

Humanism – An Approach to a Multifaceted Concept

Humanismus – Annäherung an einen facettenreichen Begriff

Brigitte Mazohl

The starting point for this article is the author's astonishment, as an emeritus historian and TZI lecturer, at the apparent self-assurance of her TZI colleagues regarding the term 'humanistic psychology'. She finds no trace of their definition of holistic humanity in the educational concept of humanistic grammar schools or in the programmes of humanistic societies today. She traces the etymology of the word and shows how the meaning of 'humanism' has changed in different historical and regional contexts and in historical scholarship. She concludes with some hypotheses as to what might have motivated the founders of humanistic psychology to chose this name.

Starting point: against unambiguity

The term 'humanism' and the adjectives 'humanistic' and 'human' derived from it are used today in very different meanings and contexts. However, in several conversations with members of the TZI community, I gained the impression that the term 'humanistic' psychology, from which TZI emerged and to which it still feels affiliated, is accorded an almost self-evident clarity that makes any closer examination of what it actually means seem almost blasphemous. In the following, I will therefore take a closer look at this term, its history and the diversity that has resulted from it.

Everyday 'humanism'

Today, there are still 'humanistic secondary schools' where the study of classical languages such as Greek and Latin and the reading of ancient authors are among the most important subjects taught. There are also 'humanist' associations, such as the Humanist Association of Germany, an umbrella organisation for humanist communities, which define themselves, among other things, by the fact that their members consider themselves 'non-denominational' (Humanist Association of Germany – Federal Association, 2025). In Vienna – apparently to counteract the declining importance of 'humanistic education' – a Vienna Humanistic Society was founded, which, in close cooperation with the University of Vienna, aims to raise awareness of 'the importance of antiquity for European culture, especially in the field of classical languages from a scientific and educational point of view' and to contribute 'to the preservation and dissemination of humanistic education' (2025, association statutes, §1).

Humanistic psychology

A completely different understanding of 'humanistic' emerges in the psychological and psychotherapeutic context. The term 'humanistic psychology' derives from the German translation of the term 'humanistic psychology', which was coined in the United States in the mid-1950s and is attributed to the psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) (Vogel, 2025). Psychologists working in America developed 'humanistic psychology' in opposition to and in distinction from both Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Burrhus Frederic Skinner's (1904–1990) behaviourism, as a 'third force' (Benjafield, 2015). Based on informal meetings of psychologists in the late 1950s, who shared a sufficiently similar – holistic – view of human

nature, the American Association for Humanistic Psychology was founded in 1961. It soon developed into a melting pot of different therapeutic methods, always focusing on "the human being with his potential for development and growth" (Vogel, 2025, p. 258). In addition to holism, the essential foundations of humanistic psychology were – and still are – the needs for self-actualisation and meaning that are common to all human beings. §1§ What is now known as 'humanistic psychotherapy' has developed from these beginnings, has differentiated itself in many ways and, despite all the differences in the methods chosen, has now established itself as the 'fourth force' #1# in the psychotherapeutic scene. In order to untangle this almost incomprehensible diversity from its "root network", German psychotherapist Jürgen Kriz recently attempted to provide an overview (Kriz, 2022). A 'humanistic view of humanity' is defined as the actual glue that holds together the different therapeutic approaches. The Working Group for Humanistic Psychotherapy, founded in 1998, also refers to its goal of 'promoting humanistic thinking in organisations and professional fields' in the preamble to its statutes, emphasising as its characteristic feature the "holistic view of the human being as a whole (), who is not only to be seen objectively () and bio-psycho-socially (), but who also wants and needs to be considered as a subject (Subjekt)" (<https://aghpt.de/satzung/>).

The Austrian patient information on psychotherapeutic approaches from 2024 reads very similarly: "The humanistic therapy's view of human nature emphasises the uniqueness, wholeness, freedom, intentionality, relationality and responsibility of the person." (Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection, 2024)

Or, in the words of Ruth C. Cohn: "Humanistic psychology adds values to existential worldviews that are generally referred to as human, i.e. humane. [...] It is human-centred rather than ability-centred and holistic in a psychosomatic and social sense. [...] Through my work on conceptual clarification, I discovered that my humanistic convictions were the most important personal foundation for the creation and development of TCI." (Cohn and Farau, 1984, p. 436f.) However, there is no mention here of classical languages and authors, nor of an emphasis on secularism. On the contrary, the five-stage hierarchical pyramid of human needs originally developed by Maslow (basic needs, safety needs, social needs, individual needs, self-actualisation) was expanded by Maslow himself shortly before his death to include the need for transcendence (Maslow, Geiger and Maslow, 1971). Many, but not all, of the later humanistic psychologists followed him in this.

Interim conclusion

In everyday speech today, the adjective 'human' is also used in a rather unspecific way. Depending on the context, it is used normatively, for example when politicians call for a 'humane' society, or it refers in a very general way to everything that has to do with human beings as such (human medicine, human geography, human sciences, etc.). The lowest common denominator of the various semantic fields thus seems to be human beings themselves, combined with very different ideas of what these human beings actually are and should be.

The roots of the term

In his handbook *Themenzentrierte Interaktion (Theme-Centred Interaction)*, Peter Vogel traces the "humanistic-humane" word family back to its underlying concept of "humanism". This, in turn, refers to a "historical movement [...] that emerged in Italy in the 14th century and, in contrast to the medieval Christian tradition, placed the human being at the centre of thought" (2025, p. 259). I would like to counter this apparent certainty with a more nuanced understanding by distinguishing the etymology of the word (as a linguistic element) from the history of the term (as a carrier of meaning), and both from the historical phenomenon itself, tracing how this "historical movement" of the early modern period was itself only much later, and as a result of various reinterpretations and redefinitions, came to be called "humanism".

Etymology

Etymologically, the word humanism can be traced back to the Latin "humanitas", which in Roman antiquity referred quite generally to "humanity" or the "earthly sphere" as opposed to the divine sphere (Walther, 2007, p. 666). However, some Latin authors also used 'humanitas' to refer to 'education and instruction in the valuable sciences (bonae artes)', corresponding to the Greek παιδεία (Stroh, 1989, p. 6).

History of the term: designation of an era or educational ideal?

The German term 'humanism', on the other hand, which was soon adopted in other European languages, is a later coinage from the 19th century. Its first use is documented in a publication that appeared in Jena in 1808, in which the Protestant theologian and philosopher Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer (1766–1858), in a polemical debate with the philanthropic movement, contrasted a humanistic educational ideal with the pedagogy of the Enlightenment (Niethammer, 1808). The 'humanistic grammar school' dates back to this early 19th-century coinage.

The term was first used almost fifty years later (1859) by the German historian and Renaissance scholar Georg Voigt (1827–1891) to describe the transitional period between the Middle Ages and the Modern Age, i.e. the 14th and 15th centuries (Walther, 2007). §2§ In his work "Die Wiedergeburt des klassischen Alterthums oder das erste Jahrhundert des Humanismus" (The Rebirth of Classical Antiquity or the First Century of Humanism), Voigt spoke admiringly of humanism as "a stage and a facet of the age of this cultural-historical process [the Renaissance, i.e. the rebirth of classical antiquity, B.M.] and its penetration into intellectual life." (Voigt, 1859, p. 4). The thrust of this was very clearly directed against the ruling medieval church, "which does not tolerate the individual human being" (ibid., p. 8) and whose power had caused the literary monuments of antiquity to sink "into hibernation" (ibid., p. 5). Classical thinkers, on the other hand, had already placed man at the centre of their attention in antiquity, and it was precisely in this that the early modern humanists followed them. This interpretation clearly reflects the secular, enlightened thinking of the 19th century, which projected its own educational values – ancient, i.e. pre-Christian writings versus theology and the Bible – back onto the historical movement of the early modern period.

'Studia humanitatis' in the Renaissance

Contemporaries of the 14th and 15th centuries, however, were not yet familiar with the term in all its later connotations. In a much more modest context, the *Res publica literaria*, the republic of scholars at that time, used only the word and concept of "studia humanitatis" in Latin, which was their common language.

This term has been documented since the beginning of the 15th century, coined by the chancellor of the Republic of Florence, Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406), who used it to describe the study of *the Artes liberales*, which the "humanistae" were required to teach (Walther, 2010, p. 667). The study of *the Artes liberales*, the seven liberal arts, in contrast to the *Artes mechanicae*, the mechanical arts, i.e. the practical skills that were not taught at universities, was a preparatory requirement for those students (women did not study at universities at that time) who subsequently wanted to attend one of the higher faculties (theology, medicine, law). §3§ The liberal arts consisted of the language-oriented *trivium* (grammar, dialectics, rhetoric) and the science-oriented *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy) and were incorporated into the philosophy faculties during the major university reforms of the 19th century. (Bernt, Hödl and Schipperges, 1980; Lindgren, 1992.)

In Anglo-Saxon research, this connection with the later 'studies of humanity' or 'humanities' is still clearly seen today: "The scholars who set out on this new road to the ancient past [...] took a special interest in the arts of language, grammar, and rhetoric; in poetry; and in the further

studies that would help to inform and improve the characters of men and women who played important roles in society" (Grafton and Bell, 2018, p. 358). It is also clearly emphasised here that these 'humanists' were not non-denominational scholars, as the modern 'secular' understanding of 'humanism' suggests, but 'faithful Christians' (ibid.).

Thus, only two characteristics of the early modern concept of 'humanitas' have survived to the present day: on the one hand, there was an emphasis on the earthly sphere, i.e. the sphere belonging to the human world, in contrast to the supernatural, divine sphere; and on the other hand, there was a focus on the study of ancient classical writings and languages. There was no question of an ethical-normative attribution of meaning in the sense of a holistic 'humanity', as defined today in particular by representatives of humanistic psychology, in the age of what later came to be known as 'humanism'.

Renaissance humanism

The term was only developed centuries later to describe the historical period that supposedly marks the transition from the Middle Ages to modern times. At least since the standard work by cultural historian Jakob Burckhardt (1818–1897) on the culture of the Renaissance in Italy (Burckhardt, 1860), the two terms "humanism" and "Renaissance" have often been used interchangeably although Burckhardt himself discussed the characteristics of humanism (revival of antiquity, discovery of the world and of man) in detail, but refers to "humanism" rather casually (ibid., p. 198). In general, it can be observed in German-speaking and Anglo-Saxon research that 'humanism' is understood as only one aspect of the much broader concept of 'Renaissance culture', whereas 'umanesimo' continues to play a much greater role in the Italian tradition to this day. The 'rediscovery' of antiquity was about much more than that, namely a return to the former greatness of Rome in the face of many years of foreign rule, from which 19th-century Italy was seeking to free itself.

In historical research on early modern humanism, the term 'Renaissance humanism' has now become established as being different from later and more modern forms of humanism. Historical research makes a much more precise distinction between the various educational and artistic movements of the early modern period, also with regard to the different periods and their respective geographical areas of influence: Michelangelo's God the Father, who breathes life into Adam in the ceiling fresco of the Sistine Chapel in Rome (1512), owes its existence to a different 'humanism' than Erasmus of Rotterdam's "Institutio Principis Christiani" (1516), the guide to Christian moral education for the young prince and later Emperor Charles V. The 'humanistic' opposition to the Church so often invoked in the 19th century is, of course, not to be found in either case.

Gerrit Walther aptly summarised this lack of specificity associated with the term humanism today: 'The clarity, coherence and ideological direction suggested by the term humanism did not correspond to the historical phenomenon [...] at all. Humanism was not identical with a school, a class or a professional group, nor with a worldview or a science. Nor did it aim at humanity or individuality in the 19th-century sense, nor did it postulate tolerance as the Enlightenment later did. It neither pursued a political programme nor did it strive in principle for understanding, peace and world citizenship' (2007, p. 668).

In conclusion: a plea for the conscious use of ambiguous semantics

So how did the representatives of 'humanistic psychology' arrive at their seemingly unambiguous self-image? The fact that the term originated in English in post-war America can probably be attributed to the fact that, on the one hand, the Anglo-Saxon educational tradition of the 'humanities' continued to thrive there and, on the other hand, this was equated with the

ancient educational ideal of human formation (παιδεία). It probably also played a role that they – all still committed to the interpretative tradition of the 19th century – recognised in the concept of 'humanism' an (alleged) battle cry against the dark centuries of the Middle Ages and the omnipotent Church, which they now, after the experiences of fascism and National Socialism, wanted to take up again in order to fight for the liberation of humanity from authoritarian and totalitarian structures. However, the Germanisation of the term has contributed significantly to the multifaceted nature of what is understood today as 'humanism' in various contexts. I therefore believe that it would be worthwhile to reflect more deeply on this complexity within the TZI community.

Notes

#1# Originally the 'third force' alongside psychoanalysis and behavioural therapy, it has developed in recent years into the 'fourth force' as 'systemic therapy' has gained recognition as a further direction.

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Call-Outs

§1§ The essential foundations of humanistic therapy are the needs for self-actualisation and meaning that are common to all human beings.

§2§ The term was first used almost fifty years later (in 1859) to describe the 14th and 15th centuries.

§3§ The study of the Artes liberales was a prerequisite for students who subsequently wished to attend one of the higher faculties (theology, medicine, law).

§4§ Humanism is understood merely as one aspect of the much broader concept of 'Renaissance culture'.

Short CV:

Brigitte Mazohl is an emeritus professor of modern and Austrian history at the University of Innsbruck and a full member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. She obtained her TZI diploma in 2007 and is currently head of the science department on the board of RCI International.

Brigitte Mazohl Email: brigitte.mazohl@ruth-cohn-institute.org