**Realist view**

Human nature is the starting point for much realist analysis, so much so that classical realism has sometimes been portrayed as ‘biological realism’. Influenced by thinkers such as Hobbes and Machiavelli, realists have embraced a theory of human nature that has three main features. First, the essential core of human nature is fixed and given, fashioned by ‘nature’ (biological or genetic factors) rather than by ‘nurture’ (the influence of education or social factors generally).

Second, instinct ultimately prevails over intellect. Human beings are driven by non-rational appetites: aversions, fears, hopes and desires, the strongest of which is the desire to exercise power over others. Intellect and reason may guide us in pursuing these appetites, but they do not define them in the first place.

Third, as human beings are essentially selfseeking and egoistical, conflict between and amongst them is an unavoidable fact of life. For classical realists, this human egoism determines state egoism, and creates an international system that is inevitably characterized by rivalry and the pursuit of the national interest. Hopes for international cooperation and even ‘perpetual peace’ are therefore a utopian delusion.

However, assumptions about human nature are peripheral within neorealism, in which rivalry and conflict is explained in terms of the structure of the international system rather than the make-up of individuals and therefore of states.

**Liberal view**

Liberals have a broadly optimistic view of human nature. Humans are self-seeking and largely self-reliant creatures; but they are also governed by reason and are capable of personal self-development. This implies, on the one hand, that there is an underlying and unavoidable tendency towards rivalry and competition among individuals, groups and, in the international arena, states. However, on the other hand, this tendency towards rivalry is contained by an underlying faith in a harmony of interests (conflicts can and should be resolved) and by a preference for resolving conflict through discussion, debate and negotiation. Liberals therefore typically deplore the use of force and aggression; war, for example, is invariably seen as an option of the very last resort. In this view, the use of force may be justified, either on the grounds of self-defence or as a means of countering oppression, but always and only after reason and argument have failed.

By contrast with the realist image of humans as ruthless power-maximizers, liberals emphasize that there is a moral dimension to human nature, most commonly reflected in the doctrine of human rights. This moral dimension is grounded in a strong faith in reason and progress. Reason dictates that human beings treat each other with respect, guided by rationally-based rules and principles. It also emphasizes the scope within human beings for personal development – as individuals expand their understanding and refine their sensibilities – and thus for social progress.

**Critical views**

While both realists and liberals tend to believe that core aspects of human nature are unchanging and fixed at birth, critical theorists generally view human nature as ‘plastic’, moulded by the experiences and circumstances of social life. In the nurture–natüre debate, they therefore tend to favour nurture. This has two key implications. First, it suggests a unifying vision of humans as social creatures, animated by a common humanity and, therefore, cosmopolitan moral sensibilities. Critical theorists, for example, are often willing to go further than liberal internationalists in endorsing a ‘one world’ vision, grounded in the ideas of global justice. The second implication of ‘plasticity’ is that it highlights the extent to which economic, political or cultural structures shape human identities, wants and perceptions. As Marxists have put it, social being determines consciousness. For social constructivists and poststructuralists, this may suggest that there is no such thing as ‘human nature’, in the sense of a set of abiding tendencies or dispositions that apply in all circumstances and all societies.

Feminists usually embrace an androgynous model of human nature, implying that women and men share a common human nature and that gender differences are socially and culturally imposed. Difference feminists nevertheless hold that there are deep-rooted, and perhaps even essential, differences between women and men, such that men are disposed to competition and domination while women are naturally sympathetic and peaceful.