

Topic Page: [Human beings](#)

Definition: **human being** from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

1.

a member of the human race, *Homo sapiens*.

Plural: human beings



Image from: [Although the fossil record is not complete, we... in Philip's Encyclopedia](#)

Summary Article: **Humanity, Concepts of**
From *Encyclopedia of Global Studies*

Concepts of humanity are anthropologically universal. There is no human life-form that does not place humans into a general order of things giving them an idea of their relationship to the surrounding world and to the other humans with whom they live together. Within their concepts of humanity, people know who they are, and who the others are—or are not—to whom they belong and

from whom they differ.

Anthropological Universals

Every concept of humanity is logically shaped by basic distinctions between humans and nonhumans. In most life-forms, the latter is divided into two dimensions: the natural and the divine, or the transcendent. Humans are placed in between, a place where both nature and the divine meet and are mediated with each other. These three dimensions of being are ordered hierarchically: The highest value is ascribed to the divine world and the lowest to nature; humans are placed in the midst of both. The limits among nature, humankind, and the divine world are never strict and sometimes even permeable.

The moral organization of human life is regulated by a clear distinction between good and evil. This presupposes a special idea of humanity; humans are defined as persons, they are individuals with a physical and psychic continuity; as such they are responsible for what they do—at least on the level of their daily lives. This responsibility endows each human being with the quality of dignity, which demands respect and recognition in social interrelationship. Dignity also derives its social quality from a person's ability to change one's own perspective by adopting that of others—the ability of empathy. Other norms of moral behavior of similar universality define fairness in competition and the cooperative form of labor.

Every human society makes a distinction between people who belong together and form a community (thus, sharing a collective identity as well as a strong feeling and conviction of togetherness) on the one side, and people who are looked at as the others and the strangers on the other side. The interrelationship between the social self and the otherness of the others is ruled by an elementary and universal logic of social differentiation: that of an ethnocentric discrimination and that of the hospitality offered to strangers. The efforts to bring about hospitality (against a quasi-natural inclination of aversion against otherness and strangeness) demonstrate the power of ethnocentrism in the realm of cultural identity. Ethnocentrism causes the image of oneself to be shaped by positive values, which enable people for self-affirmation, which empowers them to live together with others. Otherness,

however, is therefore defined by a lack of valuable elements in the life-form of people outside of one's own community. A widespread example of this discrimination is the distinction between civilization and barbarism.

All these universals could not hinder change from taking place; on the contrary, change takes place within them as its forms. History is structured as a process of development, the forces of which stem from a person's permanent intention to bring the dichotomies, within which human life is pursued, into an acceptable equilibrium. Human life is pushed forward by a permanent struggle to overcome the destructive forces, the “unsocial sociability” (as defined by Kant) of its social organization. Behind the entire struggle, there works the leading idea of, or a drive for, living in a life-form that can be accepted, if not appreciated, as one's own. This is the most basic and universal definition of liberty as the cultural power of humanizing human life. The cultural means of bringing about this “humanity”—a form or condition of life legitimated by the people who live it—is the use of reason. In an anthropological understanding, reason is a human's ability to create his or her own world according to his or her own will to live a “good” life.

Three main stages of human development or cultural evaluation can be distinguished: (1) archaic life-forms where most—if not all—qualities of being a human being are based on kinship, so others were not even looked on as being human; (2) life-forms of a higher social complexity, where the ethnic boundaries of being human were definitively transgressed, as was the case in empires or bigger kingdoms. The step toward this kind of universality can be listed under the concept of the “axial time”—following the ideas of Karl Jaspers, Shmuel Eisenstadt, and others. Its universalism of humanity developed in different cultures independently from—literally: besides—each other. Their cultural relationship was characterized by mutual exclusion. (3) Human life forms in the shape of multiple modernities, where the established and mentally powerful cultural differences have to be adjusted to new forms of integrative universalisms.

Archaic Societies

In archaic societies, only one's own people are regarded as being human. The others are lacking essential elements of humanity. Within this narrow framework of identity humanity is understood as a composition of three parts: a material body; a force of life (“vital spirit”), which combines him or her with all other living creatures; and a spiritual essence (“free spirit”), which defines the interrelationship of each individual with his or her forefathers and offspring and with all his or her kinsmen with whom he or she shares a common living space. The physical body is never left in the way nature gave it. It is molded according to its social surroundings into a cultural creature by inscribing the symbols of humanity (e.g., tattoos, hairstyles, or scarves) into it.

Human behavior was strictly regulated by the main intention to preserve the traditional order. Social interrelationship was ruled by the principle of mutuality. Consequently, a double morality was pursued: ethical principles for one's own people; and exploitation and subjugation for the “others,” the strangers and foreigners. Consequently, cannibalism was a widespread strategy of appropriating the vital and spiritual forces of others.

Humans felt closely related to nature as well as to the divine world. They could change their existence by transgressing into the nonhuman worlds. They interpreted the world as moved by spiritual forces, and by applying the means of the human mind (mainly by magical practices), they manipulated these forces. Thus, they felt enabled to master the manifold threats and dangers of nature.

Axial Times

The rise of axial times marks an essential change in human life-forms. It goes along with the development of so-called advanced civilizations. Axial times brought about the emergence of a new understanding of men and world by producing a “transcendental breakthrough” (as defined by Eisenstadt), which fundamentally changed the categories of human worldview and self-understanding: The divine world acquired a new “transcendental” quality beyond the reality of the living environment of humans. The new concept saw the world disassociated into a this-worldly dimension and an other-worldly one. This disassociation becomes paradigmatically manifest in monotheism. But in the other religious beliefs like Buddhism or Hinduism as well as in Confucianism and Daoism, the world is reflected through the idea of a metaphysical order. This order can only be understood by the use of abstract concepts or principles such as Dharma, Brahma, Dao Li, Logos, and the like.

At the same time, the human individual in its social relationship acquired a higher degree of subjectivity. The human self is settled in the “heart” of each person so that it might be endowed with a personal if not an individual relationship to the divine world. In a reversed perspective, Judaism and Christianity defined man as an image of God.

Confucianism conceptualized this subjectivity of humans by the category of “ren.” As W.-T. Chan shows, ethical principles of universal validity that can be understood as a special Chinese humanism were introduced into the traditional order of the world and its ritual celebration. It granted a closer relationship of the world order and human activity to cognition and rational argumentation (Roetz, 1993).

The new complexity of a person's relationship to the “outer world” or the “this-world” allowed a more complex subjective inwardness of humans. Now, ethnic borders for being a human being could definitively be transgressed into a new universality of humankind. The transcendent status of the sense-giving source of human life in the universe molded the new concept of humanity. This did not mean that ethnicity simply vanished, if at all, but it acquired another status in collective identity. The others became human as well. This universalization finds its clear expression in the all-encompassing dimension of the divine world, such as Brahma, Jahwe, Allah, God, or a similar term for the transcendent reality. Regardless of social, gender, or political demarcations, the individual could have an immediate encounter with this universal other-worldly divinity. This universality of humankind could be applied to, or even claimed by, each single person. Thus, it became possible to say—explicitly in Judaism and Islam—that killing one human being means to kill humankind in general (Qur'ān 5,32, referring to a Jewish saying).

The power of ethnocentrism was broken in respect to its older form of ethnicity, but it was reproduced and gained new features on the level of a universalized humankind: Cultural identity referring to this universality has claimed the privilege of representing humankind in a proper or “civilized” form, which means that there is a deviant humanity of the others that even might be characterized by a lack of “true” humanity. Since the devaluated others use the same logic of forming their self-image, the “clash of civilizations” might be the bitter consequence of clashing humanities.

Multiple Modernities

When the cultural evolution of axial time brought about a new shape of humankind, it also laid the foundation stones of two new factors, which proved constitutive for the age of modernity in the realm of culture: scientific rationality and the secular order of social life. The natural sciences, and later on the human and social sciences as well, disenchanting the natural and the human world. The same took place

in the basic rules of social life when the order of a civil society and related forms of modern democracy were established. Religion did not vanish; instead it found its realm in a deepened individualized personal subjectivity. It is clearly expressed by Immanuel Kant's thesis that every human being always is more than only a means for the purposes of others, including religious authorities, but it is a purpose of him-or herself. This "dignity" (as defined by Kant) found its institutionalized form by the institution of human and civil rights as basic rules of political and social life.

This new quality of human, his "subjectivization," found its counterpart in a new degree of objectivization on the this-worldly level. The world had become a mere object of exploitation and domination.

The subjectivization of humans also had consequences for the intersubjective communication. The growing input of individuality into the human self could also lead to a lack of sociability and sense of social awareness. This has become a major point of criticism from the perspective of non-Western traditions up to our days. Yet we have to concede that individualization opened up new perspectives of understanding and recognizing cultural differences in time and space: The hermeneutical achievements of the humanities since the end of the 18th century demonstrate the deepening and the broadening of the idea of acceptance of different cultures. Humankind manifests itself in a vast variety of life forms in time and space and in their historical change. This concept realized the global development on the level of culture. The unifying forces of modern market economy and scientific and technological rationality found their counterpart in a general and fundamental historization of the human world.

All traditional ideas of fixed cultural attributes of humans have become temporalized. This can be easily demonstrated by the general change in the concept of gender relationship. For thousands of years, it was understood as a fixed pattern of human sexual interpersonal relationship with widespread and deeply rooted tendencies of male domination. In the scope of modern historization, the "nature" of gender has become a matter of historical development and change—a conceptual precondition for women's emancipation and new arrangements of gender relation.

Historization and pluralization (also known as individualization) of humankind have deeply tackled the use of a concept of humanity in the cultural processes of identity formation. The power of universalization has grown by the new means of economy and technology.

The Western concept of human expanded via colonization and imperialism all over the world and threatened the validity of other ideas of human and other interpretations of the world. There were two ways of reacting to this threat: Either the Western mode of thinking and its ideas of the human power to govern the world was adopted (as Hu Shih and the 4th of May movement did in China), or it was strictly opposed (as Gandhi did by this idea of Hindu Swaraj). Topical intellectual movements of subaltern studies or of post-colonialism belong to the latter alternative. But they are problematic since they simply reproduce ethnocentrism by the way they are repudiating the Western one.

Postmodern culturalism and relativism can be perceived as an attempt to avoid the trap of ethnocentrism in universalistic concepts of humans. They have sharpened the awareness of cultural diversity in human life but only at the cost of overlooking the power of universalization in intercultural communication. Ethnocentrism is unavoidable as long as humans, individuals, as well as communities have to distinguish themselves from others. By doing so they ascribe positive values into their own features, and at the same time, they define otherness by devaluating the others. Be that as it may, the

way of using universal concepts of humankind in the processes of identity formation is not a determined one, but it is open. It offers a chance for a most promising way, if not to overcome, at least to civilize or humanize, the “clash of civilizations” by changing the logic of universalization in the concept of humankind from exclusion to inclusion.

By inclusion, otherness moves from the sphere outside of oneself into a shared humanity, and by this change, it becomes a specific manifestation of the general humane qualification of humankind. It gets a uniqueness that it shares with the uniqueness of oneself within the cultural frame of being different from each other. Thus, difference becomes a matter of self-reflection, and the others become a challenge of recognition. An inclusive universal concept of humankind changes the bitterness of ethnocentrism into chances of its humanization (Rüsen, 2004).

This change to inclusion can already be witnessed in the following phenomena:

- 1.The concept of man has already been enriched by giving it an aesthetic dimension. Within this dimension, the sharp sting of political and social discrimination is being disgraced—if yet only there—in the realm of the imaginary (Schiller, 1967).
- 2.The humanities have worked out a rich equipment of understanding difference and otherness. They have even disclosed basic elements of strangeness within one's own features. Thus, they have weakened the drive of exterritorializing threatening elements within one's own subjectivity into the features of others.
- 3.The secular life-form of modern civil society that is based on the idea of human dignity has opened up a chance of keeping cultural difference in a mode of tolerance, if not in a mode of mutual recognition.

Nevertheless, the idea of humankind based on the principle of dignity is still under threat. The traditional anthropocentric ideas of humans have already been challenged by three blows:

- 1.The Kopernikanean turn to a heliocentric astronomy, displacing humans from the center of the world
- 2.The Darwinian despiritualization of humans by bringing the human species into the line of a mere biological evolution
- 3.The Freudian insight into human subjectivity from his *Introductory Lectures*: that a person is “not the master in his own house”

These blows or insults were later outbidden by intellectual and political movements of dehumanizing humans. Michel Foucault proclaimed the “end of man” in *The Order of Things*, and Martin Heidegger denounced humanism as outdated in his “Letter on Humanism.” Vis-à-vis the power of market economy and the functionalizing and instrumentalizing logic of technological thinking, the idea of moral autonomy and self-determination of humans seems to be an illusion. Politically strong movements like fascism and communism were inspired by the idea of overcoming the pre-given status of humans in favor of a “new man” or “superhuman,” who will have left behind all of the deficiencies of human life in its hitherto developed multifarious varying forms and transform his or her life into a new happy world. Up to now all these attempts have ended in the catastrophes of inhumanity. The same might be the case with the topical intellectual movements of so-called trans-humanism, which has claimed to fulfill the human dream of happiness and redemption by using the new ability of humans to change his or her biological equipments and ascribe the enormous capacities of artificial intelligence into his or her mind.

The concept of humankind in the topical process of globalization is an issue of open intercultural discussion and controversy, and it is still being negotiated by scholars around the world.

Whatever the idea of humankind will turn out to be, there is one basic elementary and universal factor of human life, which, too, has often been overlooked, if not intellectually suppressed: human suffering. Vis-à-vis the crimes against humanity, which have shaped the feature of the last century, human suffering has to be given an awareness and a greater weight in the idea of humans. Without accepting that the anthropologically universal and fundamental components of fragility, fallibility, and vulnerability must also be ascribed to the humans, no concept of humankind will be convincing (Levinas, 2006).

See also:

Cultural Hybridity, Ethics, Global, Ethnic Identity, Global Religions, Beliefs, and Ideologies, Humanism, Identities in Global Societies, Modern Identities, Modernization, Otherness, Tribal Identities, Universalism

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