

# “Low Anthropology”

by David Zahl

*Reading Notes and Discussion Questions*

*Matt Henegar, January 2023 -*

## I. Introduction and the Problem of High Anthropology

**A. A Working Definition** - David defines our “anthropology” as our “operating view of human nature”. Of course, there are broader definitions, like the study of ancient human beings for example, but his use of the term is meant to describe our view of ourselves and others... in terms of nature, our capacity to accomplish things, our ability to socialize with others and our tendencies in our day-to-day interactions.

1. When you say “I’m only human” what exactly do you mean by that? What are your basic expectations for yourself in life... for others?

2. What do you think of Anne Lamott’s view that we shouldn’t try to compare our insides to everyone else’s outsides?

3. What is your own “anthropology” and how does this play out in your professional/work, your social and your faith/church spheres? Do you suffer from “imposter syndrome”?

**B. A Sliding Scale** - David talks about a sliding scale of “low anthropology” to “high anthropology”. In other words, both from an individual and societal perspective, we tend to put a high degree of pressure on ourselves that we can do EVERYTHING and do it well... high anthropology. At the same time, he recognizes that Christianity at its core is “low anthropology” ... in other words, at our most critical core, we depend on someone or something else to save us. David’s basic premise is that we can’t know it all and we can’t do it all... and that when we are fooled into believing that we can, we create alienation and division from others... and from ourselves.

1. Where do you fit on that scale? Does it depend on which areas we are discussing? What about in your work life, school life, spiritual life?

2. What did you think of the “Ritual of Humility” from the London-based “School of Life”? Do you agree that humility is the key to a healthy marital relationship and that “self-righteousness is the great enemy of love”? David says “what sounds insulting”... i.e., that we are limited in our capacity or that we have a low anthropology ... “is actually liberating.”

3. In what ways is low anthropology similar to methods employed by AA (as David says it’s “a community bound together by shared weakness... and therefore a “real” community”)?

4. In what ways does “high anthropology” alienate us from others? David says that “the fruit of high anthropology is not us having a higher view of ourselves, but of hating others more.”

5. How does our anthropology shape our view differing views and expectations of men and women? How has patriarchy affected that? What are some assumptions we make in that regard?

**C. The Problem of High Anthropology** - David writes “perfectionism turns life into a perpetual falling short and therefore a bed of exhaustion and anxiety.” And perfectionism of late has become the norm in *all* areas of our life. As Ada Calhoun writes, “In the past the question was, how nice is your home? Or how good are you at your job? Now it’s like, it’s all of the things. So it’s—are you a good parent? Are you good at work? Is your house nice? Are you in shape? Are you recycling? Like, it’s every single factor in life you have to excel at.”

1. What do you think is behind this? Is it limited to social media and our ability to present our lives as “perfect”? What about technology more generally and the ability to

have constant access to information about others and to dispense information about ourselves? Did people feel that way in the 50's and 60's?

From Zahl: "What binds together all aspects of perfectionism is the underlying anthropology. In order to be a perfectionist, you have to believe, consciously or otherwise, that human beings can get a lot closer to perfection than they are right now. You have to believe that some of us really can do it all, if we could just figure out the right strategy."

2. What about Bolz-Webber's point that "many well-meaning people feel in the age of Twitter not only to care about every wrong but also to let everyone know how much we care about every wrong and what we are doing to help"?

3. How did you react to the story about Cindra, the woman who had moved in above David in New Haven and blasted music at 2am? Do you think David was being a little too charitable to her? Or do you think we owe someone like Cindra the space to understand what is causing them to act like jerks? What is the lesson there?

4. What about that pesky "like" button? Do you buy Rosenstein's statement that they intended for it to spread love and positivity throughout the world?

5. Let's discuss our reactions to this from David: "Such certainty [i.e., ironclad certainty in our convictions], whether from the left or the right, is rooted in a rational view of other people and ourselves. We have the right information; they have fake news. We trust the science; they believe lies. We are so convinced that different information will change people's minds that when they don't agree with our carefully crafted Twitter rant, we assume they must be willfully idiotic."

6. David seems to want to bring people together. Do you agree that is a noble goal?

## II. Limitation (Pillar Number One)

**A. Algorithms** - We all know the story of the angry middle-aged man, who finds out his daughter, who was the recipient of adds for baby stuff, in fact *was* pregnant. What are probably less aware of is the extent of the algorithms that shape our lives these days. As David points out, “algorithms work only because, despite how loudly we may insist on our uniqueness, we are a predictable species.” They read the “data of our lives”, not our “spin on or positioning” of it. In other words, the algorithms often know us better than we do!

1. What are some examples in your lives of where it turns out an algorithm knew more about your preferences than you do? Do you think we are sometimes fed this information without even realizing it? In what ways are these algorithms good and in what ways are they bad?

2. What about the guy who found out, much to his surprise, that he liked Celine Dione through his experience on Pandora? What do you think of David’s point that algorithms can predict moods, life events, even life-threatening events?

**B. What He Means by “Limitation”** - David defines “limitation” as being the principal that we are all “bound by time and biology and history and all sorts of other factors that shape our behavior”. These limitations allow machines to predict what we will in any given circumstance, based on past behavior and because we are subject to those limitations.

1. What was your reaction to the way that David tied (a) the example of believing we like French New Wave cinema when in reality we love reality TV, to (b) the notion that we are sometimes led to believe we are infinite and capable of anything when in reality we are finite creatures bound by the limitations noted above? Have you bought into the idea of “full optimization”?

2. David says “when we see things as they actually are, we expend far less time and energy hitting our heads against the walls of human limitation or being surprised when we careen into them”. Do you agree? How do you think about this in terms of *your own* limitations? What about in terms of your interactions with others... and your

willingness to accept *their* limitations? David believes that this process of accepting our limits frees us to have “compassion on ourselves and others and to see how much we all need each other.”

3. In what ways is the concept of “limitation” similar to the process that Brackley was talking about when he described our need to “come to terms with the evil in the world and in ourselves”?

4. Do you think the self-help industry is as David describes it... i.e., a never-ending process of you “can” get better to you “must” get better to you “must never stop” getting better? Do you suffer from this? What about the notion of accumulation? In what way is Brackley notion of “downward mobility” helpful here? And in what ways is David basically ignoring the poor, the oppressed, the down-trodden here? In what ways does Brackley’s admonition to spend time with the poor helpful in our framing of the issues David is trying to focus us on here?

5. Do you agree and find it ironic that as David says “perceived improbability fosters ... loneliness ... resentment ... jealousy ... shame”? In what ways are we losing sight of the big picture, naval-gazing, and really failing to recognize our positions of privilege, when we fall into these types of spirals? Again, think back to Brackley here.

**C. Looking at High Anthropology or “virtue” with “Suspicion”, “Pity”, “Curiosity”** - David writes that a “low anthropologist looks on public displays of virtue with a combination of suspicion, pity, and curiosity. Suspicion, because the flawlessness is almost always a mirage. Pity, because as anyone who has spent much time cultivating a social media feed knows, such displays are exhausting. And curiosity in the sense of wondering what might be going on in one’s head to prompt so aggressive an assertion of happiness or achievement or beauty.”

1. Which one are you? The one looking on with suspicion, pity and curiosity? Or the one we should all be suspicious of? Or at times are you both? Can you think of friends who fit either description? In your experience, is being either of those characters a bad thing... a good thing? Or is the reality that this is a little more grey than it is black-and-white?

2. Do you (or know people who) struggle with the notion that there are limits to what we can *know*? What about as it relates to the Bible? What happens when this notion eludes us ... or others in our social circles and in society at large? Do you agree that it makes us avoid conversations? In what ways is a denial of this reality, at its core, an attempt to control others and avoid uncertainty in our own lives? What about the notion of holding discoveries with humility rather than disdain or impatience?

3. What about blind spots and, in particular, the Juneteenth blind spot that David describes in his own life?

**D. Real-world Impact; Depression and Other Stuff** - David notes that he was diagnosed with clinical depression in his teens.

1. What do you think David means when he says “the fact” of mental disorders is indicative of low anthropology, but that its causes may be more rooted in high anthropology?

2. Does David’s distinction between regret (feeling sadness over ways we’ve hurt ourselves) and remorse (feeling sadness over ways we’ve hurt others)? Do you think these feelings are compounded by a culture of high anthropology as David suggests?