

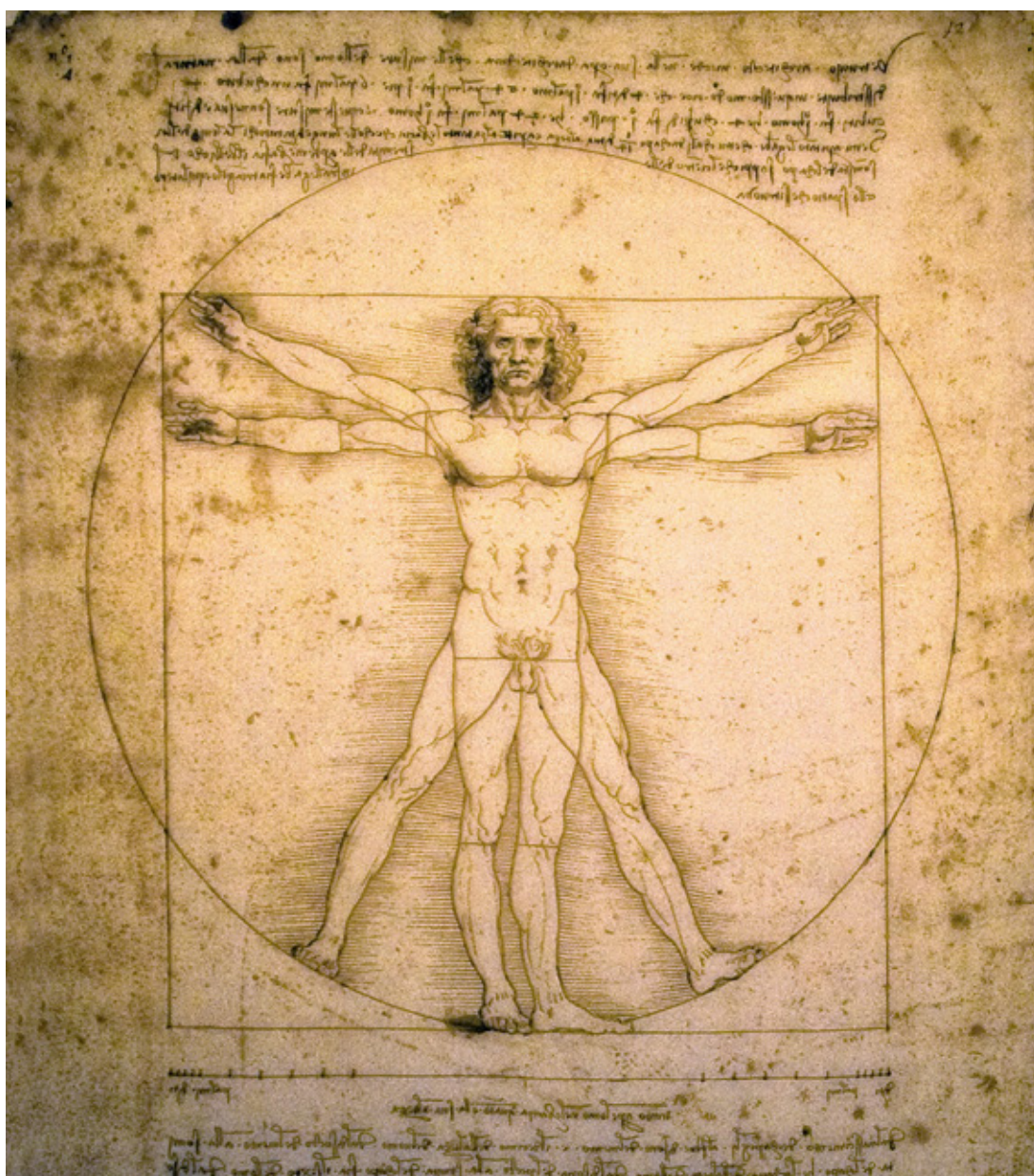
# THE BOUNDARIES OF HUMANITY



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Leonardo da Vinci,  
*The Vitruvian Man*, c. 1490



The boundaries of humanity are the ideas that trace out the very limits of what we call human, together with the attendant values, duties, and categories. To understand these better, we first need to scrutinize the two underlying concepts: the notion of boundary and the notion of a human being.

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A boundary can mark the limits of both a physical and geographical territory, as well as the mental zone of what we consider to be ours, familiar, identical. Its primary task is to identify certain distinctive characteristics, familiar qualities, and separate them out from what is regarded as different, foreign, strange, outside, and not ours. Paradoxically, however, a boundary simultaneously unites and divides what lies beyond it, thus creating a liminal space, a space of what lies between, and a space of ritual passage, change, and entrance into the sphere of the other. Its very existence heightens our awareness of what is familiar to us, of who we are and what is ours. At the same time, it also makes us realize that what lies beyond it is different – unknown and foreign. It makes us cognizant of this separateness, in a sense calling it into existence (more often than not, it is not until a boundary is established that two separate spaces are created out of one area – and so is otherness). For this reason, a boundary both unites and divides, defines the familiar and allows us to distinguish it from the foreign, as well as makes us aware of differences, leading at the same time to impressions of foreignness and separateness.

And so, a boundary may reinforce extant differences, for example between my body and existence and another body and its existence. But it can also create differences, establishing them through its very being, as is the case with borders between countries. Therefore, every boundary and every boundary space requires a specific strategy: they are treated either as what must be guarded and must not be violated (such as the uncrossable boundaries of morality – certain things that are not done) or as challenges and as liminal spaces allowing confrontation or coexistence with others (good examples of this include transborder cities such as Cieszyn/Těšín between Poland and Czechia: in times of peace such cities are symbols of bilateral relations and cooperation, but in times of war they become symbols what is under attack and at risk of being altered by others, by strangers, those who pose a danger or mount invasions). A boundary also entails a certain social and political game in which we define, safeguard, or set anew uncrossable limits, thus violating old rules, values, and boundaries. In the case of the boundaries of humanity, this very often boils down to defining where a human being begins and ends, and by the same token, who we can or can no longer define using this term, which has its political, moral, legal, and social consequences.

## Questions about man

The concept of “man” or humankind is not very strongly linked to biology. Its definition in philosophy developed around five turning points: that of Socrates and the sophists, followed by the humanistic, existential, anti-humanistic, and deconstructionist turns. The first turning point, credited to Socrates and the sophists, brought questions about “man” and defining human existence in the mainstream of philosophical research. In that period in the history of philosophy, the definitions of man were mainly metaphysical and referred to the concept of soul. According to Socrates, man was a rational being characterized by the presence of a soul. This understanding would be applied over entire epochs in the philosophy of European culture.

The humanistic turn can be symbolized by the Vitruvian Man (one of Leonardo da Vinci’s most famous drawings, created around 1490 as part of a series of studies of human proportions). It is characterized by an attempt to describe humanity from a multifaceted perspective, underpinned by the Renaissance surge in interest in the nature of both humankind and the world. The Vitruvian Man became a symbol of bodily, intellectual, cognitive, and spiritual perfection. Humanity thus signified a certain ideal to which people could aspire or with which they could compare themselves. The existential turn broke with essentialist thinking about man and focused on the uniqueness and exceptionality of an individual. Such philosophers as Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Martin Heidegger initiated an extremely individualistic way of thinking about man, perceiving individuals in terms of their existential adventure in the world. Human existence was treated as a task thrown into the world, to be solved by each of us. Anti-humanistic thinking, which emerged when metaphysical concepts were abandoned, involved defining man in naturalistic terms. The anti-humanistic turn drew strength from Darwinism, which led to an awareness that man was not a spiritual but a biological creature, the origin of man was not divine or heavenly in nature, and humans were merely one animal species living among many others. Deconstruction, in turn, not only brought critical thinking about the past, leading concepts of human existence, but also taught us that humanity is a cultural and political concept and in fact depends on the perspective adopted.

## What is “man”?

What, then, is the meaning of the notion of a human being? Starting with classical definitions, we can say that man is a rational, spiritual being that has a soul (a rational soul, as philosophers often stress) and will. Man is a person who moves from one place to another.



er (*homo viator*), works (*homo faber*), and has tools or culture. Man is also a linguistic, historical, social, and individual being that can understand the notion of time, as well as a being that is metaphysical, biological, dual (i.e. has a soul and a body, or a spirit and a body, or consciousness and a body), and hybrid (positioned somewhere between God, the angels, and the animals). Man also means *Homo sapiens*. This definition is relatively young and highlights the fact that humans are animals, biological creatures governed by the laws of evolution. The definitions of man frequently reflect the conviction that man evolves and is therefore tasked with becoming a human and required to develop his or her humanity. Thus, what was understood as humanity (rationality, spirituality, or moral competence) simultaneously turned into a requirement to fulfill and develop these specific qualities. Task-orientation meant that humans, to be themselves in full, must strive to live up to their own humanity. Many philosophers have also pointed to an external

a disqualifying factor. For *homo faber*, the boundaries of being a human will be set by the possibility of using tools in a creative way.

## The boundaries of humanity

What, then, are the “boundaries of humanity” mentioned in the title above? We can say that they are the limits of the fulfillment of what is culturally assumed to be human, which simultaneously has very strong axiological and political undertones. This is because what makes a human is treated as what is right or good. Therefore, “human” also has a meaning related to principles and norms that allow for evaluation. On the other hand, what goes beyond these principles and norms, what does not fall within the scope of being a human, amounts to deviation, aberration, evil, disturbance, and a danger to the very nature of man. Therefore, defining the boundaries of humanity also means defining the axiological framework within which humans should act in order to be able to fulfill themselves and their fundamental tasks. By the same token, setting such boundaries means that those who are not humans are inferior. In the history of European culture, women, children, people with disabilities, those classified as non-normative, manifesting a different habitus, or belonging to other, non-European cultures were, for a very long time, not regarded as humans or were treated as not having fully human characteristics.

The boundaries of humanity are therefore the norms, principles, and values that are attributed to mankind and regarded as worthy of being pursued in everyday life. They above all amount to a normative and axiological system that allows humans to know what is important and appropriate, and what they should do to achieve self-actualization. By this token, the boundaries of humanity define a style of a person’s being, convictions, views, or beliefs as being right and determine who we are or could become. Going beyond such boundaries may mean being both morally and socially disturbed, and those who fall outside their scope are not humans or not fully humans. In the history of both the notion of man and humanity and its boundaries, there have been many people who found themselves thrown outside of those boundaries. For this reason, it is vital to understand where such boundaries come from, who defines them, and what consequences they entail for our lives.

Rosi Braidotti deconstructs humanity and its limits, analyzing the Vitruvian Man as a model that has influenced entire generations of philosophers pondering this issue. First of all, it is clearly Eurocentric. Leonardo da Vinci’s beautiful image (which was one of many such images, as we can find plenty of depictions of Vitruvius’s model in the Middle Ages) is dominated by Eurocentricity and metaphysics. In Leonardo’s image,

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factor as a system of reference or control for humanity itself and human behavior. In Plato’s philosophy, that system was formed by ideas, in Christian thought by God, and in Hegel’s philosophy by historical reason and the absolute.

The notion of “man” reflects a cultural record of how humans want to see themselves and what place they ascribe to themselves in the world. Looking at the historical modifications of this notion, we can track cultural changes in attitudes towards humanity. Its boundaries are very often set by the assumed definitions of man and constitute a cultural strategy for formatting human life. Importance is therefore attached to what is referred to as spiritual development with depreciation of the body in metaphysical concepts and to social or individual aspects in materialistic concepts.

The notion of man above all determines who or what man is not. If man is a being that has a spirit or is spiritual, then humanity excludes animality, materiality, and biology. If man is a rational being, this definition excludes the sphere of irrationality, and sometimes even excessive affectivity. If man is seen as a linguistic being, the absence of language becomes

inscribed inside a square and a circle, which symbolizes what is earthly and worldly as well as what is spiritual and divine, there is a white, well-built, young man. Deconstructing these assumptions, Braidotti shows that herein lies the key to the problems with all models of humanity: they are exclusionary and chauvinistic. The Vitruvian Man is male, so women are automatically excluded from what is human. For that matter, this is consistent with philosophical traditions and classic thought – for Aristotle or St. Thomas Aquinas, women were not fully rational and therefore secondary to men. The Vitruvian Man is beautiful, young, and healthy, so people who are ill or have disabilities, as well as the elderly and children, are automatically defective. Women, children, the elderly, the sick, and people with disabilities lack something, they are not fully human. This is why boys were told to “be a man about it,” women had to obey men, and the elderly were often described as being “childish.” Although the figure of a noble old man appears in culture, it was just one image. The figure of an old woman reflects the image of an “old hag” and a “witch,” in other words a disgusting, immoral, or suspicious creature.

The Vitruvian Man therefore represents a very exclusionary vision of humanity. On top of this, it is characterized by overt cultural, ethnic, and social chauvinism. The Vitruvian Man is a European. Such humanistic assumptions provided the basis for colonial narratives: the Europeans were regarded as humans in the full sense, whereas those who had a different skin color, culture, behavior, language, or religion did not fit into the imagined perceptions of what being a human meant. As Ania Loomba shows, this exclusion had its literal, symbolic assumptions: the cynocephalus (a creature with the head of a dog) and the cyclops (a one-eyed giant) were not just fantastic creatures out of medieval bestiaries. For a very long time, they were images of people living outside of the borders of the world, beyond the boundaries of humanity.

## The limits of tolerance

The boundaries of humanity show who we can and cannot regard as humans and consequently determine who deserves respect, human rights, or dignified treatment, and who can be disrespected or denied their rights. Women were not legally empowered until the 20th century. For a long time, politicians denied them the right not only to vote but also to own property and to decide about the fate of their children. They did so because women were believed to have no decision-making, moral and rational competences, unlike real humans, which meant men. People with black or dark skin, just because they were born in Africa, India, or the Americas, were treated as half-humans and half-animals, which allowed their enslavement



АНДРЕЙ КОТОМИН, АДОБЕ STOCK

and unlawful control of their lives. There are still cases of African Americans or people from the Middle East being treated as inferior. Aversion to refugees results from the belief that they are different, not quite “people like us.” Aboriginal Australians did not attain full civil rights until the 20th century, and indeed for a very long time they were treated like animals. The extermination of the Jews during World War II, and the earlier pogroms in Europe, were based on the assumption that the Jews were different, and the fact that the Nazis compared them to insects or rats only reinforced the perception that they were not human. The massacre of members of the Tutsi ethnic group began with Hutu propaganda, in which the Tutsi were very commonly stripped of their humanity and likened to insects and other animals.

Social practice has shown that attempts to posit definitions of man and, by the same token, set the boundaries of humanity are always political in nature. Philosophical considerations have their consequences for our perception of the world. Therefore, when we are talking about the boundaries of humanity, we must remember that boundaries always both unite and divide, and delineating where they lie is not merely a scientific pursuit. History teaches us that such definitions also have very strong political overtones that affect our social position and opportunities. The boundaries of humanity are often simply the limits of our own tolerance, kindness, empathy, and morality. Non-humans are treated cruelly because humans have learned to murder animals regardless of what biological species they belong to. ■

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