

Laudatio on the awarding of the student prize for the Best Master Thesis

Start of the Academic Year 2022-2023, 5 September 2022

This year's jury was chaired by Christianne Smit; its members come from different university faculties. The jury received a total of 25 theses, again covering all disciplines, and hugely enjoyed reading them. All were of very high quality. Clearly, being nominated is already worth an award in itself.

During the deliberations, it became clear that one thesis stood out: because of its subject, its societal relevance, its research method and its theoretical contribution. Also, the jury appreciated the beautiful writing style as well as the fascinating illustrations.

The thesis questions the history of the concept of 'human'. 'Human' is one of the basic categories we use to structure our world; we divide all living beings into 'humans' and 'non-humans'. It might seem that there is only one way to do this, because biology tells us who is human and who is not.

However, the nominee clearly shows that the concept of 'human' has a specific history; who were and who were not included within 'humanity' does not just depend upon biology, but on history and culture as well. Using an impressive corpus of 18th and 19th century English and French medical texts on human reproduction, the nominee finds that the concept of 'human' emerged only in the nineteenth century. Before that time, one used the term 'man'. And while 'man' is obviously exclusive, the concept of 'human' is shown to imply hierarchies as well: while early-stage embryos were seen as 'neutral' and comparable with animals, scientists categorised later-stage embryos as either fully developed white males or halfway developed women and non-European people.

This finding is highly relevant, not just for historians of medical science, but also for a wider audience, because it alerts us to possible inequalities hidden in seemingly neutral and equalizing terms such as 'human'. And within the framework of current discussions on humanity in general, on the contrast between human and nature, and on the concepts of gender, race and sexuality, the research can help to both explain and question the meaning of crucial categories.

Ladies and gentlemen, the award for the best Master's thesis goes to: Chiara Lacroix.