

HUMAN NATURE FORUM

November 15, 2018

Dear Peucinians:

Last week, most of us decided that we preferred to live in a world without suffering, though I still wonder if we ever arrived at a common understand of what suffering is. This week we'll leave our table in Mass Hall for the Shannon Room, where we'll enjoy a colloquium on **human nature** hosted and organized by your dutiful Impresario and Herald, Susan Sontag and Simone Weil.

Philosophers have long struggled to grasp a clear understanding of human nature, much like those Athenian wrestlers struggle to grasp their oiled-up opponents. Is our existence as human grounded in any commonalities across time and cultures? If there is a nature, to what extent do social forces and experience shape it? If there is a human nature, is it a good nature to be cultivated, or a bad nature to be defied?

In Book I of the *Politics*, Aristotle boldly asserts that “man is by nature a political animal,” an evident proposition given man’s unique ability to speak and to think. These abilities allow, even compel, the expression of right and wrong, the creation of the family, and the inevitable *polis*, or human community. Yet in Book XVII of the *Analects*, a collection of Kongzi’s sayings, it is attributed to Kongzi, “by nature we approximate each other, by experience we go far asunder.” With this enigmatic phrase, I take Kongzi to anticipate a long-ranging debate in human nature: is there a human nature, or are we molded by our experiences? (Having no instruction in ancient Chinese philosophy, I could be reading this completely incorrectly, though I read a journal article making the case this afternoon.)

Or maybe it’s that human nature is “shapen in iniquity” (Psalm 51:5), because the disobedience of Adam was so great that “human nature was altered for the worse,” this original sin being so bad that humanity the world over, at least in this life, is fallen (Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.1). (Throwing a bone to the Catholic caucus, maybe against my better judgment, might one argue that Mary was excepted from this rule?) How does this square with the Old Testament’s teaching in Ezekiel 18:20, “The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father...”? Are we fallen? Do we inherit the sins of the past? Or are some of us predestined for salvation, while those like Ahab’s preterite crew are left behind?

From Machiavelli we learn that men in general are “ungrateful, fickle, false, cowardly, covetous...” (*The Prince*, XVII), but it’s not clear if this characterization is universal across time, or particular to Renaissance Italy. In fact, the place and time problem pollutes all these thinkers; to truly understand human nature, we must plunge into a **state of nature** see how man behaves “with no knowledge of the face of the earth, no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society.” In Chapter XIII of the *Leviathan*, Hobbes concludes that in the state of nature, man would engage in a war of all against all, and his life would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” This astounding claim inspired rebuke from John Locke, who formulated his infamous *tabula rasa* (“blank slate”) thesis of human nature, that there is no such thing. That troubling contrarian Rousseau builds on the malleability of human nature, arguing in the *First Discourse* that man really is good by nature, but society corrupts his moral character and civic virtue.

In the background of all this is my repeated use of “man” to mean “humanity”—the significance of this tendency may be worthy of discussion. Also lurking beneath the surface is the anthropomorphic bias of talking about human nature at all. Are humans different from other animals in any categorical or useful way? Is there a soul, or can the human mind be reduced to neurons and molecules, functioning under the same laws as the brains of **rabbits** and the biological imperatives of carrots?

With the appearance of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859 and the rise of empiricism in the 20th century, the social and natural sciences have complemented (or supplanted, contaminated?) the political philosophers and theologians with data-driven examinations of human nature, or, it seems, the lack of a human nature. Evolutionary psychology has thoroughly debunked the state of nature theorists and those who came before—or have they?

These are just a few scenes of battle with which I am hardly acquainted. There is much I am not acquainted with at all. The good news is that we will have extraordinary access to five Bowdoin professors, each of whom is an expert in a different field:

Prof. Paul Franco | Political Theory
Prof. Samuel Putnam | Psychology
Prof. Marilyn Reizbaum | English
Prof. Leah Wilson | Neuroscience
Prof. Leah Zuo | History & Asian Studies

Our esteemed professors have been studying human nature for a long time, and they are ready to share their thoughts and debate with us. If you've never been to a Peucinian meeting before, this is a great opportunity to meet some of us, talk to professors, and see what Peucinian is all about. Intellectual engagement does not end when you leave the classroom!

Please join us tomorrow night for the...

HUMAN NATURE FORUM
Thursday, November 15, 7:00 PM
The Shannon Room, Hubbard Hall
Hosted by the Peucinian Society

PLSH,
JJR

P.S. Disputation CXCI will be on November 29, though I encourage you to bring the Peucinian spirit to your Thanksgiving dinner table (results may vary).

A portrait of a man in a dark, high-collared garment, holding a human skull in his hands. The man has a serious expression and a beard. The background is dark and textured.

PAUL FRANCO
SAMUEL PUTNAM
MARILYN REIZBAUM
LEAH WILSON
LEAH ZUO

HUMAN NATURE FORUM

November 15
7:00 p.m.
Shannon Room

Portrait of a Man Holding a Skull, Frans Hals

Does human nature exist? Is human nature gendered? How have definitions of human nature changed society? Five professors come together to discuss these fundamental questions.

Hosted by the Peucinian Society