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*Humanitas: Universalism, equivocation, and basic criterion*

The Western world, or to be more precise the Latinate world, has deeply embedded within its language and thought a notion of *humanitas*, of humanity or, perhaps better expressed in English, of the humane. This notion covers immense ground, reaches into numerous discussions about human rights, humanitarian aid, humanistic studies or the humanities, and is at the bottom of many fundamental ethical and political arguments. Despite its far-reaching importance, the very concept itself has received surprisingly little academic attention, and in general only from the field of philology, the background of the present author, and – to some degree – from scholars in the history of ideas.¹ Few real philosophers or political scientists have taken up the concept in its complete range, and the reason for this is probably that the concept is messy: it contains or revolves around what could be labelled an equivocation. Here, equivocation does not imply mistake, but the fact that in the concept of *humanitas* we find things that are not the same, or not really the same, and yet they appear under the same name. And being a case of equivocation, a discussion of the concept of *humanitas* needs to focus in some detail on certain linguistic features and by consequence, due to its Latin origin, also on the ancient notion and use of *humanitas*, not least as found in the writings of Cicero, if we want to see the full picture.

But, in tracing the origins of the concept, we need to accept from the start that we cannot completely tidy up the mess and that we may end up with accepting a divide between conceptual precision on the one hand and getting the best out of a traditional manner of speaking on the other. And this traditional manner of speaking, so embedded in, e.g., the English language, the language of the present text, is almost unavoidably connected to particular interests despite its idealistic and universal claims. In fact, in dealing with the concept of *humanitas*, with its far-reaching influence in a Western and, from the twentieth century onwards also, in a global perspective, it is crucial that we come to realize its fundamentally ideological aspects. To state this ideological core briefly – but we shall return to it – the Latin/Western concept of *humanitas* combines and may denote separately 1. a common reference to man or mankind, in a sort of universal spirit, 2. a legal-ethical standard for the correct manner of interaction be-

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tween people, and 3. some notion of the potentiality of men to reach such a standard through education and/or rational thinking. These three notions are all to be found in the writings of Cicero, even within the same literary work, and yet they stand in some opposition to each other. How can a universal reference to mankind at the same time be an indication of the ethically correct (as opposed to the ethically wrong)? Are not all human beings part of mankind regardless of their behaviour or education? And these are just questions that can be put at the most general level. This, however, is not to say that the implied notions in *humanitas* make no sense. If supported by arguments, fundamental issues concerning the nature of mankind, the justification of laws and states, and the basic needs of education may receive substantial and crucial attention, and *humanitas* has since antiquity given rise to such. But the central problem in the Latin tradition is that a full discussion is never given of the concept, but is rather implied in the writings of Cicero, the fundamental user and perhaps to some degree inventor of the concept for all posterity. Through the centuries, *humanitas*, including in its various modern translations, has repeatedly entered phrasings and discussions, but with no clear philosophical support. A lack of clarity has accompanied its use, e.g., through employing without clear distinction one and the same word to refer to three fundamental spheres (mankind – correct behaviour – education), and this leads to what I call an equivocation. Philologists and historians of ideas may know this, but despite the centrality of the concept for modern issues, many others do not.

And when modern philosophers and political scientists do not question this aspect of *humanitas*, fields such as human rights, humanitarian aid, and humanistic studies come to be viewed as separate. Even if a historical analysis brings you back to the same basically Stoic origins, with Cicero as an important step in the further development of Greek ideas, the common historical meeting point of these fields is hardly ever discussed and problematized. And yet they have – in a Latinate context – been tied to each other from a very early point. And it should be stressed that the claim here is not that the content of human rights, of humanitarian aid, or of humanistic studies are in any special way linked to the Latin language or to the Latin tradition. People have been ethical, altruistic, literate, and wise within any linguistic or cultural sphere on the planet. But it is a thing peculiar to the Latin language to make this narrow combination and to coin one central concept to encompass all these fields and to equate them conceptually with mankind in all its universality. As is often stated in works on *humanitas*, no equivalent concept ever developed in ancient Greek, or in Greek before the modern period. Greek philosophers asked all the fundamental questions reflected in *humanitas*, but they never came upon the idea to make one word cover all these aspects. Instead they talked of things such
as ἄνθρωπος/anthropotes (‘man/mankind’), philanthropia (‘philanthropy’, e.g. of a ruler) or paideia (‘education/Bildung’). The same goes – per the contention of the present author – for practically all other languages preceding the Latin tradition. And again it is not the claim that other languages or cultures did not have the notions implied in humanitas. What they did not have, as opposed to Latin and the languages that copied Latin, was the combination in one word of a universal definition (‘mankind’) with an ideal ethical-legal standard (‘correct humane behaviour’) and a notion of fundamental education (studia humanitatis). This combination is unique to Latin and the languages that took over its manner of expression, that took over the concept of humanitas.

In a sense, we could simply take note of this particular – originally Latin, later widely diffused Western – use of one word and say that as is known from so many other cases, words may carry more than one meaning, and it makes little sense to insist on attempting to make a bridge between the meanings. The English word ‘kind’ may mean ‘friendly’ (e.g. a kind woman), but it may also mean ‘type’ or ‘sort’ (what kind of? what type of?). This does not lead to an intellectual discussion about the word kind. But in the case of humanitas a discussion is needed, because one of its meanings is often used to support or argue for another meaning. It is – to state such an argument in English – quite easy to argue that human beings should treat other human beings ‘humanely’, as this seems to be supported almost in its very wording. It may also be argued that the humanities are needed, for if not we lose our humanity, and so on. And these arguments are in no way groundless. What is being singled out here is the simple fact that since English has inherited the Latin use of ‘humane’, ‘humanities/humanity’ etc., it is possible in English to construct arguments that go very much along the lines of Cicero’s restatement of Stoic thinking, a restatement that inserted the word humanitas (and the related adjective humanus etc.) into strong argumentative positions, that are also focused on values.

In the following, some examples will be given of these positions in Cicero’s works, in support of the claim that it actually all goes back to Cicero. And here a central reason why the concept of humanitas has become so central in the Western tradition springs simply from the fact that in the more than twenty centuries since his death, Cicero’s works have had millions of readers, and among them many enthusiastic readers. This is evident in ancient Rome, not least from the opposition that his writings evoked at the arrival of Christianity. Later, in the European renaissance, Cicero rose from being a praised stylist to becoming a central literary figure, with Ciceronians appearing in many places. Much has been written about his importance among especially Italian umanisti, but it will here be the contention that it is in the writings of Erasmus of Rotterdam that the full argumentative potentials in the concept of humanitas became revitalized,
and with fundamental consequences for the Latin/Western tradition. Through increasing globalization in our time during the last centuries, this Latinate tradition has left its marks in discussions all over the world.

We will briefly go through some central examples in Cicero’s writings, comment upon the reactions of the church father Lactantius, and then jump to Erasmus. Finally, some words on modern practice and perhaps future dealings with the concept will round off this presentation.

In his De oratore (composed 55 BCE), Cicero depicts a discussion taking place between some Roman nobiles just before the outbreak of the Social war, the Bellum sociale (91–88 BCE). The whole scene, at the villa of Crassus, is fraught with liveliness but also with impending gloom, and in backdating a discussion that Cicero could have had with his contemporary peers, an argument of the good old days is established. In these good old days, the many sides of humanitas were still to be seen reflected in daily life and practice. Of all his works, the De oratore is the work in which Cicero tries to establish an argument based on the evocation of the many meanings of humanitas. In fact, Cicero is evoking the lost world of political debate before the rise of Roman civil wars. Here mankind, kindness, and education could, at least according to Cicero, rightfully be indicated by one word, humanitas. In the following quotations, all from the first book of the De oratore, these separate meanings of humanitas will be underlined through translating each instance with a clear, specific word in English. In fact, it often happens in translations of Latin texts that the word humanitas does not become ‘humanity’ in English but is translated with some more specific word. Such modern translations therefore give modern readers no idea of the importance of the concept of humanitas in the writings of Cicero. But here the Latin text will appear along English translations:²

\[ De \text{ oratore 1.12.53}^{3} \]

\[ Quare, nisi qui naturas hominum, vimque omnem humanitatis, causasque eas, quibus mentes incitantur aut reflectuntur, penitus perspexerit, dicendo quod volet perficere non poterit. \]

Therefore, unless you have fully perceived the natures of human beings and the whole force of mankind, and the reasons why the minds are incited or deflected, you will not be able to achieve what you want through your words.

Cicero here explains why the orator has to know how people are and react, to know their hearts, so to speak, in order to be able to convince them. So here hu-

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² All translations are by the present author.
³ For editions and translations of the works of Cicero, see e.g. Loeb Classics Library since 1911.
manitas means ‘mankind’, ‘human beings in general’, as the audience one may be talking to in general will include all sorts of people.

De oratore 1.8.32

... quid esse potest in otio aut iucundius aut magis proprium humanitatis quam sermo facetus ac nulla in re rudis?

... what can in a moment of leisure be more delightful or a better mark of education than a well-phrased and in no way uncouth speech?

This quotation discusses humanitas as something like ‘education’, for the speech that is here recommended cannot simply reflect the fact that the speaker is a human being. The second half of the comparison describes what is the mark of this humanitas: refined – i.e., educated – speech.

De oratore 1.23.106

Equidem te cum in dicendo semper putavi deum, tum vero tibi numquam eloquentiae maior rem tribui laudem quam humanitatis: qua nunc te uti vel maxime deceat, neque defugere eam disputationem, ad quam te duo excellentis ingeniia dolescentes cupiunt accedere.

But just as I have always deemed you a god in the field of rhetoric, I have never praised you more for your eloquence than for your kindness; and it is fitting that you now employ that quality and do not avoid the discussion that our two bright young men want you to engage in.

Scaevola is imploring Crassus to take up the discussion that the young participants in the discussion are asking for, and he presupposes his willingness based on Crassus’ humanitas. Neither being human nor education can by themselves be guarantees of such; rather it must be some moral/ethical obligation – a kindness – that is invoked in this passage of the De oratore.

As you see, humanitas appears in the same text in all three indicated meanings and, as a reading of the De oratore will show, even in central passages that set the scene and the content of the depicted debate. To the Latinate reader these aspects would combine into an argument, a positive understanding of all three aspects, supporting each other. And in separate passages throughout the rest of the text Cicero will offer partial definitions (man is characterized in opposition to animals by his rationality, laws and education are part of man’s civilizing process, etc.⁴), but there appears no explanation as to why these aspects have the name.

⁴ See especially De orat. 1.9.35, 1.16.71, 1.23.106 (rationality); and the passage from 1.41.85 to 1.42.191 (civilizing process).
All through his career, Cicero invoked *humanitas* as an argument. In the *Pro Roscio* (80 BCE) the very concluding sentence is that unless the defendant was acquitted (and the true perpetrators found), “we lose from our souls all sense of *humanitas*”.⁵ Here the ethical-legal meaning is clearly indicated, even if the context gives us little possibility of asserting this, given that it is the very last words of the speech. In his speeches against Verres, a governor accused of looting his province (70 BCE), Cicero highlighted the *humanitas* of Verres’ provincial hosts, opposing this to the utter lack of *humanitas* that Verres was showing.⁶ For, even though former Roman leaders such as Marcellus and Scipio had been perfect exemplars of how to treat provincial minions humanely, Verres did not follow their lead and instead robbed and looted his province. He therefore fell below the standards of *humanitas*. Some years later, in 62 BCE, in his defence of the poet Archias, Cicero bases much of his argument in favour of seeing Archias as a person worthy of respect on Archias’ *humanitas*, here referring to his poetical skills. It is in discussing these that Cicero uses the compound *studia humanitatis* (lit. ‘the study of humanity’) to denote Archias’ activities. This compound later became a catch phrase and is at the bottom of why we still talk of ‘the humanities’.⁷ Here *humanitas* implies something on top of general arguments in favour of Archias’ right to Roman citizenship, namely his status as an educated person. And such examples are found in plenty all through Cicero’s writings, also in passages of far less importance to the theme of the text, in which they appear. *Humanitas* and derivations of it became central to Cicero’s manner of speaking.

But, as indicated earlier, the interconnectedness of the universal meaning ‘mankind’ and at least of one of the more focused meanings of ‘kind’ and ‘educated’ makes the argument stronger and strengthens its full essence. It is hard to reject the claim that one should show *humanitas*, for rejecting it almost implies excepting oneself from ‘mankind’, the universal meaning of *humanitas*. And such casting out of the whole notion of mankind actually happens in Cicero’s writings, e.g. when he denigrates the Sicilian tyrant Phalaris, who was known for his sadistic punishments. In his *De officiis*, Cicero states that people like Phalaris may, like bodily members, be cut off and no longer be regarded as part of the body, the body of humanity (in the sense of ‘mankind’); in fact, Phalaris and his likes may

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⁶ See e.g. *In Verrem* 2.1.1746 and 2.4.44.98, and the discussions in Rothe (1978) and Schneider (1964).
⁷ Cic., *Pro Archia* 2.3
rightfully be killed.⁸ Here we see the mechanism of *humanitas* at work in its most ideologized way: be kind and educated, or you are no longer a member of the human race. The legal implications of this are of course serious. To make things clear, we must note that it is common, also outside the sphere of *humanitas*, to dehumanize, e.g., enemies by calling them ‘beasts’, ‘animals’ etc. and thereby implying that they are exempted from any kind of protection that the epithet human may give them. So, as we see, there is no need for the concept of *humanitas* for such denigrations to take place. But employing the concept gives a further support to this dehumanization.

Phalaris was to Cicero a historical character, though from Sicily, a place to which Cicero had special relations. These relations explain why he was the advocate chosen to accuse Verres, the former governor of Sicily. And, as is clear from two of the examples appearing above, Cicero was apt to use *humanitas* when defending the justice that he believed to be the basic or true mark of the empire, the Roman Empire. Verres fell below the standard of Marcellus and Scipio but also of some provincial hosts. *Humanitas* had a universality in its ethical claims that could be demanded of just about any person (or at least free citizen) in the empire. It was a moral standard, but it also meant a manner of talking that justified imperial ruling as long as it complied with these standards.⁹ As for the status of slaves in view of Cicero’s constant reference to *humanitas*, an imagined scene appearing towards the end of Cicero’s *De officiis* is indicative. Reusing an imagined dilemma constructed by the Greek author Hekaton, Cicero asks “What would you do if you were on a sinking ship, and the only way to save yourself would be to throw overboard either an expensive horse or a

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⁸ Cicero, *De off.* 3.32: *Nam quod ad Phalarim attinet, perfacile iudicium est. Nulla est enim societas nobis cum tyrannis et potius summa distractio est, neque est contra naturam spoliare eum, si possis, quem est honestum necare, atque hoc omne genus pestiferum atque impium ex hominum communitate exterminandum est. Etenim, ut membra quaedam amputantur, si et ipsa sanguine et tamquam spiritu carere coeperunt et nocent reliquis partibus corporis, sic ista in figura hominis feritas et immanitas beluae a communi tamquam humanitatis corpore segreganda est. (For as concerns Phalaris, it is very easy to draw a verdict. We have no social bonds with tyrants, in fact there is rather complete separation, and it is not contrary to nature to take away, if you can, from the person whom it is rightful to kill, and one should in fact remove this whole pestiferous and impious sort of people from human society. For just as some members of the body are amputated, should they start lacking blood and life and are detrimental to the rest of the body, so should this wild and cruel monster in the shape of a man be removed from the common body of humanity).*

⁹ Rothe (1978).
cheap slave’. Cicero then goes on by stating that if you put economy first you would save the horse, but if ‘humanitas’ then it would be the slave. Also in this story we see problems with the concept, for is it the implied humanity in the slave or is it the mildness of the slave-owner, or something else altogether, that would cause such a preference? Cicero does not tell us.

The concept of humanitas had its critics already in the ancient world. Aulus Gellius decries in second half of the second century CE what he believes to be a wrong usage of the word, thereby showing exactly what he took the common (Ciceronian) usage to be, as we see in 13.17:

Qui verba Latina fecerunt quique his probe usi sunt, ‘humanitatem’ non id esse voluerunt quod vulgus existimatur quodque a Graecis φιλανθρωπία dicitur et significat dexteritatem quandam benevolentiamque erga omnis homines promiscuam; sed ‘humanitatem’ appellaverunt id propemodum quod Graeci παιδείαν vocant, nos ‘eruditionem, institutionemque in bonas artes’ dicimus.

Those who have shaped the Latin language and used it correctly did not want for humanitas to carry the meaning that people commonly think and which by the Greeks is called philanthropia and signifies some good ability or will towards all men indistinctly. They used the word humanitas to signify what the Greeks call paideia; what we call education and training in the (liberal) arts.

Gellius sets up two of the meanings of humanitas (‘kindness’ and ‘education’), rejecting the first (‘kindness’), approving the second (‘education’), but making no mention of the third (‘mankind’). But Gellius’ remarks reflect at least an awareness of distinct meanings in the same word and a personal stance supported by adducing the equivalent Greek terms. Gellius’ discussion, with or without the voiced criticism, recurs in many places during the renaissance and all through the centuries, not least in the encyclopaedic Cornu copiae of Perotti (1429–1480). Likewise, we find studia humanitatis used as a common reference to learned studies in many places. It is important, however, to distinguish between the places where such Ciceronian expressions simply enter standardized language and where the argumentative implications are either reused or op-

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10 Slightly paraphrasing the original, which goes as follows (Cicero, De officiis 3.89): Plenus est sextus liber de officiis Hecatonis talium quaestionum, sitne boni viri in maxima caritate annonae familiam non alere. In utramque partem disputat, sed tamen ad extremum utilitatem, ut putat, officium dirigat magis quam humanitate. Quaerit, si in mari iacturam facienda sit, equine pretiosi potius iacturam faciat an servuli vilis. Hic alio res familiaris, alio ducit humanitas.

11 See the discussion in Høgel (2015) ch. 2.

12 Gellius (1903).

13 Perotti (1995) 64.
posed. In the quotation from Gellius, we saw that one of the meanings implied in Ciceronian *humanitas*, that of *philanthropia* or ‘kindness’, was deemed unwant- ed. Other authors, already in antiquity and onwards, found faults with other aspects.¹⁴

In the sixth book of his *Institutiones divinae*, Lactantius (ca. 250 – 325), who late in life became the tutor of Crispus, son of Constantine the Great, vehemently opposes Cicero’s ideal of *humanitas*, setting Christian *misericordia* up against it. Perhaps partly misreading Cicero, Lactantius insists that *misericordia* is a better virtue, for it encompasses all people, unlike the more restricted *humanitas*.¹⁵ We may find this critique surprising given the universal meaning of *humanitas*, but Lactantius may be thinking of the restriction that *humanitas* when taken to mean ‘education’ implies. In any case, protesting against Cicero’s utilitarian understanding of who deserves help, Lactantius goes as far as to address the deceased Cicero in the second person; see Lact. *Div. Inst.* 6.11 (PL 6.673 A):

*Hic, hic, Marce Tulli, aberrasti a vera justitia; eamque uno verbo sustulisti, cum pietatis et humanitatis officia utilitate metitus es.*

Here, here, Marcus Tullius, did you err from true justice and did away with it in one word, for you have measured the duties of piety and humanity by way of utility.

Lactantius’ protest is a witness not only of new understandings arriving with Christian concepts, but also of the profound impression that Cicero’s writings had left on many Christian writers of late antiquity.

But even if Cicero continued to be read, his ethical teaching, including his use of *humanitas*, ceased to attract its former level of attention. Medieval authors would commonly speak of *studia humanitatis*, but apart from that they would not use the simple ‘*humanitas*’ frequently to mean ‘education’. The specific meaning of kindness in the sense of implying ‘a little help’, common at least since the *Satyrica* of Petronius (1st cent. CE), is found in, e.g., the Benedictine rule and elsewhere.¹⁶ But *humanitas* does not seem to reappear in real argumentative usage before the age of the humanists. And even in the case of the early humanists, we find surprisingly little actual use of the full implication of *humanitas*. Though many humanists made a grand case for *studia humanitatis*, they hardly ever referenced this in direct connection with a universal reference to man, or to kindness. These seem not to have served their purposes to any serious degree.

¹⁴ See Høgel (2015) ch. 3.
¹⁵ Lactantius (1844 – 65) cols. 0111–0822 A.
¹⁶ See Høgel (2015) ch. 3.
The first person in early modern times who really took up the Ciceronian use of *humanitas* in an argumentative way was Erasmus of Rotterdam, in particular in his diatribes against war (i.e. internecine Christian wars). Here he depends on *humanitas* to decry the folly of warfare, building up his argument through successive writings appearing close in time: first the *Anti-polemus* (1515), then the *Enchiridion* (or *Institutio principis Christiani*) (1516), and finally the *Querela pacis* (1517),¹ where the personified Peace herself speaks and argues that internecine Christian wars make no sense, for man’s nature is to seek peace, a view he supports with a reference to *humanitas*: see *Querela Pacis*, *Ausz. Schrift*. 5.366:

*Hinc est, videlicet, quod vulgus, quidquid ad mutuum benevolentiam pertinet, humanum appetat, ut humanitatis vocabulum non jam naturam nobis declaret, sed mores hominis natura dignos.*

This is presumably why people commonly call whatever pertains to mutual benevolence ‘humane’, so that the word humanity here no longer points to our nature, but to the behaviour that is worthy of man.

As mouthpiece for Erasmus, lady Peace refers to the meaning of ‘mankind’ and at the same time uses the word *humanitas* to refer to correct behaviour. Since Erasmus could not draw on Christian vocabulary to argue against war between Christians, he has recourse to Cicero’s *humanitas*, claiming that it is against human nature – and the behaviour worthy of being called *humanitas* – to wage war. Writers before Erasmus had argued against warfare, not least Marsilius of Padua in his *Defensor pacis* of 1324, but Marsilius based no argument on Ciceronian *humanitas*.¹⁸ With Erasmus began the European tradition – based on the Ciceronian concept – of taking humanists to be the defenders of peace and of other ethical implications derived from the same word *humanitas*, an endeavour that was at the base of their erudite-professional denomination as ‘humanists’. And this tradition has more or less remained strong ever since, and in many languages a humanist is not only a learned person but also a person with a big heart. This is at least common in Germanic languages as English, German etc.

Notions of *humanitas* also found their way into discussions of natural law and international law, the *ius gentium*. There is a long development leading up to this, and when, e.g., the Geneva convention insists that prisoners of war “should in all circumstances be treated humanely” or, in the French version, that they deserve “un traitement humain”, we are again (or still) in the world of *humanitas*. How can a reference to man (humane, *humain*) secure any specific

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¹ Editions of the works are found in Erasmus (1990), to which references are made here.
¹⁸ For text and translation, see Marsilius (2006).
treatment? Are torturers not human beings? They are, but the naturalized conception of Ciceronian *humanitas* suggests some ideal notion, implied but perhaps not fully explained, which resists our categorizing them so. *Humanitas* has become, at least in Western languages – through translation of fundamental texts like the Geneva convention, – a basic criterion and yet also a messy concept, to be used with care and in heavy need of dialogue with other normative systems.

We can on good grounds argue for human rights, for humanitarian aid, and for the humanities, but if we wish to do so, our arguments should, if based on Latin *humanitas* and its fundamental equivocation, be supplied with how we understand these, not on the simple – and feeble – ground that Cicero gave us a stronghold of a word, a word in constant need of definition. Also, the interconnectedness between these fields needs to be questioned. Are the humanities, tied to ideas about human rights, or to humanitarian aid? This seems to be the case at least when using the term humanist ambiguously. These are ideological questions, but hard to avoid in a world of *humanitas*. 