Taking Darwin Seriously

politics
philosophy

George Bernard Shaw

“Darwin had the luck to please everybody with an axe to grind.”

Back to Methuselah 1921

Left
Right
Darwinian evolution is the key idea of a scientific materialism that is morally and politically corrupting because it denies the moral dignity of human beings as created in God’s image.

 Conservatives need Charles Darwin…because a Darwinian science of human nature supports conservatives in their realist view of human imperfectability and their commitment to ordered liberty as rooted in nature, custom and prudence. The intellectual vitality of conservatism in the twenty-first century will depend on the success of conservatives in appealing to advances in the biology of human nature as confirming conservative thought“

- There is a universal human nature.
- This nature is imperfect because humans are limited in their knowledge and virtue
- These natural limitations constrain any successful social order
- These natural limitations cannot be changed by social engineering
Arnhart’s Five Propositions
Darwinism supports the conservative view of ...

1. Ordered liberty as rooted in natural desires, customary traditions, and prudential judgments;
2. The moral sense as fundamental for the moral order of liberty;
3. Sexual differences, family life, and parental care as fundamental for the social order of liberty;
4. Property as fundamental for the economic order of liberty;
5. Limited government as fundamental for the political order of liberty.

Standard Conservative Objections

1. Darwinism subverts traditional morality by promoting atheism and materialism
2. The history of Social Darwinism and eugenics shows that Darwinism is morally and politically corrupting.
3. Darwinism has been refuted.
What are Ethics?

- The theoretical principles or standards of human conduct
  - The "good life," the life that is satisfying and worth living
  - Virtue
  - Good & Bad
  - Duty or obligation
- Morality is these principles put into practice

Some Open Questions

1. How could the human capacity for ethics evolve through natural means? ("the evolution of ethics")
2. Is it possible (desirable?) to derive an ethical system from the natural world ("ethics from evolution")

Evolution of Moral Mechanisms

- The root of human morality lies in the social instincts, and in particular parental care.
- At the same time as facilitating the raising of offspring, social instincts counterbalanced innate aggression.
- It became possible to distinguish between 'them' and 'us' and aim aggression towards individuals that did not belong to one's group.
- This behavior is clearly adaptive in the sense of ensuring the survival of one's family.

Evolution of Moral Mechanisms

- With the development of intellectual faculties, human beings were able to reflect on past actions and their motives and thus approve or disapprove of others as well as themselves.
- This led to the development of a conscience which became "the supreme judge and monitor" of all actions.
How can we distinguish between good and bad?

An action can be judged as good if it improves the greatest happiness of the greatest number, by either increasing pleasure or decreasing pain. (Utilitarian view)

Why should we be good?

Humans are biologically inclined to be sympathetic, altruistic, and moral as this proved to be an advantage in the struggle for existence.

Altruism

- Altruistic Act: “an act that benefits another at a cost to the actor where cost/benefit is defined in terms of reproductive success”
  - Inclusive Fitness Altruism (IFA)
    - Acts done for individuals closely related to actor
  - Reciprocal Altruism (RA)
    - “You scratch my back...”
  - True Altruism

J.B.S. Haldane

“Would I lay down my life to save my brother? No, but I would to save two brothers or eight cousins.”
Kin
You share a proportion of your genes with your relatives

- Great grandparent: 1
- Grandparent: 1/2
- Parent: 1/4
- Full sibling: 1/8
- Twin: 1/8
- Child: 1/8

12.5%
A gene for altruistic behavior between two individuals will spread if

\[ rB - C > 0 \]

where,

- \( r \) = relatedness of pair
- \( C \) = Number of offspring sacrificed by altruist
- \( B \) = Number of offspring gained by recipient
Hamilton’s Rule

“The most important advance in evolutionary theory since the work of Charles Darwin and Gregor Mendel.”

Robert Trivers, 1985
How do you explain sterile worker females who are willing to die for the queen and colony?

Haplodiploidy alters expected relatedness:
- daughter to father: $r = 1.0$
- daughter or son to mother: $r = 0.5$
- sister to sister: $r = 0.75$
- sister to brother: $r = 0.25$

Females are thus more closely related to their sisters ($r = 0.75$) than to their own offspring (daughters or sons $r = 0.5$).

Thus by giving up reproduction, they have a greater chance of passing on their own alleles via reproductive sisters than they do by reproducing themselves.

Reciprocal Altruism (Trivers)

Individuals will be selected to dispense altruistic acts if equally valuable favors are later returned by the benefactors.
- The cost to the actor must be smaller than the benefit to the receiver.
- Individuals that fail to reciprocate must be punished in some manner.

Blood Donation

- If you are an offspring or parent ($r = 0.5$), or you are a non-relative who is a frequent roostmate.

- Individuals are much more likely to receive blood from individuals they have fed in the past.

- Vampire bats are reciprocal altruists.
Genuine Altruism

- Importance of group cohesiveness
- Evolved with rationality?
- Is it socially constructed?

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The Naturalistic Fallacy

1. Moving from **is** to **ought**.
2. Assuming that what is **natural** is **good**.
3. Assuming that what currently exists ought to exist.
4. Substituting explanation for justification.

T.H. Huxley

*Evolution and Ethics*, 1894

“Let us understand, once for all, that the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it.”
T.H. Huxley
Evolution and Ethics, 1894

[T]he practice of that which is ethically best – what we call goodness or virtue – involves a course of conduct which, in all respects, is opposed to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence. In place of ruthless self-assertion it demands self-restraint; in place of thrusting aside or treading down all competitors, it requires that the individual shall not merely respect, but shall help his fellows; its influence is directed, not so much to the survival of the fittest, as to the fitting of as many as possible to survive. It repudiates the gladiatorial theory of existence. It demands that each man who enters into the enjoyment of the advantages of a polity shall be mindful of his debt to those who have laboriously constructed it; and shall take heed that no act of his weakens the fabric in which he has been permitted to live. Laws and moral precepts are directed to the end of curbing the cosmic process and reminding the individual of his duty to the community, to the protection and influence of which he owes, if not existence itself, at least the life of something better than a brutal savage.

Three Conservative Objections

1. Darwinism subverts traditional morality by promoting atheism and materialism
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Social Darwinism

- Claim that persons / groups / societies are necessarily subject to struggle.
  - More strictly, the application of such an idea to policy.
- Support for
  - Laissez-faire capitalism
  - Industrialism
  - Military aggression
  - Conservatism

John D. Rockefeller, jr.

“The growth of a large business is merely the survival of the fittest ... The American Beauty rose can be produced in splendor and fragrance which bring cheer to its beholder only by sacrificing the early buds which grow around it. This is not an evil tendency in business. It is merely the working out of a law of nature and a law of God.”
“God had not been preparing the English speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle—self admiration. No! He has made us the master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns … He has made us adepts in government that we may administer government among savages and senile peoples.”

“In this world the nation that has trained itself to a career of un-warlike and isolated ease is bound, in the end, to go down before other nations which have not lost the manly and adventurous qualities.”

“The timid man, the lazy man, the man who distrusts his country, the over-civilized man, who has lost the great fighting, masterful virtues, the ignorant man, and the man of dull mind, whose soul is incapable of feeling the mighty lift that thrills ‘stern men with empires in their brains’ – all these, of course shrink from seeing the nation undertake its new duties … I preach to you then … that our country calls not for the life of ease but for the life of strenuous endeavor. … If we stand idly by, if we seek merely swollen, slothful ease and ignoble peace, if we shrink from the hard contests where men must win at hazard of their lives and at the risk of all they hold dear, then the bolder and stronger peoples will pass us by, and will win for themselves the domination of the world.”
Eugenics – Breeding Better Americans

- Positive
  - Tax preferences
  - Education
- Negative
  - Compulsory sterilization
  - Restrictive marriage laws
  - Anti-miscegenation laws
  - Immigration restrictions

Characteristics of eugenic proponents

- Extreme economic conservatism
- Virulent anti-communism
- Belief in untrammeled capitalism
- In some cases,
  - Rejection of democracy for corporate state
  - Promotion of German and Italian fascism
From Darwin to Hitler?

Four Conservative Objections

1. Darwinism subverts traditional morality by promoting atheism and materialism.

2. The history of Social Darwinism and eugenics shows that Darwinism is morally and politically corrupting.

3. A Darwinian view of evolved human nature opens the way to the use of biotechnology to change, or even abolish, human nature.

4. Darwinism has been refuted.

Taking Darwinism Seriously

- Leads to acceptance of an innate human nature that can be socially mediated.
- Leads to ethical skepticism but not to rampant relativism.
- Means seeing morality as an evolved capacity that contributes to reproductive success.
- Means seeing “right” and “wrong” as contingent upon evolutionary (and cultural) history.
- Results in a disparity between biological and traditional theological views.

A Darwinian Left would not ...

- Deny the existence of human nature, nor insist that human nature is inherently good, nor that it is infinitely malleable;
- Expect to end all conflict between human beings, whether by political revolution, social change, or better education;
- Assume that all inequalities are due to discrimination, prejudice, oppression or social conditioning. Some will be, but this cannot be assumed.

Peter Singer, *Darwinian Left* (1999)