



**THE HUMAN
CONDITION:
REINVENTING
PHILOSOPHICAL
ANTHROPOLOGY**



AARHUS
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CONFERENCE DESCRIPTION

In recent years, prominent anthropologists have identified a certain lacuna. Inspired by a renewed interest in ethics and human agency, provoked by the all too rigid schematics of social reproduction, by trends commonly referred to as 'post-' or 'transhumanism', and by the findings of biological anthropology and the cognitive sciences, they have in various ways articulated the desire for something like a philosophical anthropology: that is, an approach to the question of the human that not only depicts the plurality of human life forms in their socio-cultural, ethical and normative diversity, but that moreover dares to ask for features common to all humans qua being human. Simultaneously, prominent philosophers have suggested a similar move towards philosophical anthropology, often in order to provide a more solid grounding for an all too specialized discourse in philosophical ethics or philosophy of mind, thereby echoing a certain reluctance to altogether dismiss ideas of humanism, despite of the dubious reputation of this term in late modern philosophical thinking.

The term 'philosophical anthropology' thus enjoys a certain interest across the disciplines that compose its name. However, it is by no means clear what kind of approach this term actually refers to. Perhaps philosophical anthropology reflects the peculiar status of its subject – the human being – as it is a label for something whose essential characters remain elusive. The project of Philosophical anthropology would hence refuse any methodological dogmas and remain a project and an ongoing effort to be reinvented anew.

The conference presents a number of prominent speakers from anthropology and philosophy all of whom have, in some way or the other, occasionally or more systematically, articulated the urge for a new philosophical anthropology.

We are looking forward to three inspiring days at the AIAS in June!

Visit the conference website:

<http://aias.au.dk/events/the-human-condition-reinventing-philosophical-anthropology/>

DAY 1: WEDNESDAY 24 JUNE 2015

- 10.00 – 10.30 Registration and coffee
- 10.30 – 10.45 Opening speech by AIAS Fellow Cheryl Mattingly and Vice-chair of the AIAS Board of Directors, Prof. Jørgen Frøkiær
- Chair: Maria Louw
- 10.45 – 11.45 Jonathan Lear: 'The Irony of Anthropology'
- 11.45 – 12.45 Lunch
- 12.45 – 13.45 Michael D. Jackson: 'Atonal Anthropology'
- 13.45 – 14.45 Bernhard Leistle: "I am a psychological and historical structure" – Philosophical Anthropology and the Problem of Culture'
- 14.45 – 15.15 Coffee break
- 15.15 – 16.15 Jarrett Zigon: 'What is a situation? The drug war'
- 16.15 – 17.15 Thomas Schwarz Wentzer: "Sozein ta phainomena" – thoughts towards responsive anthropology'
- 17.30 – 19.00 Welcome reception in the AIAS Hall
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DAY 2: THURSDAY 25 JUNE 2015

Chair: Rasmus Dyring

- 09.00 – 10.00 Cheryl Mattingly: 'Ordinary Possibility and Improbable Futures'
- 10.00 – 10.30 Coffee break
- 10.30 – 11.30 Sverre Raffnsøe: 'Human Beings in the Middle of the World on the Verge of Themselves - Philosophical Anthropology in the Anthropocene'
- 11.30 – 12.30 Timothy Ingold: 'One World Anthropology'
- 12.30 – 13.30 Lunch
- 13.30 – 14.30 Didier Fassin: Title and abstract TBA
- 14.30 – 15.30 Lotte Meinert: 'The Monstrous: 'Between cen spirits and The Hague'
- 15.30 – 15.50 Coffee break
- 15.50 – 16.50 Line Ingerslev: 'Responsive agency in habits'
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DAY 3: FRIDAY 26 JUNE 2015

Chair: Thomas Schwarz Wentzer

- 09.00 – 10.00 Veena Das: 'Is there a "common sense" of humanity and the experience of limits'
- 10.00 – 10.30 Coffee break
- 10.30 – 11.30 Michael Lambek: 'Philosophy and Anthropology: in Dialogue and on Error'
- 11.30 – 12.30 Rasmus Dyring: 'Singularity: An *Essay* in Philosophical Anthropology'
- 12.30 – 13.30 Lunch
- 13.30 – 14.30 Jason Throop: 'Being Open to the World: Epoché, Ethnography, and Experience'
- 14.30 – 15.15 Closing remarks/roundtable
- 15.15 – 15.45 Coffee and farewell
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ABSTRACTS

Bernhard Leistle, Assistant Professor, Dept. of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University, Canada

“I am a psychological and historical structure” – Philosophical Anthropology and the Problem of Culture

Rather than attempting to formulate a genuinely “new” philosophical position, or, alternatively, to apply concepts and theories of existing philosophical approaches, I will address the problem of a reinvention of philosophical anthropology from the perspective of cultural anthropology. My questioning is inspired by the pragmatics of empirical research, rather than the search for essential truths: What does anthropological research and in particular the practice of ethnographic fieldwork imply for our understanding of human nature? And conversely, which conditions does a new philosophical anthropology have to fulfill in order to provide a foundation for anthropological practices?

In the course of its 100 year old history, anthropology has, in my opinion, demonstrated two things beyond reasonable doubt: 1. human behavior and experience is culturally informed through and through, including the level of bodily sensation and perception; 2. human beings are not closed off within their cultural worlds, but are able to communicate with each other across cultural boundaries. A “new” philosophical anthropology has to be able to reconcile these two fundamental, yet partially contradictory facts. In my paper, I will make a step towards such reconciliation through the development of a dialectical-structural perspective derived from, among others, Canguilhem and Merleau-Ponty.

Cheryl Mattingly, Professor, AIAS and Dept. of Anthropology and the Division of Occupational Science and Therapy, University of Southern California, USA

Ordinary Possibility and Improbable Futures

Among various recent proposals for a philosophical anthropology, Jonathan Lear's framing of it as an inquiry into "the field of possibilities in which all human endeavors gain meaning" (2006:7) holds special promise. Lear addresses the question of human possibility from a philosophical perspective and introduces the concept of "radical hope," but I want to suggest that his inquiry has particular pertinence for anthropology precisely because the possible, or the subjunctive, plays such a central role even in what we might call "ordinary hope." In this paper, I investigate how African American parents raising children with chronic illnesses and disabilities struggle to ascertain the "field of possibilities" that confronts them. Their commitment to possibility is bound up with the way that their children become "ground projects" for them. (Ground projects, following Bernard Williams, refer to the kinds of commitments that people find so deep to who they are that they might not care to go on with their lives without them, or would not know themselves if they no longer had them.) For some parents, raising their children involves a willingness, indeed a moral responsibility, to stake their efforts on possibilities that are highly (statistically) improbable – to be, in fact, unrealistic. Commitment to improbable possible futures is grounded less in naive optimism than an ethical responsivity that Cornel West describes as "blues hope." While my investigation is rooted in a particular ethnographic situation, my stronger proposal is that exploring human responsivity in relation to "ethical possibility" might reveal something very basic to the human condition.

Didier Fassin, James D. Wolfensohn Professor of Social Science, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton University, New Jersey

Title and abstract TBA

Jarrett Zigon, Associate Professor, Dept. of Anthropology and Sociology, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

What is a situation?: The drug war

In this essay I offer a new conception of situation through a delineation of the situation named drug war and the politics that have emerged out of it. I explore how what I have learned from the anti-drug war movement in terms of what they see themselves addressing, how they address it, and how they organize may help anthropologists rethink their own objects of study. I hope to show that the concept of situation significantly adds to the anthropological toolkit because it allows us to consider that which is widely diffused across different global scales as a non-totalizable assemblage, but yet in its occasional and temporary local manifestation allows us to understand how persons and objects that are geographically, socio-economically, and “culturally” distributed get caught up in the shared conditions that emerge from the situation. Furthermore, this conception is offered in response to recent concerns within and outside of anthropology that new and creative attempts must be made in the analysis of and engagement with the worlds we study. I argue that by being attuned to hidden potential in the worlds we research, and creatively and speculatively conceptualizing such potential, we can offer a uniquely anthropological contribution and engagement in social and political projects of becoming otherwise.

Jason Throop, Associate Professor, Dept. of Anthropology, University of California, USA

Being Open to the World: Epoché, Ethnography, and Experience

Our human condition is conditioned by the existential fact that we are beings who are open and responsive to the world. As the Czech phenomenologist Jan Patočka poetically phrased it, human beings are “beings of the far reaches.” Building upon and extending some of my earlier reflections on the distinctive modes of openness that are revealed in the context of an “ethnographic epoché” (Throop 2010, 2012), this talk will critically interrogate the various ways that affect

tive and mooded dimensions of intersubjective encounters disclose dynamic attunements to the possibilities and limits deemed integral to the world. It is my hope that turning to examine how such apertured attunements articulate with, and expose, the wordly conditions of which they are necessarily a part, will clear some new paths for thinking in contemporary philosophical anthropology.

Jonathan Lear, Professor, Dept. of Philosophy, University of Chicago, USA

The Irony of Anthropology

This talk will be a preliminary and introductory account of why there might be a felt need for something that answers to the term 'philosophical anthropology'; and what kind of approach might begin to satisfy that need.

Line Ingerslev, Assistant Professor, School of Culture and Society – Department of Philosophy, Aarhus University, Denmark

Responsive agency in habits

A rational agent is someone who knows what she is doing and why; and we hold her responsible for her actions. However, in our everyday lives we often act automatically, and even against our own will. Involuntary acts and habits are actions that appear to us as having already happened, namely beyond and before our conscious grasp. I catch myself in my habits: I am late again! And they surprise me: how could I do it, again? Despite their foreign nature, I know my habits very well to be mine, but in a strange way. This paper presents a view on human agency that allows us to consider even irrational acts like habits to be personal in a strong sense. It is argued that human agency is responsive which is why we are open to temporal displacements in our self-experience.

Lotte Meinert, Professor with Special Responsibilities at Anthropology, School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University, Denmark

The Monstrous: Between cen spirits and The Hague

This paper discusses the International Criminal Court (ICC) case against Dominique Ongwen, a senior commander in the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda. In January 2015 Ongwen surrendered himself and was taken to The Hague. The warrant of arrest against five top commanders of LRA for war crimes and crimes against humanity was issued ten years ago, and is receiving intense attention, partly because it is the first ICC case issued in history. It thus plays a crucial role for the establishment of authority around the ICC institution.

In the media, Ongwen, like the rebel leader Kony, has been portrayed as a monster, and indeed his violent actions are far beyond what is conventionally considered the boundaries of humanity. Yet, fieldwork among families in the area where Ongwen was abducted from when he was 10, show that most families want their sons and daughters back, even if they have been made into 'monsters'. They want to deal with the monstrous locally. When Ongwen gave himself up Acholi elders convened a meeting to discuss their stance. Some argued it would be important that Ongwen came home to undergo a cleansing ceremony for cen, the vengeful spirits angered by Ongwen's killings, before he went to Hague. This was important for at least two reasons: Firstly, cen would make Ongwen mentally disturbed and he could be exempted from punishment on those grounds. Secondly, cen would turn increasingly revengeful, when Ongwen was taken to the well-facilitated court in Hague, and cen would attack - not only Ongwen - but also his kin.

The case raises an array of questions about the intricate relations between humanity and the monstrous, victims and perpetrators, innocence and responsibility. Can a monster inflicted by cen spirits be held responsible for crimes against humanity? Can the monstrous be isolated to a single human being - like Ongwen? Is it even a human being - or beyond? I will discuss these questions of the monstrous within humanity in relation to Hannah Arendt's concepts of the banality of evil, judgment, forgiveness and the promise.

Michael Jackson, Distinguished Visiting Professor of World Religions, Dept. of Anthropology, Harvard University, USA

Atonal Anthropology

While philosophical anthropology has traditionally presumed to make universal claims about the human condition, modern socio-cultural anthropology has, for the most part, avoided such claims, preferring a vision of human diversity, ethnic distinctiveness, and moral relativism. The challenge for reinventing philosophical anthropology is working out how we can accommodate both these orientations, recognizing difference and similarity, dissonance and consonance. In my paper, I evoke Schönberg's atonal music, Adorno's negative dialectics, and Keats' negative capability in addressing the question of how it is possible to do justice to both our empirical knowledge of the linguistic, cultural, and individual diversity of humankind and our quest to identify modes of thought, action and being that are common to all humanity and, in many cases, are shared with other life forms.

Michael Lambek, Canada Research Chair, Dept. of Anthropology, University of Toronto Scarborough, Canada

Philosophy and Anthropology: in Dialogue and on Error

The first half of the paper reflects on the nature of the conversation between Anthropology and Philosophy, looking at various features, not least the question of the relationship of the human universal to the cultural particular, a relationship which I take, following Geertz, to be one of incommensurability. The second half of the paper attempts to exemplify the relationship between our two traditions by turning to the question of the ubiquity of error. Whereas some kinds of philosophy want to identify, describe, and classify error, perhaps even to weed it out, the tendency in anthropology has been to deny, ignore, or rationalize it in order to defend the rationality of "other cultures." Once we acknowledge the widespread presence of error can we say something positive about it?

Rasmus Dyring, PhD fellow, School of Culture and Society, Department of Philosophy, Aarhus University, Denmark

Singularity: An *Essay* in Philosophical Anthropology

Rather than presenting meticulously the conceptual framework of a new or reinvented philosophical anthropology, this paper throws itself recklessly into an attempt at a philosophico-anthropological analysis of the recent historical events surrounding Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia and the ensuing Tunisian Revolution. Against approaches that seek the meaning of such events, and of human affairs in general, in the *longue durée* and in the continuity of cultural contexts and the practical resources they offer, the paper suggests a complementary approach that stresses the importance of irreducibly singular aspects of the events—singular aspects that tie in with the singularity of finite human existence.

Sverre Raffnsøe, Professor, Dept. of Management, Politics and Philosophy, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

Human Beings in the Middle of the World on the Verge of Themselves - Philosophical Anthropology in the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene is heralded as a new epoch distinguishing itself from all foregoing eons in the history of the Earth. It is characterized by the overarching importance of the human species in a number of respects, but also by the recognition of human dependence and precariousness. A critical human turn affecting the human condition is still in the process of arriving in the wake of an initial Copernican Revolution and Kant's ensuing second Copernican Counter-revolution.

Within this landscape, issues concerning the human - its finitude, responsiveness, responsibility, maturity, auto-affection and relationship to itself - appear rephrased and re-accentuated as decisive probing questions. Concomitantly, the change has ramifications for the kinds of knowledge that can be acquired concerning human beings and for philosophical anthropology as a study of human existential beings in the world.

**Thomas Schwarz Wentzer, Associate Professor, School of Culture and Society,
Department of Philosophy, Aarhus University, Denmark**

Sozein ta phainomena – thoughts towards responsive anthropology

The paper wants to distinguish three different patterns of philosophical anthropology, all of which could be said to maintain the authority of ‘saving the phenomenon’, i.e. the competence to approach the human (whatever that may refer to) appropriately (whatever that may mean). I want to defend a phenomenological approach, claiming that human existence should be articulated in terms of *responsiveness*, exploring the idea that humans are responsive beings.

Timothy Ingold, Professor, Dept. of Anthropology, University of Aberdeen, UK

One World Anthropology

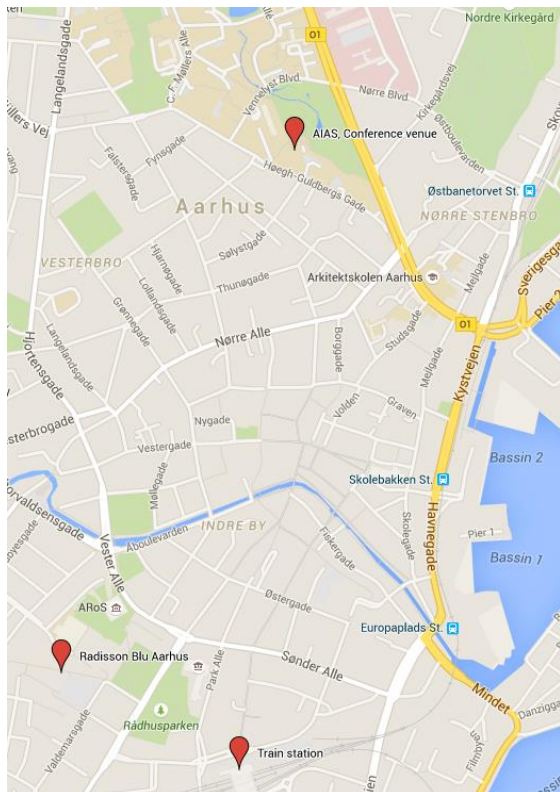
As anthropological fashions lurch from one extreme to the other – from the hyper-relativism of the cultural construction industry to the ever-multiplying essentialisms of the ‘ontological turn’ – it is worth re-emphasising a core principle of our discipline which we neglect at our peril. It is that we human beings, along with other inhabitants of the planet, are creatures not of many worlds all but closed to one another, but of one world that is fundamentally open. Every life, then, is both an exploration into the possibilities of being that this world affords and a contribution towards its ongoing formation. Here I spell out three critical implications of this principle. First, the capacities and dispositions of human beings, whatever they may be, are formed within histories of pre- and post-natal ontogenetic development, under environmental conditions that have themselves been shaped by previous human and non-human activity. Our primary concern, therefore, must be not with ontologies but ontogenies, with generations rather than philosophies of being. Secondly, practices of learning and teaching, long and unjustly marginalised in an anthropology that remains obsessed with the shapes and forms of mature thought, should be restored to the centrality they deserve. And thirdly, the oneness of the world is founded not on similarity but difference – on difference, nevertheless, that arises from within the universe of relations that make it up.

Veena Das, Krieger-Eisenhower Professor, Dept. of Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University, Maryland

Is there a "common sense" of humanity and the experience of limits

In this paper I take up the question as to whether there is a "human" form of life that is implicated in Wittgenstein's idea of forms of life. Asking how form creates the texture of life, I take examples from literature and ethnography to ask how we become dead to our circumstances? Finally, how might we track the relation between a moment (of awakening or deadening) and the flux of life.

CONFERENCE MAP





ORGANISERS

[Cheryl Mattingly](#), Dale T. Mortensen fellow at the AIAS, and Prof. at Dept. of Anthropology, University of Southern California, USA.

[Maria Louw](#) and the research group, "Moral engines", Contemporary Ethnography, CAS, Aarhus University.

[Thomas Schwarz Wentzer](#) and [Rasmus Dyring](#) and the research project "Existential Anthropology – Inquiring Human Responsiveness", CAS, Aarhus University.

VENUE

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