

Freeing anthropology from Eurocentric philosophical underpinnings

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The anthropology enterprise as it unfolded had the strong imprint of the geopolitical relationships that Europe had with the rest of the world. It was a time of European ascendancy and the rest of the world were considered inferior. Anthropology fitted into this scheme in two ways: the ideology through which the non-West was looked at empirically and the conceptual and philosophical baggage that was brought into this examination. During the period immediately after decolonisation the empirical shortcomings was looked at harshly and from the 1970s onwards the subject attempted to reform itself, although not significantly in Sri Lanka. However the philosophical givens and epistemological assumptions were largely drawn from the European intellectual roots going eventually back to the fountain head of European thought namely Greece. So in terms of the roots of theoretical constructs, anthropology still remains Eurocentric. But philosophical traditions and pursuits were not limited to the Greek and European traditions. There have been many worthwhile developments in philosophy and epistemology within the Asian traditions which have been discussed over millennia. As now the economic centre of the world is moving away from its once Eurocentric moorings the time has arrived to free anthropology not only from its once empirical shortcomings but also the limitations of a purely European philosophical and epistemological underpinning. Buddhism and aspects of its philosophy once enveloped much of Asia. The present paper explores aspects of Buddhist philosophy to retrieve conceptual elements that could be useful in the anthropology realm on how to obtain valid knowledge, how to verify it and how to generalise from it. To provide a cross-cultural platform the author uses translations into English of Buddhist philosophy.

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