

Conference Proposal: Humankind and Humanity in the European Enlightenment

In the 18th century philosophy turns towards human nature, treating it not only as a topic of inquiry, but also increasingly as a foundational concept and a methodical starting point. This new approach goes along with several conceptual shifts. Concepts such as “humankind”, “formation”, “culture”, “progress”, “vocation of man”, “enlightenment” etc. emerge conjointly and quickly become key notions, connecting both descriptive and normative approaches to human life and human nature. Philosophers use these terms to express their growing awareness of the difference or conflict between what humans *are* and what they, by themselves, *can* or *should be*; and they often conceive this tension within a historical perspective on human development. Within this context, the concept of “humankind” seems to acquire a central status with utmost relevance to the Enlightenment project and its normative demands. The debate concerning the nature of “humankind” goes beyond the mere description of what one may call the “human species”; it also often concerns the idea that humans form a particular society and obey particular social, civil, moral or “humane” standards. In other words, true humanity as a moral and social ideal only seems to be attainable within a collective framework and within a broader development of humankind and, thus, human nature.

Several questions arise: in what sense do these semantic and philosophical shifts reflect the new scientific, ethnological and anthropological insights and practices of the 18th century? How are the new methods of natural history and the observation of cultures and ethnicities integrated into the ancient project of self-knowledge? In what sense do they imply a new understanding of human nature and human development? To what extent does the new interest for humankind express new secular tendencies and a naturalized and perhaps materialistic understanding of human nature that breaks with the old views of man holding an exceptional place in the universe? Are the older Christian pretensions to lead humanity to perfection discarded or rather transformed? And finally: how are these accounts on human nature connected to the moral and political project of the Enlightenment and to modern ideas of human equality?

This conference will attempt to provide some answers to these questions. It will examine the various connections that the Enlightenment philosophy establishes between anthropological, normative and collective conceptions, between humankind, humanity, human behavior and human forms of life; it will evaluate their importance to the Enlightenment project itself, and their relevance for today’s debates on human dignity and the status of the human in a globalized world.