Rival claims about human beings in the contemporary world—what they are, how they should live, what they should prioritize—are extraordinarily diverse and contentious, both within and between numerous academic disciplines across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. From evolutionary psychology and neuroscience to analytical philosophy and cultural studies, radically disparate and incompatible claims are made about what human beings are, ranging from the most scientistically reductionist and evolutionarily determined to the most culturally self-constructivist and voluntaristically undetermined, with more traditional philosophical and theological views also very much alive. The emergence of this diversity of anthropological claims has a history, which no single course could possibly cover and the contemporary particulars of which belong to the recent past. But the longer-term history of rival views of human beings in the Western world has played a crucial role in the formation of these latter-day expressions. This Folger Seminar has two main objectives: (1) to explore some of the most fundamental influences on competing views of human beings between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries, and (2) to provide a forum for workshop presentations by participants of papers related to this theme.

The course is divided into two halves. The first half (February 6 – March 13) is intended to provide some basic common reading material for discussion about human nature in late medieval and early modern Europe. In successive weeks, we will read primary and secondary sources related to the most influential trends that shaped discourse and debate about human beings in this period: inherited medieval Christian culture, Renaissance humanists’ retrieval of and interaction with ancient sources, the Protestant Reformation, interactions between European and non-European peoples, and the advent of new philosophy and natural philosophy in the seventeenth century. These readings and discussions are intended to provide a common framework for the second half of the course (March 20 – April 24), which will focus on individual workshop presentations by participants in the form of a paper, dissertation chapter, book chapter, or article on which s/he is working.

The schedule for presentations will be determined during our first class meeting on February 6. Each participant is asked to provide one article or book chapter that in some way helps to illuminate or introduce an important idea relevant to her/his own presentation; these will be added to the syllabus and we will read them in common in preparation for the class meeting in question. Except for March 6 and April 3, we will meet each Friday from February 6 through April 24 in the Folger Library from 1:00 to 4:30 p.m., with a break from 3:00-3:30.
Our first class meeting has several additional readings, selected to give an idea of some contemporary competing views about human beings by a philosopher and psychologist, sociobiologist, sociologist, and theologian, respectively. Participants should read these and the other assigned readings each week before coming to class. The schedule of class meetings and readings is as follows:

**February 6: Introduction and Inheritances**

Background readings: contemporary competing views


Primary sources:


Secondary readings:


**February 13: Humanistic Recoveries and Initiatives**

Primary sources:


Secondary readings:

Charles Trinkaus, “The Dignity of Man in the Patristic and Medieval Traditions and in Petrarch,” in *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian


**February 20: The Reformation and Divided Christianity**

**Primary sources:**


**Secondary readings:**


**February 27: New Worlds, New Peoples**

**Primary sources:**


**Secondary readings:**


**March 13: New (Natural) Philosophy**

**Primary sources:**


**Secondary readings:**


**March 20: Participant Presentations**

**March 27: Participant Presentations**

**April 10: Participant Presentations**

**April 17: Participant Presentations**

**April 24: Wrap-up Discussion** (readings to be determined)