This chapter will:

- consider a broad-brush anthropological account of the history of the human species;
- discuss the variety of ‘humanisms’: that is to say, the plethora of conceptual approaches and belief systems that in contrasting ways prioritise humanity;
- present a radical humanist analysis of the constitutive or ‘essential’ characteristics of the human species as a means by which to define its needs.

This chapter sets out to consider what is distinctively ‘human’ about human need. Its conclusion informs the critical stance that informs the rest of the book: for appraising the distinction between that which is necessary to a human being’s existence, and that which is – in a literal sense – essential to her humanity (to which we shall turn in Chapter 3): and for understanding the dynamic relationship between human needs whose meanings are framed through prescribed beliefs and/or reasoning, and those which are framed through direct human experience, feelings and struggles (to which we shall turn in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively).

**Human history**

Recorded history began only with the development of systematic forms of written communication some 5,000 years ago. But biological, archaeological and anthropological scholarship tell us that what we now refer to as the human species, *homo sapiens*, had by that time already existed on this planet for perhaps 150,000 years. There had been even earlier species of genus *homo*, some of whom developed the use of tools and fire, and the oldest of which may have first appeared some 2 or 3 million years ago. The *homo sapiens* brain, however, was twice as large as that of the earliest hominin species, and what set it apart was a process characterised by Harari (2011) as a ‘Cognitive Revolution’, which began to unfold somewhere between 70,000 and 30,000 years ago as our species, in small foraging bands, began to colonise pockets of the world, hunting with bows and arrows and sometimes, for example, travelling in boats. While doing so, they began to evolve more elaborate forms of language and communication,
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and to develop artistic and symbolic modes of representation. Importantly, it appears that the small, generally nomadic hunter-gatherer communities in which they lived were able adaptively to develop methods of social cooperation well in advance of those of other species (Dunbar & Shultz, 2007; Sahlins, 1974; and see Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018).

Some 12,000 years ago, the Cognitive Revolution was followed by the beginnings of an Agricultural Revolution. Human beings started in some parts of the world to settle and cultivate the land; to domesticate both plants and animals. The sedentary societies that emerged began to generate increasingly sophisticated technologies, including eventually the use of metals. And by the time recorded history began some 4–5,000 years ago, some human societies in certain parts of the world had expanded in size, establishing various forms of government, religion and formalised ‘civilisations’ (Elias, 1978). Such societies became possible, in part because productive technologies made it practicable to feed, shelter and clothe larger groups of people, but also because shared (or sometimes imposed) systems of belief and understanding made it possible to coordinate such processes. The medium of language had made it possible to classify and name, to communicate about and plan access to the palpable or concrete things that people needed for survival. But it also made it possible for human beings to unify themselves around imaginary or abstract things; to create and share legends and myths; to invent and promote shared beliefs in spirits and gods; to define and agree cultural practices, customs, rules and laws. Whereas the elaborately evolved behaviours and habits of their primate ancestors were driven primarily by genetically instituted instincts, *homo sapiens* had generated and internalised intersubjective understandings of their world, so constructing what might be regarded as ‘artificial instincts’ (Harari, 2011: 181). As this process accelerated, human beings found new ways to exchange information and produce and exchange the goods they needed. Language could be expressed through written script. Produce could be traded with people from beyond the immediate group or community that produced it, not by barter, but using money; a medium of exchange requiring a shared conceptualisation of comparative value symbolised through tokens or coinage.

To what extent did these changes constitute human progress? Partial insights into the prehistoric hunter-gatherer societies of the early Stone Age can be obtained from anthropological studies of surviving aboriginal, indigenous and nomadic tribal peoples, findings from which suggest that the daily existence of prehistoric foragers may have been frugal by contemporary standards, but their ‘wants were scarce and [their] means (in relation) plentiful’ (Sahlins, 1974: 13). Theirs, perhaps, was the original ‘Affluent Society’, in which rules and rights of exchange were governed, it has been suggested, by ‘The Spirit of the Gift’. Though we should not romanticise the quality of life of prehistoric foragers, the evidence suggests that in supposedly more ‘developed’ agricultural societies,
by contrast, most people had to work longer and harder than the foragers in
order to achieve their means of subsistence, their diets were less varied and less
nourishing, and their livelihoods were not necessarily any more secure. Certainly,
the societies that emerged were more hierarchical. Ruling elites could enslave,
exploit or oppress parts of the populations over which they ruled. Kingdoms and
empires sought to expand or compete for domination across ever greater portions
of the global human population. Whereas human beings had once existed in
small self-sufficient groups, largely isolated from each other, they evolved into a
species that was on the one hand uniquely interconnected through language and
trade, yet on the other divided by conflicting religious beliefs and/or territorial
allegiances and by socially constructed relations of class, caste or ‘race’.  

As human civilisations of various shapes and sizes evolved, so did human
cognition and culturally distinctive but systematic forms of inquiry, learning
and reflection as to the nature of the world and the place of our species within
it. Classical ‘Western’ philosophy and science evolved in Europe during the
Greco–Roman era (from around two and a half to one and a half thousand
years ago), while a more eclectic range of parallel and intersecting ‘Eastern’
philosophical traditions developed across different parts of Asia (for example,
Flew, 1989; Harrison, 2013). Significant advances in science and mathematics
were made in the Middle East during the Islamic ‘Golden Age’ (between the
8th and the 14th centuries ce). And back in Europe, between the 14th and the
middle of the 17th centuries ce, there was a ‘Renaissance’ of scholarly interest
in classical philosophical thinking. From this there emerged in the late 17th and
18th centuries ce a hegemonic intellectual movement: the so-called European
‘Enlightenment’. This movement was associated not only with rapid shifts in
political thinking and scientific discovery, but also the invention of an international
world order premised on the idea of the sovereign nation state. It paved the way
for the birth of ‘modern’ capitalism and, in the 19th century ce, the Industrial
Revolution (Hobsbawm, 1962): a revolution that entailed an explosion of new
technologies, that afforded global economic and cultural dominance to the
nations at its forefront; and which heralded an era of rapid, but uneven, economic
development. The concept of economic development has been synonymous with
the process of capitalist industrialisation and the creation of unequally distributed
wealth (Picketty, 2013), for which the sine qua non is continual growth in the
human production of goods and services. Human beings have now established a
global market system, driven by finance capital and facilitated by new information
technologies, albeit that there are stark contrasts in living standards and the extent
to which human needs may be met in different parts of the world (see Chapter 7).

To what extent, therefore, is inexorable economic growth good for humanity? Is
it perhaps inimical to human needs (Gough, 2018)? The total human population
on planet Earth some 2,000 years ago would probably have been no more
than 0.03 billion, though by the 1800s ce it would have expanded to around
1 billion. But then in just 200 years it rocketed to around 7 billion and is projected to rise to somewhere between 10 and 13 billion by 2100 CE (Bacci, 2012; United Nations Population Division (UNPD), 2017). It is in the context of historical development that matters of social policy and social development come into focus. The dramatic increase has resulted from effects associated with industrialisation, medical and technological advances, increased longevity and rising living standards. It may in time be tempered by declining fertility, but the demands the human population is already placing on the Earth’s natural resources and the environmental degradation, pollution and fundamental changes to the planet’s climate associated with human activity can’t be sustainable without policy intervention (Brundtland, 1987; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2018). We may already have entered a new era, the Anthropocene era, in which the Earth’s geology and eco-systems have been fundamentally altered by the human species (see http://www.anthropocene.info/).

The immanent imperative of the evolutionary process is the need for species survival. And yet the human species – while uniquely capable of comprehending that imperative and of innovating to provide for its needs – demonstrates a tendency for self-destruction: first, because of its potentially fatal impact on the ecology of the planet it inhabits (Lovelock, 1979); and secondly, some would suggest, through its own revolutionary digital technologies. These technologies are impacting, perhaps unstoppably, upon the culture of human societies; not only are they providing new ways of automating the production of tangible goods and services; they are also facilitating the infinite mobility of capital as the intangible store of conceptualised wealth upon which ‘growth’ is postulated to depend. They are capable of generating new forms of artificial intelligence that portend the possibility that human beings may eventually be superseded by intelligent machines (Kurzweil, 2005). Thirdly, we can’t conclude this hasty overview of the human species’ development without some mention of its propensity for violence among its own members and the possibility that it has developed the capacity to destroy itself through thermo-nuclear war. It must be acknowledged that there is some limited evidence of occasional killings of humans by humans during the prehistoric era of hunting-gathering societies, including disturbing incidents of both infanticide and senilicide (that may have been, if not necessary, instrumental to the survival of foraging groups). But human history has since, of course, been replete with violent struggles, armed conflicts and wars, and in this respect the species is wholly unique.

In the overall scheme of things, *homo sapiens* is a young and precocious species, that within a staggeringly short period of time has transformed both itself and its natural environment. It has wrought destruction on itself and the planet. But its needs and the ways in which it both succeeds and fails in meeting those needs are a complex function of the essential characteristics of the species itself.
The needs of humanity

Humanisms

The thumbnail sketch of the human species that has just been presented is one premised on a two-fold humanist assumption: first, that the human species was not divinely created but has naturally evolved; second, that it is unique and fundamentally different from other naturally evolved creatures. Humanism – or humanisms – has taken a variety of ideological forms, some of which accommodate themselves with religious beliefs and others that claim to assert principles they believe to be somehow ordained by nature, or which they contend to be self-evident. Humanism can be manifested as an implicit form of human arrogance – an assumption of superiority over other species and of dominion over the planet and its resources; or else as an explicit quest for a secular alternative to religious beliefs and religiously inspired and/or supposedly apolitical value systems (see, for example, Cave, 2009).

The earliest humanists were to be found among the classical Greek philosophers, and in Chapter 3 we shall pay particular attention to Aristotle’s thinking about human nature and human well-being. The philosophers of the ‘Enlightenment’ era took the thinking of their Classical forbears in different directions; directions that we may associate directly or indirectly with the principal competing ideologies of the modern era that followed (Hamilton, 2003; Harari, 2011; 2017).

Liberal-individualist humanism would become the most enduring modern orthodoxy. Central to its emergence has been ‘Cartesian dualism’: the seminal distinction drawn by Descartes (1637) between the human body and the human mind, and the conception of a person not merely as a natural living organism, but in a very separate sense as an individual thinking being. The emphasis upon essential individuality and freedom of the human being spawned the supposition that it is through reason and the senses that human beings can divine for themselves the universal moral rights and duties that should govern relations between individual members of the species (Kant, 1785; Locke, 1689). Liberal individualism – premised on empiricist philosophy – can take many forms, but as will be seen in later chapters, it has been a hegemonic influence within the international world order. It continues to underpin the assumptions of market economics and, as we shall see, a particular understanding of human rights.

Solidaristic humanisms, of which there are several, have a more ambivalent attitude to the individuality of the human subject, illustrated initially, perhaps, in the manner that the romantic philosopher, Rousseau (1762), sought to combine the principle of individual freedom and ‘sensibility’ with that of community; with the idea of collective identity, the collective interest and the ‘general will’. Rousseau’s ideas, it is supposed, helped fuel the French Revolutionary demands not only for liberté
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and égalité, but also fraternité or solidarity. However, the emphasis on solidarity or community would find expression in very different forms of communitarianism:

• some conservative, which would seek to preserve elements of the traditional sources of social order and security;
• some reformist, which seek to temper the extent to which unfettered individual freedom might undermine cooperation, sharing and substantive equality between human beings;
• and some revolutionary, which have sought to establish a form of human society founded (and managed) entirely on strictly collectivist principles.

Critical to these kinds of humanism is an acknowledgement that Descartes’ ‘thinking individual’ does not think alone: her understanding of the ever-changing world around her is shaped intersubjectively through her relations with others. And it was supposed by Hegel (1821) that there is something essential to the character of humanity – some ‘absolute spirit’ or mind 2 – that drives our shared understandings. This idealist interpretation of the human condition is consistent with a caring and sharing form of social conservatism, as it is with certain religious beliefs. Critics of Hegel – most particularly Karl Marx – adapted Hegel’s insights to argue for social changes that might unlock or realise not some abstract ‘spirit’, but the substantive potential of humanity; its distinctive ‘essence’. During the Industrial Revolution, Marx and Frederick Engels directly influenced the emergence of modern socialism in both its reformist Social Democratic and revolutionary Communist or state socialist variants.

Supremacist humanism might seem to follow from a particular interpretation of Darwin’s (1859) theory of natural selection and an assumption that not only have humans achieved supremacy over other species, but also that the fittest and strongest human beings will, or indeed should, achieve supremacy over weaker and inferior members of the species. However, the seeds of this approach had been sown in Hobbes’ (1651) earlier portrayal of human society as a ‘war of all against all’ and it found explicit expression in the views of Nietzsche (1883), who, having proclaimed that God is dead, contended that human beings are primarily driven by their own ‘will to power’. Darwin’s evolutionary theory, of course, was concerned with a natural process, but if human beings are capable of consciously seeking domination over other members of their own species, then it is through war, conquest, genocide and eugenics that the species might supposedly improve itself or else evolve an aristocratic super-human elite or super-race. The most extreme and by far the crudest illustration of this paradoxically
These different humanisms, it may be expected, exhibit rather different understandings of human need and take correspondingly different approaches to social policy. Social policy both as a sphere of public policy making and as an academic subject is currently – whether implicitly or explicitly – informed largely by what Brian Ellis (2012) has identified as a form of progressive ‘social humanism’, which he describes as the ‘moral and political philosophy of the welfare state’. In essence, however, what he describes is in fact liberal humanism, albeit guided by ‘moral principles that are socially derived’. If for the purposes of social policy, however, we are to identify what is distinctively human about our needs, we might wish to re-visit key elements of our story of the human species and draw out elements first identified by Marx when he sought to define the ‘essence’ of humanity in substantive rather than spiritual terms. The work of distilling this analysis from Marx’s early philosophical work was originally begun in the 1960s by members of the Budapest School (see Pickle & Rundell, 2018), and in particular by György Mármus. The humanist strand in Marx’s thinking (Fromm, 1961; Parsons, 1971) has been largely overlooked or overshadowed, partly because Marx’s broader legacy was in practice diluted by democratic socialism on the one hand, and distorted by totalitarian communism on the other. Dominant approaches to and interpretations of Marxist thinking have too often been confined, in Bauman’s words, to a ‘truncated, shrunk and desiccated version of Marxism’ (2004: 33). For the purposes of this chapter, I shall set out the kernel of my interpretation of what has been, or may be, drawn or elaborated from Marx’s account of the constitutive characteristics of the human species.

**Species characteristics**

The central contention from which we start is the notion of ‘human essence’, which ‘lies precisely in the “essence” or inner unity of the total social development of humanity’ (Márkus, 1978: 63). It represents the ‘ensemble of social relations’; an essence that is neither biological nor spiritual, but precisely human. What characterises the human species and its mode of existence, according to Márkus’ reading of Marx, is human consciousness, work and sociality. And to these three interconnected characteristics should be added the universality and freedom that ‘mark the general direction of the historical progress of humanity’ (1978: 61): or
in short, humanity’s historical development. These characteristics, it may be
argued, define the human species in relation to other species and in relation to
the natural world. But they also define each member of that species as a generic
being. We shall consider each in turn.3

Consciousness

The consciousness that characterises the human species is something beyond
mere sentience. Around perhaps 70,000 years ago, the ‘Cognitive Revolution’
referred to earlier witnessed the beginnings of thinking: a form of consciousness
that made uniquely human action possible in the sense that it is action that has
purpose and meaning to the actor; and an intersubjective awareness on the part
of members of the species as to their selfhood and identity in relation to the
natural world and to each other. It is social being or ‘sociality’ (which we shall
discuss further on) which shapes human consciousness.

Descartes’ contention that conscious thinking was essentially independent
of bodily functions fuelled an enduring debate concerning the ‘mystery of
consciousness’ (J. Searle, 1997). It is a debate that continues to divide scientists
and philosophers. Is thinking and awareness of our own existence no more than
a neurological activity unique to the human brain, or does it entail something
more essential about a human being compared, for example, with a highly trained
and emotionally intelligent dog on the one hand, or a highly sophisticated and
artificially intelligent robot on the other?

Marx’s answer was that ‘Thought and being are indeed distinct, but they also
form a unity’, insofar as an individual’s consciousness is ratified or ‘confirmed’
through her ‘species consciousness’ (1844: 351). Species consciousness was more
than the capacity for passive contemplation, or the capacity for reason alone,
but the capacity for ‘sense activity’ (Marx, 1845b: 82): for reflexivity, rather than
mere reflection. Consciousness is the dynamic relationship between thinking
and being that characterises human action and therefore human history. Marx’s
understanding of the Agricultural, Scientific and Industrial revolutions was focused
on the unfolding of the ‘human essence of Nature and the natural essence of Man’
(1844: 355). In the process of harnessing nature for the conscious purposes of the
human species, human beings have begun to further their species being, albeit – as
is observed earlier – in ways that have often been suboptimal, self-destructive and
unsustainable. The greater part of humanity remains thereby ‘self-alienated’. The
potential of this unique species has been systemically constrained. But central to
humanity’s capacity as a species is the consciousness that allows its members, under
the right conditions, autonomously to shape their actions. Consciousness is the
means by which a human being has a personal and an intersubjective awareness
of her identity; seeks meaning in the world around her and in her relationships
to others; and can critically engage with that world in conjunction with others.
Work

It follows that conscious human activity, or what we might call ‘work’, is equally definitive of human essence. However, the activity valued two and a half thousand years ago by the patrician elite of ancient Athens, was to be distinguished from necessary physical labour upon which human society as a whole depends. Such labour was performed by slaves or peasants, who were not recognised as sufficiently civilised, nor therefore, as fully human. The rise of industrial capitalism, it was supposed, portended the final end of slavery and of feudal servitude, since productive labour power became a commodity to be voluntarily bought and sold under free market conditions. The dominant form of ‘work’ – both physical and intellectual – began to assume the form of wage labour. For Marx, all forms of work – whether materially productive or socially reproductive – entail human self-realisation, and the essence of work lies not in its exchange value, but in its dynamic capacity to fulfil the needs of the human species (Heller, 1974).

For Marx, all work encompasses the uniqueness of the human species’ metabolism with Nature. Work represents the human species’ symbiotic appropriation of natural resources and its manipulation of natural forces. He applied the term *stoffwechsel* (best translated as ‘social-ecological metabolism’) to define this fundamental condition of human existence (1887: 183–4). However, even in the early years of the Industrial Revolution, Marx recognised that certain human interactions with nature could have counterproductive consequences, and he foresaw that a ‘metabolic rift’ would be occasioned by the capitalist mode of production (see J. Foster, 1999). And wage labour as a distinctive form of work could be an alienated rather than a self-affirming activity. Most recently, in the late modern era, it has been suggested that the managerial ethos associated with even the best-rewarded employment can be corrosive of the human character (Sennett, 1998), while a great deal of employment – especially that which is organised informally – is poorly rewarded and chronically precarious (for example, Standing, 2011).

But the manner of human beings’ metabolism with Nature as opposed to that of other species is that it is socially, not naturally, organised and reproduced (see Box 2.1). We shall return to the subject of human sociality in a moment, but if we expand our understanding of work as human activity that lies beyond wage labour, it extends to the entire arena of social and cultural reproduction as well as to the realm of political engagement. It includes care work – which in turn includes care for children and for frail, sick or disabled adults; creative endeavour – including artistic expression, sporting and recreational activity undertaken for its own sake; all forms of study, learning and scholarly activity; engagement in voluntary and community activities as well as engagement in formal politics. Work is activity. It is quite simply what human beings do. It is the realisation of their species being and, whether or not it is materially productive, it is, potentially and in essence, the expression of human creativity.
Box 2.1: Bee and human societies compared

The fable of the bees
Bees and humans are alike in that both species appear to be ‘socially’ productive. The similarity struck a certain Dr Bernard Mandeville, who in 1705 wrote a poem, subsequently entitled The Fable of the Bees. The fable concerned a hive of bees which collectively decided more closely to emulate human behaviour, such that individual bees by pursuing their own selfish ends succeeded through relentless and unprincipled competition in incidentally meeting the needs of others. The result was an astoundingly efficient and productive hive. But then one day the bees were introduced to certain aspects of Christian teaching and Stoic philosophy, and they decided they should henceforth abandon self-interest and acquisitiveness and devote themselves to honest and peaceful living. The result was disastrous for the productivity of the hive, and the colony dissipated. The moral was that ‘greed is good’; a belief echoed later in the 18th century in the economic liberalism of Adam Smith and by many more recent neo-liberal ideologues.

The bee and the architect
A rather different thought occurred to Karl Marx who in his celebrated work Das Kapital reflected upon what it is that makes the productive activity of a human being distinctly human:

A bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst of architects from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. (1887: 178)

Marx was not commenting on the imaginary political economy of a beehive but demonstrating that the difference between bees and humans is that the latter have a conscious purpose to their work and, by implication, they have the capacity to change what they do. An architect, unlike any bee, might choose to make an octagonal as opposed to a hexagonal structure or to change the course of architectural history by constructing something radically new.

Are bees ‘social’?
Likening a bee colony to a human society is anthropomorphism. A bee colony is in some ways best understood as a single biological organism. It is natural, not social. A human society is an association of interdependent but autonomously conscious beings and is axiomatically social.

There is a complex division of labour among the bees within a colony, but this is a natural not a planned phenomenon. The colony is established around a single ‘queen’ or egg...
layer. There are male ‘drones’, which can fertilise queen bees (and will die having done so) but otherwise play no part in the life of a colony: redundant drones are expelled from the colony at the end of each season. The multitude of infertile female ‘worker’ bees are divided between ‘nurses’ (who care for the queen and the larvae) and ‘foragers’ (who go in search of pollen), but these roles are determined not by choice or command but by epigenetic tags. This is an arrangement that has evolved over millions of years and is unchanged even by human domestication. The individual worker bees that drive a hive’s production may exhibit genetically determined patterns of cooperative behaviour, but their functioning is not socially ordered, as in a human society.

Sociality

Aristotle, famously, defined the human being as a zoon politikon, a term usually translated as ‘political animal’, though, in historical and etymological contexts, it might also translate as ‘social animal’. Aristotle’s intention was to distinguish human sociality from animalistic herd or pack behaviours. Marx would later observe that ‘the human being is in the most literal sense a zoon politikon, not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal that can only individuate itself in the midst of society (1857: 84). The concept of sociality elicited from Marx’s writing by Márkus (1978: 32–5) has two interconnected components, Gemeinwesen (alluding to the communal character of human life) and Gattungsleben (alluding to the generic socio-historic shaping of human life).

Human life has a communal character in the sense that the human individual is not, and can’t wholly be, the isolated irreducible atom of liberal social contract theory: she is an inherently vulnerable, interdependent creature (for example, Turner, 2006). It is not mere ingenuity, but socially organised care and collaboration that have allowed human beings to survive and flourish despite their limited stature and strength relative to other more physically powerful species and often in spite of adverse natural and climatic conditions. Human beings’ sociality is founded on a loyalty to one another, ‘clinging together against the dark’ (Rorty, 1982: 166). But human beings are also generically social in the sense that ‘clinging together’ is made possible, as we have seen, through shared language, customs, institutions, knowledge and beliefs – all of which are dynamically socio-historically constructed and contested; and which, through social or ‘interpsychological’ processes, shape the personal development of every human being (Vygotsky, 1978).

From a different perspective, Hannah Arendt has observed that a life not lived among other humans is not a human life. She draws on Hegel in asserting that significance of mutual recognition between human beings ‘as builders of worlds or co-builders of a common world’ (1958: 458). In clinging together against the dark, it is upon the struggle for the mutual recognition and the achievement of
sociality that humanity depends. A recent and influential contribution to the philosophy of recognition debate has been provided by Axel Honneth (1995), who discusses three modes of recognition upon which worthwhile human lives depend:

- **Love.** It is through intimate relationships that we discover ourselves and who we *are*; and by which we establish and affirm our self-identity.
- **Solidarity.** It is through participation and engagement with others in communities or social groups that we discover what it is that we can *do*; and by which we establish ourselves as actors, with shared collective identities.
- **Rights.** We shall consider the relationship between human needs and socially constructed rights in Chapter 8. But the point for now is that it is through exercising our own and respecting others’ rights that we are able mutually to engage with strangers and more distant members of our species.

Sociality is a constitutive characteristic of an individual human’s species being in the sense that she is shaped through, and depends for, her identity upon her immediate and historical social context. A human’s being is realised though her mutual interdependence with other human beings. Human sociality is realised and sustained through love, solidarity and rights.

**Historical development**

Human beings, unlike any other species, make their own history (once again, see Box 2.1). When Marx asserted that ‘Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world; the point is to change it’ (1845b: 84) his appeal was to the everyday reality of human beings’ continuing and ever-evolving struggle for a better life, for self-fulfilment, for ‘moral progress’ (A. Gilbert, 1992) or emancipation. His famous assertion was a riposte to Feuerbach’s (1841) characterisation of belief in God as an idealised projection of the material or natural essence of humanity itself. Marx effectively adopted and adapted the notion of human essence by treating it not as a mere construct or interpretation, but as an historical reality; not as an explanatory insight but as the constitutive driver of human history. According to Márkus, by referring to the ‘human essence’ Marx was referring to ‘… those characteristics of the real historical existence of mankind which made it possible to comprehend history as a continuous and unified process that has a developmental tendency’ (1978: 61). The human essence, therefore, is not invariant and inherent to the individual human, but dynamic and historically constitutive of the species (see, for example, Margolis, 1992).

Humanity’s conscious social being and engagement in material productive self-activity provide the substantive dimensions of an encompassing and continual developmental process that is concerned with the realisation of the human essence;
a realisation that can only be achieved by direct human intervention under actually prevailing social and material conditions. As a species being a human is defined and constrained not merely by nature, but by her historical context. Her world may be shaped around her by the state, laws, religion, ideology, culture and customs, but these things have been created by humans and can and most certainly will be changed by humans: a process in which others might participate. Her own actions have meaning not only for her and those around her, but also potentially for the processes by which her species might survive or flourish. Human beings, uniquely, have the capacity to contribute to an historical process of species development; to have a purpose of their own making; to participate in defining the future, rather than passively replicating the past. The significance of this will, I hope, become clearer in Chapter 9.

Humans are vulnerable and needy beings, who yet make their own history. That history has unfolded as a continuing tale characterised by struggles to fulfil not only the need for material survival as a species, but to realise the dynamic essence of humanity; to fulfil not some naturally ordained purpose, but essentially human purposes. These have been on the one hand cooperative struggles with Nature, but on the other, competitive struggles between one another. In the chapters that follow, it will be argued that human needs are constructed through the social determination of human purposes. It may be concluded from the earlier account that the determination of human purposes (and thereby our needs) has been and continues to be contested. Our needs and purposes may be prescribed by prophets, priests and philosophers or by despots, leaders and ideologues; or they may be named and claimed in the process of day-to-day social existence and human being.

**Conclusion/Summary**

This chapter has endeavoured to address what it means and what is needed to be a human being. To that end, the chapter has:

- Discussed the history of the human species. In relation to the age of the Earth, the origin of the *Homo Sapiens* species is recent, but its development has been rapid and its impact has been immense. Individually, it is a physically frail and vulnerable species, but humans’ cognitive abilities and capacity for social organisation have enabled the species to dominate (with adverse environmental consequences). Demographically the species has flourished, though the fortunes of different parts of the global human population have varied. The advantages associated with new agricultural, industrial and information technologies and evolving forms of social order and governance have been unevenly distributed both within emerging centres of civilisation and between different parts of the world. Relationships and competition for resources, territory or power
within and between different human societies have been often conflictual and sometimes violent.

• Explained different kinds of humanism. For much of human history, human beings sought the meaning of their own existence and that of the world around them through mythological or religious beliefs. But some while before the scientific discovery of evolutionary processes, people began to reflect in secular terms upon the distinctive nature of the human species. It is now generally accepted that human beings were not created in any literal sense by some divine being or supernatural powers, but evolved naturally and may or must be respected, protected or recognised as such, albeit that this can be achieved in different ways, of which we have delineated three: liberal-individualist; solidaristic (which may be inflected in conservative, reformist or revolutionary directions); and supremacist. Each of these particular humanisms understands the human being and her needs in a different way.

• Offered an account of the human species’ essential characteristics: a humanist approach developed in part from the early anthropological insights of Marx. Four intersecting and interdependent characteristics of the human species are identified: its form of consciousness; its engagement in creative ‘work’; its sociality and social interdependence; and its self-defining historical development. These characteristics are fundamental to and constitutive of the essence of humanity, whose historical potential has perhaps still to be fully realised.

**Challenging questions**

1. What is it about human needs that make them axiomatically or essentially human?
2. What defines humanism and what, if anything, do different kinds of humanism have in common?