

## CENTRE FOR THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE SEMINAR SERIES 2011-2012 AUTUMN TERM

Tuesday, 6 December 2011 (Week 10)  
5.00 pm – Ramphal Building Room R.014

**Dr Roger Smith**  
**(University of Moscow)**

*'Why the History of the Human Sciences Matters to Medicine'*

Contemporary language ties 'human nature' to biology, especially to the evolutionary history of the brain, and this appears to make knowledge a matter of discovering 'the facts'. Once we know normal nature, medical researchers presume, we will be in a position to control illness. 'Human nature', however, may not be such a definable and empirically discoverable thing. First, any way of thinking about nature adopts presuppositions which are not empirical but stem from our purposes in seeking knowledge. Second, there are ways of thinking about human nature, now characteristic of the humanities, which understand it in linguistic, historical and cultural, not biological, terms. Third, belief about human nature has a 'looping' effect on that nature, that is, changes human nature: there is a sense in which we live in a world of our own creation. In this talk, I will make these points and illustrate them. This argument has much relevance to understanding relations between scientific medicine and forms of therapy which are not 'scientific' (such as the placebo effect).



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