthropology, his emphasis on universals is risky and places him within a minority. Antweiler, however, does not see investigations into cultural difference and examinations of universals as mutually exclusive. In agreement with Brown, he argues that the focus on the specificities of cultural difference and ethnographic case studies tend to marginalize human universals. Antweiler castigates the contemporary portrayal of cultural anthropology within the media and popular culture as the study of the foreign, strange, and exotic that has accompanied the ethnographic focus on cultural difference.¹ Antweiler believes that a revived interest in universals is overdue and cites Pascal Boyer's statement that the relative unimportance of universals for ethnographers may be due to a sort of "on the job sickness" that is a result of extensive participant observation fieldwork (1994, p. 6, 111). One of the major goals in Antweiler's treatment is to undermine the notion that universals are necessarily biologically determined or part of human nature. He advocates a cautious, empirically-based approach for the understanding of universals and commonalities that are derived from the interaction between nature and nurture or biology and culture/social and systemic sources (p.1). Antweiler suggests that there is a complementarity between the ethnographic research on the particularities of specific cultures and the identification of universals and commonalities.

Another one of Antweiler's goals is to demonstrate how the empirical study of universals and commonalities can contribute both to the struggle for human rights and against xenophobia and racism. In a recent essay, he argued that the recognition of pancultural universals is necessary for the development of an anthropologically-based cosmopolitan consciousness (Antweiler, 2015). Although the major focus of the book is on the empirical investigation of commonalities and universals by anthropologists, in Chapter 1, Antweiler explores the important connections with this research to the major philosophical questions about human nature, universal norms, human rights, and conceptions of humankind raised by Plato, the Stoics, Cicero, the Judeo-Christian and Islamic heritages, Kant, Freud, Roland Barthes, Francois Lyotard, Alain Finkielkraut, Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas, Tagore, Martha Nussbaum, Amartya Sen, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Judith Butler, as well as by the authors of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. In Chapter 2, following a summary of the anthropological research on universals, Antweiler argues that although these universals are usually assumed to be tied to questions of human nature, they are not equivalent to inherent human attributes or 'natural' dispositions. He makes the important point that the occurrence of a universal in a society does not imply that all individuals are affected by the universal. Thus, religion or dance may be found in all societies, but this does not mean that all individuals are religiously inclined or dance. In addition, in this chapter, he discusses how Eurocentric, Occidental, and ethnocentric biases within anthropology and elsewhere have been guilty of describing other societies as lacking universal characteristics, engendering notions of cultural deficits and handicaps. Antweiler contends that the identification of empirically-based universal commonalities among all societies may facilitate more humanitarian policies and fewer ethnocentric international development projects.

Chapter 3 is an exegesis of what is meant by culture and human nature. Antweiler notes that one cannot regard 'cultures' as isolated wholes or homogeneous units. Instead, he cites the cognitive anthropologists' literature that has emphasized cultures' intracultural and intercultural diversity. Antweiler draws on the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss' metaphorical model of 'bricolage' to discuss how cultures are formed through combinations of elements from diverse sources. With respect to human nature, he refers to one of Ernest Gellner's queries

regarding humanity's biological uniformity: Is there one kind of man, or are there many? Antweiler discusses how some existentialist philosophers, symbolic, constructivist, and postmodernist thinkers have rejected the concept of human nature, at times linking it with reactionary right wing ideology, sexism, colonial thinking, and Social Darwinism.

He discusses others who have tried to define a human nature based on "ontological factors" such as biological foundations or species-wide characteristics. Antweiler concurs that there is no such thing as a 'culture-free' human and that humans are fundamentally biocultural. He argues that all of human behavior is a final result of a "multi-level reduction process" that involves both natural and cultural factors, including random genetic factors, the prenatal environment, epigenetics affecting the fetus, and personal decision-making (p. 77). In closing this chapter, Antweiler presents two tables that reflect his views of human nature. One table lists features that he refers to as "quasi-examples" of features of human nature that appear in all cultures—such as the form of the family or personality—but that vary dramatically among cultures and individuals. A final table lists characteristics or capabilities of all humans, such as speaking aloud with grammar and syntax or understanding other persons as intentional actors. This latter table suggests how a form of human nature can be distinguished from a non-human animal nature.

In Chapter 4, Antweiler describes a number of empirically-based universals identified within anthropology and other fields of study. These include narratives and expressive culture such as storytelling; life histories and biographies; folklore or oral literature with universal themes of sexuality, love, and kinship; visual media; art; music and dance; norms for social interaction; kinship based on both biological and metaphorical relationships; multigenerational families that have reproductive, economic, social, and emotional functions; marriage; reciprocity and social exchange; socioeconomic inequality correlated with general status, rank, and prestige; prohibitions against murder, violence, and rape; ethnicity and ethnocentrism; worldviews that reify and anthropomorphize nature; specific concepts of persons with autonomy and lasting identity; cognitive attributes including logical thinking, recognizing prototypes, and inferring essentialist features of plants, animals, and human groups; the numerous universals in languages; basic emotions linked with facial expressions; violence (mostly male); egoism; nepotism; stereotypes about males and females; sexual jealousy; and romantic love. For most of these postulated universals, Antweiler discusses the literature and critical debates among anthropologists and others regarding the validity of these universals.

Chapter 5 provides cautionary notes on the methodology for identifying empirically-based universals in different societies by drawing on deductions from theory, (and abduction), specific case studies, and testing and evaluating cross-cultural and cross-species comparisons. Chapter 6 continues with these cautionary notes on how one specifies the forms, levels, and the depth of universals. Following Brown, Antweiler distinguishes 'near universals' from 'absolute universals,' and 'implicational universals.' He critiques the notion of absolute universals but accepts statistical universals or near universals (*i.e.* those that occur widely in unrelated societies with a greater frequency than would occur by chance). An example of a near universal would include the fact that ninety-five percent of the world's population has domesticated dogs. Implicational universals take the form of if/then universals (*i.e.*, if A occurs, then B will always occur). Chapter 7 takes up the explanatory question regarding why universals exist. Antweiler discusses 10 various pitfalls that rely on faulty assumptions and faulty causal reasoning with respect to explaining universals. These include privileging cultural context over the similarities of behaviors, neglecting biocultural factors, implying genetic causes or genetic determinism, and

not distinguishing individual and cultural levels of universality. He concludes the chapter with a description of the three major explanations of universals: (1) those resulting from cultural diffusion or cultural expansion, (2) those associated with evolved human dispositions, and (3) those reflecting behavioral adaptations and responses to similar living circumstances.

Chapter 8 is a presentation of the critiques of universals, including Geertz's relativist argument that became canonized, the claims regarding the imposition of universals onto other societies based on Eurocentric hegemony and ethnocentrism, and the widespread politicization of anthropology as a discipline that neglects the significant contributions of empirical research, a result of postmodern and postcolonial movements. Antweiler deftly answers these critiques. The final chapter is a plea for continuing ethnographic and cross-cultural research on universals, as they can help illuminate both the biological and cultural factors that impinge on the nature of humans and are relevant to questions about human rights, racism, cultural conflict, and globalization. The book has a few errors such as identifying Pascal Boyer as a religious philosopher and Scott Atran as a psychologist, though they are both cognitive anthropologists who worked closely with Dan Sperber at CNRS, *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique*, in Paris. There are also a few paragraphs of the book that could have been cleaned up and clarified in the translation to English. However, the book nonetheless represents a major contribution to the anthropological research on the contemporary issues and debates regarding universals or the commonalities among us. Berghahn press should be congratulated for producing such a work.

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¹ Geertz described anthropologists as “peddlers of the strange” and “merchants of astonishment” (1984).