Department of Political Science, Jamia Millia Islamia

invites submissions for its Annual Departmental Magazine

EPISTEME 2027

CONCEPT NOTE

Theme: "What is it to be Human?"

Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto.

"I am human: I consider nothing human alien to me."

— Terence, *Heauton Timorumenos*, and the motto Marx named as his own in 1865

The Department of Political Science at Jamia Millia Islamia is pleased to announce the next edition of *Episteme*, the departmental magazine that has, over the years, given undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students a space to think, argue, and create beyond the seminar room. This edition asks the oldest question the discipline has, at what may be the strangest historical moment to ask it: ***What is it to be human?***

This question only provokes further questions. Ask someone who they are and the answer usually arrives as a label: a nationality, a gender, a profession. Each says where we stand; none says who we are. Beneath the labels sit harder questions. Are we simply organisms, or something more? Are we made by our relationships, our actions, our potential? Where would we even begin with something so close to us that we cannot step outside it? Whose question is it: the philosopher's, the biologist's, the theologian's, the poet's, the state's? Is the human something we are born as, something we become, or something a society confers and can take away? Or is it lived long before it is ever explained, known in the body before it is known in an argument?

For most of intellectual history the question was rhetorical. The human was the rational animal, the political animal, the measure of all things, a category so secure it needed defining, never defending. That security has worn thin. Wars and occupations that outlast the headlines teach us to count the dead in numbers rather than names, and whole peoples are recast as threats, as surplus, as collateral, until their suffering no longer registers as human. The longer such violence goes on, the emptier the word becomes.

We want *Episteme* this year to grapple with that discomfort. What follows are some provocations that help us begin the conversation.

What *makes* us?

- Are we born human, or do we become human by being spoken to, cared for, named?
- Is it language that makes us? The ability to think about our own thinking? The freedom to choose, or only the feeling that we do?
- What shaped you before you were old enough to agree to it: a mother tongue, a faith, a caste, a nation, a neighbourhood?
- If a child grew up with no one to speak to, would they still be human?
- How much of "you" is yours, and how much is the world you were handed?

For a long time the favourite answer was reason: the human as the thinking animal, set apart by the mind. But there is an older and warmer way of looking at it, found in the humanist tradition, the belief that all human beings share a common nature and that this shared nature is worth defending. Some humanists, especially those influenced by Marx, locate that nature not in the mind but in the body, in need, work and mortality. The literary critic Terry Eagleton, writing in this tradition, puts it simply: before we are minds we are bodies that get hungry, tired and sick, that laugh and grieve and die.

Who or What Counts and Who Decides?

- What must someone be, do, or own to be treated as fully human? Who wrote those rules, and who were they written against?
- How does a people come to be dehumanised? Could there be a concept to "re-humanise"?
- What does it mean for someone to be seen?
- Why does power need some people to be less than human? What does that exclusion make possible?
- Human rights are called universal. Why do so many still have to prove they deserve them?
- If a river, a company, or one day a machine can be declared a legal person while living people are stripped of their personhood, what is the word "human" actually protecting?
- Is being human a fact about us, or a status that is handed out and taken back?

The idea of humans as reasoning animals is one of the oldest in history. Aristotle, for instance, defined humans by the capacity to reason, and in the same breath decided that women and those he called "natural slaves" could not fully do so. The definition of the human came with an exclusion built in, and the same logic later sorted people by race under colonial rule. Centuries later, a school of thought called utilitarianism, which judges right and wrong by the pain or pleasure an action causes, offered a different test. Its founder, Jeremy Bentham, argued that the question is not "Can they reason?" but "Can they suffer?"

And suffer they did, thinkers on the other side, like Du Bois writing on race, described the strain of always seeing yourself through the eyes of those who look down on you. B.R. Ambedkar, writing against caste in India, showed how the same kind of gaze decides who

may draw water from a well, enter a temple, or share a meal, and so who is granted the ordinary dignity owed to a human being. The two men saw the parallel themselves and wrote to each other about it. To be human, in their accounts, is not only a matter of what you are but of how you are seen, and of who holds the power to do the seeing.

What do we want, and who taught us to want it?

- Are your desires your own? Where did you first learn what a good life looks like: family, films, advertisements, a feed?
- Who can afford to want and desire?
- What happens when you question the dichotomy of man and woman? Does our economy benefit from the dichotomy?
- Women's invisible labour keeps the economy running; what would happen if she became a person in her own right?
- Where do love, friendship and rest belong in a life measured by productivity?
- What would you want if no one were selling you anything?

Critics of the economic system and our socio-political reality, from Marxists to feminists to anti-colonial thinkers, have long tried to deconstruct that one picture of the acceptable human that has quietly ruled our collective imagination for centuries. It was drawn along lines of race and gender from the start. Perhaps the better question is not what we are, but how we came to be and what we could dare to become.

The Earth and the machine

- What do we owe a river, a forest, an animal, a person that cannot speak for itself?
- Is there such a thing as natural? Who has it historically served to believe in natural essences and who was subjected to oppression because of it?
- Machines now write, talk, and keep people company. Does that bring them closer to being human? Were writing, conversation, and companionship what made us human in the first place?
- Is the ability to recognize patterns the essence of being human? Wouldn't that make pattern-recognition Gen-AI more human than tools?
- If a machine were taught our ideals rather than our behaviour, could it end up more humane than we are?
- If the line between human and non-human was never clean, what happens when we stop prescribing it?

Existential philosophy asks what it means to exist in the world rather than simply think about it. Martin Heidegger, one of its central figures, warned that modern technology can change how we see the world until everything - rivers, forests, and even people, start to become resources waiting to be used. Feminist thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir, Gayle Rubin, Judith Butler and Alison Jaggar have pushed the questions further, asking and forcing us to ask who drew the line between human and machine, nature and culture, masculine and feminine, mind

and body, sex and gender, reason and emotion to begin with? And must we be defined by these dichotomies?

Imagine it otherwise

This issue does not only ask you to describe the world. It asks you to redraw it.

- Suppose you were given the power to decide who, or what, counts as human. What would the test be?
- Who would be let in that is shut out today? Who, or what, might you shut out?
- What would your humans be like? What would they value, fear, love and owe one another?
- What politics would grow around your definition: who would govern, what would be law, what would be forbidden?
- And who would resist your world, and why?

Write it as a story, a constitution, a manifesto, a myth, a diary from the inside, a map. Build the world and show us the people living in it.

None of these questions needs a final answer. Take the one that unsettles you most and follow it wherever it goes. You do not need a theory to begin: write about the language you dream in, about a moment you were treated as less than human or watched someone else be, about the first thing you remember wanting. Political theory, poetry, memoir, satire, fiction and the frankly speculative are all welcome, and none is asked to agree with any other.

Possible forms of submission include:

- **Poems / Poetry**
- **Essays / Articles**
- **Short stories**
- **Memoirs / Travelogues**
- **Photography / Digital Art** *(with a short caption or a small anecdote)*
- **Cartoons / Comics**
- **Satire / Reviews**
- **Paintings / Collage / Mixed media**
- **Interviews / Conversations**
- **Memes**
- **Recipes**

There are no language restrictions. *Episteme* welcomes multilingual expression as a reflection of our shared diversity.

Let Episteme 2027 ask the question every age has had to ask for itself, this time with machines as claimants too.

Send your entries to: editor@epistemejamia.in

Deadline: 30 December 2026

Format:

- Written submissions: .doc or .pdf
- Photographs / artwork: JPG or PNG, with a short caption or anecdote
- Word limit: Up to 2500 words for essays, articles, stories, or memoirs
- All work must be original. Plagiarism of any kind will result in immediate disqualification.

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