Human adults appear different from other animals in their ability to form abstract mental representations that go beyond perceptual similarity. In short, they can conceptualize the world. When and how does this abstract system come into being? To answer this question we need to explore the origins of adult concepts. When does the developing child acquire the ability to use abstract concepts? Does the transition occur around 2 years, with the onset of symbolic representation and language, or is it independent of the emergence of language? When in evolutionary history did an abstract representational system emerge? How would a computational system operating on the basis of perceptual associations develop into a system operating on the basis of abstract relations? Is this ability present in other species, but masked by their inability to verbalise abstractions? This book tackles the age-old puzzle of what might be unique about human concepts. Intuitively, we have a sense that our thoughts are somehow different from those of animals and young children such as infants. If true, this raises the question of where and how this uniqueness arises. What are the factors that have played out during the life course of the individual and over the evolution of humans that have contributed to the emergence of this apparently unique ability? This volume brings together a collection of world specialists who have grappled with these questions from different perspectives to try to resolve the issue. It includes contributions from leading psychologists, neuroscientists, child and infant specialists, and animal cognition specialists. Taken together, this story leads to the idea that there is no unique ingredient in the emergence of human concepts, but rather a powerful and potentially unique mix of biological abilities and personal and social history that has led to where the human mind now stands.
This chapter looks at the end result of the long and complex process of the making of human concepts. It suggests that our evolutionary past is still very much a part of our conceptual system. There is plenty of evidence that our minds still make heavy use of associative systems for learning, with similarity-based generalization and a dependence on actually-experienced objects and events, just as might be proposed for the concepts learnt by rats or pigeons. Having an adaptable and fuzzy system of knowledge is much better suited to handling our daily interaction with the world than a discrete symbolic system; as the advocates of fuzzy logic systems for artificial intelligence have demonstrated. However, this basic system for learning the prototype classes in the world around us is overlaid with the culturally transmitted accumulation of concepts enshrined in the language we speak, the books we read, the films we watch, and indeed the university courses we take. These concepts become elaborated through generations of scholarship and provide the solid foundations for knowledge and science.

Where do concepts come from?

Denis Mareschal, Paul C. Quinn, and Stephen E. G. Lea

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the purpose of the book, which addresses the question of where adult human concepts come from. This question clearly has two dimensions. One side of the question is to ask what the evolutionary antecedents of human concepts are. The other side is to ask how adult concepts emerge during child development. These two interrelated questions are held together by the same debates in the comparative and developmental literature. Moreover, investigators often face the same or similar difficulties in trying to assess the concepts available to other species and young humans because of the research participants' lack of verbal ability. An overview of the subsequent chapters is presented.
Introduction
Anna Wierzbicka

in What Did Jesus Mean?: Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables in Simple and Universal Human Concepts

The Introduction argues that, despite the current fashions in scholarly circles, it is possible to unambiguously determine what Jesus meant in his parables and our sayings, and to explain it in a way that is both simple and clear. The key to such an explanation lies in the use of 60 or so simple and universal human concepts, which have been identified through empirical cross-linguistic investigations, as a shared core of all languages. These concepts include GOOD and BAD, SOMEONE and SOMETHING, KNOW, THINK, WANT, FEEL IF and BECAUSE, and 50 or so others. The chapter emphasizes the importance of Jesus’ Jewish context for the understanding of his teaching and it shows how the use of universal human concepts allows us to separate the universal content of Jesus’ teaching from its historical and cultural embedding. While the author identifies herself as a Roman Catholic, the perspective on the Gospels adopted in this chapter (and in the book as a whole) is broadly ecumenical, including Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Christian tradition, as well as the writings of Jewish scholars.

What Did Jesus Mean?
Anna Wierzbicka

This book explores the meaning of Jesus’ key sayings and parables from a radically new perspective – that of simple and universal human concepts, found in all languages. Building on modern biblical criticism in general and the vast literature on the Sermon on the Mount and the parables in particular, the author also brings to the task a close knowledge of recent developments in linguistics, anthropology, and cultural psychology. Her explanations of “what Jesus meant” build on her work as the author of many books on cultural diversity and the universals of language and thought. Rejecting the fashionable view that it is impossible to know what Jesus meant, the book draws on modern linguistic semantics to show that the
question both makes sense and can be plausibly answered. The picture
of Jesus’ teaching which emerges from this book is traditional in some
respects and radically new in others. The author's analysis brings into
sharper focus the originality of Jesus’ ethical teaching, often obscured by
superficial parallels drawn with other traditions.
The book analyzes the meaning of Jesus’ metaphors, hyperboles, and
paradoxes against the background of the traditions of Jewish prophetic
speech, and it shows the universal scope and relevance of Jesus’
teaching. Jesus’ message is universal, but to understand it we need to understand
Jesus’ Jewishness, and in particular, we need to understand that the New
Testament world of discourse includes rhetorical conventions that are
unfamiliar and even alien to the modern Western reader. This applies
also to the prophetic Drohrede, which sometimes seems to announce
God's final verdict but in fact expresses, to use the words of the Jewish
scholar Pinchas Lapide, “a deep longing for the salvation and welfare of
Israel” – Israel and the whole world.
This book argues that if Jesus’ teaching is to be intelligible to people of all
nations, it needs to be seen both in its cultural context and in a universal
perspective. It also shows that this can be facilitated through the use of
universal human concepts. The use of these tools opens an entirely new
perspective on the study of the Gospels, and especially on the meaning
of Jesus’ sayings.

English as a Cultural Universe
Anna Wierzbicka

in English: Meaning and Culture

Published in print: 2006 Published Online: 2007
Publisher: Oxford University Press
DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195174748.003.0001
Item type: chapter

This chapter discusses the concept of “Anglo English” as a shared
core of American English, British English, Australian English, and
other long established varieties of English. The chapter uses some
examples from Australian English to show both “Australia's British
inheritance” and the cultural distinctiveness of some Australian-English
words, concepts, and cultural norms. It also introduces a framework for
studying and describing meaning: the NSM theory of semantics, based
on a mini-vocabulary of sixty five universal human concepts. These
concepts, which can be identified through simple words such as do,
happen, want, know, and feel, provide a basis for a “natural semantic
metalanguage” (NSM) for the description and comparison of meanings.
The Spatial Foundations of Language and Cognition
Kelly S. Mix, Linda B. Smith, and Michael Gasser (eds)

Published in print: 2009 Published Online: May 2010
Publisher: Oxford University Press
DOI: 10.1093/doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199553242.001.0001
Item type: book

In this book, we ask how space, language, and thought interact in learning and development. This encompasses not only how children learn about space and spatial language, but also how language and cognition are grounded in space. People think and act in a spatial medium. How does this impact language learning? How does it frame human concepts? Does the acquisition of language change the way we experience space? The chapters gathered here represent a broad range of perspectives on these questions. They are authored by experts in cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, computer science, philosophy, and linguistics.

The Beatitudes
Anna Wierzbicka

in What Did Jesus Mean?: Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables in Simple and Universal Human Concepts
Published in print: 2001 Published Online: November 2003
Publisher: Oxford University Press
DOI: 10.1093/0195137337.003.0002
Item type: chapter

This chapter focuses on those Beatitudes widely regarded as “authentic,” that is, as representing Jesus’ “ipsissima verba,” and stresses their importance as the heart of Jesus’ preaching. It discusses the meaning of the Greek expressions underlying the English “poor (in spirit),” “the hungry,” “those who mourn (weep),” and “the meek,” and explains the sense of the relevant Beatitudes in simple and universal human concepts. For example, the sense of the beatitude of “the weeping (mourning)” is represented (partially) as follows: “sometimes very bad things happen to people; because these things happen, these people feel something very bad; God knows about this; God will do good things for these people because of this; these people will feel something very good because of this”
Essentialism is the idea that certain categories, such as “dog,” “man,” or “intelligence,” have an underlying reality or true nature that gives objects their identity. This book argues that essentialism is an early cognitive bias. Young children's concepts reflect a deep commitment to essentialism, and this commitment leads children to look beyond the obvious in many converging ways: when learning words, generalizing knowledge to new category members, reasoning about the insides of things, contemplating the role of nature versus nurture, and constructing causal explanations. This book argues against the standard view of children as concrete or focused on the obvious, instead claiming that children have an early, powerful tendency to search for hidden, non-obvious features of things. It also disputes claims that children build up their knowledge of the world based on simple, associative learning strategies, arguing that children's concepts are embedded in rich folk theories. Parents don't explicitly teach children to essentialize; instead, during the preschool years, children spontaneously construct concepts and beliefs that reflect an essentialist bias. The book synthesizes over fifteen years of empirical research on essentialism into a unified framework and explores the broader lessons that the research imparts concerning, among other things, human concepts, children's thinking, and the ways in which language influences thought.

The concept of human dignity is used as a flag under which people fight for freedom, equality, and decent living conditions; as a foundational concept for human rights; and as a right that protects core elements of human identity and integrity absolutely. The concept is also used to reinforce specific claims for freedom and equality rhetorically without contributing to the solution of the conflict at hand. But the concept
also bridges the gaps between the different usages; it expresses their overlap; and as a Sehnsuchtsbegriff it brings together people who long for a better and fairer world. In human dignity discourse lawyers bring legal problems and philosophers’ reflections on what humans are and owe each other—under a secular premise. Theologians rarely reflect on the dangers for human dignity within the church and similar institutions resulting from hierarchy and control, unequal treatment of women and others, celibacy, paternalism and seclusiveness.

**Human Rights: Historical Development and Contemporary Regional Models**

Federico Lenzerini

in *The Culturalization of Human Rights Law*

Published in print: 2014 Published Online: April Publisher: Oxford University Press


In order to properly understand whether or not—and, in case, to which extent—human rights standards are universal, it is useful to analyse how the idea of human rights developed within the different human societies. In Chapter 2, a brief look at pre-colonial societies is sufficient to show that the idea according to which human rights would be a creation of Western philosophers in the Age of Enlightenment is inaccurate, human rights having contextually developed in virtually all human communities since ancient times. At the same time, human rights have been shaped within all the said communities according to heterogeneous models, determined by their different cultural specificities. These differences are reflected in the present characterization of human rights, showing that the Western model of rights represents only part of the picture in the contemporary world.

**Stage, Stake, and Scaffold**

Andreas Höfele

Published in print: 2011 Published Online: January 2012 Publisher: Oxford University Press


The book argues that powerful exchanges between stage, stake and scaffold – the theatre, the beargarden and the spectacle of public execution – crucially informed Shakespeare’s explorations into the construction and workings of ‘the human’ as a psychological, ethical and political category. The theatre's family resemblance to animal
baiting and the spectacle of capital punishment, with which it shares the same basic performance space – a theatre-in-the-round – bred potential for a transfer of images and meanings. The staging of any one of these performances was always framed by an awareness of the other two, whose presence was never quite erased and indeed was often emphatically foregrounded. Situating Shakespearean drama within its material environment, the book explores how this spill-over affects the way Shakespeare models his human characters and his understanding of ‘human character’ in general. His dramatis personae are infused with a degree of animality that a later Cartesian anthropology would categorically deny. Readings based on this later anthropology tend to reduce Shakespeare’s teeming animal references to markers of moral, social and ontological difference, ‘beast’ being everything ‘man’ is not or ought not to be. This book proposes that Shakespearean notions of humanity rely just as much on inclusion as on exclusion of the animal, more generally of a whole range of nonhuman creatures. Humans and animals face each other across the species divide, but the divide proves highly permeable.

Introduction
Pablo Gilabert

in Human Dignity and Human Rights

Published in print: 2018 Published Online: December 2018
Item type: chapter

This chapter outlines the main conceptual and substantive contributions of this book, and provides an overview of the three parts composing it. A characterization of the concept of human rights is offered. The eight components of the dignitarian approach to human rights developed in the rest of the book are outlined. They comprise: (C1) an account of human dignity; (C2) the ideal of solidaristic empowerment; (C3) a distinction between abstract and specific human rights and a division of three dimensions of a conception of human rights; (C4) an account of feasibility; (C5) general and dignitarian schemas for justifying rights; (C6) a contractualist framework of reasoning for justifying rights; (C7) the method of deliberative reflective equilibrium; and (C8) the idea of a deliberative interpretive proposal. Finally, the practical significance of the idea of putting humanity first—which follows naturally from the dignitarian approach—is identified.
This chapter argues that a philosophical account of human epistemology needs to be complemented by a linguistic one, informed by analytical and empirical experience of cross-linguistic semantics. The author outlines such a complementary account, based on many decades of empirical and analytical research undertaken within the NSM (Natural Semantic Metalanguage) approach. The main conclusion is that KNOW is an indefinable and universal human concept, and that there are four “canonical” frames in which this concept occurs across languages, the most basic one being the “dialogical” frame: “I know,” “I don’t know.” The author contends that both the questions and the answers concerning the “epistemology for the rest of the world” need to be anchored in some conceptual givens, derived neither from historically shaped Anglo English, nor from the European philosophical tradition, but from a more reliable, language- and culture-independent source; and the author shows how this can be done.

The chapter argues that on a morally minimalist account of basic human rights, the ongoing allowing and infliction of severe poverty constitutes the systemic violation of a basic human right. It offers an interactionalist account of the duties imposed by the human right to subsistence, but one that takes direct responsibility for violations of these duties to be extremely broadly shared. It argues that conformity with the social institutions, practices, and mores under which the maximization of profit and personal gain is taken to be a normal and legitimate goal, even when it involves allowing or contributing to severe poverty and resisting reforms that would avoid this harm at modest economic cost, constitutes a trade-off between the interests of the affluent and the interests of those whose lives are blighted or destroyed by severe poverty that is
morally intolerable. This trade-off, amounts to the discarding of persons’ lives.