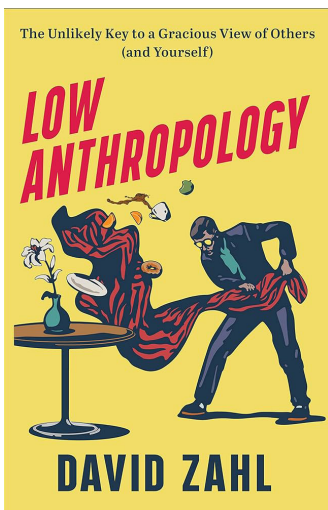


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Low Anthropology

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Introduction

For our purposes, we can define anthropology as our operative theory of human nature. Whether we realize it or not, our personal anthropology funds expectations in our relationships, jobs, marriages, and politics. Its bearing on our worldview—and, therefore, our happiness—cannot be overstated. A low anthropology assumes a through line of heartache and self-doubt, and our ability to do the right thing in any given situation is hampered by all sorts of unseen factors.

1. The Problem of High Anthropology

A high anthropology views people as defined by their best days and greatest achievements, their dreams and their aspirations. Give people reliable information and ample opportunity, and all things being equal, they'll do the right thing. A low anthropologist seeks an alternative explanation beneath the antipathy. A low anthropology injects even our most heartfelt conclusions with humility.

2. Limitation: Or, Modesty Really Is the Best Policy

Limitation means that we are bound by time and biology and history and all sorts of other factors that change our behavior. We can only stay awake so

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long and can be in just one place at a time, and so on. A low anthropology begins from the standpoint that full optimization is not and never will be within reach. A high anthropology undergirds hyper-individualism. A low anthropologist knows that everyone has a blind spot and that we need other people.

3. Doubleness: Or, Can't Stop Won't Stop

Doubleness refers to the competing forces, or voices, that drive our behavior. It describes the baffling divergence between what we think we want and what we actually do. A low anthropologist recognizes doubleness and does not minimize or explain it away. This runs against the grain of a high anthropology, which maintains that we need merely to discern the right course of action and execute. We each serve as captain of our own ship.

4. Self-Centeredness: Or, Control Freaks Anonymous

The determining factor in human affairs isn't simply that we are limited in our knowledge and capacities or that we are subject to conflicting and overpowering desires. The issue is that those desires too often veer toward the self, such that what we want comes at a cost to other people. Low anthropology proceeds from the foundational insight that human beings are egocentric and—crucially—that this is not a neutral trait.

5. How We Avoid Low Anthropology

Instead of looking within for the roots of our issues, we blame our circumstances: the town we live in, the place where we work, the person we live with, the car we drive. Avoiding a low anthropology fosters the sense that we are alone in our condition, that everyone else has us beat, that we are unlovable. The embrace of a low anthropology tends to accomplish the opposite.

6. The Fruit of Low Anthropology

A high anthropology entertains the possibility of mastery and comprehensive understanding. It can therefore be highly judgmental in practice. To the extent that low anthropology bears good fruit in people's lives, it has to do with the humility it engenders. Since a low anthropology allows for hypocrisy and contradiction and frailty, even expects it, it allows for love.

7. Low Anthropology and the Self

Ironically, the kind of authenticity evinced by social media influencers and self-help gurus is not authenticity at all. We may post a picture of our messy hallway with a caption about getting real, but no one is streaming videos of themselves snapping at their children. A low anthropology understands that very few people can be boiled down to a single set of attributes. Are any of us purely one thing and not another?

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8. Low Anthropology in Relationships

A high anthropology approach to relationships flows from the conviction that a person will love us for our strengths, accomplishments, and positive attributes, so we strive to maintain those strongpoints and veil our shortcomings. This process is both exhausting and isolating. Relationships informed by a low anthropology, however, may include our finest moments, but they are forged in our worst ones. Low anthropology relationships begin with realistic expectations, of both the other person and oneself.

9. Low Anthropology in Politics

A politics of low anthropology takes as a given that limited, doubled, and self-centered people will build systems of government that are limited, doubled, and self-centered. This means that no system will be perfect. A low anthropology takes a somewhat dim view of personal freedom, knowing that what we want to do and what we should do are seldom identical. A politics of low anthropology presses for a system that distributes power as widely as possible and will seek to be as representative as possible.

10. Low Anthropology in Religion

In a religion of high anthropology, Christians play by a different set of rules than non-Christians. For the unbeliever, God is merciful and forgiving. For the believer, however, God expects a bit more: more devotion, more charity, more accountability, more faith. Before they know it, faith has turned into a new ladder to climb, a spiritual extension of meritocracy. A religion of low anthropology understands that God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves: he forgives, he saves, and he resurrects. More than being someone to emulate, Jesus delivers those who fail to emulate him.

Conclusion

In the world of high anthropology, we get what we deserve, nothing more, nothing less. Reciprocity reigns. Fail to meet reasonable expectations, and it's game over. In a world of low anthropology, grace upends the predictable economy of cause and effect. It is a world of surprise where, despite our limitations, our doubleness, and our self-centeredness, good things happen with alarming frequency. Not always, mind you, but not never.