

# American History Online

## human nature

The definition of what human beings' nature is, or what makes humanity different from other animal species. Every political thinker and society has assumptions about the distinctive nature of people and builds society, economics, politics, and international relations on that vision of human essence.

For example, classical Greek political thought generally sees humans as by nature social, always living in communities and requiring others to fulfill one's individuality. So, Aristotle defines humans as distinct by two faculties: (1) reasoned speech and (2) moral choice. Both of these human qualities (rational conversation and ethical action) require other people to be developed and exercised. So, for Aristotle, to live alone is to be not fully human. One must be intellectually and morally engaged with others to develop one's uniquely human *telos*, or purpose in life. Political participation in the small democratic polis is necessary to completion of people's social nature, for Aristotle's *Politics*. Plato's *Republic* goes even further in defining distinctive social functions (or Virtues) for each individual. Some are born to rule (the philosophic); some have a "spirited" military capacity by nature; and many people are by heredity economic (meant to work and produce in society). The just government, for Plato, must recognize and train these "natures" and harmonize them within a just society. The fulfillment of human nature forms the basis of justice in Plato's theory. Ancient Roman thought (Cicero) views human nature more in terms of patriotism and law, the social virtues appropriate to the Roman Empire. Christian thinkers (St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin) present a biblical view of human nature: people created by God in his image (rational, creative, loving), but corrupted by willfulness and sin (selfishness, pride) and redeemed or forgiven by God by Jesus Christ. This Christian view of human nature as fallen and rebellious, yet potentially repentant, humble, and saved by God, leads to a complex vision of society and politics. The real end of human life is knowing and glorifying God (for which we were created), and no social or political activity can replace that, but humans now live in an imperfect world and are called to be like Christ, loving others, seeking peace. So most Christian views of human nature commend political participation and obedience but see the kingdom of heaven as humans' true community. People are to accept the world (and themselves) as imperfect things, yet strive for goodness (social justice and individual holiness). Unlike the Greek pagan philosophers, or Modern communist thinkers, however, St. Augustine believes that humans can never reach their completion in this world.

Renaissance political thought (Machiavelli) sees humans as mean, selfish, petty, and violent, but its humanism allows for no hope of redemption. Instead, *The Prince* must be "realistic" and use deceit and force to rule these small minded, foolish creatures. Politics is power. Thomas Hobbes continues this materialistic realism by viewing human nature purely in biological terms, a human as "matter in motion" governed by sensory impulses, pleasure and pain. Only a calculating rationality saves one from destruction. John Locke develops this by defining the human being as "free, equal, and independent" but having a moral reason, self-restraining ethics, which allows for social harmony. conservative Edmund Burke allows for a human nature shaped by the civilizing influence of tradition and aesthetics (beauty); radical romantic J. J. Rousseau emphasizes human feelings, emotions, and sympathy for others.

Communism (Karl Marx) denies a permanent "human nature," seeing it fluid and changing with history. The one constant feature of humanity, for Marxism, is its productive capacity, but economic relations and technology advance and change people with it. Soviet thinkers believed that socialist Russia would create a "New Man" (intelligent, kind, peaceful, creative, loving) and end the old human nature of acquisitiveness, individualism, conflict, and greed. This was not actually realized in communism.

The great political thinkers have an explicit idea of human nature that explains, at least in part, human capacities and behavior. All political thought is premised in ideals of human nature.

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