**humanism/仁(Rén)**

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What is humanism? showing humanity? In French, this term of humanity designates both the set of humans, taken collectively, but also what characterizes the human as opposed to what would not be.

And we can consider this opposition in two different ways:

1. on the one hand the character of humanity allows the distinction between Man and animal or between Man and machine. Man being taken here as a generic term. It is then a question of humanity, understood as the nature of Man, his essence, what defines him;
2. on the other hand, this character could identify behaviors of Man that are consistent with his nature. Inhumanity then refers to actions or behaviors that are contradictory to this nature.

If we understand humanity in the sense[[1]](#footnote-1), we are led to define what makes the human being a human. Traditionally this brings us to the notion of “(human) person”. There is therefore in the Western tradition a reference to a metaphysical foundation (foundation and universality).

The term person in Greek (πρόσωπον) refers to the mask used by actors in the theater. It therefore refers to the role played by the human being or his status. But the translation of this term also means “face” what is interesting for us, and we will come back to it (when we will refer to the Hebrew etymology). It is by the face of the other that perhaps the deepest character of his humanity is recognized.

The Latin translation of “person”, persona, was used in Law to designate the fundamental legal distinction that exists between humans and things (de personis et de rebus: “about persons and about things”).

According to Aristotle, the (human) person is an “individual substance of a rational nature”.

Humanity is therefore defined first by a substance (ὑπόστασις; sub-stantia, which stands under) that is to say a subject (ὑποκείμενον: sub-jectum, substrate, matter that receives form). The essence of this subject (its οὐσία) is first of all not to be divisible (to be undivided), it is a one reality, an inseparable, individual unity, which has meaning first in itself. Its essence (what makes the person a person) is also defined by the fact that the human person is of a rational nature. This does not mean that the human person is defined by the exercise of intellectual capacities, but that, by his birth (nature comes from natus and nasci, born), he belongs to a species endowed with rationality (even if some representatives of this species do not exercise it for various reasons, for example pathological ones). There is room for debate here, and this would have important consequences for respect for the human being, for his humanity. Indeed, some philosophical currents have wanted to define the human by capacities (humanity disappearing with the loss of these) , or the ability to exercise them, then distinguishing the human being from the human person (the subject having the capacity to exercise rationality for example). In such a conception, human beings can lose their nature as a human person, lose something of their humanity, while in the classical conception: he who is born human, by the fact that he is born of humans, permanently retains his humanity from birth to death. One understands the possible impact of the difference between these conceptions on the definition of so-called “Human Rights” (absolute in classical conception or relative in conceptions that distinguish human beings and human persons). In any case, we see that the emphasis is placed, in this Aristotelian definition of the human person, on an individual (and not on the collective) and on the reference to cognitive abilities (which are supposed to differentiate the human from the animal: “homo est animal rationale”).

But for Aristotle again, and the Western tradition that will follow him, another way of defining humanity, the proper character of Man, is to refer to the human soul[[2]](#footnote-2). What makes the human is human here is linked to a principle, to the soul (ψυχή), that is to say to “the first act of an organized body that has life in power”. All the living are alive because of their soul (the term, anima, in Latin, refers to what animates, what gives movement, motus). Humans have a specifically human soul, an intellective soul (distinct from the sensitive soul of animals or vegetative of plants). Humanity thus refers here to a (meta-empirical) source a “depth” that gives the human being its unity and its own character as a living animal of a rational nature.

A modern (Cartesian) tradition will distinguish the soul from the body and the res cogitans from the res extensa, making humanity a reality torn between spirit and matter, but the Aristotelian conception of the human person cannot be identified with this type of dualism.

On the other hand, it is interesting to emphasize here that the idea of the human person during a long sequence of Western thought is linked to a transcendence of the human in relation to matter and in relation to the animal. The human is a being made of matter (as shown by its etymology: homo refers to humus, the earth; the Greek χθων, χαμαι, χωμα (the earth that we stir) comes from Sanskrit Ksam. In Hebrew, המדא, the soil, where Adam comes from), but which cannot be reduced to matter. As Blaise Pascal says: “Man passes man infinitely”, Man is open to a depth (an order) that exceeds him (and that gives meaning to the human).

Humanism has undergone a double evolution in the history of Western thought. On the one hand, an accentuation of the individual aspect: the humanism of the Enlightenment appears as a self-determination of man by man. The human becomes the source of humanism. And, in the contemporary period, the thoughts that define the human no longer do so in relation to metaphysical nature (an essence) but from existence (Sartre).

We have described, so far, a notion of humanity, centered on the individual. But there is also, in Western philosophy, a definition of the human referring to a more collective, more relational dimension, which may or may not be metaphysically founded. Traditionally, it is not the relationship with the other that founds humanity, but the human nature that founds relational capacity.

same thinking thing in different times and places; which is inseparable from thinking, as it seems to me essential to it”.

From the perspective of a Chardin Teilhard, humanity cannot be conceived as a sum of isolated individuals. The so-called noosphere (a term he coined in his discussions with Edouard Le Roy) is that environment in which humans interact, intensify their relationships, form a bloc but in which the person is never annihilated[[3]](#footnote-3). The "human sense" is that sense of the convergence of humans towards each other. What would not move in this direction regresses in humanity[[4]](#footnote-4). This is also in line with Bergson's idea in Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion[[5]](#footnote-5): “closed societies” and “closed morals” are dead-end paths to human evolution. In Teilhard we have an original thought that defines the human and humanism by a conception that articulates individuality, personality and relationship. And his own way of thinking about this is “amortization”: the growth of love between humans. Love being defined by Teilhard as a relationship that unifies more and more by deepening differences. The individual and the relationship are intimately linked. In a perspective that is for him resolutely theological: “God creates by uniting” (Deus creat uniendo).

In the perspective of Emmanuel Levinas, there is something of the human and his transcendence that is perceived in his face (in Biblical Hebrew: צִָּנִים) word in the plural, which means “presence”, but also “the person”). It is this “face” that calls me to responsibility and invites me to be human, by respecting it and not recovering it in my closed system (in a totality[[6]](#footnote-6)). Here it is Ethics (of respect for others) that underpins Metaphysics and not the contrary! Humanity therefore has two facets, one individual and the other relational. But the ancient Western tradition (Antiquity or Middle-Age) derives the relational facet from the metaphysical nature of the individual, while the modern and contemporary traditions would tend to abandon human nature (or deny its existence) to found the human character in the relationship.

We now come now to humanity understood in the second sense (2).

In Greek philosophy, that of Aristotle the character of humanity (humanism) is revealing in the fact to act in accordance with the (metaphysical) nature of Man and this nature is linked to reason.

But what makes humans and their humanity? We must question not only the Greco-Roman tradition but also the Judeo-Christian tradition.

In the Christian tradition the archetype of the human being is Christ, who is said to be “meek and humble of heart”. It is a poverty of heart, a stripping of oneself that makes “humanity par excellence”. It is the gift of self to the other that is, in this context, the sign of humanity. It is the gift of self out of love (caritas, ἀγάπη) that signs humanity. In the “parable of the Good Samaritan” (Lk 10:25-37), one invites us to “be one's neighbor” and we see that showing humanity is to make oneself actively available to the other. The one who became (he wasn't before!) man's neighbor is “He who has shown mercy (ἔλεος) towards him” (36-37).

The Bible already says that “the Lord is tender and pity, slow to anger and full of love (multum misericors)” (Ps102:8). The term “love” is that of mercy, which in the Hebrew context means the fact of being touched in one's bowels by the misery of the other. Compassion, pity and mercy are linked in Hebrew (רַַחַם raham, rahamim) The norm of humanity here is clearly not on the side of cognitive abilities but of love.

Curiously perhaps, I will also refer here to Darwin, who in his famous book The Descent of Men, defines the noblest part of Man as his ability to care for the sick, the poor... We are therefore fully human, in this sense, when we let ourselves be touched by the suffering of the other and because we give a place to the suffering, fragile other, ... This idea has been highlighted by the geologist, professor at the college de France in Paris, Xavier Le Pichon in his book, Aux racines de l’homme. De la mort à l’amour (At the roots of Human Being. From Death to Love)[[7]](#footnote-7). According to him, to welcome weak, disabled, suffering persons is a way to become human and to enhance humanity.

1. For example, John Locke in *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, II, c.27, §9, Oxford, Peter H. Nidditch, 1975, p. 335: “We must consider what *Person* stands for; which, I think, is a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which is inseparable from thinking, as it seems to me essential to it”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cfr Saint Thomas d’Aquin, *L’âme humaine* (traduction et notes par François-Xavier Putallaz), Paris, Cerf, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Cfr Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, The Human Phénomenon* (a new edition and translation of *Le Phénomène Humain* by Sarah Appleton-Weber; foreword by Brian Swimme), Brighton, Sussex Academic Press, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Cfr* Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, « Quelques réflexions sur les droits de l’Homme » in *L’Avenir de l’Homme, Oeuvres de Teilhard de Chardin 5,* Paris Seuil, 1959, pp. 247-249. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Paris, Alcan, 1932. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Cfr* E. Levinas, *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l’extériorité*, La Haye, Martinus Nijhoff, 1961. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Paris, Presses de la Renaissance, 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)