

Human Nature – Humans and Nature in the History of Political Thought



7th Biennial Conference of the
European Society for the
History of Political Thought

Central European University,
Vienna

25-27 September 2024

Hieronymus Bosch, The Garden of
Earthly Delights (c. 1503-1504),
left panel, The Earthly Paradise.
Museo del Prado, Madrid.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Garden_of_Earthly_Delights#

The European Society for the History of Political Thought invites proposals for its 7th international conference on “Human Nature – Humans and Nature in the History of Political Thought”, to be held at Central European University in Vienna, on 25-27 September 2024.

Man is by nature a political animal (*anthropos physei zoon politikon*), says Aristotle in his *Politics*, inspiring millennia of reflection on the interconnection of politics and human nature. Such reflections are found in Hellenistic, Roman, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions of political thought which, from early on, drew not only on Aristotle, but also on Platonist cosmology and Stoic natural law theory. However, the creationist perspective of the book religions also sparked many debates about the compatibility of philosophical concepts of nature with revelation. The Christian juxtaposition of natural state and sinful state is just one example. Nonetheless, throughout the medieval period, political theorists from all “Abrahamic” religions upheld the centrality of the concept of human nature.

Such perceptions of “human dignity” were usually based on an idea of the distinctive, even privileged status of human beings in the order of creation, on account of the gifts of the soul and reason as the foundations of the human capacity for virtue and liberty. However, at critical historical junctures, especially in modern times, this very idea came to be questioned: sceptics, modern theorists of natural law, Enlightenment classics studied humans as coequal with other parts of created nature, and their nature as contingent and historicized, developing in conjunction with those other parts. Moreover, scientific discoveries, such as blood circulation, blurred the lines between the natural and the mechanical (*l’homme machine*). Finally, evolution theories further eroded the distinctive status of man in nature. All this had important consequences for emerging notions about the constructed nature of human sociability and the civil polity. The “naturalization of man” also entailed a new interest in and new thinking about the relation of politics, civil society and the state with physical nature.

More recently, the category of human nature has come under pressure from many sides. Postcolonialism has denounced the universalist conceptions of human nature as imperial. Historical materialism, existentialist political theory (Hannah Arendt), discourse analysis (Michel Foucault), feminist philosophy (Simon de Beauvoir), and gender studies (Judith Butler) are among the many directions in political thought that explicitly seek to challenge and overcome the concept of human nature. Environmental thinking, notions of the Anthropocene or Capitalocene, epigenetics and co-evolution are setting the problem of human nature and the humanity-nature relationship in a new light.

Thus, the aim of this conference is threefold: 1) We invite papers that explore the concept of nature and its criticism in the political thought of all historical periods. 2) We encourage comparative reflections on conceptual equivalences in traditions of political philosophy and theory (Chinese, Indian etc.) that did not build on Hellenic or Hellenistic foundations. 3) We are interested in critical reflections on the continuing relevance of the concept of human nature in political thought.

Confirmed keynote speakers:

- Sarah Hutton (University of York)
- Silvia Sebastiani (EHESS - École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris)
- Milinda Banerjee (University of St Andrews)

Proposals for individual 20 minute papers (max. 250 words) and full panels (of 3 or, exceptionally, 4 papers, max. 500 words) are both welcome. Please send your proposal and a short CV with publications (max. 1 page altogether; in case of panels, for each speaker) by 28 February 2024 to eurohpt@gmail.com. Notifications about acceptance or rejection shall be sent by 15 April 2024.

Participation fee (provisional): 60 EUR and 45 EUR for PhD students to cover catering and organization costs. The fee is calculated to meet unavoidable expenses. The organizing committee is making efforts to secure external funding for the conference. In case these efforts are successful, the participation fee shall be waived, and we may also be able to provide a small contribution to covering the expenses of participation for academics without access to institutional funding.

Participants who are not members of the ESHPT will be asked to join the society (standard rate: 30 EUR p/a, graduate students: 20 EUR p/a).

By ESHPT tradition we intend to publish an edited volume selected from papers read at the conference with our partner Brill in the series <https://brill.com/display/serial/HEPCT>.

The Organizing Committee:

Erica Benner, ESHPT President

László Kontler, Central European University

Adrian O'Connor, University of South Florida

Matthias Riedl, Central European University