



## THE PHILOSOPHICAL-ANTHROPOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE CONCEPT OF THE “PERFECT HUMAN” IN THE MEIJI ERA

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ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS
<p>This study explores the philosophical and anthropological essence of the ideal of a perfect human being formed during the Meiji era (明治). It analyzes the moral and ethical, intellectual and educational, as well as socio-cultural characteristics of the individual. Enlightenment, discipline, diligence, national pride, and the integration of Western experience are identified as key factors that lead a person toward perfection. Furthermore, the individual's role and responsibility within society, their activity guided by the spirit of collectivism, and their commitment to promoting national interests are examined through a philosophical and anthropological lens. As a result, the human ideal of the Meiji era (明治) is interpreted as a central concept in Japan’s modernization process.</p>	<p>Meiji era ( 明治 ), civilization, perfect human, modernization, anthropological approach, national identity, spirituality, society and individual, cultural synthesis.</p>

### Introduction

The Meiji period represented a turning point in the historical development of Japan, marked by a transition from a traditional society to a modern civilization. The concept of the “perfect human” that emerged during this era served not only as a foundation for socio-economic modernization but also as a means of reinterpreting national identity and elevating society to a new stage of development through the effective adoption of Western civilization. Therefore, the study of the concept of the “perfect human” in the Meiji period from a philosophical and anthropological perspective is highly relevant, as it reveals not only Japan’s model of development but also new dimensions of the relationship between the individual and society.

The significance of this topic lies in the fact that the concept of the “perfect human” formed during the Meiji period played a crucial role in shaping Japan’s independent development strategy. While preserving national values, it sought to harmonize the achievements of modern science, technology, and enlightenment. In this regard, the concept promoted such qualities as self-awareness, national unity, discipline, and diligence, all of which became essential factors for social progress. Even today,

the philosophical and anthropological analysis of these ideas provides an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the modernization processes experienced by different cultures.

The necessity of studying this topic stems from the growing importance of preserving national identity, cultivating a well-rounded individual, and reinterpreting spiritual and moral values in the era of globalization. The experience of the Meiji period demonstrates that the individual should be viewed not merely as a biological or social being, but as an active subject of spiritual and cultural development. Consequently, this analysis remains relevant not only from a historical and philosophical perspective but also in the contemporary context, contributing to the enrichment of universal theories concerning the development of the individual and society.

## Literature Review

The following section analyzes the works of four foreign scholars whose studies have made a significant contribution to understanding the concept of the “perfect human” in the Meiji period (明).

1. Carol Gluck – “Japan’s Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period”.<sup>1</sup>

Carol Gluck examines the ideological discourse of the late Meiji period as a system of “modern myths,” demonstrating how the normative image of a “modern, disciplined, and devoted citizen” was constructed through state rhetoric, the press, education, and official ceremonies. She argues that ideology was neither linear nor monolithic; rather, it was interpreted differently across various social groups. Within this process, behavioral norms expected of individuals - such as diligence, obedience, and national solidarity - became essential attributes of the concept of the “perfect human.” Gluck’s approach reveals the mechanisms through which this ideal was formed, particularly at the intersection of ideology and everyday practice, based on extensive empirical sources.

2. Oleg Benesch – “Inventing the Way of the Samurai: Nationalism, Internationalism, and Bushido(武士道) in Modern Japan”.<sup>2</sup>

Oleg Benesch interprets “bushido” (武士道) as an “invented tradition,” demonstrating how it was reconstructed by political and intellectual elites as a form of moral capital during the process of Meiji modernization. Through the discourse of “bushido”, virtues such as courage, self-discipline, loyalty, and self-sacrifice were elevated to the level of a universal civic ideal and became fundamental standards of national education and civic ethics. The study further explores the relationship between international image-building and domestic nation-building, arguing that the model of the “perfect human” functioned both as a reflection of global expectations and as an instrument of internal social cohesion.

3. James E. Ketelaar – “Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan:

Buddhism (仏教) and Its Persecution”.<sup>3</sup>

James E. Ketelaar places religious policy at the center of his analysis, demonstrating how the persecution and reinterpretation of Buddhism (仏教) during the Meiji period (明治) contributed to the formation of civic identity and the establishment of “pure” national moral standards. Through the metaphorical transformation from “heretic” to “martyr,” he examines the dynamics of power in state - religion relations and the process through which social actors developed self- awareness. As a result, an individual who conformed to official ideology, emphasized ritual discipline, and demonstrated

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<sup>1</sup> Gluck C. Japan's modern myths: ideology in the late Meiji period. – Princeton University Press, 1985. – T. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Benesch, Oleg. Inventing the way of the samurai: nationalism, internationalism, and bushido in modern Japan. OUP Oxford, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Ketelaar, James Edward. Of heretics and martyrs in Meiji Japan: Buddhism and its persecution. Princeton University Press, 1990.

loyalty to the community acquired the institutional characteristics of the “perfect human.” The work provides a profound analysis of the religious and cultural mechanisms through which this ideal was constructed.

#### 4. Sheldon Garon – “Molding Japanese Minds: The State in Everyday Life”.<sup>4</sup>

Sheldon Garon systematically analyzes the state’s educational and disciplinary practices in everyday life, including community organizations, savings campaigns, moral propaganda, and social welfare programs. His research reveals the technologies employed to create an “obedient, frugal, and community-oriented” citizen. These practices demonstrate the continuity of social engineering processes that originated during the Meiji era and show how the concept of the “perfect human” was reinforced through personal habits and the ritualization of everyday life. The book argues that this ideal was reproduced not only through official discourse but also through micro-level social practices, highlighting its close connection with the educational and disciplinary apparatus of the modern state.

### **Methodology**

The methodology of this study is designed to examine the concept of the “perfect human” in the Meiji period from a philosophical - anthropological perspective and incorporates several scientific approaches. First, a theoretical approach was employed to analyze the fundamental concepts of the human ideal, its ideological foundations, and its role in social development within a philosophical framework. In addition, a comparative method was applied to compare the Meiji-period Japanese concept of the “perfect human” with concepts of the individual found in other historical periods and cultural models, thereby identifying their common and distinctive features.

Furthermore, a historical - comparative approach was utilized to investigate the influence of the socio-political conditions of the Meiji era, national ideology, and modernization processes on the formation of the ideal individual within its historical context. Through these methodological approaches, the study provides a comprehensive theoretical, comparative, and historical analysis of the formation and development of the concept of the “perfect human.”

### **Analysis and Results**

The Meiji period (1868–1912) represented a transformative era in Japanese history, during which the values, scientific achievements, and political institutions of Western civilization were extensively incorporated into the nation’s development process. Under these circumstances, the concept of the “perfect human” became a philosophical and anthropological framework for reinterpreting human nature, the individual’s place in society, and the process of spiritual and cultural development. This ideal was shaped in accordance with the demands of modernization and viewed the individual as the principal agent in the construction of a new civilization.

From a philosophical perspective, the “perfect human” was understood as an individual who possesses self-awareness, embraces reason and knowledge as fundamental principles of life, and is capable of harmonizing personal interests with the broader goals of social progress. From an anthropological perspective, the individual was regarded not merely as a biological being or a product of traditional social structures, but as the outcome of historical conditions and cultural transformations. Self-

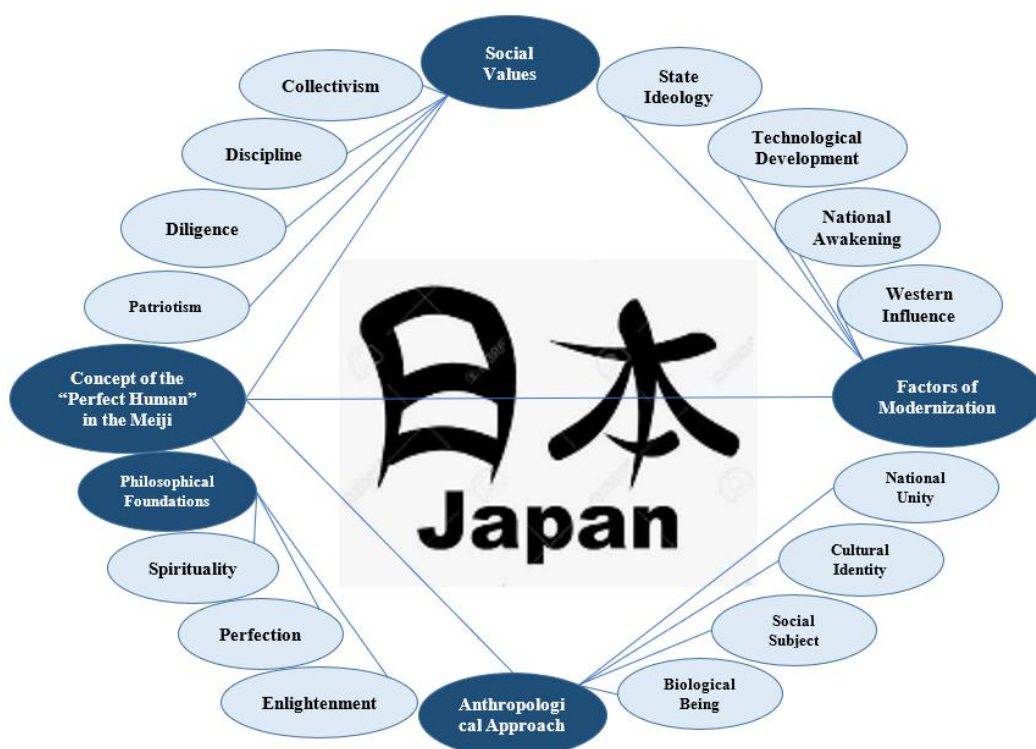
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<sup>4</sup> Garon, Sheldon. *Molding Japanese minds: The state in everyday life*. Princeton University Press, 1998.

improvement, independent thinking, and a strong sense of social responsibility became indispensable components of this civilizational ideal.

Fukuzawa Yukichi and other Enlightenment thinkers of the Meiji period (明治) played a crucial role in disseminating this ideal. According to their views, the “perfect human” was regarded as the key to social renewal, technological advancement, and national strength. This ideal placed the individual at the center of social reforms and defined him or her as an active agent of societal progress. In this way, the philosophical-anthropological approach of the Meiji era interpreted human beings not merely as entities adapting to society, but as transformative forces capable of reshaping and renewing it. Consequently, this conception became one of the ideological foundations of Japan’s modernization process.

The concept of the “perfect human” in the Meiji period (明治) emerged within the broader context of Japan’s modernization and interpreted the individual as the principal subject of national development. When compared with the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, a common feature can be identified in their emphasis on individual autonomy and moral responsibility. While Kant viewed the human being as a free and rational agent governed by universal moral law, Meiji intellectual thought portrayed the individual as an educated and responsible person dedicated to serving the interests of the nation and the state. Similarly, in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s philosophy, human beings realize their essence through historical development and the objectification of the Absolute Spirit. In contrast, the Meiji concept of the “perfect human” was closely connected to national modernization and the strengthening of state power. Thus, Hegel’s notion of a universal historical necessity was adapted within Japan to suit a specific national context.



**Figure 1. Philosophical-Anthropological Framework of the Concept of the “Perfect Human” in the Meiji Period<sup>5</sup>**

<sup>5</sup> Source: Developed by the author.

**Figure 1.** (Illustrates the philosophical and anthropological framework of the concept of the “perfect human” during the Meiji period. The model demonstrates the interrelationship between social values, modernization factors, philosophical foundations, and anthropological approaches in shaping the ideal individual. The concept integrates traditional moral virtues, national identity, and modernizing influences, emphasizing the individual as an active agent of social and cultural development.)

A comparison with Confucian thought reveals similarities in the emphasis on moral cultivation and social responsibility. However, whereas Confucius envisioned the “junzi” (君子)(the exemplary or noble person) through the principles of tradition, ritual, and social harmony, the Meiji ideal associated human perfection with the acquisition of modern science and technology and with the enhancement of national strength. Therefore, although certain elements of the philosophies of Kant, Hegel, and Confucius were incorporated into Meiji intellectual discourse, the Meiji concept of the “perfect human” ultimately developed as a distinctive philosophical-anthropological model primarily oriented toward national modernization and the interests of the state.

The primary objective of the philosophical-anthropological concept of the “perfect human” in the Meiji period was to prepare Japanese society for the process of modernization while preserving its national identity and effectively utilizing the achievements of Western civilization. This ideal sought to shape individuals not merely as biological beings or performers of social roles, but as morally, intellectually, and civically responsible persons. The concept of the individual was integrated with the principles of spirituality, discipline, diligence, and loyalty to the interests of the state, thereby defining human beings as active agents contributing to national unity and social progress.

One of the major strengths of this concept was that it provided a powerful ideological foundation for Japan’s rapid transformation into a modern state. The emphasis placed on human capital, the reform of the educational system, and the mobilization of society around a shared national vision contributed significantly to strengthening the country’s economic and political independence. From a philosophical perspective, the harmonization of social duty and personal aspirations fostered collectivism and a sense of national pride. From an anthropological standpoint, the concept highlighted the socio-cultural nature of human beings and presented them as the principal driving force behind the process of national awakening.

However, this concept also possessed several limitations. First, individual freedom and personal interests were often subordinated to the interests of society and the state, which restricted opportunities for independent and creative self-development. Second, the excessive prioritization of national unity had the potential to reinforce inequalities among different social groups. Third, certain ideas adopted from Western civilization occasionally came into conflict with traditional national values, creating tensions within the principle of harmony that underpinned the ideal of the “perfect human.” Consequently, while the concept of the “perfect human” contributed significantly to Japan’s modernization success, it was less effective in ensuring individual freedom and fully accommodating cultural diversity.

## Conclusion

The concept of the “perfect human” in the Meiji period emerged within the context of Japan’s modernization and was characterized by a synthesis of national values and the principles of Western civilization. This ideal was interpreted through such qualities as personal discipline, moral maturity, diligence, and loyalty to the community. From a philosophical perspective, it encouraged individuals

to pursue enlightenment, ethical conduct, and cultural harmony as pathways to human perfection. From an anthropological standpoint, the individual was regarded as an active agent of social development. This approach successfully integrated the state's modernization policies with the moral and ideological needs of society, placing the concept of the "perfect human" at the center of national progress. Overall, the concept of the "perfect human" during the Meiji period played a decisive role in shaping Japan's distinctive model of modernity. It enabled the country not only to preserve its national identity but also to adopt and adapt Western experiences in the process of building a modern state. As a result, the concept of the individual became a fundamental criterion for social stability, unity, and development. The Meiji ideal continues to demonstrate the enduring relevance and universal significance of the concept of the "perfect human" in the pursuit of national progress and human development.

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