ALMA MATER STUDIORUM UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

ARCHIVIO ISTITUZIONALE DELLA RICERCA

Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna
Archivio istituzionale della ricerca

The “negative” view of human nature: apologia for an unrealistic assumption

This is the final peer-reviewed author’s accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:
Raschi, F., Zambernardi, L. (2025). The “negative” view of human nature: apologia for an unrealistic assumption. EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, 31(1), 53-76 [10.1177/13540661241269698].

Availability:
This version is available at: https://hdl.handle.net/11585/981817 since: 2025-02-19

Published:
DOI: http://doi.org/10.1177/13540661241269698

Terms of use:

Some rights reserved. The terms and conditions for the reuse of this version of the manuscript are specified in the publishing policy. For all terms of use and more information see the publisher's website.

This item was downloaded from IRIS Università di Bologna (https://cris.unibo.it/).
When citing, please refer to the published version.

(Article begins on next page)

24 February 2025

The "negative" view of human nature: apologia for an unrealistic assumption

Francesco Raschi and Lorenzo Zambernardi
University of Bologna, Italy

Abstract
The "negative" view of human nature is customarily seen as a distinctive assumption of the classical realist approach. Such a controversial characterization is regarded either as a metaphysical conception belonging to the pre-scientific age of realism or as a dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy. Although the dark image of human nature has elicited fierce critiques, we contend that it needs to be reconsidered. The present article forms a kind of apologia for the "negative" view of human nature: not because of any belief that humans are all truly dangerous individuals, but for a purely political reason. Some of the most important mechanisms introduced in order to defend liberty, independence, domestic and international pluralism, and prevent power from concentrating in one point and thus becoming dominant, are themselves based on a view of the individual as problematic and potentially dangerous, whose behavior needs restraining by institutional and political measures. As we show in the article, it is no accident that the anthropological conception of human beings as dangerous is not the "private property" of political realism, but is shared by some illustrious fathers of liberalism such as Locke, Montesquieu, and Kant. It may be one of the ironies of history that the political philosophy whose manifesto proclaims the defense of freedom and individual rights should rest on a vision of the individual as potentially a dangerous bully, sometimes driven by greed and lust for power.

Keywords
Anthropology, human nature, liberalism, realism, assumptions, theory

Introduction

The dark, sinister, or "negative" view of human nature is customarily seen as a distinctive core assumption of the classical realist approach.[1] In International Relations (IR)

theory, it is also viewed as one of the main differences between classical realism and neorealism, and it is widely considered as one of the major weaknesses of the former. Indeed, such a controversial assumption is regarded either as an irrational, metaphysical conception belonging to the pre-scientific age of realism (Hall, 2013; Thayer, 2004: 17–18; Waltz, 1990: 24–29) or as a dangerous, immoral self-fulfilling prophecy (Crawford, 2009; Freyberg-Inan, 2004: ch. 8; Shimko, 1992: 297). Although the "negative" image of human nature has elicited fierce critiques and even revulsion, it needs to be reconsidered both within and, especially, outside the realist camp. In dismissing and rejecting this "anthropological" characterization, scholars have failed to understand the political function of such an ontological assumption.

The present article forms a kind of apologia for the "negative" view of human nature: not because of any belief that humans are all truly dangerous individuals, but for a purely political reason. Some of the most important mechanisms introduced in order to defend liberty, independence, domestic and international pluralism, and prevent power from concentrating in one point and thus becoming dominant, are themselves based on a view of the individual as problematic and potentially dangerous, whose behavior needs restraining by institutional and political measures. It is no accident that the anthropological conception of human beings as dangerous (e.g. Hobbes) or in some cases even as evil (e.g. Machiavelli) is not the "private property" of political realism, but is shared by certain thinkers generally placed in schools quite different from realism, or indeed at the extreme antipodes. Although a "negative" conception of human nature is usually connected with classical realism, as the article will show,[2] *some* illustrious fathers of liberalism shared the view. The reason for that apparently paradoxical agreement between such different thinkers is the common awareness that we have no natural permanent guarantee that humans will obey the laws or abstain from violating the social compact. Domestic and international politics entail, alike, not just competition, but abuse, bullying, and conflict which may erupt into violence and the use of force in by no means marginal circumstances. To many a political thinker—realist or otherwise—it is only by acknowledging that individuals may always turn dangerous that one can circumscribe the dire effects of interaction among them.

Before proceeding further, two points need to be clarified. First, we do not claim to defend all political theories which are rooted in "negative" views of human nature. Indeed, by a similar philosophical anthropology one can advance very different political arguments and theories: one can lay the foundation of the modern state (e.g. Hobbes); one can justify political institutions based on "the two anchors of society—religion and slavery" (de Maistre, in Berlin, 2003: 144), but one can also try to build political institutions that are meant to preserve liberty within the state and among nations (e.g. classical liberals). The main goal of this paper is to reverse the traditional understanding of the bleak picture of human nature as something necessarily negative. As we shall see, this anthropological characterization is not merely a cautionary warning that the earthly paradise will not be achieved so soon, but provides us with useful political instruments for a social world in which abuse and violent conflict remain potential threats and, in some instances, actual realities.

Second, when we contend that "*some* illustrious fathers of liberalism" shared a "negative" view of human nature, we are not making a general statement about this tradition.

Indeed, it would be foolish to generalize about liberalism, which is at best a large and diverse family.[3] Moreover, several scholars have convincingly challenged how the liberal tradition is generally understood. For instance, Duncan Bell (2014) has traced several shifts in the meaning of liberalism between 1850 and 1950, focusing especially on how Locke came to be interpreted as a liberal thinker. Not surprisingly, many important recent histories of liberalism focus mainly on the 19th and 20th centuries (Fawcett, 2018; Freeden, 2005), when the term "liberal" acquired a political meaning, or trace the origins of this tradition back to the years of the French Revolution (Rosenblatt, 2018: ch. 2). Although liberalism remains an elusive, controversial and contested tradition, we employ the expression "fathers of liberalism" as a convenient shorthand to identify Locke, Montesquieu, and Kant.[4] Although the term liberalism was not part of their lexicon, a central question of their political thought is how to preserve liberty while creating the conditions for domestic and/or international order.

The article is organized as follows. In "Realism and its 'negative' view of human nature" section, we present both the unflattering view of human nature typical of political realism and some of the main critiques it has raised within and without the realist camp. In "The political function of a controversial assumption" section, we clarify how the "negative" view of human nature, postulated by many realist and liberal writers, was not meant to stand as an assumption behind scientific theories, but to provide the ontological basis for certain specific political projects. Thus, not only does criticizing classical realists for their fictive philosophical anthropology make no sense, but above all it impedes our understanding of the political function of this peculiar assumption. In "The 'negative' view of human nature in classical liberal theory" section, by looking at the works of Locke, Montesquieu, and Kant, we offer evidence that a "negative" conception of human nature is a core principle of many illustrious fathers of liberalism. In so doing, this work helps deconstruct some of the myths that have informed histories of political thought and inclines to a reading of classical liberal thinking without the simplifications and the frequent misreadings surrounding the conventional description of it.[5] For, while in IR theory the intellectual history of realism and so-called inter-war idealism has been an object of thorough research and appraisal (e.g. Ashworth, 2006; Guilhot, 2011; Guzzini, 1998; Lebow, 2003; McQueen, 2017; Molloy, 2006; Schmidt, 1998; Williams, 2005; Wilson, 1998), classical liberalism has not attracted similar attention.[6] Finally, in the last section, we clarify the theoretical and disciplinary relevance of this investigation and its political implications for current international affairs.

Realism and its "negative" view of human nature

Political realism has often been described as a tradition based on a markedly pessimistic anthropological assumption. Many passages by writers associated with that school describe human beings in such terms. Thucydides (1998: 171) writes that human beings are "always ready to act unjustly even in violation of laws." Machiavelli (1998: 66, 67) depicts individuals as "ungrateful, fickle, pretenders and dissemblers, evaders of danger, eager for gain" and "wicked." Hobbes (2012: 150) maintains that the "generall inclination of all mankind" is a "a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth only in Death." Reinhold Niebuhr (1964: 179) describes human passions "as

always characterized by unlimited and demonic potencies of which animal life is innocent." According to Hans J. Morgenthau (1945: 13), one of the most important roots of conflict "stems from" human beings' "*animus dominandi*, the desire for power." Interaction among humans of such kind results in a social world in thrall to force and the logic thereof.

The "negative" view of human nature does not necessarily go hand in hand with a pessimistic approach to politics and history. Hobbes is a case in point: he thought it possible to arrive at stable, lasting order, thanks to the creation of Leviathan (Dienstag, 2008: *162;* McQueen, 2018: *249). Yet, undoubtedly, many (not all) realist authors do seehuman nature as the prime source of social, political, and military conflict.*

One page of *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, by IR theorist John Mearsheimer (2001: 19), calls this mode of characterizing human beings "human nature realism." This he contrasts with neorealism which concentrates exclusively on the anarchical structure of international politics. In a note from the same book, Mearsheimer (2001: 407–408) suggests that one of the chief reasons that view has become marginal in contemporary American social science is the *behavioral revolution*, which did away with all theories based on alleged metaphysical assumptions, such as anthropological pessimism (see also Shimko, 1992; Sterling-Folker and Charette, 2015: 88). One might add that the job of delegitimizing human nature realism was later completed by *rationalism* (Guilhot, 2017: 189; Snyder, 2011: 65), which replaced the anthropological philosophy typifying political realism by an equally ontological assumption, if apparently more benevolent: your human being is not evil but simply a selfish being who maximizes his own advantages.

Other factors besides have contributed to undermining the anthropological position of classical realism. Some argue that, at best, it is a misleading simplification. Humans cannot be reduced to the harm they are able to cause; in other words, they do not boil down to one unvarying essence (Herborth, 2015; Kessler, 2015: 268; Smith, 1983: 170). And certain contemporary realists had actually recognized the point, an apparently inconsistent admission. For example, neither E.H. Carr (2001: 92) nor Hans J. Morgenthau (1945: 1; see also Ross, 2013) depicted individuals as one-dimensional beings.[7]

One further major criticism can be leveled against anthropological realism: the realization that it goes beyond mere mistaken simplification, lying rather at the very root of *Realpolitik*, for it tends to justify, reify, and reproduce the whole logic of conflict and power politics (Crawford, 2009: 284–285; Freyberg-Inan, 2004). Such critics argue that, especially in international politics, by depicting human beings as evil and permanently untrustworthy, we help create a world in which fear and distrust become systemic properties. The anthropological realist assumption is thus triggering a self-fulfilling prophecy that goes to fashion the world when it meant only to describe it.[8]

For all these reasons, and others no doubt, the philosophical anthropology behind political realism has largely been discarded; to have set right the blunders of so-called classical realism is a merit that is accorded to neorealist theoretician Kenneth Waltz—even by his critics. Ian Hall (2013) used just such terms to describe Waltz: viz. that he cut out the scientifically valueless metaphysical speculation on human anthropology, and replaced it by a systemic theory based on the anarchy of the international structure, and imbued with ideas from the social science that seems most closely modeled on natural science, neoclassical economics. The transformation Waltz (1990) brought about is

summed up in a sequel to *Theory of International Politics*—"Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory"—where realist political thought is contrasted with neorealist scientific theory.

Much needs to be said—and much has been written, in fact—about the alleged scientific basis of Waltz's structural theory, as opposed to so-called classical political realism (see, for example, Guzzini, 1998: 125–141). But that issue is not central to the argument here, and we will not be pursuing it. However, two additional points connected with the critiques discussed earlier need further discussion: (1) the universal, essentialist conception of human nature ascribed to classical realists, and (2) the idea that, human nature being a constant ("short of genetic engineering," Wendt, 1999: 134), it can hardly account for the great variation in human behavior.

The political function of a controversial assumption

Authors associated with classical realism such as Hobbes and Machiavelli did not think that all mankind was dangerous and evil. To claim that human nature is fallible is far from equivalent to the essentialist and standardizing assertion whereby individuals are reduced to their potential for wrongdoing. In other words, it does not mean that all individuals are evil and in thrall to the wish for power. In one passage from the *Discourses*, where Machiavelli (1996: 15) discusses what made the Roman Republic "more perfect," he states, not that human beings are all evil, but that one needs "to presuppose" that they are so when one "disposes a republic" and "orders laws." Machiavelli is hence saying that prudence requires we create political institutions that are able to contain individuals' *potential* evil.[9] Hobbes (1949: 12), too, makes a similar point in the Preface to *De Cive*, when he writes that "though the wicked were fewer than the righteous, yet because we cannot distinguish them, there is a necessity of suspecting." In other words, although most people most of the time will follow the law, it only takes a few individuals to threaten and jeopardize political order.

It would undoubtedly be not merely far-fetched but quite wrong to claim, as John Adams did, that "All men would be tyrants if they could" (in Sahlins, 2008: 5). There are enormous differences between individuals in terms of belligerence, dangerousness, wickedness or solidarity, generosity and goodness.[10] But the opposite position would be equally untenable: that nobody would be a tyrant if they could. Some, few perhaps, aspire to become one, and luckily still fewer manage to do so, but there are times when the acts of the few suffice to create a large-scale situation of violent conflict and anarchy.Take war, for instance. Though it entails interaction between at least two parties, decisionby one is enough to trigger it.

A further common criticism of anthropological pessimism is that in the end human nature does not explain anything. Since human nature is a constant, it cannot account for the huge variation in human behavior. Hence, it lacks explanatory force. This was precisely Kenneth Waltz's (1959: 29) argument when he said that

> the search for causes is an attempt to account for differences . . . What does account for the alternation of periods of war and peace? While human nature no doubt plays a role in bringing about war, it cannot by itself explain both war and peace.

However, such criticism misses the target. Undoubtedly, a constant cannot explain variation. And there is also no doubt, as Waltz maintained, that the Hobbesian vision of human nature is "arbitrary." But Waltz (1959: 166) is mistaken when he suggests that, being "arbitrary," this conception of human nature can "lead to no valid social or political conclusions." Though one cannot indeed construct valid scientific theories upon it, this peculiar anthropological stance was not intended to explain human behavior or political phenomena; it was not intended, in other words, as the ontological basis of a scientific theory.

The main function of that controversial anthropological assumption is not that of realistically describing the nature of human beings, but of laying the foundations upon which to legitimize certain political practices, mechanisms, institutional arrangements. It is not a realistic description of human nature, but an artificial device employed to justify political practice.

In order to understand this point better, it seems useful to compare the classical realists' anthropological assumption with Kenneth Waltz's understanding of the role of assumptions in the construction of theory based on Milton Friedman's famous essay *The Methodology of Positive Economics*.[11] Friedman (1953: 3–43) argued that an assumption is not to be judged by whether it is true or false—that is, whether it finds correspondence with reality, but rather should be evaluated for its epistemological usefulness. In *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz (1979: 89–92, 117–119) reiterates this controversial thesis, when he postulates that the main actors in international politics are states with their interest in survival. Assumptions are, for Friedman and Waltz, mere epistemological tools useful or not for theory-building, but certainly not faithful representations of reality. According to them, the "realism" of assumptions is a secondary issue. Actually, Friedman (1953: 14) states that "Truly important and significant hypotheses will be found to have 'assumptions' that are wildly inaccurate descriptive representations of reality, and, in general, the more significant the theory, the more unrealistic the assumptions." Likewise, Waltz (1990: 27) states that "assumptions are brazenly false." For both Friedman and Waltz, assumptions are mere heuristic devices justified by their explanatory power.

The "negative" view of human nature, which is not based on a realistic description of what human beings are, plays a similar function to the one postulated by Friedman and Waltz, though not on the epistemological level but on the much more relevant domain of politics. The value of this controversial assumption lies not in making social phenomena more understandable and predictable, but in laying the ontological foundations for legitimizing certain political practices, mechanisms, and institutional architectures. Although we agree with Jacobi and Freyberg-Inan (2015: 13) when they claim that "assumptions about humans and their properties are ultimately normative judgments about why and how the world works as it does," we contend that the "negative" view of human nature is normative for a different and ulterior reason: it embodies specific political projects.

Authors like Machiavelli and Hobbes did not approach politics as a mere object of analysis, but rather as an area in need of political action and construction. For Machiavelli, the context was "the fragility of political orders" (Philp, 2007: 38) and the political goal was the creation of a strong Italian state that could withstand the hegemonic policies of

European states on the Peninsula in the 16th century (Machiavelli, 1998: ch. 26). For Hobbes, the goal was the building of political order and the eradication of anarchy and civil war in "an era of endemic conflict" (Williams, 2005: 20; see also Ryan, 2016). Both thinkers were less interested in the "realism" of their conception of human nature than in what could reasonably be done in a social world inhabited by individuals who are not all or completely good.

In this respect, it can hardly be strange or random when not just political realist thought stems from a "negative" account of human nature, but so too do early modern thinkers tackling the problem of building a liberal society and a plural international system in which individual, group, and state rights are protected from abuse and the concentration of power. The next section will deal with the anthropological conception of certain fathers of liberalism and will show that a "negative" view of human nature provided them with the ontological basis for devising a viable brand of liberal politics.

The "negative" view of human nature in classical liberal theory

Liberal thinkers and theorists, it is often said, subscribe to a different image of politics from the realists—one based on a different view of human nature (e.g. Doyle, 1997: 201; Shimko, 1992). They see individuals as rational beings able to engage in collaboration and cooperation in pursuit of their own interest. Conflict and war are not produced by human nature, but by imperfect social institutions that are prone to change and progress.

The liberal emphasis on profit, interest, prosperity, and rights is nonetheless not equivalent to espousing a benevolent form of human anthropology. Even many classical liberal writers start from the assumption that humans are driven not just by interest but by passion and the quest for power (Boucoyannis, 2007: 704; Holmes, 1995: 2). As we shall see in this section, a "negative" account of human nature is not exclusive to realism, but often underpins classical liberal theory (Rosow, 2015: 66). Indeed, while trying to devise the necessary political institutions and mechanisms to create liberal societies, liberal thinkers began from a "negative" conception of human nature. Besides the classical realists cited earlier in this article, certain fathers of liberalism themselves base their political ideas on an overtly "negative" anthropology: Locke, Montesquieu, and Kant. From this standpoint, the typical realist view of human nature is by no means unique.

That classical liberal theory is predicated on an unflattering view of human nature may seem a paradox. Indeed, liberalism is a political doctrine that posits individual freedom as the primary goal to be protected from the potential abuse and cruelty of the state and other political institutions, groups, and individuals (Shklar, 1989: 21). Yet, from Locke's principle of the division of powers to the constitutional machinery devised by Montesquieu, a "negative" view of human nature has been the founding ontology of many classical liberals.

Let us begin with John Locke, customarily portrayed as an author who has a much more positive view of human nature than Hobbes. It is true that the state of nature, in Locke's (1988: 280) opinion, should not be confused with the state of war: it is "a State

of Peace, Good Will, Mutual Assistance, and Preservation" and not "a State of Enmity, Malice, Violence and Mutual Destruction." Yet even for Locke we need to get away from the state of nature; for life in that state is perilously precarious. We hence need to establish an authority standing above the parties and ensuring the law—no longer *natural* but *positive*—as well as administering justice. Natural law (or reason), writes Locke (1988: 271), is also known under the state of nature but is not universally observed. Individuals are always prone to abandon reason out of ignorance, in pursuit of their own interest (Locke, 1988: 351) or because of their "inherently rebellious nature" (Dunn, 1969: 16). The state of nature has one grave drawback, namely, that for want of a judge to appeal to, it is up to each individual to enforce natural law (Dunn, 1969: 173; Rosow, 2015: 55–56). But "Judges in their own Cases" are never good judges; they are "unreasonable" judges because "Self-love will make Men partial to themselves and their Friends. And, on the other side, that Ill Nature, Passion, and Revenge will carry them too far in punishing others. And hence nothing but Confusion and Disorder will follow" (Locke, 1988: 275). Ill nature, passion, and revenge: the terms show that even for Locke, part of mankind is not exactly benevolent. And, interestingly, although the state of nature among commonwealths does not pose the same "Inconveniences" as the state of nature among individuals (Armitage, 2013: 81), it is the absence of a common arbiter that makes states the ultimate judges as to the decision to go to war. Because "Great robbers," Locke (1988: 386) maintains, "are too big for the weak hands of Justice in this World, and have the power in their own possession, which should punish Offenders," the only remedy is to appeal to Heaven and make use of force which is inevitably implied.

Moreover, Locke's view of human nature also leads to the separation of powers. For s/he who makes the laws should not also enforce them, since in that case the legislator might regard her/himself as above the law. On this point, Locke (1988: 364) writes,

> it may be too great temptation to humane frailty, apt to grasp at Power, for the same Persons who have the Power of making Laws, to have also in their hands the power to execute them, whereby they may exempt themselves from Obedience to the Laws they make, and suit the Law, both in its making and execution, to their own private advantage, and thereby come to have a distinct interest from the rest of the Community.

According to Locke, abuse of power and arbitrary actions are a permanent danger, which must be limited through a number of specific institutional devices, such as the division of powers and functions between government and judiciary. As Deborah Boucoyannis (2007: 717) noted,

> Locke assumed the natural sociability of man; this feature of his thought, however, referred to the normative foundations of natural law, not the institutional framework designed to secure it. Locke provided one of the foremost defenses of the separation of powers, which would not be necessary if power was not also assumed to corrupt.

In other words, Locke's political theory is not exactly positive about human nature.

Textual evidence that some of the fathers of liberalism did not espouse a benevolent view of human nature is provided also by Montesquieu, author of *The Spirit of the Laws*,

which was, after the Bible, the book most cited and discussed during the founding of the American republic (MacGilvray, 2015; see also Shklar, 1987: 121). In a passage from that work where Montesquieu (1989: 253) deals with the subject of slavery, he gives this description of human nature:

> Who can doubt that each man, individually, would not be quite content to be the master of the goods, the honor, and the life of others and that all his passions would not be awakened at once at this idea?

Slavery apart, one might say that Montesquieu's whole philosophical and political system comes down to just such a view of humanity. In one of the best-known passages from *The Spirit of the Laws*, he writes that "it has eternally been observed that any man who has power is led to abuse it; he continues until he finds limits" (Montesquieu, 1989: 155). In other words, Montesquieu described human beings as driven by an insatiable lust for power.

His fundamental doctrine rests precisely on that view of human nature: the constitutional separation of powers, he argues, is an indispensable way of ensuring "liberty," that supreme good "which makes for the enjoyment of other goods" (Montesquieu, 2012: 452). Hence, the necessary condition for liberty is that power be not concentrated in one person, institution, or entity, but divided and distributed within the political system and civil society: "So that one cannot abuse power, power must check power by the arrangement of things" (Montesquieu, 1989: 155). Following in Montesquieu's footsteps, Edward Gibbon would apply the same perspective to the whole system of international politics: "The division of Europe into a number of independent states, connected, however, with each other, by the general resemblance of religion, language and manners, is productive of the most beneficial consequences to the liberty of mankind" (in Hall, 1986: 14; see also Deudney, 2007: 140).

In IR theory, Montesquieu is also renowned for his thesis on the *doux commerce*—that is, the positive relation between commerce and peace. There is no doubt that Montesquieu thought that commerce brings prosperity and inclines toward peace (Rosow, 1984). While he thought that commerce softens manners and reduces prejudice, he was equally aware that international trade would not inevitably lead to peace. Although for Montesquieu "commerce is the best policy imaginable" (Shklar, 1987: 107), he did not believe that the refinement of manners would radically change human nature.[12] Actually, he endorsed an unchanging view of human nature, as clearly emerges in his *Considerations on the Causes of the Grandeur and Decadence of the Romans*: "since men have had the same passions in all ages, the occasions which produce great changes are different, but the causes are always the same" (Montesquieu, 1894: 23).

Locke and Montesquieu are not alone in distrusting individuals. Immanuel Kant, too, commonly regarded as the grandfather of liberalism in IR (e.g. Doyle, 1983: 206; Doyle 1997: 252)[13] with his famous project designed to bring permanent peace among nations, never sheds a note of pessimism about human beings (Herborth, 2015: 232). To Kant (1991a), both social life and the political order stem from an antagonism that may always destroy civil and international peace: "By antagonism, I mean in this context the *unsocial sociability* of men, that is, their tendency to come together in society, coupled, however,

with a continual resistance which constantly threatens to break this society up" (p. 44, emphasis in the original). Individuals are driven to congregate by a desire for honor, power, and wealth: "it drives him to seek status among his fellows, whom he cannot *bear* yet cannot *bear to leav*e" (Kant, 1991a: 44, emphasis in the original).

In Kant, of course, social antagonism does play a positive, providential role (Muthu, 2012: 227): without "his self-seeking pretensions, man would live an Arcadian, pastoral existence of perfect concord, self-sufficiency and mutual love. But in this condition all human talents would remain hidden forever in a dormant state" (Kant, 1991a: 45). Progress itself is based on human beings' natural egoism and antagonism, for which Kant (1991a: 45) is thankful: "Nature should thus be thanked for fostering social incompatibility, enviously competitive vanity, and insatiable desires for possession or even power." But the benefits of unsocial sociability, according to Kant, depend on antagonism developing in a balanced way: "within a precinct like that of civil union," under an overriding law that enables differing judgments to coexist:

> Man, who is otherwise so enamored with unrestrained freedom, is forced to enter this state of restriction by sheer necessity. And this is indeed the most stringent of all forms of necessity, for it is imposed by men upon themselves . . . In the same way, trees in a forest, by seeking to deprive each other of air and sunlight, compel each other to find these by upward growth, so that they grow beautiful and straight—whereas those which put out branches at will, in freedom and isolation from others, grow stunted, bent and twisted. (Kant, 1991a: 46)

Even at the international level, progress is produced by antagonism and discord. The possibility of war breaking out produces powerful incentives within domestic societies to create wealth, the precondition for which, according to Kant, is political freedom. The role of competition and conflict in the moral progression of humankind is what Andreas Behnke (2012: 256) has aptly described as the "productive and constitutive nature of War." It is only at the final stage of the "development of the human species [. . . that] Reason can replace war as the driving force behind freedom" (Behnke, 2008: 520).

One might say that, in Kant's view, without man's innate "unsocial sociability," no progress would be possible. However, when he states that, with their selfish animal instinct, humans need a master, a ruler ensuring different individual judgments may coexist, Kant (1991a: 46) is explicitly saying that human beings' problematic nature is a constant threat to social order: "Nothing straight can be constructed from such warped wood as that which man is made of."

Kant's arguments as to the defective nature of mankind are not confined to the texts on the philosophy of history, political philosophy, and law. In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, published 2 years before *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1795), he goes even deeper into the issue of human nature and its built-in limitations. That is where he introduces the theme of "radical evil." He writes,

> the statement, "The human being is *evil*," cannot mean anything else than that he is conscious of the moral law and yet has incorporated into his maxim the (occasional) deviation from it. "He is evil by nature" simply means that being evil applies to him considered in this species . . .

> we may presuppose evil as subjectively necessary in every human being, even the best. (Kant, 1998: 55–56)

It has been pointed out that radical evil is a kind of secular version of original sin, which is agreed to lie behind certain political realists' anthropological typecasting. The religious doctrine of original sin, engrained evil, tends to rule out free will and hence treat human nature deterministically. Grace alone can save human beings. "Yet," as Seán Molloy (2017: 121) clarified, "Kant's political theology does not leave us mired in his equivalent of original sin." According to the German philosopher, the tendency to evil stems from an act of freedom and may thus be "imputed" (Kant, 1998: 50) to the individual. Human beings know the moral law and may freely decide not to observe it, following that tendency to wickedness (Louden, 2009: 97; Molloy, 2017: 123; Muchnik, 2009: 116–118). When an individual acts from self-love instead of the law of universal reason, he commits evil. Kant concludes the argument in these words:

> It follows that the human being (even the best) is evil only because he reverses the moral order of his incentives in incorporating them into his maxims. He indeed incorporates the moral law into those maxims, together with the law of self-love; since, however, he realizes that the two cannot stand on an equal footing, but one must be subordinated to the other as its supreme condition, he makes the incentives of self-love and their inclinations the condition of compliance with the moral law whereas it is this latter that, as the supreme condition of the satisfaction of the former, should have been incorporated into the universal maxim of the power of choice as the sole incentive. (Kant, 1998: 59)

Doubtless, Kant believed in a progressive, enlightened cultural and political development, thanks to the teleological rationality (i.e. the capacity to deliberate about ends and not only about means) with which human beings are endowed. According to the German philosopher, humans are not moved by a deterministic nature; they can make choices because they have a predisposition to become rational animals and decide what to make of themselves. They are capable of self-correction.[14] Yet, human beings "are not automatically or necessarily rational"; they are not "inherently rational" (Louden, 2011: xxi).

Interestingly for our argument, Kant goes on to state that a similar "corrupt propensity" is confirmed in the relations among states which are characterized by "raw nature" to which they deliberately cling, despite its being "directly in contradiction to official policy":

> So *philosophical chiliasm*, which hopes for a state of perpetual peace based on a federation of nations united in a world-republic, is universally derided as sheer fantasy as much as *theological chiliasm*, which awaits for the completed moral improvement of the human race. (Kant, 1998: 57, emphasis in the original; see also Kant, 1991d: 92)

In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant's pessimism as to the forming of a State of Peoples [*Völkerstaat*], designed to put an end to the international state of nature once and for all, thus seems still more radical than in his writings on perpetual peace, where he propends for a "negative substitute," a *Völkerbund*: since nations

> (reject *in hypothesi* what is true *in thesi* [Völkerstaat]), the positive idea of a world republic cannot be realized. If all is not to be lost, this can at best find a negative substitute in the shape of an enduring and gradually expanding *federation* likely to prevent war. The latter may check the current of man's inclination to defy the law and antagonize his fellows, although there will always be a risk of it bursting forth anew. (Kant, 1991b: 105)[15]

The "current of man's inclination" to thwart or put off perpetual peace is thus lastingly bound up with the nature of human beings.

Internationally, although Kant (1991d: 92) advocates perpetual peace and denies that the balance of power will ensure peace among nations, he does acknowledge the need for a balancing policy wherever the threat of hegemony arises. After commenting that every state seems determined "to achieve lasting peace by thus dominating the whole world, if at all possible," he goes on to add that "*nature*" wills it otherwise, and uses two means to separate the nations and prevent them from intermingling—*linguistic* and *religious* differences. These may certainly occasion mutual hatred and provide pretexts for wars, but as culture grows and men gradually move toward greater agreement over their principles, they lead to mutual understanding and peace. And unlike that universal despotism which saps all man's energies and ends in the graveyard of freedom, this peace is created and guaranteed by an equilibrium of forces and a most vigorous rivalry (Kant, 1991b: 113–114).

Again, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, when Kant (1991c: 167) talks of the *potentia tremenda* whenever one state "alarmingly" increases its "power," he says that this

> is an injury to the less powerful state by the mere fact that the other state, even without offering any active offence, is more powerful; and any attack upon it is legitimate in the state of nature. On this is based the right to maintain a balance of power among all states which have active contact with one another.

In other words, according to Kant, as long as the confederation of republics is not achieved,[16] the balance of power remains a legitimate way of preserving a plural state system whenever it is jeopardized by one power posing a hegemonic threat.

In sum, the liberal thinkers we have been considering here traced the roots of the dangerous and potentially destructive dynamics of politics to human nature. Thinkers as different as Montesquieu, Locke, and Kant employed a "negative" anthropological philosophy to make a stronger case for liberal policies meant to foster freedom, liberty, and nondomination. These liberal political writers were up against the same problem as Rousseau (1997: 270) explicitly put his finger on and, in a letter to Mirabeau (16 July 1767), called "squaring the circle": how to preserve one's own freedom while creating the conditions for domestic or international government. Unlike Rousseau, however, the liberal thinkers discussed here promoted liberty through a series of institutions and practices designed to allow political freedom to individuals within the domestic polity or independence to states in the international system. Constructing and preserving a system based on nondomination implies checked and institutionally limited competition between different groups, individuals, and states over principles and ends. The organizing of power with a view to safeguarding liberty by dividing up powers, by stating and

guaranteeing individual rights—these show the liberals' grave distrust of human beings in general and especially those in positions of power.

The continuing relevance of the "negative" view of human nature

One of the most familiar narratives in the history of IR suggests that classical realism and liberalism profoundly differ on the issue of human nature. As we have shown in this article, this account does scant justice to the actual history of the field. It seems hard to maintain that some of the most important fathers of liberalism had any more positive anthropological viewpoint than the authors associated with political realism. Indeed, a "negative" view of human nature appears as a defining classical liberal assumption underlying typical liberal domestic arrangements, such as a system of checks and balances and the separation of power, and an international practice like the balance of power. Thus, to be committed to a progressive political agenda, as early liberals were, is not inconsistent with pessimistic philosophical anthropology.

Beyond question, such an ontological view is not grounded in scientific research and empirical inquiry. As we mentioned above, it is not a realistic description of what human beings are. Neuroscience, for example, has shown that solidarity and cooperation are hard-wired in the human brain (e.g. Bråten, 2007). Since anthropological pessimism does not present any valid and acceptable assumption for doing empirical research, this article does not propose bringing a "negative" view of human nature back into "explana-tory" IR. What is, then, the significance of this investigation for the discipline and cur- rent international affairs? While excluding that this peculiar anthropological view shouldbe employed as an assumption in empirical research, this conception is relevant for both International Political Theory and Normative International Theory. In particular, from our inquiry, we may suggest three main implications. The first two concern disciplinary history and the possibility of developing a new research agenda. The third implication, by contrast, refers to the persistent *political* relevance of the "negative" view of human nature.

First, the liberal doctrine examined here is impervious to the conventional realist critiques raised against liberalism. While the criticisms of E.H Carr (2001) and Hans J. Morgenthau (1946) may apply to the writings of Paine, Cobden, Bryce, and Bentham and to some of the schemes of 20th-century liberal internationalists, they certainly do not apply to early liberals. While the history of the field is often taught as a series of ideal-typical "isms" among which liberalism and realism figure prominently, the study of international theory would greatly benefit from a more serious engagement with the works of thinkers rather than from a focus on traditions and schools (Raschi and Zambernardi, 2018: 382). For not only have some classical realist writers been the object of simplistic generalizations, but the political thought of some of the fathers of liberalism, too, has often been presented as a "vulgar caricature" (Wolin, 2004: 263)—an outcome that realist scholars surely contributed to producing (Ashworth, 2006; Schmidt, 1998; Wilson, 1998). Retrieving the anthropological conception of some classical liberals, as we have done in this article, has shown the intimate intellectual relation between

thinkers who are generally placed in opposing traditions. The article has drawn attention to an underappreciated dimension of liberal theorizing, revealing overlooked connections with so-called classical realists.

Second, a question that needs to be further investigated is why, in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, some notable self-proclaimed liberals rejected the typical anthropological view of their illustrious predecessors and embraced the idea that political conflict can be solved once and for all through the application of reason and by overcoming ignorance and prejudice. Although here it is only possible to briefly indicate what this inquiry would be, it is worth clarifying that the main goal of such an investiga-tion would be not to trace the historical development of liberalism but rather to under- stand the forces and motivations that drove some liberal thinkers to abandon a conflictingview of politics and replace it with a progressive faith in humanity. Put differently, the goal of this inquiry would be not only to show that the seemingly familiar liberal tradi- tion is much more intellectually diverse, intricate, and incoherent than generally thought—this is something we already know (see, for example, Freeden, 2015; Gray, 2000; Jahn, 2013; Jørgensen, 2021)—but to explain how and why contemporary liberalthinkers moved from a "negative" view of human nature to more benign assumptions (e.g. rationality, reasonableness) about individuals and states. Although reason, rational- ity, and reasonableness were foundational pillars in the writings and theorizing of early liberals, these notions were, nevertheless, accompanied by the idea of the conflicting nature of politics rooted in human nature. Indeed, although the fathers of liberalism believed in the possibility of progress, they also thought that regression was a permanentthreat (Ryan, 2012: 24). In this sense, the present article has contributed to preparing theground for further research concerning the historical development of one central strand of modern political theory, in both its domestic and international variants.

Such future research would work not only in tandem with several reconsiderations of the history of the field but would also speak to an emerging perspective in the social sciences: the growing work on "relationality." One of this approach's major claims is that there are no such things as essences, substances, and atomistic units like individuals or states, but primarily relations (Fierke, 2022: 72; Jackson and Nexon, 1999; Kavalski, 2023). Further deepening the constructivist insight that actors are constituted in social interactions with others (Kurki, 2022: 824), a relational perspective suggests that thinking and acting atomistically reinforces that "either-or logic" which produces hierarchies and "the drive to dominate" (Trownsell et al., 2021: 2, 28–29). Beyond question, all conceptions of the individual as a dangerous being or, for that matter, as a rational actor, are "essentialist" and "substantialist" definitions, which legitimize and reproduce specific patterns of behavior. As Sterling-Folker (2006: 230) rightly maintained, "different conceptions of human nature lead to different views about what we ought to do and how we can do it, because they amount to world views that claim not just intellectual assent but practical action."

While the different anthropological views existing in IR reflect shifts at the theoretical level, relational scholars are correct when they contend that these varying conceptions also mirror broad and deep changes in society and the economy. For example, there is no doubt that thinkers like Locke (Macpherson, 2011) and Montesquieu (Althusser, 1959) conceived their political doctrines not only to defend individuals from arbitrary power

but also with a view to promoting a society of individuals consistent with the bourgeois structure that was emerging at the time of their writing. From this perspective, research on the history of the successive anthropological views prevalent in IR and, more generally, in the social sciences purports to show that the several ontological definitions attaching to human beings are historically constituted notions belonging to knowledge construction situated in specific social contexts. Although this type of research would not directly help explore the new pathways that the relational approach can open, it would nevertheless contribute to undoing existing essentialist constructions of humans and actors. By recognizing the ways in which the concept of human nature has morphed over the centuries, this future research would multiply the possibilities for rethinking the ontological assumptions that have guided IR.

Let us move now from the realm of theory and disciplinary history to that of politics. Despite all the faults and limitations deriving from the "negative" view of human nature, let us delve further into the political role of this peculiar ontological assumption. As we mentioned above, a "negative" conception of human nature does not equate to maintaining that the drive to power exists in all humans. Thinkers like Machiavelli, Hobbes, Morgenthau, and the classical liberal authors discussed in this article viewed human beings as capable of aggression and abuse but also inclined to reason. They did not paint a picture of human nature that was all black. If most people were violent, power-hungry, and purely self-interested, there would not be society as we know it. Actually, most of the time humans are rational enough to avoid conflict and war. However, although greed, cruelty, and antagonistic behavior are not general human traits, they are undeniable attributes of some individuals and policymakers. And most importantly, even a few individuals or states can be enough to trigger a violent conflagration. Indeed, the actions of the *few* may have vastly disproportionate consequences. This is what Carlo Burelli (2019: 984) recently defined as conflict's unilateral emergence: "Unilateralism means that even a small minority, which wishes to impose its view, still prompts conflicts withmany others." The occurrence of violence, abuse, and war cannot be entirely eliminated because, despite a majority of reasonable individuals, some are still moved by less-than-honorable motivations. Even if one accepts Steven Pinker's (2011) finding that the use of violence has declined over the centuries, violence within societies and among states still occurs, and bodies keep piling up.

The possibility of conflict emerging unilaterally implies that both domestic and international societies must be based on mechanisms that prevent an excessive accumulation of power by one party that may desire to impose its will. Since early liberals did not believe that the forces of spontaneous order were sufficient to preserve peace and liberty, they thought that power must be restrained domestically and internationally. From this perspective, all these authors were largely prescriptive in their writings, suggesting prudence as a basis for the design of domestic institutions and the conduct of foreign affairs.

While preserving a plural domestic and international society requires checks and balances that counteract potential rising threats, prudence also entails a cautious diplomatic response to international changes rather than swift, dramatic action and projects of global social engineering. Kant's (1991b: 105) acceptance of the "negative substitute" of the Völkerbund for the Völkerstaat, Montesquieu's general emphasis on moderation (Craiutu, 2012), and Locke's (1988: 147) direct appeal to "Prudence and Wisdom" in the

exercise of the "federative power" (i.e. foreign policy), are all calls for prudence in international affairs. Prudence is here a general principle implying a more discriminating approach toward foreign policy, which can save states and the world from ideological crusades and unnecessary military adventures. And it should be remembered that the problem of limiting power implies the restraint of others as well as self-restraint.[17] As Montesquieu put it in a passage from the *Spirit of the Laws* (XI.4) in which he maintains that liberty is in danger even in moderate governments, "Is it not strange, though true, to say that virtue itself has need of limits?"

Being prudent does not merely require taking into consideration the likely consequences of future actions, but means also being aware of the insurmountable limits to the possibility of controlling the outcomes of foreign policy: the ultimate goal of prudence is not to erase uncertainty but rather to diminish the perils of what remains unpredictable. In light of the intrinsically uncertain nature of social reality, a prudent style of thought and action is the sole answer to the complexity, contingency, and openness of politics.

The relational approach we mentioned above can surely help modify conflicting and discriminatory patterns of behavior. With its transformative outlook, a relational approach is likely to curb racial, gender, and other systems of oppression that continue to pervade the social universe. In so doing, it can eliminate many of the root causes of exploitation and collective violence. However, dismantling the existing "either-or logic" can only come about through a gradual, incremental process. Thus, a relational approach is unlikely to eliminate violence, abuse, and war altogether, especially in the short term. No approach by itself can achieve such a grandiose objective. The goal of preserving peace and liberty is never entirely accomplished as the social and political reality keeps evolving in unforeseen ways. In human societies, civil and political conquests are never definitive: even those that are most stable and successful looking often prove provisional. The need for specific political arrangements and practices based on the precept of prudence is explained in the last resort by the potential dangerousness of human beings, even if dangerous humans are a small minority of a larger peaceful and righteous majority. Although one may legitimately think that acting out of a concern for prudence may be in contradiction with the relational approach because the former may reinforce the fixed boundaries of actors, the two practices should not be seen as mutually exclusive but rather as potentially complementary. As the prudential mechanism of the domestic balance of power is consistent with an inclusive society where differences are seen as important elements of a whole, so too a prudent foreign policy, when accompanied by diplomatic, cultural, and social practices meant to overcome the "either-or logic," does not in itself contradict the relational approach.

Did early liberals and classical realists elaborate their theories on an empirically unrealistic idea of human nature? The answer is positive, but this ontological assumption is the foundational basis for a set of political institutions and practices meant to protect liberties and rights and to avoid one actor dominating over others. *Pace* Mearsheimer (2018: 7), who contends that the "more closely any ism accords with human nature, the more relevance it will have in the real world," this article has tried to show that sometimes unrealistic assumptions might be politically relevant.

Conclusion

In the *Concept of the Political*, Carl Schmitt (1996: 61) famously contended that "all genuine political theories presuppose man to be evil, i.e. by no means an unproblematic but a dangerous and dynamic being." It is not the purpose of this article to uphold any such problematic assertion. The reverse, for Schmitt was surely wrong to describe liberalism as a non-political theory. In thundering against liberalism, Schmitt failed to realize that, as a doctrine, it is neither too soft on human nature nor ducks the conflictual nature of the "political." The fathers of liberalism were far from being naïve or gullible; they did not believe in the total malleability of human nature and the social world.

In arguing thus, we are not making the essentially pointless suggestion that on the question of human nature there are no substantial differences between, for example, Hobbes and Machiavelli and liberals such as Kant and Montesquieu. Actually, there are differences among all these thinkers, whether we read them as liberals or realists. And we are not suggesting that classical liberals were realists. What we are claiming, however, is that there is an astonishing shared view among all these authors as to the potential dangerousness of human beings, whose actions must be restrained by certain political mechanisms and practices. Liberal thinkers do, of course, hold certain fundamental values (the individual and his civil, political, and social rights, international peace among nations, etc.). These are genuine goals to be sought, distinguishing them from many other authors. Yet, the institutions and concrete methods of achieving them are indeed rooted in a "negative" view of human nature.

We certainly live in a different world from the one in which early liberal thinkers lived. Although armed conflict and civil war are today not omnipresent threats for many people, there is no ultimate remedy for social evils except to establish institutional and political mechanisms that limit conflict and abuse. Politics remains open-ended and the social world is prone to progress but also to regress. It may be one of the ironies of history that the political philosophy whose manifesto proclaims the defense of freedom and individual rights should rest on a vision of the individual as potentially a dangerous bully, sometimes driven by greed and lust for power, whom we must perforce distrust.

Acknowledgements

An initial version of the article was delivered at the conference "Le forme della realtà. Una mappa dei realismi politici," Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy (8 April 2022). We are thankful to Alessandro Campi and Damiano Palano for inviting us to contribute to the panel "Antropologie del realismo (II)" and to all participants for their comments and constructive criticism. We also gratefully acknowledge the feedback of Carlo Burelli, Luca Mavelli, Mario Tesini, Srdjan Vucetic, Alex Wendt, and the two anonymous reviewers of this article.

Notes

1. The reference list concerning the question of human nature in classical realist theorizing would be long, much too long to cite fully here. But see, for example, McQueen (2017: 10–11), Schuett (2010), Brown (2009, 2013), Donnelly (2000: 43–50), Freyberg-Inan (2004), Wight (1991: 25), Smith (1983), and Waltz (1959: 20–26). Following Dienstag (2008), to describe this conception of human nature we generally employ the term "negative" rather than pessimistic, sinister, or dark.
2. For an exception, see Boucoyannis (2007: 704), who noted that both classical realists and liberals assumed that "human nature is self-interested, driven by passions, and striving for power." However, Boucoyannis does not develop the anthropological perspective further and focuses on the balance of power.
3. Gray (2000: 2), for example, speaks of two faces of liberalism (i.e. liberalism as a "prescription for a universal regime" and liberalism as a "project of coexistence") and Ryan (2012: 22, 28, 34) suggests the existence of various liberalisms.
4. For a similar use, see Holmes (1993: 87) and Armitage (2013: 90). According to Deudney (2007: 118), instead, Montesquieu is a liminal political thinker, "providing the most comprehensive and substantive statement of early modern and Enlightenment republicanism on the eve of its transmutation into Liberalism." It must also be noted that some fathers of liberalism and other liberal thinkers reserved liberty for the economically independent white man or for western societies only. On the relation between liberalism, imperialism, and colonialism, see Armitage (2012) on Locke, Mosher (2012) on Montesquieu, Muthu (2003), Flikschuh and Ypi (2014), and Franke (2024) on Kant, and Rosenblatt (2018: 115–118) on Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill.
5. In Part II of *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, Stephen Holmes (1993) debunked many misreadings surrounding the classical liberal tradition, but he did not (legitimately) address the question of human nature.
6. For exceptions, see Van de Haar (2009) and Whelan (2004).
7. Although disagreeing about the origins of Morgenthau's views, scholars concur that the author of *Politics among Nations* had a multifaceted and sophisticated conception of human nature. See Lang (2007) and Molloy (2009) for the influence of Aristotle on Morgenthau's thought, Mollov (2002) for its Jewish origins, and, finally, Petersen (1999) and Frei (2001) for the Nietzschean and Freudian roots of Morgenthau's ideas on human nature.
8. See also Hannah Arendt's critique of Hobbes' account of human nature in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In particular, Arendt (1973: 139) charged the English philosopher with providing an image of human beings "without reason, without the capacity for truth, and without free will" and, thus, incapable of resisting the accumulation of state power.
9. Although Machiavelli believed humans to be disposed toward evil, he also believed in virtue and civic virtue, in the active (military) participation of citizens, and in political redemption (Pocock, 1975: 212; Viroli, 2013). However, for Machiavelli institutional design must be based on prudence, not on virtue or active citizenry.
10. For a critique of human nature as a determinant of human behavior, see, for example, Sokolowska and Guzzini (2014: 142–146) and Bell (2015).
11. Neither in *Theory of International Politics* nor in "Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory" does Waltz quote Friedman directly, but there is no doubt that the former shares the latter's epistemological position on the nature, role, and functions of assumptions.
12. Moreover, as Michael Mosher (2012: 144) has noted, Montesquieu stressed that behind *doux commerce* there have often lain coercion and conquest: "Commerce may have been *doux* in consequence but not in origin," Mosher suggests.

13. For a critique of the liberal interpretation of Kant, see Caranti (2022) and Deudney (2007: 181–185).
14. According to Mark Larrimore (2008: 357), Kant believed that the "whites" were "the only ones with the 'drive to activity' required to make themselves over in the image of freedom." On race and racism in Kant, see also Franke (2024: ch. 4). Behnke (2008: 526–530) interprets *Eternal Peace* as a sort of exclusionary type of anthropological universalism based on a hierarchy of humankind. However, Robert Louden (2000: 101–106) notes that, despite his undeniable racism, Kant thought that moral progress would ultimately include all human beings.
15. On the distinction and relation between Völkerbund and Völkerstaat in Kant, see Caranti (2022: ch. 6).
16. It is interesting to note that in Kant's thought, cosmopolitan peace shifted from being possible in "thousands of years" (*Friedländer Lectures*, 1775-6) to being a "regulatory principle" in the final and published version of *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798) (cf. Louden, 2014: 227–228). Moreover, as Molloy (2017: 27) noted, "Kant rejects the possibility of humans achieving the transition to perpetual peace solely by their own power—they require faith in God in order to realize their humanity." This is the core of what Molloy (2017) describes as Kant's political theology.
17. On prudence as self-restraint, see Molloy (2013: 775), who argues that proponents of the balance of power like Hume and Morgenthau believed that prudence "ought to underpin the logic of those operating it."

References

Althusser L (1959) *Montesquieu. La Politique et l'histoire*. Paris: PUF.

Arendt H (1973) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Company.

Armitage D (2012) John Locke: theorist of empire? In: Muthu S (ed.) *Empire and Modern Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 84–111.

Armitage D (2013) *Foundations of Modern International Thought*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ashworth LM (2006) Where are the idealists in interwar International Relations? *Review of International Studies* 32(2): 291–308.

Behnke A (2008) "Eternal peace" as the graveyard of the political: a critique of Kant's Zum Ewigen Frieden. *Millennium* 36(3): 513–531.

Behnke A (2012) Eternal peace, perpetual war? A critical investigation into Kant's conceptualisations of war. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 15(2): 250–271.

Bell D (2014) What is liberalism? *Political Theory* 42(6): 682–715.

Bell D (2015) In biology we trust: biopolitical science and the elusive self. In: Jacobi D and Freyberg-Inan A (eds) *Human Beings in International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 113–131.

Berlin I (2003) Maistre. In: Hardy H (ed.) *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty*. London: Pimlico, pp. 131–154.

Boucoyannis D (2007) The international wanderings of a liberal idea, or why liberals can learn to stop worrying and love the balance of power. *Perspectives on Politics* 5(4): 703–727.

Bråten S (ed.) (2007) *On Being Moved: From Mirror Neurons to Empathy*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Brown C (2009) Structural realism, classical realism and human nature. *International Relations* 23(2): 257–270.

Brown C (2013) "Human nature," science and international political theory. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 16(4): 435–454.

Burelli C (2019) A realistic conception of politics: conflict, order and political realism. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 24(7): 977–999.

Caranti L (2022) *The Kantian Federation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Carr EH (2001) *The Twenty Years' Crisis*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Craiutu A (2012) *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748–1830*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Crawford NC (2009) Human nature and world politics: rethinking "man." *International Relations* 23(2): 271–288.

Deudney DH (2007) *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Dienstag JF (2008) Pessimistic realism and realistic pessimism. In: Bell D (ed.) *Political Thought and International Relations Variations on a Realist Theme*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 159–176.

Donnelly J (2000) *Realism and International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Doyle MW (1983) Kant, liberal legacies, and foreign affairs. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 12(3): 205–235.

Doyle MW (1997) *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism, and Socialism*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company.

Dunn J (1969) *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of "The Two Treatises of Government*." Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fawcett E (2018) *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (2nd edn). Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Fierke KM (2022) *Snapshots from Home: Mind, Action, and Strategy in an Uncertain World*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Flikschuh K and Ypi L (eds) (2014) *Kant and Colonialism: Historical and Critical Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Franke MFN (2024) *Withdrawal from Immanuel Kant and International Relations: The Global Unlimited*. New York: Routledge.

Freeden M (2005) *Liberal Languages: Ideological Imagination in Twentieth-Century Progressive Thought*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Freeden M (2015) *Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Frei C (2001) *Hans J. Morgenthau: An Intellectual Biography*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press.

Freyberg-Inan A (2004) *What Moves Man: The Realist of International Relations and Its Judgment of Human Nature*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Friedman M (1953) The methodology of positive economics. In: Friedman M (ed.) *Essays in Positive Economics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, pp. 3–43.

Gray J (2000) *Two Faces of Liberalism*. New York: The New Press.

Guilhot N (2017) *After the Enlightenment: Political Realism and International Relations in the Mid-20th Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Guilhot N (ed.) (2011) *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Guzzini S (1998) *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy: The Continuing Story of a Death Foretold*. London: Routledge.

Hall I (2013) Kenneth Waltz: the man who saved realism. *E-International Relations*, 24 June. Available at: https://www.e-ir.info/2013/06/24/kenneth-waltz-the-man-who-saved-realism/

Hall JA (1986) *Powers and Liberties: The Causes and Consequences of the Rise of the West*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Herborth B (2015) Imagining man—forgetting society? In: Jacobi D and Freyberg-Inan A (eds) *Human Beings in International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 229–246.

Hobbes T (1949) *De Cive or the Citizen* (ed. SP Lamprecht). New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Hobbes T (2012) *Leviathan*, vol. 2 (ed. N Malcolm). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Holmes S (1993) *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Holmes S (1995) *Passions and Constraint: On the Theory of Liberal Democracy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Jackson PT and Nexon DH (1999) Relations before states. *European Journal of International Relations* 5(3): 291–232.

Jacobi D and Freyberg-Inan A (2015) Introduction: human being(s) in international relations. In: Jacobi D and Freyberg-Inan A (eds) *Human Beings in International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–31.

Jahn B (2013) *Liberal Internationalism: Theory, History, Practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jørgensen KE (ed.) (2021) *The Liberal International Theory Tradition in Europe*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kant I (1991a) Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan purpose. In: Reiss HS (ed.) *Kant: Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 41–53.

Kant I (1991b) Perpetual peace: a philosophical sketch. In: Reiss HS (ed.) *Kant: Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 93–130.

Kant I (1991c) The metaphysics of morals. In: Reiss HS (ed.) *Kant: Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 131–175.

Kant I (1991d) On the common saying: "this may be true in theory, but it does not apply in practice." In: Reiss HS (ed.) *Kant: Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 61–92.

Kant I (1998) *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings* (ed. A Wood and G Di Giovanni). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 33–191.

Kavalski E (2023) Relational theories in international relations. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, 31 January. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.681

Kessler O (2015) Observing visions of man. In: Jacobi D and Freyberg-Inan A (eds) *Human Beings in International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 266–285.

Kurki M (2022) Relational revolution and relationality in IR: new conversations. *Review of International Studies* 48(5): 821–836.

Lang AF (2007) Morgenthau, agency and Aristotle. In: Williams MC (ed.) *Realism Reconsidered*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 18–41.

Larrimore MJ (2008) Antinomies of race: diversity and destiny in Kant. *Patterns of Prejudice* 42(4–5): 341–363.

Lebow RN (2003) *The Tragic Vision of Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Locke J (1988) *Two Treatises of Government* (ed. P Laslett). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Louden RB (2000) *Kant's Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Louden RB (2009) Evil everywhere: the ordinariness of Kantian radical evil. In: Anderson-Gold S and Muchnik P (eds) *Kant's Anatomy of Evil*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 93–115.

Louden RB (2011) *Kant's Human Being: Essays on His Theory of Human Nature*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Louden RB (2014) Cosmopolitical unity: the final destiny of human species. In: Cohen A (ed.) *Kant's Lectures on Anthropology: A Critical Guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 211–229.

MacGilvray E (2015) Robert Dahl, a preface to democratic theory. In: Levy JT (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Classics in Contemporary Political Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Machiavelli N (1996) *Discourses on Livy* (trans. HC Mansfield and N Tarcov). Chicago, IL; London: University of Chicago Press.

Machiavelli N (1998) *The Prince* (trans. HC Mansfield). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Macpherson CB (2011) *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McQueen A (2017) *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

McQueen A (2018) The case of kinship: classical realism and political realism. In: Sleat M (ed.) *Politics Recovered: Realist Thought in Theory and Practice*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 243–269.

Mearsheimer JJ (2001) *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Mearsheimer JJ (2018) *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press.

Mollov B (2002) *Power and Transcendence: Hans J. Morgenthau and the Jewish Experience*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Molloy S (2006) *The Hidden History of Realism: A Genealogy of Power Politics*. New York: Routledge.

Molloy S (2009) Aristotle, Epicurus, Morgenthau and the political ethics of the lesser evil. *Journal of International Political Theory* 5(1): 94–112.

Molloy S (2013) 'Cautious politics': Morgenthau and Hume's critiques of the balance of power. *International Politics* 50: 768–783.

Molloy S (2017) *Kant's International Relations: The Political Theology of Perpetual Peace*. Ann Arbor, MI: University Michigan University Press.

Montesquieu C-L (1894) *Considerations on the Causes of the Grandeur and Decadence of the Romans* (ed. J. Baker). New York: Appleton.

Montesquieu C-L (1989) *The Spirit of the Laws* (trans. and ed. Cohler, BC Miller and HS Stone). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Montesquieu C-L (2012) *My Thoughts* (ed. HC Clark). Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Found.

Morgenthau HJ (1945) The ethics of politics and the ethics of evil. *Ethics* 56(1): 1–18.

Morgenthau HJ (1946) *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Mosher M (2012) Montesquieu on Empire and Enlightenment. In: Muthu S (ed.) *Empire and Modern Political Thought*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 112–154.

Muchnik P (2009) An alternative proof of the universal propensity to evil. In: Anderson-Gold S and Muchnik P (eds) *Kant's Anatomy of Evil*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 116–143.

Muthu S (2003) *Enlightenment against Empire*. Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Muthu S (2012) Conquest, commerce, and cosmopolitanism in enlightenment political thought. In: Muthu S (ed.) *Empire and Modern Political Thought*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 199–231.

Niebuhr R (1964) *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (Human Nature), vol.1. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Petersen UE (1999) Breathing Nietzsche's air: new reflections on Morgenthau's concepts of power and human nature. *Alternatives* 24(1): 83–118.

Philp M (2007) *Political Conduct*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Pinker S (2011) *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. New York: Viking.

Pocock JGA (1975) *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Political Tradition*. Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Raschi F and Zambernardi L (2018) Was anybody ever a realist? A sceptical view on the distinction between political realism and liberalism. *History of European Ideas* 44(3): 370–383.

Rosenblatt H (2018) *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Rosow SJ (1984) Commerce, power and justice: Montesquieu on international politics. *The Review of Politics* 46(3): 346–366.

Rosow SJ (2015) "Human nature" and the paradoxical order of liberalism. In: Jacobi D and Freyberg-Inan A (eds) *Human Beings in International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 54–73.

Ross AAG (2013) Realism, emotion, and dynamic allegiances in global politics. *International Theory* 5(2): 273–299.

Rousseau J-J (1997) *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings* (ed. and trans. V Gourevitch). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ryan A (2012) *The Making of Modern Liberalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ryan A (2016) *On Hobbes: Escaping the War of All against All*. New York and London: Liveright.

Sahlins M (2008) *The Western Illusion of Human Nature*. Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press.

Schmidt BC (1998) *The Political Discourse of Anarchy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Schmitt C (1996) *The Concept of the Political* (trans. G Schwab). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Schuett R (2010) Classical realism, Freud and human nature in international relations. *History of the Human Sciences* 23(2): 21–46.

Shimko KL (1992) Realism, neorealism, and American liberalism. *The Review of Politics* 54(2): 281–301.

Shklar J (1987) *Montesquieu*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shklar J (1989) The liberalism of fear. In: Rosenblum NL (ed.) *Liberalism and Moral Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 21–38.

Smith S (1983) War and human nature. In: Forbes I and Smith S (eds) *Politics and Human Nature*. London: Frances Pinter, pp. 164–179.

Snyder J (2011) Tensions within realism: 1954 and after. In: Guilhot N (ed.) *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 54–78.

Sokolowska E and Guzzini S (2014) The open-endedness and indeterminacy of human nature. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 17(1): 142–156.

Sterling-Folker J (2006) Lamarckian with a vengeance: human nature and American international relations theory. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 9: 227–246.

Sterling-Folker J and Charette JF (2015) Disciplining human nature. In: Jacobi D and Freyberg-Inan A (eds) *Human Beings in International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 74–94.

Thayer BA (2004) *Darwin and International Relations: On the Evolutionary Origins of War and Ethnic Conflict*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.

Thucydides (1998) *The Peloponnesian War* (trans. and ed. S Lattimore). Indianapolis, IN; Cambridge: Hackett.

Trownsell T, Tickner AB, Querejazu Escobari A, et al. (2021) Differing about difference: relational IR from around the world. *International Studies Perspectives* 22(1): 25–64.

Van de Haar E (2009) *Classical Liberalism and International Relations Theory: Hume, Smith, Mises, and Hayek*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Viroli M (2013) *Redeeming the Prince: The Meaning of Machiavelli's Masterpiece*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Waltz KN (1959) *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Waltz KN (1979) *Theory of International Politics*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Waltz KN (1990) Realist thought and neorealist theory. *Journal of International Affairs* 44(1): 21–37.

Wendt A (1999) *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Whelan FG (2004) *Hume and Machiavelli: Political Realism and Liberal Thought*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Wight M (1991) *International Theory: The Three Traditions* (ed. G Wight and B Porter). London: Leicester University Press.

Williams MC (2005) *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wilson P (1998) The myth of the 'First Great Debate'. *Review of International Studies* 24(5):1–15.

Wolin S (2004) *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Author biographies

Francesco Raschi is Associate Professor of History of Political Thought at the University of Bologna.

Lorenzo Zambernardi is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Bologna.