PART ONE

EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND ONTOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS
WHAT IS THIS QUINTESSENCE OF DUST?
THE CONCEPT OF THE ‘HUMAN’ AND ITS ORIGINS

Boria Sax

What piece of work is a man! How noble in reason!
How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how
express and admirable! In action how like an angel!
In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the
world! The paragon of animals! And yet, to me,
what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not
me: no, nor woman neither…¹

Plato in a lecture defined ‘man’ as a ‘two-footed featherless animal’. The philosopher Diogenes of Sinope appeared the next day at the Academy carrying a plucked chicken and said, ‘This is Plato’s man’.² Assuming the plucked chicken was still alive, the poor bird must have appeared utterly helpless and disoriented. Chickens were a common sacrificial offering, and this one was probably destined shortly for the altar. Taken as a symbol, the plucked chicken suggested a definition of humanity not in terms of physical properties but in terms of our alienation and fear. Diogenes, in other words, answered Plato by revealing an emotional core of what it means to be a human being.

Our understanding of the word ‘human’ changes radically, not only from one historical era to another but also with context.³ It is impossible to untangle the biological meanings of the word from moral, theological, metaphysical, social, poetic, and legal ones. Humanity has at times been defined, among other ways, in terms of

¹ Shakespeare, Hamlet, 2:2.